

## **A Logical Friendship: The South Korea-United States Relationship<sup>1</sup>**

*By: Benjamin Zimmer*

*Benjamin Zimmer is a recent Master of International Affairs graduate from The Bush School of Government at Texas A&M University where he focuses on East Asia. He is the creator of The Korea Page: News and Analysis from the Korean Peninsula and is interested in Korean politics and security issues. His writings have appeared in The Peninsula Report, Charged Affairs, and The North Korean Review Journal Online. He can be found on twitter at [@bzimmer8](https://twitter.com/bzimmer8)*

On April 1, 2020, South Korean workers for the United States Forces Korea started to face furloughs as Seoul and Washington failed to reach a defense cost sharing agreement. Since November of 2019, the United States-South Korea alliance has been tense. This rise in tensions is due to Washington's pressuring South Korea to pay more for stationing American troops in country and to settle Seoul's regional dispute with Japan. Despite a rise in tensions over the past few months, it is within the best interests of the United States to maintain a strong relationship—both military and economic—with South Korea.

This paper is broken down into four sections. First, it will establish the benefits of a strong alliance with South Korea. Then it will briefly examine the issues causing tensions in the alliance and their historical roots. Third, it will turn to opportunities recent tensions provide for regional adversaries, mainly North Korea and China. Finally, it will close by offering policy recommendations for maintaining a strong, beneficial alliance with South Korea.

### **A Beneficial Partnership**

Historically, the United States' alliance with South Korea was a military alliance centered around a threat: North Korea. Initially, the United States sought to restrain South Korea's first president Syngman Rhee from attacking North Korea.<sup>2</sup> Between 1950 and 1953, the United States led a military coalition to fend off an invasion from Pyongyang. This military background shaped the creation of the Combined Forces Command Korea and the United States Forces Korea, which, to this day, continue to play an important role in the maintenance of the alliance.

Over time, however, the relationship has evolved beyond military matters. In 2009, the two countries signed the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS). Since taking effect, the KORUS agreement has created a fairer trading environment by cutting tariff barriers, acting as a growth mechanism for jobs, and slashing the bilateral trade deficit by 68%.<sup>3</sup> The KORUS agreement also resulted in an increase of trade between Seoul and Washington. Between 2012 and 2019, total trade between Korea and America rose from \$102 billion to \$135 billion while American auto exports to South Korea rose over 200%.<sup>4</sup> Without a doubt, a strong alliance with South Korea has and will continue to provide strong economic benefits.

---

<sup>1</sup> This piece has been updated and greatly expanded since its original publication. For the original, see Benjamin Zimmer, "Pressuring Friends: Recent Developments in the ROK-US Alliance," *Charged Affairs*, January 27, 2020, <https://chargedaffairs.org/pressuring-friends-recent-developments-in-the-rok-us-alliance/>.

<sup>2</sup> For a historical overview of the US-ROK alliance, see Victor D Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 94–121.

<sup>3</sup> Kadee Russ, Deborah Swenson, and Kelly Stangl, "The Economics of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement," *Econofact* (blog), November 6, 2017, <https://econofact.org/the-economics-of-the-korea-u-s-free-trade-agreement>.

<sup>4</sup> Data for the dollar amounts was taken from the UN Comtrade database accessed on May 19, 2020. See also: "Benefits of the KORUS FTA for the U.S." *U.S. Korea Connect*, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.uskoreacconnect.org/benefits-of-korea-us-fta/>

A strong relationship with South Korea also has security benefits outside of the economic realm. First, the American alliance with South Korea promotes regional stability by deterring an attack from North Korea. Economically, by preventing the breakout of a second Korean war, the alliance saves the United States upwards of \$2 trillion.<sup>5</sup> Not only does deterring North Korea benefit Washington economically, it also opens Seoul to the benefits of American-led stability based on common values. This provides the United States with a comprehensive partner that can promote stability based on American democratic values throughout East Asia.<sup>6</sup>

However, as Michael O’Hanlon wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, the alliance “transcends specific threats from North Korea, Russia, or any other hostile power” within East Asia.<sup>7</sup> Today, a strong partnership with South Korea provides room for a convergence of foreign policy objectives beyond the Korean peninsula. For example, Seoul has either invested or exported over \$12.5 billion in military hardware to American allies in the Indo-Pacific while also committing around \$6.2 billion in overseas development aid to those same allies.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, South Korea committed an anti-piracy unit to the Strait of Hormuz after the United States called for assistance protecting oil tankers within the region. This convergence gives Washington a greater ability to pursue and protect its foreign policy interests throughout other parts of the world.

