

Korean Crisis: Washington's Ire Shifts From Kim Jong-un to Moon Jae-in

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Trump infuriated and insulted South Koreans when he said “they do nothing without our approval.”

As the two Koreas continue to move their peace process forward in the wake of their highly successful September summit in Pyongyang, the Trump administration, along with military-industrial think tanks and journalists who influence US policy, have shifted their collective indignation away from North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and toward South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

A year after threatening Kim with a “bloody nose” strike unless he stopped his nuclear buildup, the Trump administration and its allies are now going after Moon’s economic engagement with North Korea as a chief impediment to Pyongyang’s pledge to denuclearize. Moon, in their view, has weakened Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign of sanctions and military threats by moving too quickly on inter-Korean reconciliation and ignoring US demands that sanctions be lifted only after the North’s nuclear disarmament.

In contrast, the United States has stood firm. “I haven’t eased the sanctions,” President Trump told Lesley Stahl on *60 Minutes* this past Sunday in comments [1] that were overshadowed by his defense of his professed “love” for Kim Jong-un. “I haven’t done anything.” A few days earlier, Trump sent shock waves through South Korea when he was asked about reports that Moon’s government was considering the idea of terminating the sanctions and trade embargo that South Korea itself had imposed on the North in 2010 [2].

Trump said South Korea wouldn’t lift sanctions on Pyongyang without American approval, and then repeated himself: “They do nothing without our approval.” [3] His arrogant assumptions were too much for the *JoongAng Daily*, a conservative paper that generally supports US policy. “[Trump’s] choice of the word—approval—could sound very offensive as it suggests the United States denies us our sovereignty,” its editorialist wrote [4]. The center-right *Korea Times* added that Trump’s statement “is seen as infringing on the national sovereignty of South Korea. [5]”

In fact, the Moon government has been generally supportive of US and UN sanctions and has consulted with the Trump administration about lifting them in specific instances. At the same time, President Moon is seeking support for sanctions relief as US and South Korean negotiations with Pyongyang move forward. “I believe the international community needs to provide assurances that North Korea has made the right choice to denuclearize and encourage North Korea to speed up the process,” he said this week in Paris during a visit with French President Emmanuel Macron [6]. Moon is on a nine-day tour of European capitals that was followed up on Thursday when he met with the pope at the Vatican and extended to him an invitation from Kim Jong-un to visit Pyongyang [7].

The US ambassador to South Korea, Harry Harris, underscored US impatience when he warned in Seoul that the US and South Korean governments must speak with one voice [8]. “We are, of course,

cognizant of the priority that President Moon Jae-in and his administration have placed on improving South-North relations,” he told a conference on Tuesday co-sponsored by the US-government-run Wilson Center. “I believe this inter-Korean dialogue must remain linked to denuclearization, and South Korea synchronized with the United States.”

In what seemed like a tit-for-tat response, South Korea’s ambassador to Washington, Cho Yoon-je, responded on Wednesday to the US concerns that Seoul is “moving too fast” on implementing its agreements with the North [9].

“When inter-Korean relations are moving a little faster than North Korea-US dialogue, that gives South Korea the leverage to act as a facilitator and enables it to break through deadlocks between North Korea and the US,” Cho said in a speech to South Korea’s Sejong Institute and the US Council on Foreign Relations. While agreeing that sanctions “must be implemented faithfully,” he argued that the “momentum on one side can drive the process on the other and create a virtuous cycle.” Cho pointed to the three summits between Moon and Kim as evidence, saying that they “breathed new life into North Korea-US dialogue.”

The turning point for the Trump administration’s relations with Seoul may have come on September 14, when the two Koreas opened a liaison office just north of the DMZ. They did this against the public recommendation of the State Department, which had initially warned that South Korea’s supply of electricity, water, and other supplies to the Gaesong Industrial Complex would violate US and UN sanctions. Since the virtual embassies opened, representatives from the two Koreas have had more than 60 face-to-face meetings, and the office has become a clearinghouse for over a dozen bilateral projects launched during the summit [10].

