



**PRESERVING THE US-ROK
ALLIANCE IS CRITICAL**

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Experts are working overtime trying to predict the unpredictable in President Trump's upcoming summit with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un. One thing is certain: Whatever the outcome, be it breakthrough or breakdown, the alliance between the United States and South Korea is the bedrock on which post-summit engagement will be built.

Intense debates about the role of the US-ROK alliance going forward, and about US troop levels on the Korean Peninsula, roil the media and some policy circles. But they often miss this point. Senior officials in both countries recognize the irreplaceable utility of the alliance in ensuring stability as we potentially progress toward a post-nuclear Korean Peninsula.

South Korean political leaders have steadfastly maintained that the alliance is the essential element in making possible this period of renewed diplomacy with North Korea. Across the political spectrum in Korea this special relationship that was "forged in the crucible of war" more than six decades ago is highly valued. And President Donald Trump said in a TV interview earlier this month that he has "no plans" to withdraw US forces from South Korea as he prepares for the Hanoi summit.

The best possible summit outcome is that concrete and material steps are taken by North Korea toward "final, fully verified denuclearization," or FFVD, the latest iteration of the policy objective of the US and South Korea. However, it's important to keep in mind that denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula will be a process, not an event, and one that could take many years. The Libya model of rapid denuclearization is not in play in North Korea following more than 70 years of deeply entrenched hostility and the nearly mythic devotion the country feels for its nuclear program, the only successful modern industry it has fostered.

During a protracted period of denuclearization, the United Nations Command, headed by Combined Forces and US Forces Korea Commander Gen. Robert Abrams, could cooperate with the international community to carry out and verify demilitarization and disarmament procedures. Even in this constructive scenario, however, North Korea's potent conventional artillery threat to South Korea would remain. That is why Gen. Abrams argues that unless North Korea's conventional warfare capabilities are also reduced, US troops should remain on the Peninsula even after denuclearization.

Moreover, even if there is a successful FFVD, South Korean President Moon Jae-in believes the alliance has a long-term role. As he [told](#) an audience in New York City last September, "Even after North Korea's denuclearization, and even after the peace treaty is signed, and even after reunification, the ROK-U.S. alliance should remain in place in order to continue to uphold peace and stability in Northeast Asia."

Under a more inconclusive scenario, so-called "corresponding measures" would involve a slower, stepped approach. That worries some who foresee elements of the alliance traded away for something less than full denuclearization. But US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun has signaled that the US could be flexible in talks while still holding the line on denuclearization. The Trump administration's willingness to consider an end-of-war statement does not necessarily threaten the alliance, although military readiness will remain essential for continued stability. Such readiness can only be assured if combined ROK and US military

exercises continue meaningfully. That will be the case until we are confident the nuclear and conventional threat is eliminated and North Korea abides by international norms.

If the summit process were to unravel in Hanoi, with a full breakdown in engagement, the process could devolve back to the tense situation in 2017, with North Korea possibly resuming weapons testing. That would try the patience of China, the North's economic patron. The need for a robust alliance to deter threats to peace on the peninsula, to Japan and even to the US mainland would be obvious.

The alliance would continue as the world's best insurance of stability, as it has been for the last 65 years following the Korean War Armistice. In all that time the alliance has proved extraordinarily resilient to both internal challenges and external pressures from North Korea and China.

Under any scenario post-Hanoi, the steady hand of the alliance will be key. With luck, it will be the cornerstone of new era of non-hostile engagement and cooperation with North Korea.

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