

A Korean Tragedy

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Abstract

Moon Jae-in's failure to challenge South Korea's servile relationship to the United States has condemned his presidency to impotence. As the 'August Crisis' unfolds the South Korean president has little influence over the situation. He is spurned by Pyongyang, has no traction in Beijing or Tokyo, and is taken for granted in Washington.

Key Words

Moon Jae-in, US-ROK alliance; US, China, North and South Korea; Clientelism

Observing Moon Jae-in win the election on 7 May, take up the presidency of the Republic of Korea and move on to a summit with President Trump has been like watching a movie where the action is put into slow motion to emphasise the inevitability of the disaster to come. The hero may gesticulate but he is essentially powerless and the plot flows through to the inexorable denouement. Things have come to this pass because the hero, for whatever reason, has made some fatal mistake and has not sought to extricate himself. He is doomed to a fate over which he has no control.

So too with Moon Jae-in.

His fundamental mistake was to not recognise, acknowledge and analyse South Korea's geopolitical situation especially its relationship with the United States. He not merely did not challenge South Korea's servile status but seemed actively to embrace it. The decisions that were informed by that failure, and his policy towards the US, China and the other Korea – the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea – mean that his administration is doomed at best to irrelevance, and at worst to being party to a catastrophic war. His summit with President Trump and his vacillating stand on issues such as the US Operational Control of the ROK military and the deployment of THAAD illustrate his precipitate decline from a candidate with promise to a president rapidly becoming a spent force. Reports of plans to establish a new political party may be a bellwether indicating mounting disillusionment with him.¹

Although the discussion here, for brevity, focusses on Moon Jae-in as an individual it should be remembered that he represents a large, and at the moment dominant segment of the liberal political elite, as well as the aspirations of many, perhaps most South Koreans. Nor, for reasons of focus, will much be said about the policies of the other main actors – North Korea, China, Russia, Japan and the United States.²

The formation of the US-South Korea relationship

South Korea was created by the United States in 1945 out of the detritus of the Japanese empire. It was a client state whose function was to protect the booty of war, primarily Japan itself, from the Soviet Union and whatever contagion might spread from Eurasia. It also served as a base from which Japan could be enfiladed in case the Japanese people, in reaction to the disaster of militarism might veer towards Communism. A foothold on the Korean peninsula, historically the corridor for cultural and military interaction between Japan and mainland Asia might provide a stepping stone

for a possible counter-offensive into Eurasia. South Korea's turbulent history since then might be seen as an attempt to wrest control back from the United States and find its place in the sun. It might be thought that it was naturally progressives who would have led that struggle and that is probably true at the popular level. However, ironically it has been leaders such as Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee, considered reactionaries, who have perhaps shown the most rebellious streak. Syngman Rhee released prisoners of war rather than return them to North Korea and refused to take part in the armistice talks in an attempt to force the Americans to continue the war so the peninsula could be united under his control. The Northern Limit Line, the disputed maritime boundary in the West Sea which the Americans created in order to restrain Rhee's attempts to reignite the fighting, remain an irritant to North-South relations to this day. Park Chung-hee, who had served in the Japanese puppet Manchukuo Army, fearful that the US withdrawal from Vietnam, and opening to China in the 1970s meant that it might abandon him started a clandestine nuclear weapons programme. He caved in, of course, when the Americans discovered it. Nevertheless in the last few decades it has been progressives such as Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun whose attempts to take a more independent stance have contrasted with the greater subservience of conservatives such as Lee Myung-bak and especially Park Geun-hye.

Significantly it was Roh Moo-hyun who, at his summit with Kim Jong Il in 2007, complained about the difficulty of gaining greater autonomy from Washington.³ That conversation has added poignancy because it is his then chief-of staff President Moon Jae-in who is now in a position to further that struggle, but seems unwilling to follow Roh's aspirations.⁴

It is because of this history that South Korea's most important relationship by far continues to be that with the US, and it from the nature of

this that other relationships – especially with China, Japan, Russia and the DPRK – emanate. Little can be done about those relationships unless that with the US is resolved.

Power, impotence, and possibility

The relationship with the US also determines the contours of power of the ROK presidency. There are some things the president can do, there are some things the president cannot do, and then there is a grey, indeterminate area in between. Moon Jae-in has failed to recognise this.

