

## **Re-Examining the Viability of the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Can the Alliance Survive the 'Illiberal Hegemony' of the Trump Era?**

**Sera Yun<sup>1</sup>**

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*The portfolio of foreign policies under the Trump administration has been characterized by a marked departure from liberal to “illiberal” hegemony as well as severance from the traditional pillars of liberal internationalism, testified by the President’s commitment to an ‘America First’ principle. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the extent of influence that such illiberality has generated on the two nations’ foreign policies and evaluates the degree of threat that such policy divergences pose on the survivability of the decades-long ROK-U.S. alliance. The paper uses cross-comparisons, statistical inferences, geopolitical considerations, and realist assumptions to argue that: despite the perceivable divergences within the ROK-U.S. alliance, its current strategic importance and foreseeable benefits outweigh the illiberal nature of the U.S. hegemony. In the context of an increasingly illiberal world order, this paper posits that strategic alliances cannot and should not rely on the ‘liberal benevolence’ of the other party. Instead, to maintain and strengthen the resiliency and strategic nature of the alliance, parties should continually investigate the sources of their differences and seek for more comprehensive cooperation to bridge gaps. Given the relatively unexplored concept of illiberal hegemony under President Trump and its impact on America’s traditional allies in Northeast Asia, such as South Korea, this paper contributes to current literature by providing a better understanding of the nature, dynamics, and future prospects of alliances in the region.*

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**Keywords:** Illiberal hegemony, ROK-U.S. alliance, United States, South Korea, strategic positioning, Trump, Moon, security, Northeast Asia.

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## Introduction

Over the course of the Third Summit between South Korea and the United States of America, held at the Blue House on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, President Donald J. Trump and President Moon Jae-in emphasized the steadfastness of the ROK-U.S. alliance several times.<sup>2</sup> Since its inception in 1953 following the end of the Korean War, the alliance between the two countries has served as a key mechanism for facilitating the security cooperation of the Northeast Asia (NE) region. Within the context of the growing threat of North Korea's nuclearization, the ROK-U.S. alliance is as important as ever. Yet, despite active efforts by both countries to portray their bilateral relationship as strong and consistent, the two allies are perhaps facing one of the most fraught moments in the history of their friendship. Tensions can be attributed first and foremost to the change in leadership of both countries – President Trump and President Moon entered office in 2016 and 2017, respectively. To complicate matters further, the emergence of an “illiberal” hegemony under Trump has dramatically transformed America's foreign policy in NE Asia. This transition, coupled with a rapidly changing regional security environment that will test the ROK-U.S. alliance, will be the focal point of this paper's analysis.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is four-fold. First, it analyzes the elements of illiberal hegemony and performs a comparative analysis of its influence vis-à-vis the direction of the Trump and Moon administrations, focusing on two main foreign policies: 1) the resolution towards the denuclearization of North Korea; and 2) the coordinated response to China's rise. Secondly, based on findings regarding the various types and depths of existing policy divergences, it measures the degree of the threat they pose on the internal strategic alignment of the alliance via three criteria. It also probes the effect of external and structural changes, such as the recent shift in the geopolitical landscape of the NE Asia region, on determining the likelihood of such divergences manifesting into a real threat to the alliance.

Thirdly, the paper draws from statistical inferences, the geopolitical implications of state actions and policies, and a

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<sup>2</sup> Bo-hyeop Kim and Ji-won Noh, “Presidents Trump and Moon emphasize “steadfastness” of South Korea-US alliance,” *Hankyoreh*, November 8, 2017, accessed November 4, 2018, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/818067.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/818067.html).

comprehensive understanding on the ideological, financial, and security interests at stake to conclude that the illiberal nature of the U.S. hegemony under Trump is neither sufficient, nor antithetical, to the continued strategic strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Finally, based on these analyses and findings, the paper briefly probes a potential set of shared and individual areas of consideration for the U.S. and South Korea to maintain or strengthen their respective strategic positions in the alliance. Improving their roles as partners will ensure the resiliency and longevity of the alliance in times of adversity.

To these ends, the paper utilizes the classic international relations theory of realism to ground its argumentation, employing concepts such as balance of power and containment, as well as the assumption of a state's pursuit of national interests and self-preservation, among other realist calculi, to assess the strategic survivability of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The paper also draws heavily from government publications, contemporaneous media sources, and policy recommendations from international affairs experts to derive theoretical, empirical, and up-to-date insights on the recent course of geopolitical events in the region pertinent to the ROK-U.S. alliance. In particular, this paper borrows from the perspectives of scholars and practitioners like Scott A. Snyder and Victor Cha to further strengthen its academic relevance to ongoing scholarly discussions.

## **Changes in the ROK-U.S. Alliance Under Trump and Moon**

### *Departure from 'Liberal' to 'Illiberal' Hegemony*

From the campaign trail to the inauguration, the Trump administration has vowed to put an end to America's decades-long commitment to globalism. With 'America First' as the guiding principle of his administration's foreign policy, Trump has denigrated key multilateral and neoliberal bodies that America had traditionally overseen to maintain the liberal world order, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, to name a few. As an extension of this principle, he abandoned the historic Paris Agreement (for perceived economic disadvantages to the U.S. economy) and renounced the centerpiece of Obama's strategic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region by withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He further launched an aggressive re-negotiation of America's free trade agreements, including the North American Free

Trade Agreement and the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, declaring his pursuit of transactional relations, even with allies.<sup>3</sup> This series of departures from the conventional institutions and values of the liberal world order hint at Trump's severance from the major pillars of liberal internationalism, drawing a stark contrast with America's grand strategy characterized by liberal hegemony. This traditional strategy, lionized by both the Democrats and Republicans alike since the close of the Cold War, determined to preserve the United States position as the most powerful hegemon in the world. Liberal hegemony was achieved and maintained, for decades, through liberal mechanisms – the U.S. transformed the international system into a rules-based order regulated by multilateral institutions and exporting market-oriented democracy under the realm of free trade.<sup>4</sup> Trump's unconventional actions, therefore, have prompted fears among allies that America is destined for an inward turn and an abandonment of its long-held leadership role in the international arena.<sup>5</sup>