### **Tensions in the Alliance**

The Trump administration, since coming to office, has explicitly expressed its commitment to South Korea as an ally, at times reassuring policy makers in Seoul. During a tour of Asia in 2017, Trump expressed a united front with Korean President Moon Jae-in in a speech delivered to South Korea’s national assembly.<sup>9</sup> In June 2019, Trump visited South Korea to reaffirm Washington’s commitment to “an unwavering friend and a loyal ally.”<sup>10</sup> On the surface, the Trump administration’s strategy regarding Korea is to maintain a strong allegiance and present a united front on critical issues such as deterring North Korea.

Since November 2019, however, several issues—defense cost sharing and the status of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) in particular—have increased tensions within the alliance and have made it more difficult for both Washington and Seoul to coordinate foreign policy objectives.

First is the issue of defense cost sharing and the stationing of American troops on the Korean peninsula. Article 4 of the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and South Korea granted Washington “the right to dispose United States land, air, and sea forces in and about the

---

<sup>5</sup> Kyle Ferrier, “Monetizing the Linchpin: Trump’s Foreign Policy Versus the U.S.-Korea Alliance’s Value to Washington,” *Korean Economic Institute of America Special Paper*, December 5, 2019, p. 2, [http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei\\_monitoring\\_the\\_linchpin\\_191205.pdf](http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/kei_monitoring_the_linchpin_191205.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> “Excerpt: The US-South Korea Alliance,” *The Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-us-south-korea-alliance>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael O’Hanlon, “Is the U.S.-South Korea Alliance Worth It?,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-the-u-s-south-korea-alliance-worth-it-1528152773>.

<sup>8</sup> Ferrier, “Monetizing the Linchpin,” p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Nyshka Chandran, “Trump Warns North Korea About Making a ‘Fatal Miscalculation,’” *CNBC*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/07/donald-trump-speaks-in-south-korea.html>

<sup>10</sup> “President Donald J. Trump is Strengthening Our Historic Alliance with the Republic of Korea,” *The White House*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-strengthening-historic-alliance-republic-korea/>

territory of the Republic of Korea as determined by mutual agreement.”<sup>11</sup> Since 1966, American troops have been stationed in Korea under the Status of American Forces in Korea. South Korea began to directly support deployment of American troops with monetary contributions in 1989 with the first multi-year cost sharing agreement signed in 1991.<sup>12</sup> Since the conclusion of the first agreement, South Korea’s contributions have increased around 5% with each renegotiation.<sup>13</sup>

Since taking office, President Trump has viewed these agreements as a net loss for the United States and has called for massive increases in South Korean contributions. Early in February 2019, South Korea agreed to increase its contribution by 8.2% to \$925 million for the year with a promise to renegotiate the agreement at the end of the year.<sup>14</sup> Nine months later, however, the Trump administration demanded South Korea pay \$5 billion a year for continued American troop presence on the peninsula. The demand represented a 500% increase in South Korean payments from the previous year.<sup>15</sup> As South Korea pushed back, the United States simply walked out of the negotiations, claiming that South Korea was unresponsive to American demands. On the other hand, South Korean negotiators implied the United States was simply being inflexible in its position.<sup>16</sup> Since the breakdown of negotiations, the two countries have yet to come to an agreement.