In terms of the present situation the president can surely undo the barriers between the two Koreas erected by Lee Myung-bak and Park Chung-hee. That means most importantly the bilateral sanctions (May 24) imposed by Lee and his closing of the Kumgangsan tourism venture and Park's termination of the Kaesong Industrial Park.⁵ The US, and conservative forces with South Korea might be unhappy about the reactivation of these links but there is really little they can do about it if the president shows resolve, short of orchestrating a coup and that is an unlikely overreaction.⁶ He could also surely free the 12 North Korean waitresses whom the National Intelligence Service (NIS) claims 'voluntarily defected' on the eve of the parliamentary elections in April 2016.⁷ Since the waitresses appear to have been held incommunicado since then it is evident that the claim by their colleagues that they were abducted (in an unsuccessful attempt to swing the elections to the conservatives) is probably true.⁸ Certainly the North has asked for the issue to be on the agenda in North-South talks and said that it will not allow another round of family reunions until they, and Kim Ryon-hui who claims she went South voluntarily but has changed her mind, are allowed to return home.⁹ Such confidence building measures might require some adroit footwork to save face but are within the power of the president. Moreover the waitress

abduction issue would give Moon an opportunity to defang the NIS which is notorious for being involved, in deep state fashion in South Korean politics on behalf of the conservatives.¹⁰

On the other hand there is little direct role for the president to play in respect of the North's nuclear weapons and missile programme. The DPRK has developed a nuclear deterrent principally because of the American threat and if there is to be any agreement about it that has to be negotiated between Washington and Pyongyang.¹¹ The president of the Republic of Korea cannot speak on behalf of the president of the United States. He cannot provide security guarantees and cannot make promises. Most recently Park Geun-hye made a big fuss about South Korea's role in this process but, despite her earlier talk of Trustpolitik, was merely grandstanding. By contrast we can presume that Moon genuinely wants to promote peace, which makes his policy mistakes all the more puzzling. What he can do (but has not done) is to nudge the US in the direction of realistic negotiations with North Korea on the basis of accepting a minimal nuclear deterrent and endorsing tension-reducing measures such as China's freeze-for-freeze proposal.¹²

The area between these two extremes of power and powerlessness is naturally much more difficult to pin down. Much depends on the personal characters of the US and ROK presidents, their resolve, clear-sightedness and intelligence as well as the qualities of their political, military, and administrative apparatus and support among the elite and the populace in general. For instance, what control does the civilian government really have over the joint military exercises which cause so much consternation in Pyongyang, as they are intended to, and which feature in North Korea's proposal for a mutual freeze (exercises for nuclear and missiles tests) subsequently taken up by China and endorsed by Russia?¹³ In

theory the Republic of Korea is an equal partner and provides the locale and by far most of the troops. But in reality we do not know how much influence the South Korean president really has. All we know is that the exercises go ahead and that the US throws scorn on the idea of suspending them.¹⁴

Two issues, for which we do have data, provide a prism with which to examine this amorphous area.

One is the question of the Operational Control of the South Korean military (OPCON) and the other is the deployment of THAAD.

The United States took over control of the South Korean military during the early stages of the Korean War. Nothing quite comparable seems to have [happened in the North](#) involving the Soviet Union and China, and whatever direct leverage China had over the DPRK military is long gone. In the South peacetime control was handed back to the Koreans in 1994, during the Kim Young-sam administration. Before then even the troop movement necessary for Chun Doo-hwan's coup and the Kwangju Massacre, required [US permission](#). The United States has retained 'wartime control', usually known by the acronym OPCON. In 2006 Roh Moo-hyun negotiated for full control to revert to South Korea in 2012 but in 2010 his successor, [Lee Myung-bak](#) pushed that back to 2015, and postponement was further extended by Park Geun-hye to after 2025, leaving South Korea, as even the right-wing *Chosun Ilbo* admitted, facing [a unique situation in the world](#). This was echoed by Gen. [Richard Stilwell](#), a former commander of US forces in Korea, who called it the "most remarkable concession of sovereignty in the entire world." The OPCON issue is a strange business with many reports in the US and South Korean media suggesting that it is the Americans who want to abolish it and the South Korean military, and conservative presidents, who want to retain US

control. Furthermore a [Korea Times report in 2014](#) explicitly linked THAAD and OPCON: “Korea is expected to allow the United States to deploy missile interceptors on its soil in return for Washington delaying the transfer of wartime operational control of Korean forces to Seoul.”

It is unclear why the South Korean military would want to stay under foreign control. The proffered explanation that this is necessary because of the North Korean [threat](#) does not make much sense; as John Glaser put it in *Foreign Affairs* ‘South Korean military capabilities far exceed those of Pyongyang.’¹⁵. The South Korean [military budget](#) is far greater than the North’s, with twice the population it can field twice as many troops, its equipment is generally speaking far more advanced (it is America’s largest arms buyer), and in any case it is protected by the US nuclear umbrella and [the US-ROK alliance](#). The only area in which the North has definite superiority is in nuclear weapons (though the delivery capability is uncertain), but they are a deterrent against American attack and would have little utility in a war between the two Koreas, confined to the peninsula. If Washington backed off from bombing North Korea’s nuclear reactors in 1994 because of the danger of [radiation](#), then the same calculation would apply to Pyongyang. However, if South Korea has little to fear from an attack, the military may have considered that a takeover of North Korea would not be possible without US involvement, partly for its defeat and pacification but also to keep China at bay.