A closer inspection of Trump's portfolio of foreign policies, however, indicates that this is not the case. Although Trump has echoed the language of pre-World War II isolationists, his security policy has remained concretely hegemonic in nature; in fact, it can be argued that it is even more ambitious than previous administrations. Observations over the last two years make it increasingly apparent that Trump is no isolationist: the administration's bellicosity with North Korea led the country to the brink of war in 2017, the President has engaged in two high profile summits with one of the world's most notorious dictators, Kim Jong Un, and there has been a marked uptick in U.S. combat operations worldwide. Rather, Trump has simply deviated from America's traditional grand strategy. Breaking from his predecessors, Trump has taken the liberalism out of liberal hegemony. Whereas Trump still seeks to retain America's superior economic and military capabilities, he has chosen to forgo the liberal elements and mechanisms characteristic of U.S. hegemony until now.

Instead, the focus of America's hegemony has shifted toward aggrandizing hard power and emphasizing the U.S. military posture

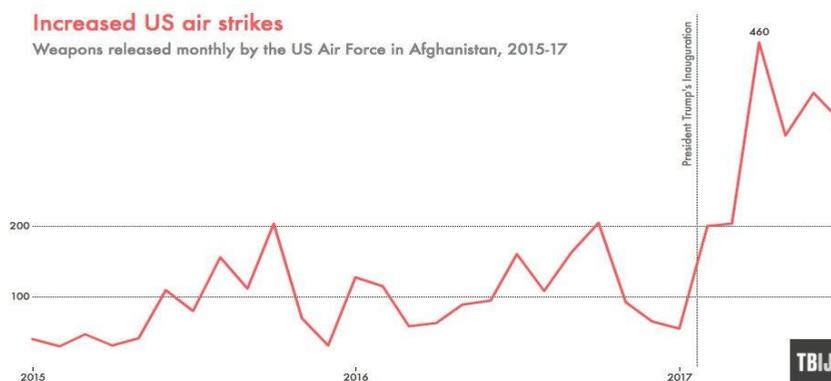
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<sup>3</sup> Barry R. Posen, "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2018), accessed December 2, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-13/rise-illiberal-hegemony>.

<sup>4</sup> Posen. "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy."

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

through modernization of hardware, troops, and high-tech weaponry.<sup>6</sup> As figures 1 and 2 demonstrate, the Trump administration has pursued ongoing wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan, with more resources than his predecessors, and increased air strikes against jihadist fundamentalist groups in Somalia and the Islamic State in Yemen at a level not witnessed since 2012.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, in April 2017, in response to evidence that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, President Trump ordered a U.S. naval strike against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in retaliation for violating a chemical weapons agreement.<sup>8</sup> What many confuse as a contradiction between the proposed inwardness of the 'America First' principle and the empirical aggression of Trump's foreign policies, in reality, bespeaks the emergence of an entirely new U.S. grand strategy: one where the U.S. acts as an 'illiberal hegemon'.



**Figure 1.** Increased U.S. Air Strikes after President Trump's Inauguration, based on weapons released monthly by the U.S. Air Force in Afghanistan, 2015-17. Source: U.S. Air Force Central Command.

America's transition from liberal to illiberal hegemony, however, is not totally unsurprising. The U.S. has suffered relative geopolitical and economic decline within the liberal world order for years. America's share of global GDP, for example, has shrunk from 40% in 1960 to 22% as of today.<sup>9</sup> This decline draws a stark contrast with its greatest threat, China, which has witnessed an unprecedented increase in its political,

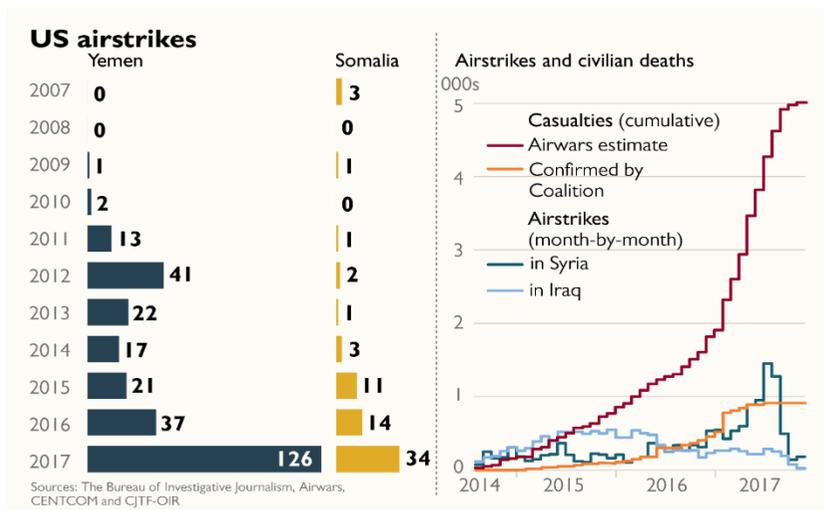
<sup>6</sup> Ashley Smith, "Illiberal hegemony: The Trump administration strategy for US Imperialism," *International Socialist Review* 109, (2018), accessed October 31, 2018, <https://isreview.org/issue/109/illiberal-hegemony-trump-administration-strategy-us-imperialism>.

