

For Lasting Peace, President Moon Must Lead South Korea Out of America's Orbit

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In-depth Report: NORTH KOREA

Featured image: South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un embrace each other after releasing a joint statement at the truce village of Panmunjeom, Friday. / Korea Summit Press Pool

It didn't take much for the leaders of the two Koreas to put an end to the decades-long culture of crisis pervading the Korean Peninsula. With a phone call, a quick drive to the North Korean side of the Demilitarized Zone, and a public embrace, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un emphasized the absurdity of the barrier wedged between a people with a common history, culture and language.

It was the United States' aversion to diplomacy that encouraged Moon and Kim into one another's arms on May 26th, and it may ultimately have been the impetus needed for South Korea to take the lead in ensuring this peace process — a [top priority](#) of the current administration — is a success.

Moon's agreement to meet with Kim so soon after Trump unilaterally called off the Singapore summit was nothing short of an [act of defiance](#) against the US administration, something no South Korean president before him would have had the domestic backing to do.

With images of their embrace broadcast around the world, North Korea's genuine interest in diplomacy became undeniable and the onus was immediately put on the United States to reopen the summit. Failure to do so would throw into stark relief what few politicians, media members or regular South Korean people have been willing to acknowledge — that the United States has been the [most to blame](#) for antipathy between the two Koreas since the Korean War.

Forced to follow suit, Trump eventually declared the summit will go ahead after all. Though his decision should be applauded, the process remains a lengthy one with no clear end in sight — at least not a positive ending — if America alone is permitted to determine its outcome. After all, it is extremely risky to trust the United States, and the North Koreans know it.

America: An Unreliable Diplomatic Partner with a History of Duplicity

The stated aim of this whole process is, of course, peace through North Korean denuclearization — something the US establishment [remains skeptical](#) Kim will ever do. Yet

while the North's commitment to nukes is often stated as the reason why this initiative won't end successfully, in truth it is America's [long-standing policy](#) of North Korean [regime change](#) as well as its overall record of [duplicity](#), [betrayal](#) and general [lawlessness](#) around the world that makes it impossible for Kim to completely believe any security guarantees the Trump administration may offer as the process moves forward.

The most recent examples involving [Libya](#) and [Iran](#) stand as more than enough evidence of this, and North Korea also has its own experience with the US [failing to abide by agreements](#) — particularly when the George W. Bush administration was in power. The provocative [military drill](#) earlier in May and the [aggressive rhetoric](#) of [top US officials](#) over the past few weeks leading up to the summit cancellation only served to highlight that the US establishment may be wholly disinterested in making a fair deal and sticking to it.

It therefore makes [no sense](#) for Kim Jong-un to simply lay down his nuclear shield for what are likely to be ephemeral security and economic guarantees from the US that can be [canceled](#) or obstructed on a whim by a future hostile administration or congress. And if the reaction of the [establishment media](#) to the diplomatic process is any indication of a Washington consensus, there's no reason for North Korea to think any deal dependent on the long-term commitment of the United States will stand the test of time.

So even though the peace process will go nowhere if America is to be the Great Decider, it is safe to assume that Kim Jong-un [isn't just doing this for a lark](#). Conditions have changed internationally and on the Korean Peninsula since North Korea's last serious attempt to come in from the cold. Internationally, Kim must be aware that America is [bleeding out its influence](#) around the world — a fact that is increasingly obvious as economically [powerful nations](#) that normally go along with American sanctions begin to [push back](#) when it hurts their own economies. At the same time — and more critically — North Korea finally has a negotiating partner in South Korea that has an unprecedented ability and apparent inclination (proven by Moon and Kim's impromptu second meeting) to be an independent actor in the peace process.

The Path to the Impossible: How Peace Became an Option in South Korea

The president of South Korea completely flipped the script by agreeing to meet Kim on the North Korean side of the DMZ on May 26th. In doing so, he proved to the South Korean people that they no longer have to passively accept the foreign policy whims of the United States. As a result, South Koreans woke up to the prospects of peace after going to bed [frustrated, disappointed and concerned](#) due to Trump's abrupt cancellation of the summit.

Moon has been empowered by the rapidly changing political dynamics in South Korea. The [entire sequence](#) of diplomatic events between the two Koreas leading up to the significant meeting on May 26th would have been [purely unthinkable](#) little more than a year ago. After all, Moon is the president that wouldn't have been had the right-wing Park Geun-hye not been [impeached](#) in March last year.

As Park Geun-hye's [bizarrely](#) and [ineptly corrupt](#) administration collapsed upon itself, it [brought down](#) with it the entire political establishment that dominated politics in the country [since the age of military dictatorship](#) — an establishment [intimately aligned](#) with the United States. The crimes of Park's predecessor, the [hawkish](#) Lee Myung-bak, were also later [exposed](#) and he too now sits behind bars waiting for sentencing. With the anti-North Korean

old guard suddenly rendered to the [fringes of politics](#), the younger generation has begun to take control of its political fate and won't be fooled by the classic [red-baiting tactics](#) of the past.

Moon Jae-in easily won the subsequent [2017 presidential election](#) and has enjoyed a [remarkably high](#) approval rating so far, particularly since the peace process began. The right wing is [divided](#), conquered and completely [irrelevant](#). A high number of South Koreans say they [trust the motives of Kim Jong-un](#) and so many [approve](#) of the peace process that at least one local politician affiliated with Moon's party is using it [as a backdrop](#) to his campaign in the upcoming local elections. It wouldn't be a stretch to suggest Moon might just have the most backing a democratically elected leader has ever had to fulfill a key administrative goal — and there are four years remaining on his term. He will need to use every bit of this leverage to see the peace process to a successful end.