Moon Jae-in, as [candidate](#), vowed ‘to push for early takeover of wartime troop control’ although at the same time significantly he said he would ‘enhance deterrence against North’. This may have been a ploy to deflect conservative reaction, or it might reflect a contradiction in his thinking. Now he is president and the right-wing *Dong-A Ilbo* reports that [Pres. Moon and Trump agree on](#)

[early OPCON transfer](#). But do they really agree? First of all no specific date is mentioned; it is still a matter of being ‘early’ just as it was in his candidate days back in April. Secondly, the South Korean media, right and liberal, has been prone to self-delusion, especially in respect of foreign relations during the Moon ascendancy. Thirdly the proposed Future Command structure does not seem plausible, as the *Dong-A Ilbo* points out:

....under the new system, the post of commander goes to South Korean military, and that of deputy commander to the U.S. military.

“If the Future Command is established after the transfer of wartime operational control, the U.S. forces will be under the command of a foreign military authority for the first time in history,” said a military official....

However, experts point out the possibility that the stance of the Trump administration, which preaches “America First,” might be misaligned with that of the Moon administration. They say that it is unlikely that President Trump will accept the deal and leave the U.S. forces, which boast the world’s best military power, subjected to the commands and instructions of the South Korean military.

Indeed. It is difficult to envisage the US, and this is not an exclusively Trump thing, putting its military under Korean command in a situation where war with China, and perhaps Russia, is a distinct possibility. There may perhaps be some face-saving cosmetic arrangement if Moon pushes hard enough, but it seems unlikely that the real configuration of power will change.

Despite its wider ramifications, OPGON is primarily a bilateral matter between the US and the ROK. THAAD is different. THAAD is primarily about China, and to a lesser extent Russia, with North Korea being used as a pretext. OPGON might be seen as part of the process by which the US controls South Korea, and THAAD part of the reason why it wants that control.

THAAD, or Terminal High Altitude Area Defense to give it its full title, is part of the US missile defense system. The prime reason for missile defense is arguably to mop-up any counter-attack after a first strike on the near-peer rivals, China and Russia. Iran and North Korea have been used mainly to disguise this underlying strategy which is profoundly dangerous not merely for the target countries but for the US itself and the world in general. Iran does not have long-range nuclear missiles but on top of that the Iran deal halted the development and deployment of any possible nuclear weapons programme. This did not stop the US from continuing to claim Iran as a reason for missile defense deployment in Europe, clearly exposing as the Russians pointed out, what the real target was. There is more validity in respect of North Korea, especially with the test launch of the Hwasong-14 ICBM, but even here the pretext is rather flimsy. Given the huge disparity in power between North Korea and the US and its allies, the very modest, nascent Korean nuclear deterrent would scarcely justify on its own the enormous costs of missile defense. There are cheaper ways of keeping safe.

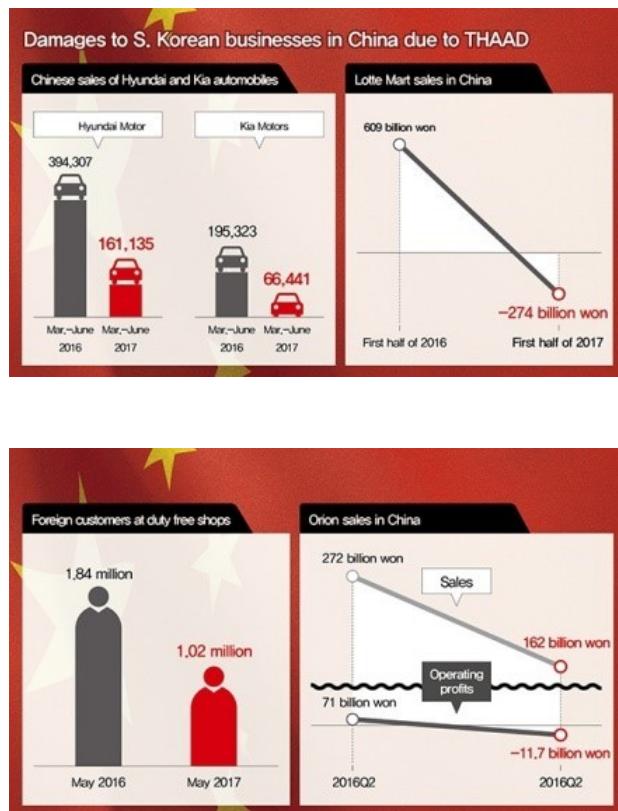
THAAD can be divided into two components – the X-Band radar which in long-distance mode can look deep into China and Russia, and detect ICBM launches, and the accompanying battery of usually six interceptor missiles. It is the X-Band radar which disturbs China and Russia because it threatens their nuclear deterrent capability. Interceptor missiles stationed in Korea would not protect the US,

even if they worked, because they are designed to attack incoming missiles in their terminal phase. Significantly they are located in South Korea not to protect Seoul, but US bases further south. However there are serious doubts about their efficacy, both in general but also because they are not designed for the low-level missiles that North Korea would use in a conflict. What is the point if they are ineffective?