<sup>7</sup> Posen. "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

economic, and military power. China is projected to surpass the U.S. in several important metrics of power in less than a decade, and most others by 2050. In addition to Washington’s failure to build stable democratic governments in Afghanistan and Iraq, many of the world’s bastions of democracy, such as members of NATO, are experiencing far-right populist movements and turning increasingly inward, to boot. With neither China nor Russia showing any sign of submitting to the U.S.-led liberal order, along with new waves of nationalism, sectarianism, protectionism, and populism sweeping across both the developing and developed worlds, the Washington Consensus is undergoing a crisis that calls for a new geopolitical strategy.<sup>10</sup> The next part of this paper will comparatively analyze the types and depths of changes under these seismic global shifts, as well as their compatibility with the renewed direction of President Moon, in two main policy areas.



**Figure 2.** Increased U.S. Air Strikes and Civilian Deaths after President Trump’s Inauguration, in Yemen and Somalia. Sources: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Airwars, CENTCOM, and CJTF-OIR.

*Resolution Towards the Denuclearization of North Korea*

Under the leadership of Moon and Trump, South Korea and the U.S. hold fundamentally different perspectives on how to ultimately resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. The most prominent change to America’s North Korea policy under the Trump administration is its

<sup>10</sup> Smith, “Illiberal Hegemony: The Trump Administration Strategy for US Imperialism.”

transition from the Obama-era policy of 'strategic patience' to 'maximum pressure and engagement'. During his visit to Panmunjom in April 2017, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence declared the end of "the era of strategic patience," heralding the Trump administration's new strategy to confront North Korea's expanding nuclear capabilities in a more provocative and consequential manner.<sup>11</sup> As opposed to the Obama-era policy, which used time and sanctions to pressure North Korea to the nuclear negotiating table without the use violence, Vice President Pence stated emphatically that "all options are on the table," including military engagement, such as a preventive strike or even war.<sup>12</sup> The administration was sure to convey that any use of nuclear weapons by North Korea would be met with an "overwhelming and effective response."<sup>13</sup> This drastic increase in America's aggressiveness can be attributed to major developments in North Korea's nuclear program – namely, it is now equipped with an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capable of reaching most parts of the U.S. mainland.<sup>14</sup> This policy transition was cemented shortly after, when tensions flared up as Trump and Kim traded bellicose rhetoric against one another. North Korea threatened to attack the U.S. territory of Guam, to which Trump promised "fire and fury" and "a bloody nose," should North Korea issue any more threats against the U.S.<sup>15</sup>

This conspicuous shift in America's stance on North Korea is a microcosm of Trump's grander transition towards illiberal hegemony. The Trump administration's approach of examining every measure available, including potential war, one that could inflict severe damage on (or even the destruction of) South Korea, draws a stark contrast with Moon's peace-oriented and dialogue-based approach towards North Korea. During his election campaign and inauguration, Moon resolutely pledged that his chief task was to ensure the following two principles: 1) that South Korea will never witness a war on the Korean Peninsula again

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<sup>11</sup> Ken Thomas, "PENCE WARNS NORTH KOREA: 'The era of strategic patience is over,'" *Business Insider*, April 17, 2017, accessed November 29, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-pence-warns-nkorea-era-of-strategic-patience-is-over-2017-4>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Zachary Cohen, Ryan Browne, Nicole Gouette and Taehoon Lee, "New missile test shows North Korea capable of hitting all of US mainland," *CNN Politics*, November 30, 2017, accessed October 15, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/28/politics/north-korea-missile-launch/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Jon di Paolo, "North Korea threatens to strike US territory of Guam after Trump 'fire and fury' warning," *Independent*, August 8, 2017, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/north-korea-us-donald-trump-guam-strike-nuclear-missile-kim-jong-un-a7883516.html>.

and 2) that ‘Korea Passing’, wherein South Korea is sidelined in NE Asian politics and falls victim to any large power’s military engagement, shall be prevented at all costs.<sup>16</sup> During a speech in Berlin on July 6th, 2017, Moon highlighted the importance of peace and cooperation based on mutual respect, pledged to help North Korea obtain support and cooperation from the international community, and stressed the need for both Koreas to be in the “driver’s seat” in regards to inter-Korean relations and eventual reunification.<sup>17</sup>

The tagline of Moon’s peace initiative towards North Korea, ‘co-existence and co-prosperity,’ has, ostensibly, not sat well with some in Washington. The U.S. Secretary of State at the time, Rex Tillerson, noted that North Korea’s current level of nuclear capability is intolerable for the U.S. and must be stopped, even through unilateral measures.<sup>18</sup> Due to the build-up of differences, tensions between the two countries came to a head when Trump accused Moon of “appeasement”, and declared to the United Nations General Assembly that he would “totally destroy” North Korea if it threatened the U.S.<sup>19</sup> This marked a crucial departure in the two leader’s approach to the North Korea issue. The divergence also embodied Trump’s illiberal hegemonic approach to global politics, demarcating itself from the past, when even the most rigid American administrations relied on a combination of consent and coercion to exercise hegemony.<sup>20</sup> The traditional pursuit of balancing U.S. interests – through a mix of soft and hard power – had been replaced by less allied coordination and more saber rattling. While Trump and Moon may have envisioned a sustainable security environment in NE Asia, marked by the complete denuclearization of North Korea, it has become evident that the approach through which the two administrations aspire to achieve it diverge greatly. To what extent does this divergence challenge the viability of a unified ROK-U.S. alliance?

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<sup>16</sup> Hyung-Jin Kim and Tong-Hyung Kim, “South Korea president open to sending special envoy to North Korea,” *USA Today*, August 16, 2017, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/08/16/south-korea-moon-jae-in-north-korea/575208001/>.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Ruediger, “President Moon’s North Korea Strategy,” *The Diplomat*, July 13, 2017, accessed January 9, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/president-moons-north-korea-strategy/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Doug Saunders, “Behind Korean progress on peace, you’ll find the careful strategies of President Moon,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 27, 2018, accessed January 8, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-behind-korean-progress-on-peace-youll-find-the-careful-strategies-of/>.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, “Illiberal hegemony: The Trump administration strategy for US Imperialism.”