Peace Requires South Korean Independence

With the hyenas from within put down, the South Korean president may now focus on the enemies of peace from without — the United States military establishment and, in particular, officials like [John Bolton](#) at the very top of a Trump administration that bears an [increasingly](#) striking [resemblance](#) to that of George W. Bush.

It was the latter administration that oversaw the destruction of the last [nuclear agreement](#), a development that [convinced the North](#) to go nuclear and nixed the Sunshine Policy peace initiative Moon played a part in as [chief presidential secretary](#) to former president Roh Moo-hyun. President Moon is therefore very aware of what he is up against.

While Moon's political backing at home will protect his flank, inter-Korean cooperation will serve as the vanguard as the South Korean president advances against these enemies of peace. It's still early days, but a nascent web of trust is being woven between the Koreas that will be increasingly difficult to break. They won't stop working together simply because Trump or other American officials say they shouldn't.

The two Koreas can therefore collaborate to keep the US at the table with a dogged willingness to ignore or overcome the many challenges likely to be mounted by the American establishment — just as they did with the recent meeting in the DMZ. In doing so, they will eliminate any pretext for the US to drop out of the peace process without alienating the South.

The actions of the Trump administration around the world admittedly suggest it cares little about [angering allies](#) by starting [trade wars](#) or [incentivizing them](#) to [strengthen](#) their diplomatic and economic ties with supposed American rivals. Yet there may come a point where enough dominant voices in Trump's inner circle recognize that axing the peace process could push South Korea — a crucial foothold in America's [mission](#) to [militarily encircle](#) China — too far beyond US influence for comfort.

Still, even if the US remains sincere, it will take ironclad security guarantees to convince North Korea to denuclearize, as Russian President Vladimir Putin rightly [stated](#) in late May. This is where South Korea must take the lead.

A good start might be the South Korean government publicly declaring that, not only does South Korea decide when war happens on the Korean Peninsula (as Moon [already asserted](#)

last September), its military will never be a part of a preemptive strike on North Korea, and no future invasion of North Korea will be permitted from South Korean soil. They might also unilaterally ban all future [military drills](#) near the inter-Korean border that have [threatened](#) Korean stability in the past.

All of these guarantees will require significant changes to the current relationship between the South Korean and American militaries, something Moon can carry through by taking advantage of his political clout at home. He can also use his domestic leverage to work around the US and encourage multilateral security initiatives with China and Russia that, taken as a package, could serve as insurance for North Korea if, or when, the US fails to live up to its side of any future deal.

Could America Backing Out be the Path to True Korean Independence?

However, given the hawkish and domineering nature of the US administration, it seems just as likely that they will refuse anything short of outright North Korean capitulation and eventually back out of talks.

This wouldn't have to be the end of the game though, because doing so would only confirm to South Koreans that they have little further to be gained by marrying their security to the imperial agenda of the United States. A resulting surge in anti-American sentiment and the continued desire for peace among the South Korean electorate could set the stage for a divorce from America that President Moon alone has the power to lead.

If the US attempts to punish South Korea for their peace initiative and Moon carries his level of public support to a majority victory in the 2020 national assembly elections, it could result in a dramatic departure from America's shadow — perhaps even the nullification of the US-Korean alliance and the banishing of US troops from South Korean soil.

This may sound like pure fantasy, but consider the possibility that peace with North Korea is Moon's [lifelong goal](#) and something to which he has devoted much of his political career. He already [expressed the position](#) during his presidential campaign that South Korea "...should adopt diplomacy in which it can discuss a US request and say no to the Americans." His [statement](#) at the first inter-Korean summit in the DMZ on April 26th was an even more explicit acknowledgment that the Koreas may inevitably be forced to go it alone for peace:

"Today we have dispersed the dark clouds of war from the Korean Peninsula and opened a new path to peace, prosperity and unification. Though we must move forward with the support and cooperation of the international community, **we have both agreed that it is South and North Korea who must take the lead in deciding the fate of the Korean people. We also both agree that the historic duty to create a new global order rests with us.**" *(quote translated by author)

Moon may therefore be ready and willing if there comes a point when South Korea is forced to actively work against the US and seek additional help from other emerging global powers to push diplomacy with the North forward.

South Korea's drift outside America's orbit could also be expedited by an increasingly desperate US establishment lashing out as it loses its hold on the peace process and South Korea, further exposing itself as a malign force in Northeast Asia.

This would merely be an acceleration of a natural development required of South Korea in the long term. China is by far South Korea's [number one](#) export market (accounting for twice the volume of trade to the US) and its greatest source of tourism revenue. It is becoming [increasingly untenable](#) for the South, with a military [still under the command](#) of the US in wartime, to continue serving as a bastion in the American [containment of China](#). The US standing in the way of the peace process could be enough to wake up South Koreans to the inevitability of their situation.

The anti-peace right-wing suddenly lost its grip on South Korean politics due to the ineptitude and corruption of the Park Geun-hye administration. In the same sense, the Trump administration appears to be accelerating the decline of American influence around the world with its heavy-handed approach to diplomacy and trade policy. If this trend continues on the Korean Peninsula, the peace process may end up being the most significant chapter yet in the decline of the American empire.

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