The clue is that the US has stationed two units of X-band radar (AN/TPY-2) on its own in Japan.¹⁶ The Japanese government, and popular opinion to a large extent, is happy to participate in the containment of China.¹⁷ The traditional rivalry between the two great East Asian powers has its potency. South Korea is different. Whatever the issues between China and Korea, either Korea or the peninsula as a whole, they fade in comparison with the animus towards Japan. In fact, during the administration of Park Geun-hye, before THAAD surfaced, relations between Beijing and Seoul were very good. So, in contrast to Japan, it would be difficult for the US to install in South Korea a weapons system explicitly aimed at China. The solution was to bundle it with the interceptor missiles and claim that the purpose of the whole business was to protect South Korea against the North.

Whether the South Korean political/military elite really bought this story is unclear. Park Geun-hye did, partly because of deference to the US and partly because of the guidance of Choi Soon-sil. There has been a huge amount of popular opposition to THAAD, which fed into the candlelight rebellion against Park. However much of this resistance has been side-tracked into protest on environmental grounds. There may well be genuine reason for concern for the health of communities close to the radar installation, and this has caused its relocation to a new location, a Lotte golf course further away from habitation. However the objections to THAAD are deeper and wider than that.

Firstly there is the economic impact of Chinese retaliation, and here Lotte, poetically, has been a major victim. The latest estimate by the *Hankyoreh* of the economic damage is \$4.8 billion in the first half of 2017 alone.¹⁸ This has been shared by South Korean chaebol operating in the Chinese market, and the small and medium companies that supply them and South Korea's tourism industry, heavily dependent in recent years on Chinese visitors. The *Hankyoreh's* graphics tell their own story.



Source: Cho, Kye-wan. "In first half of 2017, THAAD retaliation caused \$4.3 billion in losses for S. Korean companies." *Hankyoreh*, 6 July; See [here](#).

Whilst the *actual* economic damage of the THAAD deployment and general deterioration in Beijing-Seoul relations is severe, and despite wishful thinking is likely to continue, the *potential* impact on national security should not be overlooked. In the event of conflict between the US and China, something which the US

military media and thinks tanks muse about frequently, the THAAD installation, and by extension South Korea itself becomes a target.

The deployment of THAAD is an unmitigated disaster for South Korea. It has already caused huge economic damage, soured relations with Beijing (with concomitant implications for Beijing-Pyongyang relations), and thrust South Korea into danger with little advantage. It provides slight protection in case of a war with North Korea, the possibility of which in any case could be greatly and easily lessened by tension-reduction initiatives. It is, yet again, the sacrifice of South Korea for US strategic advantage. As with OPCON, Candidate Moon promised great things. With President Moon the issue is not yet settled but signs are not promising.

It had been clear prior to the election that the US, despite predictable denials by the State Department, had, in collusion with the interim administration of [Hwang Kyo-ahn](#) and the South Korean military, been rushing through the deployment of THAAD.¹⁹ President Moon would later claim that the THAAD deployment was 'mysteriously' rushed.²⁰ In fact there was nothing mysterious about the accelerated deployment, with the battery suddenly being installed before dawn in March.²¹ It was a natural precautionary measure to assure that the incoming administration, presumed to be led by Moon Jae-in, could not cancel the THAAD agreement. Actually it seems that Washington was not really concerned about Moon since there was no vituperation campaign directed against him, in the way we have been accustomed to in respect of other leaders who might be considered troublesome, like Putin, Assad, and Kim Jong Un. Indeed, President Trump, with his customary ineptness actually said on the eve of the election that the US would send South Korea a \$1 billion invoice for THAAD.²² General McMaster was hurriedly deployed to bluff his way around that.²³ In truth the much maligned Trump may have taken

Moon's measure; although his intervention may have swung votes to Moon, THAAD and the US-SK alliance was not in any great danger however much he tightened the screws. McMaster said that the US would pay for now, but that the deal would be 'renegotiated' - in other words South Korea would pay tomorrow, something which had always been on the cards.²⁴

In early June President Moon suspended THAAD deployment because of two issues relating to the rush to deploy.²⁵ One was that the Defense Ministry had failed to mention in a report to the Blue House - the office of the president - the delivery of additional launchers for the deployed THAAD battery.²⁶ It also transpired that the Ministry had not carried out the environmental impact assessments it should have, though this had been known since April at least.²⁷ Moon reprimanded the Defense Ministry and ordered a full environmental impact assessment.²⁸ In reality the issues were marginal and the action diversionary.