*Rise of China*

Another factor that significantly challenges the steadfastness of the ROK-U.S. alliance is the differing policies of Trump and Moon towards their approach to the rise of China. Obama's previous policy towards China was rooted in the idea of 'strategic partnership, cooperation, and competition', which aimed to selectively deter and contain China in certain aspects yet tried to peacefully integrate China's rise into the evolving global and regional order. For example, Obama's 'Rebalance to Asia-Pacific' strategy aimed to enhance America's leverage vis-à-vis China through such means as deploying 60% of its navy and air force in the Asia-Pacific region as well as establishing the TPP trade framework which excluded China's participation.<sup>21</sup> Previous administrations still sought to strengthen positive-sum Sino-U.S. cooperation on common security issues, such as climate change, counter-proliferation, anti-terrorism, and nuclear security. Viewing cooperation with China on major global challenges as essential to the success of America's overall strategy, the Obama administration also reassured Beijing on regime legitimacy issues, such as the formal recognition of People's Republic of China under the 'One-China' policy.<sup>22</sup>

However, according to the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy released by the Pentagon, the current administration portrays China as seemingly existential threat hostile to the NE Asia regional and global order – one that must be contained at all costs. This threat assessment abandons the positive and strategic features of Sino-U.S. cooperation present in the previous administration's China policy (a policy more characteristic of liberal hegemony).<sup>23</sup> This policy shift was further cemented both through the Taiwan Travel Act, signed into law in February 2018, that allowed high-level officials of the U.S. to visit Taiwan and vice-versa – a violation of the 'One-China' policy – as well as Trump's unveiling of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategy at the APEC CEO Summit in April 2018.<sup>24</sup> The FOIP calls for the return of a quadrilateral coalition, the so-called 'Quad,' which

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<sup>21</sup> Michael D. Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia: the U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2, 2018, accessed March 2, 2019, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/02/creating-unstable-asia-u.s.-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy-pub-75720>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 2017, accessed December 15, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia: the U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy."

consists of the U.S. and its major partners in Asia (India, Japan, and Australia – all of whom are openly ambivalent or critical of China’s rise), is also a core mechanism of the FOIP. All three countries have long expressed their geopolitical security concerns and publicly criticized the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ as China’s attempt to reform the global order in its image. Therefore, the FOIP’s deliberate selection of these partners into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) in 2017, along with the intensification of the Malabar naval exercises that proceeded with the Quad, can be interpreted as Trump’s purposeful decision to employ a hard-power counterweight against China’s increasing assertiveness and power in the region.<sup>25</sup>

America’s transition from strategic engagement with China to an approach that explicitly conceptualizes China as a revisionist state requiring exclusion, appears to be incongruous with South Korea’s firm ‘balanced diplomacy’ strategy. Moon’s strategy was first demonstrated when the South Korean leader all but rejected Trump’s offer to participate in the FOIP, which may indeed be perceived by the South Korean government as a military initiative to contain China. A policy of containment poses a dilemma for Moon and his administration; South Korea walks on a tightrope, balancing relations between the U.S. and China. Balanced diplomacy aims to avoid overdependence on one single large power, instead securing South Korea’s national interests as a middle-power country through the diversification of relations.<sup>26</sup> By doing so, South Korea aims to procure enough economic and diplomatic cooperation with China to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, while also maintaining its security alliance with America.

Moon’s firm adherence to balanced diplomacy was further demonstrated at a 2017 Summit with Xi Jinping in December, where the two restored their bilateral relations through South Korea’s pledge to the ‘three no’s’: 1) no additional deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), 2) no participation in the U.S. missile defense network, and 3) no establishment of a trilateral military alliance with the U.S. and Japan.<sup>27</sup> This decision was, predictably, not well-received by

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<sup>25</sup> Posen. “The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump’s Surprising Grand Strategy.”

<sup>26</sup> In-hwan Jung, Yeon-cheol Seong and Ji-eun Kim, ““Balanced diplomacy” becomes fundamental to President Moon’s foreign policy,” *Hankyoreh*, November 6, 2017, accessed November 17, 2018, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/817686.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/817686.html).

<sup>27</sup> Byong-su Park, “South Korea’s “three no’s” announcement key to restoring relations with China,” *Hankyoreh*, November 2, 2017, accessed October 15, 2018, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/817213.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/817213.html).

the Trump administration. The Summit was perceived as a political concession by Moon that limited America's security options. The clear delineation of Moon not to participate in the U.S.-led regional missile defense network also disrupted Trump's hopes of advancing America's 'Hub and Spokes' alliance system into a broader trilateral alliance with Japan, not only to counter the intensifying threat of North Korea, but more importantly, to effectively contain China's growing power.<sup>28</sup>

Ranking	Country	Share ratio	Voting power
1	China	30.34%	26.06%
2	India	8.52%	7.51%
3	Russia	6.66%	5.93%
4	Germany	4.57%	4.15%
5	Korea	3.81%	3.50%
6	Australia	3.76%	3.46%
7	France	3.44%	3.19%
8	Indonesia	3.42%	3.17%
9	Brazil	3.24%	3.02%
10	UK	3.11%	2.91%
Total ratio of shares of regional members		74.77%	73.29%
Total ratio of shares of non-regional members		25.23%	26.71%

Source: Korean Ministry of Strategy and Finance

**Figure 3.** AIIB's Top 10 Shareholders, total ratio of shares of regional & non-regional members. Source: Korean Ministry of Strategy and Finance.