The Korean snub of the State Department may have triggered another flare-up in early October, when the two Koreas began removing landmines along the DMZ as part of the bilateral military agreement signed during the Pyongyang summit to prevent an accident from spiraling into another war. Their announcement of the pact greatly displeased Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. According to Korean press reports, he “furiously harangued” Moon’s top diplomat [11], Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, in a blistering phone call [12] that shocked many Koreans when its contents were made public in a parliamentary hearing [13].

Pompeo’s impatience was reignited this past Monday, following a weekend agreement by the two Koreas to hold a groundbreaking ceremony in late November or December for a massive binational project to link roads and railroads severed during the Korean War [14]. Asked to comment, a State Department official tartly observed that sanctions must be enforced until the North denuclearizes. “We expect all member states to fully implement U.N. sanctions [and] take their responsibilities seriously to help end the [North’s] illegal nuclear and missile programs,” the diplomat told *Yonhap News* [15].

The transportation deal also stoked the ire of the think tanks. “As North-South rails get linked, US-ROK alliance faces a new disconnect,” Patrick Cronin, the director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, a Democratic Party-aligned think tank, tweeted. The influential Center for Strategic and International Studies chimed in, pointing out that “Seoul’s latest move is expected to increase friction with its traditional ally Washington over the pace of inter-Korean engagement. [16]”

Criticism of Moon is also coming from liberals, including former advisers to President Obama. They have zeroed in on South Korea’s interest in a declaration to end the Korean War, which the North has said should be a precursor to any nuclear agreement. “A peace declaration is not merely ineffective in establishing peace, it advances the North Korean push to unwind the U.S.-ROK

alliance,” Daniel Russel, Obama’s top diplomat on Asia, told *The Wall Street Journal* on October 7. “This is not an argument we should be having right now. [17]”

The mainstream media, too, have been highly skeptical of South Korea’s engagement with the North. “South Korea wants to lift sanctions on North Korea,” Vox.com blared in a highly slanted story on October 10 [18]. “That could kill Trump’s nuclear plan.”

And in an October 15 story from Tokyo, *The Washington Post* asserted that recent North-South agreements come “amid some concerns in Washington about the enthusiasm with which [Moon] has embraced North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, despite the fact that North Korea has so far taken no concrete steps to disarm.” [19] This “fact,” of course, is disputed by the North as well as by the Moon government and many analysts familiar with Pyongyang’s behavior.

Meanwhile, as if to underscore its contempt for the people of North Korea, the Trump administration—in a decision made by Pompeo himself—has blocked several predominantly Christian US aid groups from traveling to North Korea to deliver humanitarian aid [20]. “It has become clear that the Trump Administration regards the provision of humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people as a legitimate target for its maximum pressure campaign,” said Keith Luse, executive director of the nonprofit National Committee on North Korea.

“It’s a disturbing new trend in American maximum pressure to use humanitarian work” as a lever of pressure, added Jennifer Deibart, North Korea Program coordinator at the Mennonite Central Committee [21], one of the groups barred from traveling, in an interview with NK News. A few days later, Moon’s health minister, Park Neung-hoo, told the National Assembly in Seoul that the United States was blocking South Korea’s own efforts to provide medical aid to the North [22].

The Trump administration’s criticism of the Moon government has been amplified by a hard-line cadre of commentators who have no qualms about trashing and even redbaiting the South Korean president [23]. One of the most outrageous has been Gordon Chang, a prominent writer for *The Daily Beast* who has allied himself with South Korea’s fringe right wing and parrots their propaganda in his many appearances on media, from MSNBC to Fox [24].

