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AFTER THE MIDTERMS: WHAT SOUTH KOREA SHOULD WATCH IN CONGRESS

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Wonseok Song is a co-founder and executive director of the Korean American Grassroots Conference (KAGC), specializing in congressional advocacy, grassroots organizing, and Korean American civic engagement. He has worked in these fields since 2012, beginning at Korean American Civic Empowerment (KACE). He co-founded KAGC in 2015 and has served as its executive director since 2017. His work includes engagement with congressional offices on Korean American community priorities and U.S.–Korea relations, congressional staff exchanges and delegations to South Korea, and programs preparing Korean Americans for careers in public service. He regularly contributes commentary on U.S. elections, Congress, and American politics to media outlets. He pursued graduate studies in Christian education at Union Presbyterian Seminary (VA) and nonprofit management at Columbia University (NY).



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중간선거 이후: 한국은 미국 의회의 무엇을 주목해야 하는가?

Wonseok Song

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With the midterm elections a week away, Washington is preoccupied with control of Congress. Seoul should look beyond the outcome to how the next Congress will shape the implementation of U.S.–ROK commitments. This brief examines the implications of Democrats winning control of at least the House, focusing on tariffs, nuclear cooperation, and shipbuilding.

A Democratic victory would not necessarily make the Trump administration easier for Seoul to deal with. The White House has set the bilateral agenda, and many commitments are already reflected in policies and agreements. Congress will continue to prioritize American industry, employment, and national security. What may change if Democrats gain control of the House is the pace of implementation and the conditions attached to these agreements.

민주당이 하원 다수당을 차지할 경우 달라질 수 있는 것은 이러한 합의의 이행 속도와 이행에 부과되는 조건이다

A More Assertive Congress

A House majority would give Democrats leverage to seek funding restrictions and oversight requirements through appropriations and defense legislation. For example, the FY2020 NDAA restricted funding for reducing U.S. troops in South Korea below 28,500, requiring defense secretary certification and a 90-day waiting period. A Democratic House would also prevent Republicans from advancing their fiscal agenda unilaterally through budget reconciliation, which bypasses the Senate filibuster but still requires both chambers' approval. A Senate majority would add control over

executive and judicial confirmations, limiting Trump's ability to advance his agenda without accommodating the opposition.

Investigations would offer another avenue of influence. Democrats have promised extensive scrutiny of the administration, alongside calls to impeach Pete Hegseth and force votes on ending the Iran war. Removal requires conviction by two-thirds of senators present, and legislation to end hostilities could face a presidential veto. Yet congressional action need not achieve either outcome to matter. Subpoenas, hearings, and budget scrutiny can consume senior officials' time, expose contested decisions, and complicate implementation.

Republicans may also reassess their relationship with the president. During consideration of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, many Republican lawmakers who had raised objections ultimately backed the legislation after presidential pressure, promises of further action, and threats to support primary challengers. A substantial electoral defeat blamed on Trump's policies could alter that calculation. Lawmakers who have feared the consequences of opposing him may begin to question whether continued loyalty puts their own seats at risk.

Democrats would face internal constraints of their own. An expanded contingent of House members backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), alongside the potential election of progressive Senate candidates such as Michigan's Abdul El-Sayed, could widen differences with moderates over spending, defense, and trade. Especially with narrow majorities, Democratic leaders would need to reconcile these competing priorities to advance a common legislative agenda.

A Democratic majority and greater Republican independence could give Congress more influence over an agenda dominated by the White House. Trump would likely turn increasingly to executive action and existing statutory powers. His discretion would remain considerable, especially in trade and foreign affairs, so the effects on South Korea would vary across issues.

Alliance Support and Burden-Sharing

Congress has long provided bipartisan support for alliances and continuity in U.S. security commitments. Allied trade and investment support jobs in congressional districts, while veterans and military communities maintain longstanding ties with partner countries. These connections give Seoul a constituency beyond the executive branch, but do not ensure agreement with every Korean proposal.

Congress can help preserve alliance commitments without assuming responsibility for day-to-day diplomacy.

Defense burden-sharing illustrates the distinction. Democratic control would not, on its own, reduce Seoul's contribution. The current Special Measures Agreement covers 2026–2030 and was concluded as an executive agreement, without congressional approval. Congress's influence lies primarily in oversight and funding, rather than in setting Seoul's contribution directly. During Trump's first term,

the Democratic chairs of the House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees endorsed fair allied contributions but opposed steep increases that could damage the alliance or disrupt the U.S. military presence. A new majority could challenge the Trump administration's penchant for steep increases in burden-sharing while still expecting South Korea to do more. Seoul should emphasize the readiness and deterrence its contributions provide, rather than focus solely on payment levels.

Competition with China will remain an area of bipartisan agreement. Senator Elissa Slotkin, a member of the moderate Democratic network associated with ModSquad PAC, has called for treating economic security as national security. Her emphasis on critical supply chains and technological competition illustrates how these priorities resonate within the party's moderate wing. Korean proposals can gain traction when they demonstrate benefits for U.S. security and economic resilience.

Tariffs: Legal Authority and Political Leverage

Tariffs are one area where a more assertive Congress could ease pressure on South Korea. If Republicans blame electoral losses partly on rising household and business costs, more may oppose additional tariffs, which contribute to rising prices. Support for confronting China does not necessarily translate into support for sweeping tariffs on allies.