In addition, under the principle of balanced diplomacy, South Korea has remained wary of taking an explicit position against China, such as in the South China Sea disputes or regarding the political status of Taiwan. Instead of intervening in Sino-U.S. security issues, South Korea has worked to capitalize on the economic potential of China and to bolster Sino-Korean economic cooperation. For example, despite American invitations, South Korea has to this date, resisted entering the U.S.-led TPP, rather declaring to decide on its membership by June of this year after inter-ministry discussions.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, South Korea has shown signs of putting the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) ahead of the TPP in its free trade agreement strategy, with President Moon, along with 15 heads of state, already having adopted a joint statement on the RCEP on November 14, 2018. In addition, despite alleged U.S. attempts to dissuade South Korea, it became one of the founding members of the Chinese-initiated Asian

<sup>28</sup> Elsinia Wainwright, "The Evolving US-Asia Alliance Network," Australian Institute of International Affairs, October 26, 2016, accessed October 29, 2018, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-evolving-us-asia-alliance-network/>.

<sup>29</sup> Jaewon Kim, "Seoul to decide on new TPP membership by June," *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 13, 2018, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Seoul-to-decide-on-new-TPP-membership-by-June>.

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 and has since increased its investments to become the AIIB's fifth largest shareholder (see figure 3).<sup>30</sup>

An essential implication of these actions is that South Korea neither perceives China as a direct security threat, nor views relations with the U.S. and China as zero-sum. Rather, South Korea has adopted flexible strategies towards both powers depending on the degree of their policy alignment with the denuclearization of North Korea.<sup>31</sup> It is evident that although Trump and Moon may agree upon the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance to the stability of NE Asia, their views on China diverge greatly. Thus, the gap between the level of Trump expects from South Korea in countering China, especially under the principle of illiberal hegemony, and Moon's increasing inclination towards a strategic partnership with China poses another threat to the steadfastness of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

### **Threat of Divergences on the Survivability of the Alliance**

Having analyzed the divergences in the core principles and direction of the ROK-U.S. alliance under Trump and Moon, the next area for evaluation is whether these differences pose a de facto threat to the alliance. To facilitate this examination, the aforementioned differences will be analyzed based on three criteria: 1) the likelihood of America's unilateral military engagement with North Korea, 2) the potential for the reduction or withdraw of the U.S. military from the territories of its regional allies, especially South Korea, and 3) the threat posed by Sino-Korean diplomatic proximity to the strategic foundations of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Lastly, this part of the paper will also add contextual analysis on the recent change of dynamics in NE Asia and its effects on the alliance. This analysis will provide a more comprehensive insight into whether the illiberal nature of Trump's foreign policies outweighs the strategic importance and benefits of the ROK-U.S. alliance in the views of the U.S. and South Korea.

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<sup>30</sup> Su-hyun Song and Ho-jung Won, "AIIB may finance projects for North Korea," *The Korea Herald*, June 18, 2017, accessed January 19, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170618000179>.

<sup>31</sup> Jessica J. Lee, "The Truth About South Korea's TPP Shift," *The Diplomat*, October 23, 2015, accessed February 19, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/10/the-truth-about-south-koreas-tpp-shift/>.

*Likelihood of U.S. Unilateral Military Engagement or War with North Korea*

Trump has repeatedly emphasized the possibility of unleashing “fire and fury” and “a bloody nose” against the growing nuclear threat of North Korea.<sup>32</sup> However, implementation these tactics is highly unlikely due to the ideological and strategic risks associated with them. First, America’s engagement in a preventive, unilateral strike against North Korea will precipitate severe backlash from South Korea, as well as significant international criticism regarding the necessity, justification, and legality of such actions. Such backlash would severely undermine America’s ideological and moral legitimacy that is central to the justification for the implementation of a U.S.-led security architecture in Asia. For the Trump administration, such ideological legitimacy is imperative to differentiate the U.S. from China, which it has condemned as “revisionist” and “immoral, in the competition for regional and global dominance.”<sup>33</sup>

Second, unilateral U.S. military action against North Korea would cause irrevocable harm not only to the ROK-U.S. alliance, but America’s overall grand strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Beyond the ideological split this would likely cause among the long-time allies, it would also severely hinder U.S. military preparedness in the region. This is because America benefits from maintaining South Korea as a ‘strategic buffer zone’ against North Korea and China. South Korea’s participation in the U.S. alliance system reinforces democracy in the region, and most importantly, provides a geographically convenient footing for U.S. military bases around China’s periphery. A policy of containment lies well within Trump’s illiberal hegemonic tendencies and this direction was demonstrated clearly in Trump’s call for the quadrilateral coalition, through which his administration intends to strengthen the U.S.-led FOIP strategy against China.

Strategic positioning remains crucial towards facilitating the U.S. to monitor and defend the U.S.-led order amid the shifting dynamics in the Asia Pacific and to swiftly mobilize troops and resources, if the need were to arise. The strategic disadvantages of a unilateral military strike or war are further supported by Victor Cha, former Director for Asian

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<sup>32</sup> di Paolo, “North Korea threatens to strike US territory of Guam after Trump ‘fire and fury’ warning.” <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/north-korea-us-donald-trump-guam-strike-nuclear-missile-kim-jong-un-a7883516.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Agence France-Presse, “Trump labels China ‘revisionist power.’ N. Korea ‘rogue state,’” *ABS-CBN News*, December 19, 2017, accessed December 30, 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/12/19/17/trump-labels-china-revisionist-power-n-korea-rogue-state>.

Affairs on the White House National Security Council, who posits that such preventive actions will not eliminate the threat of proliferation, but rather exacerbate it by encouraging North Korea to retaliate and prompting other anti-U.S. actors act against America in fear of suffering a similar fate.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, curbing the threats posed by North Korea through non-aggressive measures (or at the very least, via means that rule out the option of war) is imperative for the U.S. to preserve the credibility and legitimacy of its hegemonic position in the region. Despite Trump's bellicose rhetoric against North Korea, the likelihood of a preventive military engagement or war remains low.