The number of launchers installed or on their way was of no great importance to either China or the US - it was the X-band radar that counted, and that had been deployed. Whilst the number of launchers, and hence the missiles that could be fired, might offer a degree of extra protection to US troops in South Korea, and by extension the population south of Seoul, this was a minor consideration to the Pentagon?. Furthermore, Japan which already hosts two US-operated X-band radar units was reportedly considering installing THAAD interceptors in 2015 but has now scrapped that in favour of Aegis Onshore units.²⁹ It appears that the interceptors in the Aegis Onshore system are more effective than THAAD and since the X-band radar was already in place the Japanese opted for the better system. There is a further complication. The radar unit only feeds data to the THAAD interceptors when it is in terminal mode, but not in advanced mode, which would be used for

surveillance of Chinese missiles sites.³⁰ The US operates the system and the South Korean government cannot be sure what mode the radar is in. If the THAAD deployment in South Korea is really about long-range surveillance of China, and Russia, as the Chinese, Russians and independent experts such as Theodore Postol argue, and the radar is in advanced mode then the interceptors would be inoperable.³¹ The number of launchers would be quite irrelevant.

Environmental and health concerns have been a major part of South Korean popular reaction to the THAAD deployment.³² The initial choice for the first THAAD battery was moved in response to protest to a Lotte golf course, which whilst it might have been profitable in the short run to Lotte, made the company's extensive operations in China vulnerable to government and public opposition to THAAD.³³ Protests in other places where THAAD, or X-band radar have been installed have been muted in comparison to the vigorous campaign in South Korea, but they also have tended to focus on the immediate health and environmental aspects.³⁴ However whilst local residents have legitimate cause for concern it is clear that this is a minor aspect of the real cost and danger to South Korea. It may be that the authorities have played the environmental issue up as a straw man diversion. The environmental impact assessment announced by the government in June may retard the full deployment of the first stage of THAAD, but it is unlikely to stop or reverse it. Certainly the government exudes confidence that, in the words of Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha:

"Securing democratic and procedural legitimacy through an environmental impact assessment of the THAAD site will further strengthen public support for the THAAD deployment and ultimately strengthen the South Korea-US

alliance.”³⁵

Strange sentiment, one might argue, for a government propelled into power by opposition to Park Geun-hye, who in deference to the US-South Korea relationship agreed to THAAD, and to a desire for change.



Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, center, holds hands together with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, left, and Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono during their joint talks on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Manila, the Philippines, Monday. Yonhap

Source: Yi, Whan-woo. "Allies ready for follow-up N. Korea steps." *Korea Times*, 7 August 2017.

The Trump-Moon Summit

It is traditional for an incoming South Korea president to make the first overseas visit to Washington to pledge fealty. South Korea is not alone in this, of course, and even Donald Trump, held in such disdain, often scarcely disguised, by foreign leaders had a long waiting list of suitors. That is the nature of international power. However Moon's visit displayed more than the usual degree of obsequiousness. His pre-summit conciliatory

statements were interpreted by many as a ploy to hide his real resolve to chart a new course for South Korea. For instance, the libertarian commentator Doug Bandow, with his usual mixture of realism and fantasy, wrote in *Forbes* in May, just after the election, that:

The two presidents spoke last week by phone shortly after Moon took office and have agreed to a summit next month. Talks might help, but even friendly discussions won't hide the fact that the two countries' interests differ in substantial ways. And if President Moon pursues policies which undercut Washington's objectives, relations could prove quite difficult: President Trump doesn't suffer criticism gladly. The frigid relationship between George W. Bush and Kim Dae-jung might serve as a model.

U.S.-South Korean ties have varied over time, in response to changing international conditions as well as shifts in the respective governments. However, the Trump-Moon match likely will present a special challenge. Donald Trump may find the serious and principled Moon to be a tougher adversary than Kim Jong-un.³⁶

In the event President Trump must have been pleasantly surprised, if he noticed at all, that the new South Korean president was, on the surface at least, neither principled nor tough. The scene was set in two different ways before the actual meeting before the presidents.

On the emotional, public relations level, Moon's first engagement in the United States was a visit to the Marine Corps Chosin Memorial in

Virginia commemorating the famous battle in the Korean War between the US-led forces and the Chinese and North Koreans.

An Associated Press report put this into context:

South Korea's new leader has vowed to stand firmly with President Donald Trump against North Korea, playing down his past advocacy of a softer approach toward the nuclear-armed nation as he made his first visit as president to Washington.