The second recent pressure point within the alliance is American attempts at mediating South Korea’s recent tussle with Japan. In November of last year, the United States called on South Korea to reconsider its position on the termination of GSOMIA, a bilateral agreement on the sharing of military intelligence between South Korea and Japan. South Korea refused.<sup>17</sup> Following the decision, Korean media lauded it and called on the government to continue resisting American demands regarding GSOMIA until relations with Japan improve.<sup>18</sup>

Termination of the GSOMIA is part of a broader range of disputes between Japan and South Korea, mainly centered around the Japanese military’s use of forced labor and comfort women from South Korea during World War Two. In 1965, Tokyo and Seoul signed the Treaty of Basic

<sup>11</sup> “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea,” Signed October 1, 1953, *United States Forces Korea*,

[https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H\\_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty\\_1953.pdf](https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty_1953.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Jin-young Chung, “Cost Sharing for USFK in Transition: Whither the ROK-US Alliance,” Chapter 3 in Donald W. Boose, Jr., Balbina Y. Hwang, Patrick Morgan, and Andrew Scobell eds., *Recalibrating the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance*, (Carlisle: U.S Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> “ROK and US Reach Agreement on 10<sup>th</sup> Special Measures Agreement,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*, February 10, 2019, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=320383](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=320383)

<sup>14</sup> Choe Sang-hun, “U.S. and South Korea Sign Deal on Shared Defense Costs,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/10/world/asia/us-south-korea-military-costs.html?auth=login-email&login=email>. See also: United States Department of State, “Special Measures Agreement: Agreement Between the United States of America and Republic of Korea and Implementation Agreement,” Signed March 8, 2019, *Treaties and Other International Acts Series* no. 19-405, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/19-405-Korea-SMA.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> “방위비 분담금 협상 이틀째...美, 5배 인상 요구 고수,” *YTN*, November 19, 2019, [https://www.ytn.co.kr/\\_ln/0101\\_201911191101164466](https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0101_201911191101164466).

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Kuhn, “As Tensions Rise Over Defense Costs, U.S. Walks Out Of Talks With South Korea,” *NPR*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/19/780760208/as-tensions-rise-over-defense-costs-u-s-walks-out-of-talks-with-south-korea>.

<sup>17</sup> 유용원 and 이민석, “文대통령, 미국 면전에서 ‘지소미아’ 거부,” *조선일보*, November 16, 2019, [https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2019/11/16/2019111600073.html](https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2019/11/16/2019111600073.html).

<sup>18</sup> 김명일, “지소미아 종료 D-1, 연장 총공세 나선 미·일...한반도 운명 가를 하루 (종합),” *한국경제*, November 21, 2019, <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/201911212601H>.

Relations as well as an agreement outlining the settlement of historic issues, including over \$300 million in reparations for surviving comfort women.<sup>19</sup> Another agreement in 2015 between Korea and Japan outlined further steps toward a final solution for Japan's past transgressions.<sup>20</sup> However, many South Koreans, including those who favor the ruling party, demure that these agreements are final due to the pressure exerted by the United States from behind the scenes.<sup>21</sup> Seoul wishes to settle historical issues with Japan in a bilateral format and the recent kerfuffle regarding GSOMIA was no different.

### Regional Responses

Regional actors such as China and North Korea could potentially exploit these rifts to advance their own national interests. For example, North Korea's regional strategy is built on cutting off the American-South Korean relationship to bring down South Korea.<sup>22</sup> A natural split greatly enhances Kim Jung-un's ability to gain unilateral concessions on denuclearization from either South Korea and/or the United States. Kim will likely work to play Seoul and Washington off each other, using the recent pressure points as bait, to gain strong concessions for minor steps toward denuclearization. In short, a weak alliance greatly hinders the ability of regional actors to pursue the denuclearization of North Korea.

China, on the other hand, can exploit the situation by offering South Korea a seemingly more stable and reliable partner in the region. First, the withdrawal of American influence and presence from South Korea provides China greater access to an already large economic market.<sup>23</sup> Second, American withdrawal leaves Beijing as the greatest force pushing for the denuclearization of North Korea in the region. Therefore, Beijing will have the economic and political leverage to shape the geopolitical landscape of East Asia in a way that greatly minimizes the influence of American liberal values and institutions throughout the whole region.

### Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Though recent actions have exacerbated tensions, it is imperative that the United States and South Korea work together to resolve these issues. A key first step was South Korea's decision to reverse the termination of GSOMIA last November.<sup>24</sup> South Korea's step worked to restore

<sup>19</sup> "Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and The Republic of Korea," Signed June 22, 1965, *United Nations Treaty Series* no. 8471, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf>; "Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation (With Protocols, Exchanges of Notes and Agreed Minutes)," Signed June 22, 1965, *United Nations Treaty Series* no. 8473, p. 258, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8473-English.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Yuki Tatsumi, "Japan, South Korea Reach Agreement on 'Comfort Women,'" *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/japan-south-korea-reach-agreement-on-comfort-women/>.