*Potential for the Reduction or Withdrawal of the U.S. Military Deployed in the Territories of Regional Allies*

The defense budget under Trump can be interpreted as America's continued commitment to its core allies in NE Asia, including South Korea. First, as demonstrated in figure 4, America's national defense budget has increased by more than 20% compared to the 2017 figures, with its new spending dedicated to the acquisition of precision-guided munitions. Given that this increase occurred even after Trump announced a significant cut in the foreign military financing of the U.S. State Department, it can be interpreted as representing America's renewed commitment to current military campaigns waged in the defense of the U.S. homeland and the security of its allies.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Trump remains sworn to the trillion-dollar nuclear modernization program initiated under the Obama administration, through which each leg of the U.S. nuclear triad—missiles, bombers, and submarines—will be renewed. This underlines an important assumption stemming from the Cold-War era – that in order to credibly deter attacks against its allies, U.S. nuclear forces must maintain the capability to launch first and destroy an adversary's nuclear arsenal, thus preventing a reciprocal missile launch and the damage that would be incurred by a full-scale nuclear attack.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, by pursuing the security

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<sup>34</sup> Nyshka Chandran, "The man who almost became ambassador to South Korea just warned about US plans for North Korea," *CNBC Politics*, January 31, 2018, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/31/south-korea-expert-victor-cha-warned-white-house-on-north-korea.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Aaron Mehta and Joe Gould, "Trump budget to cut Foreign Military Financing, with loan option looming," *Defense News*, May 19, 2017, accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2017/05/19/trump-budget-to-cut-foreign-military-financing-with-loan-option-looming/>.

<sup>36</sup> Posen. "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Surprising Grand Strategy."

mandate of the ROK-U.S. alliance America can continue to ensure that Korea as well as Japan remains nuclear-free, further strengthening the nonproliferation effects of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

In this context, Trump's rhetoric should not be interpreted as a complete departure from America's mandate to uphold the collective security of its regional allies. Rather, it points to the re-emergence of America's 'offshore balancing' strategy, wherein, it checks the power of rival actors and maintains the balance of power through proactive burden-sharing with regional allies.<sup>37</sup> This has already been manifest in Trump's demands for allies to contribute an increased share towards the costs associated with the maintenance of U.S. troops deployed in allied territory. An offshore balancing strategy is a marked departure from the liberal hegemonic practice of subsidizing allies to the maximum extent possible, both in order to maintain the total support of allies as well as to assuage fears of abandonment. Offshore balancing under Trump seeks a more proportionate share of responsibility in the regional security of NE Asia, focusing on subsidizing support to allies only where necessary. A significant reduction or the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops deployed in the territories of America's regional allies, however, is unlikely to occur under the current administration.

#### *Realistic Threat of ROK-China's Diplomatic Proximity*

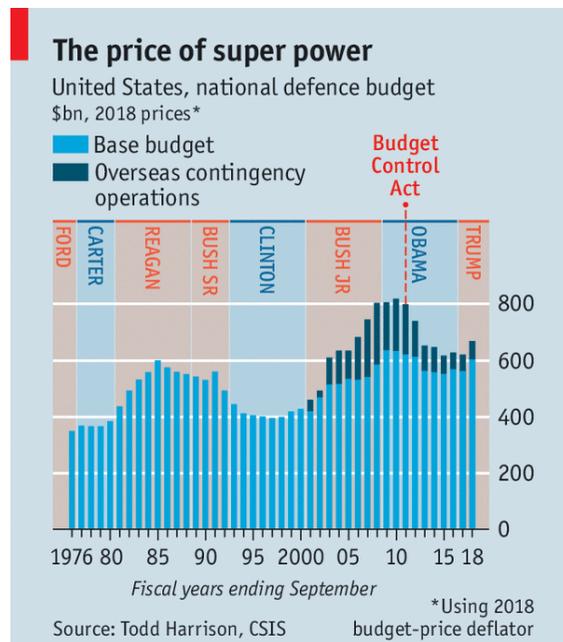
South Korea's recent compliance with China's security and geopolitical interests should not be mistaken for a major shift in its long-term strategic calculus. While Moon has gone to great lengths to demonstrate respect for China's security concerns and to improve bilateral relations, South Korea's long-term strategy for dealing with North Korea remains very much within the framework of the ROK-U.S. alliance.<sup>38</sup> For South Korea and the Moon administration, the critical question is not one of choosing between China and the U.S., but of utilizing its security alliance with the U.S. for increased leverage in dealing with China to elicit cooperation towards the denuclearization of North Korea. For example, the South Korean ambassador to America, Ahn Ho-Young, publicly stated that the ROK-U.S. alliance remains the foundation of

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<sup>37</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, and Stephen M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy." *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016).  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

<sup>38</sup> Kristian McGuire, "China-South Korea Relations: A Delicate Détente," *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2018, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/china-south-korea-relations-a-delicate-detente/>.

South Korea's foreign policy toward China.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, South Korea's protocol to respond to North Korean provocations with ROK-U.S. joint military exercises remains unchanged and is unlikely to be superseded by Sino-ROK military cooperation.



**Figure 4.** Price of Superpower, based on the National Defense Budget of the U.S., in \$ billion, 2018 prices. Demonstrates the increased figures in 2018 under Trump. Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

When further coupled with the prospect of reunification and the need to secure a sustainable and functional reunification process, the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance takes even greater significance. Regardless of the timeframe or mechanisms for achieving reunification, in the early stages of reunification, South Korea will be pre-occupied with the processes of stabilization, nation-building, and decreasing the vast economic and political disparities with the North. In such a unique geopolitical context, retaining a steadfast alliance with the U.S. supports South Korea's interests of protecting its fundamental political and

<sup>39</sup> Audrye Wong, "Comparisons of the Alliance Thinking in Japan and South Korea as a Reflection of National Identity," Korea Economic Institute of America, October 6, 2016, accessed November 30, 2018, [https://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/joint\\_us-korea\\_2016\\_-\\_alliance\\_thinking.pdf](https://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/joint_us-korea_2016_-_alliance_thinking.pdf). October 6, 2016. [https://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/joint\\_us-korea\\_2016\\_-\\_alliance\\_thinking.pdf](https://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/joint_us-korea_2016_-_alliance_thinking.pdf).