President Moon Jae-in offered an emotional tribute Wednesday to Marines who fought in a fierce battle in the Korean War that helped in the mass evacuation of Korean civilians, including his own parents. Moon said that without those American sacrifices, he would not be here today.

Moon was underscoring his personal commitment to the U.S.-South Korean alliance in the face of questions over whether his inclination toward engagement with North Korea despite its rapidly advancing nuclear capability could lead to strains in relations with Washington.³⁷

Moon's visit to the US marine memorial certainly played well in Washington, but seems like a gratuitous affront both to Pyongyang and to Beijing from someone who wanted to build bridges.

On the policy level, as Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations noted with approval:

...Moon's strategy of alignment with Trump on security issues — forecast in public interviews in the weeks prior to the summit — took almost every security issue off the table before Moon arrived in Washington.³⁸

That being the case the primary function of the summit meeting was to establish 'personal chemistry'. Moon appeared confident that this had been achieved:

On this relationship with Trump, Moon said, "We saw eye to eye more than I expected, and he was very respectful and kind."

"Speaking before the US media, President Trump used the terms 'great chemistry' and 'very very, very good,'" he added.³⁹

'Respectful and kind' are not usually qualities associated with Donald Trump. The US president also claimed to have 'great chemistry' with Chinese president Xi Jinping after their meeting in April; Xi did not boast about it, merely smiled gnomically.

Self-delusion and wishful thinking

Unfortunately it soon became apparent that despite the bonhomie things were not as rosy as portrayed.

Firstly THAAD. Apart from the more general and longstanding issue of relations with North Korea, this is perhaps the most immediate in South Korea's relationship with the United States. It is important in itself, as described above, but it is also symbolic of South Korea's dilemma. Briefly on a range of issues the interests of the United States and South Korea not merely do not coincide, but are at odds.

Sanctions on Iran to take one example from many. The United States has its own strategic reasons for its policy towards Iran and hostility to the current Islamic Republic, but whatever they are South Korea has no reason to share them. South Korea has no issues with Iran and would not benefit if the Islamic Republic fell and a US-compliant regime were installed. Nevertheless South Korea has been pressured to impose sanctions on Iran at considerable cost to itself.⁴⁰ As with Iran, South Korea is compelled to conform to US strategies towards China. However whatever the reasons for US policies, and the potential benefits and costs that might accrue to the United States, they are not shared with South Korea. On the contrary South Korea incurs more economic damage and greater danger, for no possible benefit. If the US did go to war against China what possible good could come to South Korea? So THAAD is important in itself but more than that it symbolises and encapsulates the dilemma South Korea faces being caught between the US and China. This dilemma is frequently mentioned in the South Korean press but only at a superficial level.⁴¹ Moreover articles in the South Korean media on the Chinese reaction to THAAD are commonly infused with wishful thinking and a refusal to face up to the facts. We are told that economic danger will really not be that great, that the Chinese are being petulant and that this will pass, that skilful South Korea diplomacy will make the problem go away.⁴² However, the problem has not gone away, and will not go away.⁴³

So if there is one pressing issue that President Moon needed to discuss with President Trump at the summit it was THAAD. For the conservatives this was a matter of pledging loyalty to the US and for the progressives it was a question of defusing the danger that THAAD posed to South Korea.⁴⁴ Yet in the preparations for the summit it was reported that Cheong Wa Dae (the Blue House, or presidential office) 'Wants to Keep THAAD off Summit Agenda'.⁴⁵ And so it came to pass. The

Chosun Ilbo said that 'Korea, U.S. Skirt THAAD Controversy During Summit' although it is clear that it was Moon alone, that was doing the skirting because 'The omission seems to have been the result of strenuous efforts by the government here, which was wary of getting off to a rough start with the notoriously volatile Trump'.⁴⁶

Then there was the question of the free trade agreement - KORUS FTA - signed by the Obama administration and earlier labelled by Donald Trump "a horrible deal" that has left America "destroyed."⁴⁷ His intention to renegotiate the agreement was clearly signalled.⁴⁸ Finding a satisfactorily anodyne way of handling the contradiction between Trump's intention and Moon's wishes delayed the summit joint statement by 7 hours.⁴⁹

A further result of the summit is that it reported that the transfer of OPCON has been further delayed, from 'within the term' [of Moons' five year presidency] as promised to 'at an early date' which since it is contingent on 'the situation with North Korea's nuclear and missile advancements' may mean sometime in the deep, dark future.⁵⁰ In the meantime Trump also signalled, yet again, that South Korea would have to pay more for the US military presence in Korea including the cost of relocating forces to Pyeongtaek, south of Seoul out of range, it was hoped, of North Korean artillery.⁵¹ Despite the costs this might be a forlorn hope.⁵² The relocation costs are in addition to the cost, borne by South Korea, of cleaning up contamination from USFK bases.⁵³

The response of the South Korean media, and the officials and politicians up to Moon Jae-in himself whose views they mirrored and amplified was largely a mixture of self-delusion and wishful thinking.

