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QI Panel:

Will Lee Jae-myung Reorient South Korea's Foreign Policy?

June 9th, 2025

9:00 - 10:00 AM ET

Jake Werner 0:43

Hello, my name is Jake Warner. I'm the director of the East Asia program at the Quincy Institute, and thank you for joining me today for this webinar, a very timely webinar on the direction of South Korea and South Korean foreign policy under the new presidential I have a wonderful panel with me here today. We're going to talk all about this issue, but let me say a few words about the Quincy Institute.

First, the Quincy Institute is a transpartisan think rank, promoting ideas that that move US foreign policy and national security policy away from global dominance and militarism and toward diplomatic engagement, and South Korea is an important part of this. The South Korea, the US, South Korean Alliance, is essential to regional geopolitics. It has become an increasingly fraught relationship as the US, China relationship has deteriorated and now, as the new Trump administration has come in and introduced new forms of instability, so this is an essential question we're going to be addressing today. What direction will the will the new the daebon administration take, and how will it deal with all the challenges facing Korea, in the region, in the alliance and and how does domestic politics fit into that?

So I'm very happy to welcome this excellent panel. First joining us is Dr Kim Joon-hyung, who is an elected representative in the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea since 2024 prior to that, he taught international politics at Handong global university for 25 years, and served as an advisor to former president Moon Jae In he is currently also the president of Korea diplomacy Plaza, a network of regional experts and IR professionals, as well as a standing committee member of the foreign and unification committee. He's joining us from Seoul, so really appreciate Dr Kim staying up late and helping us understand things from on the ground. Next I have Darcei Draudt-Véjares, who's a fellow for Korean studies in the Asia program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Se is a political scientist and policy analyst and currently holds non resident fellowships at George Washington University Institute for Korean studies, as well as the National Bureau of Asian Research. Also joining us is James Park, who is a research associate at the Quincy Institute's East Asia program. His research covers South Korean foreign policy and domestic politics, any security issues and US policy vis a vis East Asia. Last but not least, Frank Aum is the senior expert on Northeast Asia at the United States Institute for Peace, Institute of Peace, where he focuses on ways to strengthen diplomacy, to reduce tensions, enhanced peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Previously, he worked at the Department of Defense, including a special assistant to the assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs, a senior advisor on the Korean peninsula in the Office of

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the Secretary of Defense, and also served as head of delegation for working level negotiations with the Republic of Korea on Alliance matters, and received the Secretary of Defense medal for outstanding public service.

So we have an incomparable panel here to discuss these key issues. And I should add that each of, each of the each of the researchers here have have quite recently published highly relevant research. So each of them has a new research paper out in the last last couple months, and they'll be drawing on that research today to help us understand these issues. I really encourage you to to to read their work in in full. It's really it's really worthwhile, all right. So just to give a sense of where we're at, for those who have not been following the tumultuous politics in South Korea recently, about six months ago, now, the the now former president now impeach and removed President Yoon Suk-yeol, declared martial law and tried to dissolve alleged. Legislature, this attempted self coup collapsed quite quickly because of very strong demand to preserve democracy and because of the decisive action of the legislature, which is under the under the leadership of the Democratic Party, or the Minja Don, and that is, of course, the same party that the new President, Jim Young comes from, so after Now this last six months, the dealing with the fallout from the attempted and failed self coup, and then the impeachment, the removal of Yoon Suk Yeol, which was highly contested by right wing supporters, but was ultimately successful.

Just last week, South Korea elected Lee Jae Myung. It was a clear victory, although it was not quite as the gap between the two candidates was not quite as big as many were expecting, given the ignominious failure of the of the Conservative Party. The Conservative candidate scored slightly better than than was expected, and himself got just short of the 50% mark because there there were several third third party candidates in the running as well. He now faces an array of very pressing issues. Among them is navigating the daunting geopolitical and security environment in Asia. Of course, first and foremost is North Korea right in the middle of that. North Korean nuclear tests have grown significantly in recent years. Dialogue with Pyongyang has completely stalled. And in the midst of all that we have a tense relationship with China. We have the prospect of a quite turbulent relationship with the United States, as the administration of Donald Trump makes demands of Korea economically and to support its own to support the Alliance spending to a larger degree, all of this uncertainty is making it very difficult to understand even what the challenges are, much less how to navigate them. So the South Korean Foreign Policy situation looks quite difficult, but the situation makes our discussion today very interesting. So we have that to benefit from.

I'd like to begin by asking Representative Kim, how do you see things from South Korea from from your position in the legislature, what do you think of South Korea's geopolitical situation? What do you expect from the Lee Jae Myung administration? And in your own opinion, what? What direction would you like to see South Korea moving in its foreign policy?