economic systems, while also reducing its security costs through ROK-U.S. financial cooperation and commitment to burden-sharing.<sup>40</sup> In this aspect, the alliance is central to South Korea's need for an 'insurance' to secure a safe and favorable process of reunification, to maintain stability, and to address the wide spectrum of challenges that will emerge in both the short- and long-term unification process.<sup>41</sup>

This analysis coincides with the position of Scott A. Snyder, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations for Korea Studies and director of the U.S.-Korea Policy program, on the comparative strategic value of China and America to South Korea. Snyder contends that despite China's rising economic and political influence, insofar as U.S. defense commitments remain credible, the ROK-U.S. alliance will be the anchor and platform that will most realistically actualize South Korea's pursuit for the fundamental objectives of security, prosperity, and eventual reunification.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Recent Shifts in the Northeast Asia Region*

Lastly, a crucial external shift that has contributed to solidifying the strategic alignment of the U.S. and South Korea has recently occurred. The atmosphere in NE Asia has rapidly transitioned away from aggression in the past few months, marked by the historic first Summit between North Korea and the U.S., held on June 12, 2018 in Singapore. This has provided a window of opportunity for denuclearization through dialogue and for the potential to address domestic, regional, and global security concerns through peaceful mechanisms.<sup>43</sup> The Summit outlined the commitment of the U.S. and North Korea towards the normalization of diplomatic relations, joint efforts to build a "lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula," and reaffirmation of the Panmunjom Declaration for the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Leon Whyte, "Evolution of the US-ROK Alliance: Is There a Post-Unification Future?" *The Diplomat*, September 7, 2015, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/evolution-of-the-us-rok-alliance-is-there-a-post-unification-future-pt-1/>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> "U.S. Alliance Remains South Korea's Strongest Security Guarantee, Argues Scott Snyder in New Book," Council on Foreign Relations, January 2, 2018, accessed February 3, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/news-releases/us-alliance-remains-south-koreas-strongest-security-guarantee-argues-scott-snyder-new>.

<sup>43</sup> "Trump and Kim joint statement from the Singapore summit," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2018, accessed November 8, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/06/12/trump-and-kim-joint-statement-from-the-singapore-summit/?utm\\_term=.94f49a60a32e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/06/12/trump-and-kim-joint-statement-from-the-singapore-summit/?utm_term=.94f49a60a32e).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

The gravitation of South Korea, North Korea, and the U.S. towards non-aggression and dialogue also signifies that the degree of divergence between the stances of Trump and Moon does not severely challenge the foundations of the alliance or push America towards the extreme end of its illiberal hegemony—military engagement, preventive strike, or war. At the very least, it points to a lower likelihood of such eventualities occurring. Albeit still an ongoing process, the recent series of summits has laid a foundation for diplomacy, dialogue, and cooperation that is crucial to reduce tensions both within the U.S.-ROK alliance, and the NE Asian region as a whole.

Thus, the perceivable divergences within the ROK-U.S. alliance, especially with regards to key security issues, may provide potential grounds to challenge its steadfastness. However, the four-fold analysis on the ideological, financial, and strategic risks associated with forgoing the alliance, as well as the implications of the recent external shift, reveals three key findings. First, the two nations' deeply-rooted strategic interests remain aligned, even under Trump's pursuit of illiberal hegemony. Second, the likelihood of such divergences translating into conflict is insufficient to seriously erode the foundations of the alliance. Third, the illiberal nature of U.S. hegemony under Trump does not outweigh the strategic importance and benefits of the alliance. Therefore, continued adjustments and improvements of the alliance appear to be a more plausible option.

### **The Way Forward**

Based on these findings, the divergences between the two countries can be re-interpreted as areas for improvement, cooperation, and opportunity, rather than impassible obstacles. The leaders of both countries must first identify the sources and depths of these divergences. After identifying areas of improvement, both should take systematic steps to ensure that the alliance's vital security strategies are the result of mutual understanding and close consultation. In this context, Snyder similarly affirms that the U.S. and South Korea should maintain a combined approach towards existing and emerging security challenges in a way that enhances inter-operability, thus optimizing the efficiency of resources and coordination among varying strategies.<sup>45</sup> Trump and

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<sup>45</sup> Lynne Rienner Publishers, "Expanding the US-South Korea Alliance," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed September 1, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/excerpt-us-south-korea-alliance>.

Moon must cooperate to establish mutually-acceptable mechanisms upon a basis of shared trust, and seek a comprehensive, longer-term strategy that suits the needs of both parties. This is crucial in ensuring that the alliance is not undermined by the fluctuating degree of 'liberality' that is bound to shift with the turnover of administration. Next, we will briefly probe a potential set of areas for strategic cooperation, as well as key areas that the two countries can independently strengthen for enhanced strategic positioning in the ROK-U.S. alliance.

#### *Shared Areas of Strategic Cooperation for the U.S. and South Korea*

To ensure the continued strategic significance of the ROK-U.S. alliance, both the U.S. and South Korea have already embarked on progressive steps to preserve the alliance, through fluctuating degrees of liberality in both administrations. For example, the Joint Statement released by Trump and Moon in June 2017 reiterated the two nations' common goal to advance the 'comprehensive strategic Alliance,' endeavoring to reshape its mandate in ways that do not require a common enemy, but are rather based on common values and shared strategic interests.<sup>46</sup> The introduction of 'New Frontiers' for the alliance is likewise intended to broaden the two country's cooperation beyond the immediate challenges posed by North Korea or the illiberal world order. For example, the two countries have already begun to broaden the scope for cooperation through high-level consultations in non-security areas, such as the economy and trade, renewable and nuclear energy, science and technology, and space, and the environment.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, both countries can begin to embark on the process of specification and operationalization of their post-reunification alliance, which may better outline the prospects for Korea's participation in the delivery of international public goods that befit the U.S. interests, such as disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, maritime security, and global health security cooperation.