It was natural that the South Korean media would give much more coverage to the summit than the American. However what the Koreans

did not bring out was how perfunctory US coverage had been. The US media, again naturally, finds little of interest to report when a foreign leader kowtows because is the natural order of things. It is when they don't that media ears prick up; thus North Korea gets much more attention in the US press. So too with President Moon's visit.

The main article in the New York Times that mentioned the summit was about wider issues – 'Trump Takes More Aggressive Stance With U.S. Friends and Foes in Asia' – and it was buried on page A8.⁵⁴ The Washington Post did have one by-lined article on the summit but the heading showed that the real subject was North Korea – 'With South Korean president, Trump denounces 'reckless and brutal' regime in North Korea'.⁵⁵ The summit was not considered newsworthy enough to hit the Washington Post's twice daily email alert. The press conference was relatively poorly attended with 'dozens of open seats'.⁵⁶

In general, the *JoongAng Ilbo* proclaimed that it had been 'A successful summit'.⁵⁷ THAAD, as we have noted was 'skirted over' but other issues that were discussed were transmogrified into Korean victories. On economic issues the *Korea Times* decided that South Korean investment into the US demonstrated that 'Moon's US visit brings economic achievements'.⁵⁸ The Joint Statement did not specifically mention KORUS FTA.⁵⁹ However it did mention steel – one of America's big gripes – under US pressure 'fair and free trade' was simplified to 'fair trade' a Trump slogan that meant trade where the US balance was positive, which it is not with South Korea or a lot of other trade partners.⁶⁰ There was no doubt that the trade imbalance was on Trump's mind and the existing FTA was to be torn up and refashioned, to America's benefit.⁶¹ When that could no longer be denied President Moon claimed that 'Trump's trade comments were "outside of what was agreed upon"'.⁶²

However the main issue was North Korea and here the South Korean narrative was embarrassingly delusional. The Joint Statement excoriated North Korea, vowed to maintain and increase sanctions, eulogised the US-South Korea relationship, and had this to say about negotiations:

Noting that sanctions are a tool of diplomacy, the two leaders emphasized that the door to dialogue with North Korea remains open under the right circumstances.....

President Trump supported the ROK's leading role in fostering an environment for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula....

President Trump supported President Moon's aspiration to restart inter-Korean dialogue on issues including humanitarian affairs.⁶³

This mishmash of PR talk was converted into exuberant headlines, such as the Chosun Ilbo's 'Moon Wins U.S. Support for 'Leading Role' in Talks with N.Korea'.⁶⁴ It was all nonsense, of course. The US was not going to hand over a leading role in negotiations with North Korea to South Korea any more than it would give the lead in talks with China to New Zealand, or with Russia to Poland. The US media had been dismissive. Mark Landler in the *New York Times* noted that Trump 'showed little patience for Mr. Moon's hope for engagement with the North'.⁶⁵ The fantasy was publically exposed when Moon Jae-in did try to open up talks with the North on 17 July.⁶⁶ Seoul was roundly told off not merely by Washington but also, rubbing salt in the wound, by Tokyo.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly these criticisms were echoed by the conservative press.⁶⁸

At the time of writing there has been no response from North Korea.⁶⁹

No doubt North-South talks will eventually take place but also, no doubt, there will be little progress. Moon has so firmly, and unnecessarily, nailed his flag to the American mast, and has not taken steps to repair North-South relations that he could have, that it is difficult to see Kim Jong Un being enthused. Pragmatism will prevail, and Pyongyang will not refuse out of chagrin to talk to Seoul, but it is unlikely that relations will improve any more than they did under Park Geun-hye.

The Korean Tragedy

Tragedies in Western literature, from the Greeks through to Shakespeare, Dreiser and beyond have a fixed and usually gory denouement. This Korean tragedy has no obvious denouement in sight but the sense of inexorability is still there. Despite Team Trump's bluster about strategic patience being over it is abundantly clear that they are following Obama's policy of 'strategic patience' – which might be better termed 'strategic paralysis' because, like Obama they do not know what to do. They do not want to negotiate peaceful coexistence with North Korea, which means accepting in some form Pyongyang's nuclear deterrent, because of its geopolitical implications. Although it certainly cannot be ruled out, going to war is too dangerous and has drawbacks in terms of the containment of China, hence is unlikely. That leaves muddling along.⁷⁰ Moon Jae-in might well have been able to change this but he has endorsed American intransigence leaving the Korean peninsula in a very dangerous situation.