Representative Kim Joon-hyung 8:03

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Yeah, always happy. Okay, it's good to see you all and friends and colleagues, yeah, since I visited Washington last November, right after elections, I think I didn't go to Washington at all, so it's good to see you, actually. You know, for my personal episode, I got hurt here somewhere in the muscle in the shoulder when I a wrestler, can go through the gate at the night. So I been treated by acupuncture. And it's not really recovered easily. So in a way, I got the scar of the night, and it was like a six it feels like a six years rather than the six month.

Anyways, back up, you know, go back to the question that you asked. I was given three questions you just mentioned, so let me use this time to answer the question. First, South Korea's geopolitical situation, the external environment of the ROK, which the Lee Jae Myung government is taking over, is difficult enough to be called a national crisis, war in Ukraine and Gaza, an ongoing geopolitical challenge of the US, China. Strategic competition is growing, and the inter Korean relationship is showing no signs of improvement from the worst situation, in particular, the Korean economy is now recovering its growth momentum and is facing difficulties on all sides. Excuse me. According to the recent report by KDI, a government funded research institute, Korea economy seems to be struggling to achieve even 1% Eight increase of GDP this year, it is difficult to expect a recovery in growth rate next year. So many small business almost, you know, bankruptcy this series, somebody compared this is like crisis in the 1997 when the IMF helped Korea as an expert brand economy, Korea has been in the best environment in the context of globalization, in the past 30 or more years, since the end of Cold War, and the so called traditional geopolitical disadvantage of Korea has been its weakest now, it can be said that such a favorable external environment is over. The so called liberal international order, or rule based international order, is collapsing due mainly to the US, I should say Trump, which originally created and maintained it on March 11, the 50th day since the Trump took office.

David Sanger of the NYT New York Times said that the US has destroyed the foundation of the international system that it had worked so hard to build over the past 80 years in just 50 days. I totally agree with him, there is a fragmented on the one hand, there is the US, China Strategic competition, and on the other hand, there is a fragmentation of the each country surviving on its own. Korea is one of the most vulnerable countries, I think, in this situation. Second question, here's the expectation of how the you know, expectation of how the President Lee diminishes would approach the difficult geopolitical situation. He is a self proclaimed pragmatist. The same is true of my long and close observation of him, because of the extreme, polar polarizations of Korean politics. Conservatives are constantly trying to frame him as a leftist, commies, pro China, pro North Korea, anti American and anti Japanese. But that is hardly the case. He made it even clearer through election process. He said that he moved to the right, and that the Democratic Party in Korea is closer to moderate conservative, and that it is not anti American or pro China, but rather centered on national interest, so called programmatism.

President Lee's default position is to support Alliance, although Lee's win brings back to the office progressive forces in ROK that were last in office in 2012 22 under President Moon Jae In two years earlier than expected. This position was somewhat disappointing to many progressives, including me. Lee Jae Myung comes into the office with a solid, popular mandate and comfortable control of the National Assembly, something his predecessor never had.

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However, the road ahead is rough rather than smooth. President Lee says he will overcome the difficulties of the US China Strategic competition with the prerogative, but it is not an easy task, as it sounds. Trump's America is new administration's biggest challenges. Trump's worldview, as you know, believes that the reason for weakening of the US today is not the fault of enemies like China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, but of the airlines and friendly countries. He says the US airlines unfairly exploited the US market and free ride it on his security. For him, now is the payback time, and the entrance fee will be the properly collected now and in the future. Tariffs and increased cost sharing are entrance fees. The ROK-U.S. alliance has been basically benefit for the ROK so far, but it is becoming a risk.

There are two risks in the ROK-U.S. relationship. One is tariff pressure, and the other is security issues. While Trump's main concern is tariff, there are rocks because us alliance is facing pressures in two forms. One is a reduction of the US troops in Korea, and the other is strategic flexibility. Trump is actually destroying the foundation of the Alliance, while Pentagon is demanding ROK to expand this role if the reef fails to wake up from the political correctness by the by the terms of expression of the trump of the ROK us Alliance. Like previous administration, the cost of the alliance will be enormous. Final question, how he thinks hurricanes foreign policy should be like in the coming years? That means what, I think, there are three ways to counter Trumpism, and actually, my advice, right? Yeah, this, this part was actually I gave President Lee at the day of the election. He read it, and he said, Thank you, but I don't know whether he takes it or not.

Anyways, first, we must respond slowly, as we have seen so far, Trump's policies and pressures lever are not fixed, but changed depending on the situation. Trump keeps moving his target when the intentions and objectives are not clear, it is advisable to observe and refer to the result of negotiation with other countries, if possible. Trump's tariff policy will not last long. It has never succeeded in American history. It will shape the world economy in the short term, but in the long term, it will accelerate decoupling of the US and the world economy. Of course, Korea is one of the country's most vulnerable to tariff pressure, but we have to hold out as long as we can. Second. We must respond together with other countries. Trump prefers one on one bilateral approach to specific partners. This is because he believes that allies that are highly dependent on us can be easily dealt with in bilateral relations. If so, the answer lies within the problem. In order to overcome Trump's bilateral pressure, we must respond multilaterally with other countries. In particular, we must respond together with the countries in similar situations, such as Japan, EU, Canada, Mexico and Australia, there is a justification for solidarity in protecting free trade, which Trump is trying to destroy.