<sup>21</sup> Daniel C. Sneider, Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya, "U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation," *National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report* no. 59, (July 2016), p. 4, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/special\\_report\\_59\\_trilateralism\\_july2016.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/special_report_59_trilateralism_july2016.pdf); 정재정, "한일 역사 과거, 현재... 그리고 새로운 관계를 향하여," *대한민국 정책브리핑*, September 9, 2019, <http://www.korea.kr/news/contributePolicyView.do?newsId=148864499>.

<sup>22</sup> 김동표, "한·미·일 이간책... 北김일성 '갓끈 전술' 현실화," *아시아경제*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.asiae.co.kr/article/2019082312114862089>.

<sup>23</sup> In 2017, 25% of South Korean exports went to China while 21% of imports originated from China, more than any other country, including the United States. "South Korea," *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kor/>.

<sup>24</sup> Koya Jibiki and Kim Jaewon, "South Korea Reverses Decision to End GSOMIA Intel Pact with Japan," *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 22, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Japan-South-Korea-rift/South-Korea-reverses->

the trilateral relationship between South Korea, Japan, and the United States. It also maintained a key mechanism for the three countries to coordinate responses to North Korean provocations. The United States can capitalize on the momentum provided by this decision by working to create a bilateral dialogue between South Korea and Japan that resolves their deeper historical issues.

Now, the United States must work with South Korea to come to an agreement on the defense cost sharing issue. Critical to this is resuming negotiations. In the next round of negotiations, the United States must back off its demand of \$5 billion and work towards a more reasonable compromise with South Korea. The Trump administration must also show that the increased amount can be used fully for alliance maintenance; as of now, just over \$1 billion of South Korean contributions remains unused. Finally, the Trump administration must remove more unconventional budget items from their proposal and focus on using South Korean contributions to cover the local costs of stationing troops in South Korea.<sup>25</sup>

The United States clearly benefits from its alliance with and presence in South Korea. And a weak alliance provides room for regional adversaries to increase their ability to erode the benefits by taking over a larger market and weaponizing the points of contention. By working with South Korea to resolve historical disputes with Japan and restore the multi-year defense cost sharing agreements, the United State can continue to reap the benefits of the alliance and show its continued commitment to peace in East Asia.

---

decision-to-end-GSOMIA-intel-pact-with-Japan.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Jeong, "To Make Korea Pay More for Security, Trump Has to Show His Shopping List," *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-make-korea-pay-more-for-security-trump-has-to-show-his-shopping-list-11578393004>.