Moon's fundamental failure has been his commitment to the present US-SK relationship. He sees this as the foundation on which solutions can be built. However the relationship is in fact the problem from which others stem. Principally, but not exclusively, that means relations with North Korea and China while

ignoring South Korea. Furthermore by accepting the present relationship with the United States, 'the US-SK alliance', he is relinquishing control to America. Instead of autonomously developing a less antagonistic relationship with North Korea by utilising the instruments at his disposal, such as Kaesong or the abducted waitresses, he has subsumed the inter-Korean relationship under the US-SK alliance, so it is subordinated to US North Korea policy. Decisions, if they are made at all, are made in Washington and initiatives such as the July proposals to Pyongyang are doomed not to absolute failure but to very limited outcomes.⁷¹ Pyongyang will spend limited time talking to the servant when it knows that it is negotiations with the master that count.⁷²

It did not have to be this way, but with Moon having chosen the path he has it is difficult to see how he can turn back and rescue the situation. He is trapped by his original failure to challenge South Korea's servile status. This is not to say that choosing the path of autonomy, of seeking to extricate South Korea from the US alliance would have been easy. There would be considerable opposition within South Korea where the military and civil bureaucracies, and wide swathes of society, have been nurtured *for generations* within the American embrace. The actions of the defense establishment over the rushed deployment of THAAD in defiance of the Blue House, and the July prohibitions on the entry of American-Korean peace activists Christine Ahn and Juyeon Rhee are indications of resistance by what might be called the South Korean deep state.⁷³ It is uncertain to what degree a South Korean president can enlarge autonomy, let alone move towards independence without provoking a crisis. Moon Jae-in, as with any progressive South Korean president, is vulnerable to being removed from office by impeachment or coup and must tread carefully.

However the special circumstances in which Moon Jae-in came to office presented an

historic opportunity. On the one hand there was the popular impetus towards change and renovation provided by the Candlelight Revolution and on the other the mounting criticism of Donald Trump amongst elites worldwide, including South Korea and within the United States itself. It should be cautioned that the disdain for Trump by the American foreign policy establishment has been for his incompetence, and that establishment would not look kindly on a South Korea breaking free from the US alliance.⁷⁴ Nevertheless Trump's low standing does provide leverage. If, for instance Moon had pressed for autonomy at the summit and this had precipitated a public crisis in US-SK relations then this might have been blamed on Trump. South Korean autonomy would have been increased but this might have passed less noticed amongst the slew of criticisms of Trump.

Moon Jae-in should have used this historic opportunity and moved quickly during the honeymoon period that new leaders traditionally have to refashion the US-South Korea relationship in the direction of autonomy and eventual independence. This would not have been easy, and might have been fraught with danger, but continuing on the path of subservience towards the United States offers no hope. South Korea will remain a pawn of American policy for the containment of China and the maintenance of global hegemony. This long-term predicament is compounded by the impulsive and strategically incoherent actions of President Donald Trump. The 'August Crisis', as it has been labelled by the South Korea press, and which is continuing at the time of writing, will probably pass.⁷⁵ Trump's minders, especially and crucially Secretary of Defense Mattis will almost certainly prevent an American attack on North Korea.⁷⁶ One advantage of Trump's narcissism is that though he has a reputation for nursing grievances he readily turns, in his own mind, a defeat into a victory. Nevertheless, despite Moon's phone calls to Trump and delusory articles in the

South Korean media about 'close and transparent' cooperation, and wistful calls that 'Seoul should make its opposition to war even clearer to Washington' South Korea really has little traction.⁷⁷ It is clear from coverage in the US media that little attention is paid to South Korea. Senator Lindsay Graham's TV interview on 1 August quoting Trump seems horribly plausible:

Graham said that Trump won't allow the regime of Kim Jong Un to have an ICBM with a nuclear weapon capability to "hit America."

"If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong Un], it will be over there. If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here. And He has told me that to my face," Graham said.

"And that may be provocative, but not really. When you're president of the United States, where does your allegiance lie? To the people of the United States," the senator said.⁷⁸

South Korea's tragedy is that Moon Jae-in has failed to realise that if he is to fulfil his allegiance to his people he needs to break free from the status of client and pawn and move towards autonomy and then independence. The 'Candlelight Revolution' offered an historic possibility to attempt to do this but President Moon has squandered the opportunity.

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Notes

¹ Jong-hoon Kim and Hyun Lee (Interviewer), "S Korean Progressives Launch New Party to Complete 'Candlelight Revolution'," *Zoom in Korea*, 4 August 2017.; See Part 1 [here](#) and Part 2 [here](#).

² There is a large, if usually unsatisfactory, literature on this, which also gets extensive coverage, especially at times of crisis, in the media. For what it is worth my recent thoughts on this are at Tim Beal, "The Korean Peninsula within the Framework of US Global Hegemony," *The Asia Pacific Journal - Japan Focus* 14, no. 22:3 (2016).

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