Lastly, we must respond with confidence. We must strongly oppose Trump's America First policy in order to properly protect ironically rock us Alliance as it is, destroying the foundation of the Alliance today, South Korea is not the South Korea of the past that was not sure of a survivor without the US. Nevertheless, it is true that the absolute myth of the US and the ROK-U.S. Alliance still works and will still feel small when we stand in front of the US. I think it's saying to IJM, I am not saying that we should take an anti American line. However, we must have the confidence to withstand the pressure of the US. Trump's time is in finite, not infinite, which

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means finite we must maintain strategic autonomy. We should learn from the fact that the US, allies and partners, such as EU and Japan, have been negotiating by the book, but Trump's carrying it up. The Trump administration sees terror talks as a chance to pressure a rival, if not an enemy, into possession, but those countries have acted as as though they were dealing with an ally. In the case of Korea, it is member of 15-30 countries that have been robbing the US. We may already be facing a fundamental change in the ROK us Alliance, rather than repeating is strengthening of the ROK us Alliance like parrot. It is time to break away from the existing myth of the ROK-U.S. Alliance and redefining that. This is it. Thank you very much.

Jake Werner 18:55

Thank Thank you. Representative, Kim, that is a very, I think, incisive view on the issue. We will, we will see, probably sooner rather than later, if you get me on follows the advice that you offer, I'd like to turn to Darcy. Darcy, before we really dig in on some of the immediate issues that Representative Kim raised, I'd like to ask your thoughts coming out of your your recent paper. You have a recent research paper out called the transformation of South Korean progressive foreign policy. And you you give a bit of a historical framework. You characterize where progressive foreign policy was coming from, and some of the ways that it has really changed in recent years, with reference both to the kind of structural constraints that the outside world is imposing on it, as well as the direction that that domestic politics is moving, how that conditions the concerns and the possibilities. For the Democratic Party under Jae Lee. So I'm very interested in getting a sense of kind of the trajectory that you see here and and then what your expectations are given this the sort of larger historical and structural analysis

Darcie Draudt-Véjares 20:22

Yeah, yeah. I'm thank you for sharing the paper. I spent a lot of time thinking about it. And let me say, the inception of this paper wasn't actually December, when Lee Jae Myung was ramping up for this particular election. I've been thinking about this for, I would say, since Moon Jae In was running for election a while ago, and the reason I thought about this was I've been working on Korean issues for over 12 years now in Washington, and I lived in Korea before that, and I in 2017 when Moon Jae In was elected here in Washington, we were anticipating a return to anti Americanism that had characterized some of the mid 2000 era relationship between South Korea and the United States, but I had an intuition that that wasn't going to be the case. And in fact, I think we saw during the Moon Jae In administration areas where there might have been friction, and there was some friction.

This isn't to say that it was, it was put completely in lockstep or anything like that, but the level of anti Americanism, the sorts of protests that were on the street in the mid 2000s didn't come to fruition. I think part of that we could say is because of the particularities of the Trump administration and his vision toward North Korea. That being a major issue here. But we didn't see it, right? So I decided to look into why this was the case and why this might be the case going forward. So as you said, I looked at both the domestic and the international. Domestic dimensions, I think in many respects, the International dimensions are some of the strongest

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reasons. Historically, the South Korean progressives have organized a lot of their foreign policy priorities around engagement with North Korea and the particular vision of reconciliation. But what I write about in the paper, and I think is very much the case is, regardless of whether South Koreans want engagement with North Korea, the fact of the matter is, is North Korea today is very different from North Korea in during the Moon Jae In administration, and is certainly a very different North Korea than the 2000s I mean, number one, We have a demonstrated nuclear weapons capability, strong development, missile, missile program. And I think some of the most important things here are its defensive pact with Russia, which fundamentally changes, I think, the calculus in Northeast Asia about who is, what great powers are involved.

And then secondly, last year, North Korea changed its constitution to no longer seeking unification, and to defining South Korea as a hostile state. So this puts a lot of pressure on progressive foreign policy that's hinging on engagement with North Korea. The second thing that's a really, real factor in this is the China component. And we see a big shift in how South Koreans in general see China vis a vis vis a vis they signed a US rivalry. And let me give you the exact moment would be the economic coercion that followed deployment of the THAAD missile battery system to South Korea. We see in public opinion. We see in the way leaders are talking about North Korea, a sharp plummeting in how South Koreans view China. So whereas there might have been some party, party preferences on this, the sino us rivalry, that isn't really the case anymore. So then this gets us to the domestic component. And again, South Korean across the board, politically, are much more reticent to a closer relationship with China. I'm not, I'm not going to mention the Trump factor here, but particularly with China. And then this is again, with North Korea, South Koreans.