## **Bibliography**

### English Source Material:

- “Agreement on the Settlement of Problems Concerning Property and Claims and on Economic Co-operation (With Protocols, Exchanges of Notes and Agreed Minutes).” Signed June 22, 1965. *United Nations Treaty Series* no. 8473, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8473-English.pdf>.
- “Benefits of the KORUS FTA for the U.S.” *U.S. Korea Connect*. accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.uskoreconnect.org/benefits-of-korea-us-fta/>.
- Cha, Victor D. *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Chandran, Nyshka. “Trump Warns North Korea About Making a ‘Fatal Miscalculation.’” *CNBC*. November 7, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/07/donald-trump-speaks-in-south-korea.html>.
- Choe Sang-hun. “U.S. and South Korea Sign Deal on Shared Defense Costs.” *New York Times*. February 10, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/10/world/asia/us-south-korea-military-costs.html?auth=login-email&login=email>.
- Chung, Jin-young. “Cost Sharing for USFK in Transition: Whither the ROK-US Alliance.” Chapter 3 in Donald W. Boose, Jr., Balbina Y. Hwang, Patrick Morgan, and Andrew Scobell eds. *Recalibrating the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance*. Carlisle: U.S Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2003.
- “Excerpt: The US-South Korea Alliance.” *The Council on Foreign Relations*. Accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-us-south-korea-alliance>.
- Jeong, Andrew. “To Make Korea Pay More for Security, Trump Has to Show His Shopping List.” *Wall Street Journal*. January 7, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-make-korea-pay-more-for-security-trump-has-to-show-his-shopping-list-11578393004>.
- Jibiki, Koya and Kim Jaewon. “South Korea Reverses Decision to End GSOMIA Intel Pact with Japan.” *Nikkei Asian Review*. November 22, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Japan-South-Korea-rift/South-Korea-reverses-decision-to-end-GSOMIA-intel-pact-with-Japan>.
- Kuhn, Anthony. “As Tensions Rise Over Defense Costs, U.S. Walks Out of Talks with South Korea.” *NPR*. November 19, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/19/780760208/as-tensions-rise-over-defense-costs-u-s-walks-out-of-talks-with-south-korea>.
- “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea.” Signed October 1, 1953. *United States Forces Korea*. [https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H\\_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty\\_1953.pdf](https://www.usfk.mil/Portals/105/Documents/SOFA/H_Mutual%20Defense%20Treaty_1953.pdf).
- O’ Hanlon, Michael. “Is the U.S.-South Korea Alliance Worth It?” *Wall Street Journal*. June 4, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-the-u-s-south-korea-alliance-worth-it-1528152773>.
- “President Donald J. Trump is Strengthening Our Historic Alliance with the Republic of Korea.” *The White House*. June 28, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-strengthening-historic-alliance-republic-korea/>.
- “ROK and US Reach Agreement on 10<sup>th</sup> Special Measures Agreement.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea*. February 10, 2019, [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=320383](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=320383).

- Russ, Kadee, Deborah Swenson, and Kelly Stangl. “The Economics of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.” *Econofact*. November 6, 2017, <https://econofact.org/the-economics-of-the-korea-u-s-free-trade-agreement>.
- Sneider, Daniel C. Yul Sohn, and Yoshihide Soeya, “U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateralism: Building Bridges and Strengthening Cooperation.” *National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report* no. 59. July 2016, [https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/special\\_report\\_59\\_trilateralism\\_july2016.pdf](https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/special_report_59_trilateralism_july2016.pdf).
- “South Korea.” *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*. accessed May 28, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kor/>.
- Tatsumi, Yuki. “Japan, South Korea Reach Agreement on ‘Comfort Women’,” *The Diplomat*, December 28, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/japan-south-korea-reach-agreement-on-comfort-women/>.
- “Treaty on Basic Relations Between Japan and The Republic of Korea.” Signed June 22, 1965. *United Nations Treaty Series* no. 8471, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20583/volume-583-I-8471-English.pdf>.
- United States Department of State. “Special Measures Agreement: Agreement Between the United States of America and Republic of Korea and Implementation Agreement.” Signed March 8, 2019. *Treaties and Other International Acts Series* no. 19-405, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/19-405-Korea-SMA.pdf>.
- Zimmer, Benjamin. “Pressuring Friends: Recent Developments in the ROK-US Alliance.” *Charged Affairs*, January 27, 2020, <https://chargedaffairs.org/pressuring-friends-recent-developments-in-the-rok-us-alliance/>.

#### Korean Source Material:

- 김동표. “한·미·일 이간책...北김일성 ‘갓끈 전술’ 현실화.” *아시아경제*. August 23, 2019, <https://www.asiae.co.kr/article/2019082312114862089>.
- 김명일. “지소미아 종료 D-1, 연장 총공세 나선 미·일...한반도 운명 가를 하루 (종합).” *한국경제*. November 21, 2019, <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/201911212601H>.
- “방위비 분담금 협상 이틀째...美, 5 배 인상 요구 고수.” *YTN*. November 19, 2019, [https://www.ytn.co.kr/\\_ln/0101\\_201911191101164466](https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0101_201911191101164466).
- 유용원 and 이민석. “文대통령, 미국 면전에서 ‘지소미아’ 거부.” *조선일보*. November 16, 2019, [https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2019/11/16/2019111600073.html](https://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2019/11/16/2019111600073.html).
- 정재정. “한일 역사 괴거, 현재...그리고 새로운 관계를 향하여.” *대한민국 정책브리핑*. September 9, 2019, <http://www.korea.kr/news/contributePolicyView.do?newsId=148864499>.