On October 13, Chang tweeted, “Is Moon Jae-in a traitor? [25] He speaks so passionately about #NorthKorea while not doing the same about the society he was elected to represent.” Two days later, he added, “I hope Prez Trump publicly demands #SouthKorea stop violating UN sanctions [26]. If Prez #MoonJaein does not relent, we need to impose costs on the South.” Chang’s latest piece in *The Daily Beast* is entitled “Bad Moon Rising: Why Is Trump Letting Moon Jae-in Hand South Korea to Kim Jong Un? [27]”

Chang’s strident attacks on Moon noticeably increased in tempo and vitriol after he was the guest of honor at a dinner at the Trump International Hotel in Washington on October 2 hosted by the extreme-right Korean Patriot Party. It was founded in 2017 to oppose the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye [28], who is now in a Seoul jail cell after being removed from power for corruption. The party regularly holds anti-Moon rallies in downtown Seoul, where its fervent supporters wave US, South Korean, and Israeli flags [29].

In remarks at the National Press Club, Patriot Party leader Wonjin Cho—its only member in the Korean parliament—explained that he was in the United States to warn the Trump administration that President Moon is a “pro-North Korean leftist” with “socialist aims” who is intent on “serving the interests” of Kim Jong-un.

“The Moon government wants to fight America,” he asserted. “The only way for South Korea to

survive is to get rid of his leftist policies.” Chang’s presence at the party’s dinner that night was conveyed in a handout distributed at the press conference (I was the only reporter there).

One reason for the Trump administration’s criticism of Moon is the notable shift away from sanctions by China and Russia, who both hold veto power over the UN Security Council. In a meeting last week in Moscow [30], the deputy foreign ministers of China, Russia, and North Korea called on the UN to “adjust” the sanctions and instead “establish a peace mechanism on the [Korean] peninsula through bilateral and multilateral cooperation.”

For its part, North Korea has signaled that it sees lifting the sanctions as equally important as an end-of-war declaration [31], according to the liberal *Hankyoreh* newspaper in South Korea. It quoted from a recent commentary posted on KCNA, the North Korean news service.

“Considering how much time has passed since we stopped our nuclear tests and suspended our ICBM launches, it is only right for the sanctions to disappear accordingly, considering that they were concocted on the pretext of those actions,” the North Korean column said. “It’s customary to give back as much as you take, but the US keeps taking without giving anything in return.”

Meanwhile, recent polls in South Korea show that Moon’s popularity has risen to 65 percent since his last summit with Kim [32]. In contrast, the conservative opposition Liberty Korea Party has 11 percent support. Gordon Chang’s allies in the Patriot Party don’t even show up in the numbers, underscoring its irrelevance and obscurity.

Still, Chang was hard at work on Wednesday, accusing Moon of “trying to exercise the powers of a communist leader.... If he likes totalitarianism that much, he should just move to #NorthKorea.” [33] His attack is ironic, considering that Moon’s parents were refugees from the North who fled the country in a US Navy vessel after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 [34].

But Washington hard-liners may now have another target. In a major development Friday, the Pentagon announced that it was suspending the next round of US–South Korean military exercises to improve the atmosphere for the US and South Korean negotiations with Pyongyang. “Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis and Minister of National Defense Jeong Kyeong-doo decided to suspend Exercise Vigilant Ace to give the diplomatic process every opportunity to continue,” Pentagon spokesperson Dana White said in a statement reported by CNN [35]. This was a strategic move: Last year’s Vigilant Ace drills involved 230 aircraft and were denounced by the North as an “all-out provocation,” [36] a term Trump himself used when he first canceled US-Korean drills in June.

The gesture can only be good news for the peace process and might be seen in Pyongyang as the US response to its demand for “corresponding measures” in return for its own steps toward denuclearization [37]. And it could show that that President Moon’s persistence in pressing for continued engagement is paying off, big time.

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• THE NATION. OCTOBER 19, 2018 1:33 PM:
<https://www.thenation.com/article/washingtons-ire-shifts-from-kim-jong-un-to-moon-jae-in/>

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Footnotes

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- [3] <https://apnews.com/9bc987989a10485fad1fef1eb2e02605>
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