And this is what I trace in the paper. I provide a lot of data on this is South Koreans, particularly younger South Koreans, are increasingly see North Korea as a different state, as a different people. There's different social, political, cultural and certainly economic barriers to any sort of inter Korean relation. And so what I argue in the paper is that these transformation, these these, these pressures are forcing a transformation, particularly as the leadership in South Korea is changing. Right as Representative Kim mentioned South Korea today, and you could talk about this any of the bilateral relations, right? Representative Kim tucked in respect to the the US South Korea component, but with any of its bilateral relations, South Korea today is different than it is 20 years ago. It's a top, top global economy. It's a now we know it's a cultural powerhouse. Koreans won a Tony Award yesterday, completing their EGOT. So there it's just like a much bigger it's not necessarily the patron, client relationship that it was before. So that's what I called her in the paper, and that's how I see the changes that are going on in progressive foreign policy.

Jake Werner 24:58

Thank you. That is very helpful. Cool. And I think it's worth maybe emphasizing how important that shift, both in thinking in North Korea and South Korea about the peninsula relation is it's moving from a very strong sense of identity between the two sides, that we are one people, we should be reunified. Both sides seem to be moving away from that vision and increasingly

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accepting what could be a permanent separation, or if there, if there would were to be some sort of pursuit of a unification. It's far off into the future, and it's really not driven by the same sort of ethno nationalist politics that previously drove things. So that does seem very and that, I think that's something that people in the United States will have a hard time fully appreciating because they're most most people united states are not sort of immersed in the sort of cultural and political, political culture of of the peninsula. So thank you for emphasizing that

James. I want to turn to you and sort of coming off of that question. You know the as Darcie emphasizes the possibilities for diplomacy, whether that's diplomacy with North Korea, with China, with even with the United States, have become increasingly dark for South Korea, but in you you also have a recent paper out from punishment to denial stabilizing deterrence on the Korean peninsula, and you argue that there is not only a real urgency for diplomacy, this paper focuses on North Korea. So, so I'd like you to address that, but, but I'd also be interested in your thoughts on possibilities with the United States, since, since these two questions are going to have to coordinate. If the United States is inalterably opposed to diplomacy with North Korea, that would make it very difficult for South Korea to pursue it. So do you see the Where do you see the possibilities for diplomacy in this sort of forbidden environment?

James Park 27:09

Before moving on to diplomacy with North Korea. I kind of want to give my overview of, sort of, you know, what I expect from the Lee Jae Myung administration foreign policy in the coming months and years. And I have to say I would generally agree with Representative Kim and Darcy's assessments, um, and I personally think that, you know, we might see some continuity from the previous years, but also reorientations in some ways. You know, as we all know, Lee's predecessor, Yoon Sung. Yo pursued a value based foreign policy, which was, you know, centered around alignment with the US Japan and other like minded democracies to, you know, counter regional autocracies. And in this framework, South Korea, under Yoon, you know, adopted a more adversarial posture toward North Korea, more clearly aligned with the US against Russia by, you know, indirectly supplying artillery shells Ukraine, and more clearly, aligning with the US against China on regional security issues, including Taiwan and the South China Sea. And in this process, Yun also tolerated strong sort of domestic opposition to accommodating Japan on World War Two historical issues in order to normalize South Korea's military ties with Japan and advance U.S.-ROK0Japan, trilateral military cooperation.

However, I think Lee Jae Myung might he intends to take a different approach. He read already many times that you know about sort of pursuing a foreign policy that will seek to emphasize South Korea's national interest, rather than value based alignment. You know, you largely identified international politics in terms of in a value based struggle between democracy and autocracy, and this worldview, I think, may have influenced him to be, you know, naturally sort of more risk acceptant in deterring and confronting North Korea the way he was, and also more willing to compromise South Korean ties with China and Russia for alignment and cooperation with the US. But on the other hand, I think Lee Jae Myung prefers a more pragmatic foreign policy focused on risk aversion and reduction. Lee has indicated that his administration would.

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Seek to maintain a strong US ROK alliance and develop close ties with Japan, but also seek to maintain stable relationships with China and Russia, at least avoiding confrontation with them and pursue diplomacy with North Korea. And when we look at the list of Lee Jae Myung appointees to key foreign policy positions, they seem to reflect his commitment to a more pragmatic foreign policy. For example, Wi Song Lakh was confirmed last week as the National Security Advisor, and Kim Yeon Jong, who is also being mentioned as a likely candidate for the Special Advisor to the President for foreign policy and security, both are career diplomats and considered pro Alliance figures who support close Alliance cooperation with the US and partnership with Japan, but they've also emphasized the need to take a nuanced approach to China and Russia.