After the Supreme Court ruled in February 2026 that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act did not authorize presidential tariffs, the administration announced other options, including Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974. An election win for Democrats will not extinguish those powers or end investigations already underway. Bipartisan opposition to tariffs could nevertheless make additional tariffs more costly politically. Seoul should assess both the administration's authority to impose tariffs and the domestic resistance it would face in exercising it.

한국 정부는 미국 행정부의 관세 부과 권한뿐만 아니라, 실제로 그 권한을 행사하는 과정에서 직면할 수 있는 국내적 반발도 함께 평가해야 한다

Nuclear Cooperation: From Endorsement to Implementation

At the same time, it is worth noting that Congressional scrutiny could slow initiatives Seoul wants to accelerate. The November 2025 bilateral fact sheet supported a process leading to South Korea's peaceful uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing, subject to the existing nuclear cooperation agreement and U.S. law. It also approved Korean construction of nuclear-powered submarines and

committed to cooperation on fuel sourcing. Trump's endorsement created an opening but left the legal arrangements unresolved.

Several Democratic senators have already raised proliferation concerns. Edward Markey, Jeff Merkley, Chris Van Hollen, and Ron Wyden cited South Korea's past nuclear weapons efforts and recent debate over nuclear armament in demanding strong safeguards. Their views do not necessarily represent the entire party. A Democratic majority would, however, give them more opportunities to raise these concerns through committee proceedings and oversight of negotiations.

Congressional involvement in nuclear cooperation depends on the legal route. Consent or subsequent arrangements under the existing framework, an amended agreement, and separate legislation entail different procedures. A Section 123 agreement that satisfies statutory requirements can enter into force after congressional review unless a joint resolution of disapproval becomes law. An agreement exempted from one or more statutory nonproliferation criteria requires affirmative congressional approval before entering into force.

Hearings on proliferation safeguards do not themselves stop the statutory review clock. Yet lawmakers can still influence negotiations before submission and attach conditions to related legislation or funding. Their role is not confined to accepting or rejecting a finished agreement.

Nuclear-powered submarine cooperation also requires arrangements beyond the civilian nuclear framework, including for technology and fuel supply. Australia's AUKUS experience shows the importance of congressional backing. Republican Senator Roger Wicker challenged submarine-transfer legislation over U.S. production capacity and the industrial base. The enacted law required presidential certification that transfers would not degrade U.S. undersea capabilities. Democratic lawmakers also supported AUKUS legislation, underscoring that positions on naval nuclear cooperation do not divide neatly along party lines.

Democrats' adversarial relationship with the White House could make securing congressional support for Trump's nuclear initiatives more difficult. Seoul must therefore engage lawmakers more actively, addressing their proliferation concerns and demonstrating how cooperation serves U.S. military needs and strengthens the American industrial base.

민주당과 백악관 간의 대립적 관계는 트럼프 행정부의 핵 관련 구상에 대한 의회의 지지를 확보하는 데 어려움을 가중시킬 수 있다. 따라서 한국 정부는 미 의회 의원들과의 소통을 더욱 적극적으로 확대하고, 이들이 제기하는 핵확산 우려를 해소하는 한편, 관련 협력이 미국의 군사적 수요를 충족하고 산업 기반을 강화하는 데 어떻게 기여할 수 있는지를 설득력 있게 제시해야 한다

Reciprocity is for Alliances, Too Shipbuilding: Location Matters

Shipbuilding cooperation has a broader bipartisan constituency. Investment in U.S. shipyards can expand production and create jobs, and the SHIPS for America Act has bipartisan support. A change

in congressional control is unlikely to diminish interest in Korean capital and technology that can rebuild American capacity.

Building ships in Korea is a different proposition. The House-passed fiscal year 2027 National Defense Authorization Act included an amendment advanced by Representative Jared Golden barring the use of authorized funds to procure Navy battle force ships built in foreign shipyards. Lawmakers can support working with an ally while insisting that production remain at home. Districts with shipyards, defense suppliers, and maritime workers will help determine their positions.

Major elements of the White House's Maritime Action Plan require legislation and funding. Negotiations over SHIPS for America provisions and restrictions on foreign construction will help determine how the Make American Shipbuilding Great Again initiative, or MASGA, proceeds. Bills not enacted by the end of this Congress must be reintroduced in the next. Seoul should follow incentives, procurement requirements, and exemptions as closely as statements of support.

Beyond Election Day

The election's significance for Seoul will emerge in appropriations negotiations, legislative decisions, investigations, and oversight. Korean officials and businesses should watch how lawmakers assess contributions from allies like Korea, whether tariff opposition crosses party lines, how nuclear agreements reach Congress, and where shipbuilding legislation permits or restricts cooperation.

> **선거 이후 한국 정부의 과제는 어느 정당이 의회를 장악하든 관계없이, 초당적 지지를 확보하고 협력의 지속성을 뒷받침할 수 있는 다양한 이해관계자들의 지지 기반을 구축하는 것이다**

Delivering on White House commitments requires understanding congressional powers and demonstrating benefits for American security, industry, and local employment. Seoul's task after Election Day is to build support across party lines and among the constituencies that can sustain cooperation, regardless of who controls Congress.

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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