#### *Strengthening the Strategic Positioning of South Korea in the ROK-U.S. Alliance*

A key objective for South Korea is to refrain from relying on the

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<sup>46</sup> "Joint Statement between the United States and the Republic of Korea," The White House, June 30, 2017, accessed September 29, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-united-states-republic-korea/>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

traditional ‘liberal benevolence’ of the U.S. Through its strategy of balanced diplomacy, South Korea must strive to assume a greater role and thus elevate its status in the eyes of the U.S. to become an indispensable geopolitical partner, bringing regional and multilateral scope to the ROK-U.S. alliance.<sup>48</sup> South Korea must provide tangible strategic benefits for the U.S. as a stable middle power in the region with more leverage to engage with its neighboring countries. Especially given the growing importance of China and the U.S. in vital areas of global security, this will further strengthen Korea’s position as an effective and trusted middle power in the larger multilateral construct of reinforcing international rules, norms, and standards. Such transition from a passive participant in the U.S.-led alliance framework into a strategic broker will be crucial in solidifying the indispensability of South Korea for the geopolitical and strategic interests of the U.S. These pursuits will prepare South Korea to readily confront the potentially drastic shifts in the degree of ‘liberality’ that may be witnessed not only in the forthcoming U.S. administrations, but in the wider regional and global order.

*Strengthening the Strategic Positioning of the U.S. in the ROK-U.S. Alliance*

A key objective for the U.S. is to capitalize on the economic potential of South Korea as a strategic partner. This is because the economic rejuvenation and prosperity of the ROK are strategic interests of America that will be crucial regardless of the degree of ‘liberality’ of its own administration. In this context, it is worth examining the Moon administration’s introduction of and dedication to the two-pronged ‘New Northern Policy’ and ‘New Southern Policy’ under his New Economic Map Initiative, which seeks to build an economic community expanding across the Korean Peninsula, the Russian Far East, NE Asia, Eurasia, and Southeast Asia. Its increased cooperation with vital actors such as Russia and China, as well as regional blocs like ASEAN, indicates that retaining Korea as a viable economic and trade partner will prove to be increasingly important for the growth and sustainability of the U.S. economy.<sup>49</sup>

Especially given the rapidly-weakening North Atlantic paradigm, the U.S. must strategically befit itself into the economic vision of South

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<sup>48</sup> Wong, “Comparisons of the Alliance Thinking in Japan and South Korea...”

<sup>49</sup> “New Northern Policy,” *The Korea Times*, June 25, 2018, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2018/07/202\\_251237.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2018/07/202_251237.html).

Korea and strengthen their economic interdependence. This will allow the U.S. to prevent being sidelined by this cross-cutting regional strategy that spans across multiple fields including energy, shipbuilding, fishery, electrical grids, transportation, and other new growth drivers.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, by drawing North Korea into its joint projects, this framework is intended to help North Korea to normalize relations with the U.S., as well as to decrease its economic over-dependence on China that has often proven to be counter-productive to the U.S. interests.<sup>51</sup> This signifies a potential non-interventionist approach that can integrate North Korea into the global order while still operating within the strategic framework of the U.S. and promoting peace in the region without America having to directly embroil itself in what may otherwise prove to be a protracted and costly process.



**Figure 5.** South Korea's Infrastructure Vision under the New Economic Map Initiative of Moon Jae-In. Demonstrates the desired strategies and projects under the initiative. Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The increasingly illiberal nature of the Trump administration is

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Jae-Young Lee, "The New Northern Policy and Korean-Russian Cooperation," *Valdai Papers*, no. 76, October 27, 2017, accessed September 29, 2018, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdai-paper-76-the-new-northern-policy-and-korea/>.

not detrimental to the ROK-U.S. alliance or an indication of its nearing expiration. On the contrary, it reveals the evolution of the alliance to progressively focus on multi-disciplinary issues, upon the basis of which the two countries must develop a more compelling and comprehensive alliance—beyond the traditional patron-client status—to survive drastic changes to the regional order.

### **Conclusion**

The volatile region of NE Asia has witnessed significant internal and external changes over the past few years—the progress of North Korea’s nuclear program, changing geopolitical dynamics amongst important stakeholder countries, and most importantly, major shifts in leadership that have introduced the threat of an illiberal order from an unexpected actor. In such a context, this paper evaluated the impact of such changes on the validity and necessity of the long-held ROK-U.S. alliance and the implications for its future. In response to the initial queries set forth, the findings of this paper indicate that the pursuit of illiberal hegemony under the current U.S. administration has surely engendered perceivable divergences between Trump and Moon in the direction of the ROK-U.S. alliance, notably in the resolution towards North Korea’s denuclearization as well as how to engage with a rapidly rising China. However, further analysis has led to the conclusion that, although legitimate, such policy divergences do not constitute a *de facto* threat substantial enough to override the deep strategic alignment that underlies the alliance. Rather, the current strategic importance and foreseeable benefits of the alliance point to the need for continuous adjustment. Evolving, adaptative behavior will ostensibly lead to a far more resilient and strategic alliance, capable of transcending the fluctuating, unpredictable degree of ‘liberality’ in the current world order.

Preserving the strategic foundation of an alliance, however, should involve reciprocal efforts. In addition to graduating from the risky assumption of ‘liberal benevolence’ from the other party, both partners must continually strive to upgrade their strategic positioning within the alliance to remain valuable and indispensable. If both countries recognize the areas that require improvement, the alliance has tremendous potential to bridge divergences and re-emerge with even greater unity and strength. Moving forward, the ROK-U.S. alliance has the opportunity to serve a crucial role in procuring the long-desired stability and security of Northeast Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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