And Lee Jae Myung also appointed Lee Jong Seok, former unification minister, who has rich experience in structuring and facilitating inter Korean diplomacy. He was appointed as the head of National Intelligence. And Lee is also known to be considering Chung Dong Young, another longtime champion of inter Korean diplomacy, as his unification minister. So I think Lee Jae Myung is pretty he seems to be pretty serious about, you know, wanting to go in this direction, the pragmatic policy framework that he laid out. And this, in my view, it does make sense from the perspective of South Korea in terms of risk, like a regional risk management, you know, facing North Korea's ongoing nuclear threat and geopolitical tensions in the broader East Asia. You know U.S alliance remains South Korea's you know, arguably the best security guarantor, despite despite the uncertain, all the uncertainty, and given this situation, the Lee administration will prioritize, I think, working with the Trump administration to advance shared security interests, particularly regarding North Korea. It also makes sense that the Lee administration views Japan as an important partner to work with. By continuing to build on the existing bilateral and trilateral cooperation with Japan, the Lee administration would be able to reaffirm its commitment to the US regional alliance structure and also seek to advance its interests related to dealing with North Korea and addressing supply chain instability, particularly in bilateral format with Japan.

However, there are also evident challenges to the administration's pragmatic foreign policy, as Representative Kim and Darcy have noted, you know, you know the Lee administration, would you know is anticipated to pursue, you know, some level of hedging between Washington and Beijing. You know, trade, combining imports and exports makes, makes up roughly over 90% of South Korea's GDP. So and in this structure, both China and the US remain crucial to South Korea supply chain as the largest and the second largest trade partners, but I'm not sure if the Trump administration would respond well to this kind of South Korean hedging. It's been reported that Trump administration officials, you know, are inclined to force allies and partners to choose between the US and China, and in this kind of atmosphere,

I just have to say, I I, I fully agree with, you know, our assessments here that, you know, there are, there are a lot of challenges going forward for the Alliance, and they would have to, I think the best way to navigate through this is, you know, to emphasize and focus on cooperation, identifying on, you know, area of cooperation, shared interest, and you know, prioritizing that and both sides would also have. To, you know, try to reach, you know, some kind of compromise

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on, you know, difficult issues like Alliance cost sharing tariffs. It would be very difficult, but yeah, and, you know, talking of North Korea is the area of cooperation. You know, Trump, President Trump has, obviously, you know, stated multiple times his interest in re engaging with North Korea. And you know, whether you know he has genuine interests or not. You know, the track record suggests that you know he does have some sort of personal ambition, um, regarding North Korea and, you know, sort of becoming the first US president, directly engaging with Kim Jong Un and he might want to build on that legacy. And I think Frank, he laid out a very detailed and thorough sort of roadmap how, you know, Trump and South Korea, Lee Jae Myung can work together to sort of sort of revive that effort. And I think I want, I want to leave it up to Frank to talk more about that issue in particular.

Jake Werner 36:47

Great, then, yeah, let's, let's bring it to Frank. Before we do that, just remind everyone who's listening right now that we will keep some time at the end for audience questions. So please put any questions you have in the Q and A, and we'll come to them shortly. So then bringing this question to you, Frank and you also have a new paper out. It's called pursuing stable coexistence, a reorientation of US policy toward North Korea, co authored with Ankit panda. So drawing on that research, I'm wondering what you're seeing as, what you recommend as sort of the frame framework for stable coexistence for North Korea, and what the possibilities for diplomacy between the US, South Korea and North Korea might be?

Frank Aun 37:38

Yeah. Thank you so much, Jake, so I definitely share the assessment that President Lee faces many significant challenges today, but I also think he has a crucial opportunity to advance his goals based on the unique characteristics of the current geostrategic environment. And the main opportunity comes from a combination of on one hand, there's this expanding negotiating space that's created by President Trump's America first approach to America, Alliance relations. And then, on the other hand, President Lee has new priorities, right? So things like OPCON transition, a rock led future command structure, U.S.- force reductions, joint military exercises. Us, strategic asset deployments, bilateral trade relations, these things all become more fluid within this new strategic environment when it comes to North Korea. So President Lee has already started off on the right foot by emphasizing the principles of peace, dialog and cooperation, and in his election night speech, he also underscored the importance of peaceful coexistence, which onkin and I have written about, as you mentioned in our Report, we think stable coexistence is the right goal to target with North Korea, rather than immediate denuclearization or excessive deterrence.

And this is precisely because we are currently mired in a dangerous coexistence with North Korea, a North Korea that has up to 90 nuclear weapons, the fissile material for 90 nuclear weapons, and maintains an aggressive nuclear doctrine right that favors preemption, and despite the fact that the US intelligence community assesses that Pyongyang will not relinquish its nuclear weapons. Us, policy is still clinging to the unattainable goal of denuclearization, and

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this creates a contradiction between analysis and diplomatic objectives, and I think this contradiction fosters policy incoherence. US, and it also heightens the risk of conflict and miscalculation, right? And one of the manifestations of this risk is the US emphasis on using pressure and coercion over the last 20 years to change North Korea's behavior, even though Pyongyang has directly responded to this policy by significantly improving its military capabilities, right?

And I think conversely, if you look at the historical track record, it shows that when we engage with North Korea, it behaves a lot better periods of active diplomacy between the two countries, such as during the 1990s the Agreed Framework era, the 2011 2012 Leap Day deal negotiations, or the 2018 2019 Trump Kim dialogue. These periods corresponded with notable reductions in provocative North Korean behavior. One last point I'll make on North Korea is that, and I think is very important at the moment, is that the idea of stable coexistence, that that strategy, it's consistent with how President Trump is articulating his desired approach to North Korea. Right? They haven't released the results of a North Korea policy review yet, but everything that President Trump has stated publicly is that he wants to get along with North Korea. He's also said that we will have relations with North Korea.

So I think our paper basically provides a strategic rationale for what Trump wants to do, which is getting along with North Korea, right? I want to highlight a couple of challenges that Lee Jim will face when he tries to do this. One is that last year, as Darcie mentioned North Korea, abandoned the policy of unification with South Korea, and he called South Korea its principal enemy. On top of that, the previous President Yoon promoted a new aggressive unification policy that was basically in support of regime change. So I think if President Lee wants to avoid the fate of Korea passing and make sure that Seoul is at the table when Washington and Pyongyang negotiate the future of the Korean Peninsula, he will need to proactively clarify his inter Korean policy and more explicitly prioritize an emphasis on inter Korean normalization rather than unification.

I think, in general, President Lee has been vague on this issue, but I think he'll need to be a lot more explicit if he wants to improve inter Korean relations. The second challenge is how to demonstrate to North Korea that he is sincere about peace building. I think, you know, one way is obviously prioritizing normalization over unification, another way is to reduce aggressive and excessive deterrence signaling. I think this might be hard, because President Lee has also spoken about backing South Korean conventional deterrence, including upgrading the aggressive three axis defense system that was developed by prior administrations, which North Korea finds hostile, right but I think President Moon Jae In the previous left leaning administration, he already demonstrated that South Korea can support and rely on us, extended nuclear deterrence and its own conventional deterrence while still mitigating tensions. So for example, President Moon maintained military deterrence and readiness through combined military exercises, but he reduced their scale and scope and he halted the deployment of US strategic assets. He also softened the terminology for the three axis system to dampen the hostile rhetoric. So I think President Lee should also consider treading a similar fine line here. And I'll stop here because I know we're kind of running out of time.

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Jake Werner 44:21

Thank you. That's that's very helpful. Representative Kim, I'd like to come back to you and hear any any responses you have to what the rest of the panel said. Specifically, I'm interested in what you see as the possibilities for diplomacy with North Korea, given given the difficulties we've reviewed here, including, including the fact that North Korea seems to have really turned against the possibility of talks even named like, as we've noted, naming in constitutional revision. So, so very fundamental revisions to they, they have named South Korea as a hostile state in their constitution as. Last year. So do you see this sorts of possibilities for diplomacy? Number one, and then there's, there is a question from the audience that I think it would be interested for you to interesting for you to address. Question is, do you think that cooperation between South Korea and the EU can can strengthen the Jae Myung administration? And so can you address that like a little bit more in a little bit more detail? What, what South Korea working with other middle powers to to coordinate against possible hostility from either China or the United States might look like?

Representative Kim Joon-hyung 45:35

Okay, I think it's my my presentation misses point, especially North Korean issue, and other colleagues talked about a lot. Okay, let me express my opinion and my predictions. I think at least Trump that I totally agree with, you know, Dr ohm, he said is, I think it's some kind of obsession. He's not peaceful person, of course, but he has some obsession that he wants to be a peacemaker, that nobody can compete so and he put that word in his inauguration speech, and I think is in that sense he's really committed to that. That means he tried to reach out, and he always excused why? 2018 peace process failed, because meal cards, and he tried knock on, but the, you know, considering his exaggeration, I don't think anything happening now. He's knocking. I think he has been knocking the door. But North Korea is doesn't, you know, respond if, if some response comes out, came out, and you know, Trump is, you know, kind of exaggerate more than the reality. But that means, you know, I always reminded by this Chesson is comment right after failure in Hanoi and US will not go, will not have the best you know, chance like this later. And of course, is North Korean traumatic experience at the time.

So, but you know what? I agree I don't worry about the passing South Korea passing Korea, when Trump is reaching out at first, because for the past three, four years, is worse situations, you know, escalations of tensions. So at least I, I liked, you know, Trump is kind of trying to de escalate the situations. Yeah, of course, we have to jump in some somewhere in between, but from the beginning, we should not kind of interfere, you know, some kind of, you know, melting movement or reaching out things like that. That's why my point and and North Korea is not really, it's the different, totally different. Now I did compare with 70 or 80 years ago, they have Russia on the back, and they're much stronger, and sanction system almost gone. So even though Trump is trying, I don't think it's really North Korea. Is there is there any incentives or benefits they can offer to make North Korea Pyongyang Come on. That's my one question.

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But I think overall, maybe one good thing Trump is going to do is the escalation of the Korean peninsula with North Korea. Second question about solidarity, or some kind of we have worked together. I think it's I mentioned about the EU and Mexico and Canada, but the major, I think initiator or initiative and initial move should come from Northeast Asia. I think there is some kind of movement between Japan, Korea and China. So these three countries, with the Germany, you know, kind of dominating world manufacturing, you know, industry like a value chain our Yeah, I know between you know us, China, strategic competition is hard for Korea to do something with China. Recently, you know, Hegseth talked about, you know, basically, you have to cut your relationship with China. And I can we ask that, can America cut, you know, from China. So that's nonsense, but anyways, I think that's that's why I kind of advised President Lee many times. So is there really a you know, bad deal with Japan when we normalized, you normalized, but we have to take advantage. Survey, I think it's a good relation with Japan is important, and Japan is very vulnerable to U.S., and very similar situations.

I think we have some kind and these the Ishiba Actually, when initial movement is failed, they kind of try to use alternatives. So in that distance, I think Korea, Korea, Japan first together, kind of some kind of, you know, co work, and at the same time we can try so that's why there's some kind of argument that we should reopen the dialog for Korea, Japan, China, FTA, and then we try to build some kind of trade regime, free trade regime, some kind of free trade regime. And we can kind of call other US, friendly countries that kind of movement. Maybe the more Trump is pressuring allies and partners, then more urgent need to kind of build a coalition, things like that. It's a because, as I said, you know, protectionism by tariff is not going to succeed. Some in some level is at some point, maybe, possibly, maybe it's ironically, depending on how strong or how unilateral Trump's measure toward these allies.

Jake Werner 51:36

Thank you. Thanks. No, that's That's great. You know that really, that really points to the possibility that China, although, although, as we've discussed, China has engaged in in very sharp economic coercion against South Korea in the past, China might be in a more cooperative attitude right now, feeling under siege from the United States, looking for, looking to strengthen connections with South Korea and Japan, so that that does seem like a possibility. Thank you, Darcy. And I'd like to come back to each of the panelists, if we can. So let's, let's keep answers very short, unfortunately, but I want to ask Darcy about the economic aspects of of foreign policy here in your your paper, you you talked about the ways that economic tensions within South Korea are conditioning ideas about foreign policy, and we've already sort of gestured towards the fact that the United States is going to bring, be bringing a lot of economic pressure on South Korea, which is unusually vulnerable in those terms. And one of the people in the in the questions raised the possibility of relationships with Gulf States to pursue energy security, and obviously there's a lot of investment to be to be pursued there as well. What do you see kind of as the economic dimensions of foreign policy that the Lee Jae Myung administration are going to be facing, or could they take advantage of?

Darcie Draudt-Véjares 52:55

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Yeah, yeah, this is a really important question. I could talk. I'll try to keep it short, because I could talk forever about this topic, but I think this is operating at two levels. The first one is the domestic level, which I talk a little bit about in the paper, growing economic inequality, high unemployment rates, particularly among young people. I get those in the paper, and that's a really important thing, like how Lee Jae Myung, those are the issues that he addressed in his election, this feeling of economic insecurity felt by everyday people. There's another layer to this, which is more like about industrial policy and the way business leaders see their Korea's place in the world. And that dimension is also really important in this. In this particular moment, as Representative Kim mentioned supply chain. Security is a really important issue here, and I think that the way that Korea can overcome this, and it's being forced to because of the trade securitization, tech securitization, by on the part of both the United States and China, they're both doing this is to diversify its partnerships.

So South Korea has a long track record in this. It has a lot of bilateral FTA discussions about it joining multilateral trade agreements like the like the Trans Pacific Partnership. These are all long standing issues that are in the South Korea right now. But I think that thinking about not just the sino us rivalry aspect of this as it's thinking about projection chains, but also ASEAN member states, South Korea has a really strong presence there that it can it can bolt buttress. This isn't necessarily new. South Korea's outreach to the Southeast Asian states started in the 2000s it was strengthened in Myung bak the conservative president's global Korea strategy. Moon Jae In had a new southern policy that was about outreaching to these states. That's a really big dimension to this, as the two of the questions mentioned, Europe is a really important part of this too, because the economies are complementary. The consumers, both everyday consumers, as well as like B to B relations. Europe and South Korea are a much more complementary economies than China is, which is now an economic competitor in many respects, Korea, China has risen. It's a competitor in many of the electronics, in particular areas where South Korea dominates, ship building, where South Korea dominates, and then the Gulf states, as was also mentioned, South Korea is in a really difficult energy security environment. Lee Jae Myung has promised to shift toward a more clean energy profile.

So how that really relates to in this question of the geopolitics of energy? Is that question? But the one thing I will say is, this is a really I just wrote another piece for Carnegie, a short blog post about how this middle power diversification strategy can be a benefit to this new administration, but it needs to be really careful. It can't do everything. So South Korea is a top global economy, but it's also a relatively small country, right, compared to Russia and the United States and China. So it has limited resources, even though it's very strong in those resources, high tech skills, high production skills, but it needs to be choosy in what it's pursuing. So for example, Yi Jae Meng emphasized in his campaign promises AI chips, semiconductors and clean energy as top three of top three agenda items in the industrial domain. That seems like a really good place where Korea has a comparative advantage, and it's also really important to the global economy. So honing in, not trying to do everything, diversifying its partnership, but honing the industrial domains in which it's seeking, I don't say dominance, but leadership is a really important part as of this new administration going forward.

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Jake Werner 56:48

Thanks. We just have a couple minutes left. I want to give maybe one minute to each of our main panelists. Sorry for cutting so short, but I want to address this question to both James and Frank. It really looks like the United States is going to be seeking to coerce every country to make a choice between the US and China. This seems to be happening both in the economic realm. We're seeing this sort of forced choice being part of the negotiations the administration is pursuing with third countries. And it may also, I think, most, most worryingly, be part of the military realm as well. We've seen some indications out of the Defense Department. There's going to be quite an aggressive push to firm up lines within the region against China. What do you think? What do you think South Korea, under Jim Yong can can do, given this, these kinds of pressures from the United States, and it should be noted, China is really, has really hardened on this question, in a sense, signals that if countries align with the United States against China, they are going to take action against those countries as well. So both sides are kind of like in the process of pressing third countries, sort of squeezing third countries between them. What can South Korea do?

James Park 58:00

I think one thing South Korea can do is sort of trying to remain relevant for us strategic interest, but at the same time not giving up its entire leverage to Washington. So for example, you know, South Korea has, you know, the world leading shipbuilding industry, also South Korea. Can you know, help the US strengthen its you know, competitive edge in terms of, you know the LNG. You know cooperation in Alaska that Trump administration is reportedly pursuing. But, you know, so South Korea has these leverages, but at the same time, I think, kind of like a big deal with the US Trump administration might be counterproductive in a way, um, you know, it's not necessarily clear that. You know, once TRUMP, President Trump, gets what he wants, his demand will just end there, right? Like, I think you know, the evidence suggests you know, otherwise in many cases. So if they would be very hard to do. But I think, you know, trying to, you know, trying to cooperate, where South Korea can with the US, but at the same time, you know, making sure it's not sort of giving up its entire leverage. So, yeah, I think you would have to be wise, sort of trying to navigate through this.

Jake Werner 59:59

Yeah, great point. Frank, what do you think?

Frank Aum 1:00:03

I agree with Professor Kim and James? South Korea should not be rushed. It should take its time. There's, you know, negotiations happening between the US and China, between US and Japan. You can probably learn lessons from what's happening with those countries. And South Korea has leverage. South Korea is one of the top investors into the US, one of the top importers of LNG, so on, definitely on the economic issues. South Korea is not without leverage.

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It has cards to play, but even on the defense side, things like OPCON transition, so the Defense Department and the Trump administration has been asking its allies to assume a greater burden for its for defense, so that it can give more attention and resource to the China mission. South Korea can can take advantage of that, right? I could easily, see Lee Jim Young saying, We would be glad to assume greater burden will. How about accelerating OPCON transition? How about the South Korea taking the lead of the combined defense? Right? So there's many things that Lee Jim Young has, some unique cards that he can play where he can he won't even be conceding, because these will be things that he wants, right? So I think he needs to be savvy about this.

Jake Werner 1:01:25

All right. Well, excellent, thank we are out of time. I wish we had another hour to go through these issues. There are 100 issues that we need to...

Representative Kim Joon-hyung 1:01:36

Yeah, I totally agree with Dr Aum. The problem is, even though, you know, during Biden, we've listed a lot, but Korean governments is hesitate to use that withstand against American pressure, because politically, visa is not gained in domestic politics, especially progressive governments cannot, you know, show that you know, withstand your buttress, that's the issue. So that's the question that you have to ask is if we can do that.

Jake Werner 1:02:04

Thank you. Yes, and it's important to speak to national legislators, because they always bring us back to the fact that politics is ultimately based in domestic politics in any country. Thank you. Well, thank you to all, all of my panelists. This has been a wonderful discussion. I really encourage you to to read the work that we've we've referenced here. I also want to, want to mention that Quincy is doing these, these sorts of webinars all the time. We're covering all the major issue areas in us, foreign policy. We have another one coming up tomorrow. Our our executive vice president Trita Parsi will be interviewing Vali Nasr about his new book, Iran's grand strategy of political history. So just check out the Quincy website if you're interested in seeing additional events, or you can subscribe to our mailing list from our homepage, which is Quincy inst.org Thanks to everyone, good night to Representative Kim, and good morning to our other panelists and and to most of our viewership. And I hope you have a great day. Thank you.