

What if Trump is re-elected as U.S. president?

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Speaking at an International Press Institute (IPI) event on May 1, 2000, Al Gore, the vice president and Democratic Party presidential candidate, vowed to be “creative” in dealing with North Korea. In an interview with the New York Times on Oct. 5 that year, he pointed to “tentative yet positive results” from the gradual lifting of sanctions on North Korea. If he had won presidency instead of George W. Bush, what impact would it have had on the Korean Peninsula?

He would have inherited North Korea policy from the Clinton administration and sustained Seoul-Washington coordination on Pyongyang on the same page for at least two more years. He might have gone so far as to improve — and eventually normalize — U.S.-North relations, which the Clinton administration could not do due to a lack of time. At that time, North Korea’s nuclear technology was still at a fledgling stage. If Pyongyang had been pulled onto the international stage to become a normal state through the incentives of economic aid and reciprocal networking — and if its unruly actions had been contained — its nuclear development could have been stopped at the early stage.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election will have even more serious ramifications on the future of the Korean Peninsula than in 2000. As CNN’s Fareed Zakaria pointed out, next year’s U.S. election will be focused on foreign policy. According a recent survey by the Pew Research Center, 71 percent of Republican Party supporters wanted America to pay less attention to world affairs and concentrate more on domestic issues. That position has become the mainstream in the conservative party after it is shared not only by former President Donald Trump — who announced his candidacy for a non-consecutive second presidential term — but also by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

If Trump returns to the White House, how will the world change? Most of all, the U.S. will go more inwardly. Trump’s former chief strategist Steve Bannon said what he focuses on is not the war in Ukraine but on protecting the U.S. southern border from illegal immigrants from Mexico. As Trump also wants to end the Ukraine war quickly, America will most likely isolate itself from the rest of the world if Trump is re-elected. The hard-won alliance of liberal

democracies in the West by current U.S. President Joe Biden will certainly collapse, whereas the opposite alliance of authoritarian regimes like Russia and China will gain grounds. In that case, a considerable number of Global South countries will shift to the Russia-China axis. As Russian President Vladimir Putin said, we may see a novel world where “liberalism become obsolete” and where the rule of force, not the rule of law, dominates.

In his memoir, John Bolton, the former White House national security adviser, wrote that Trump did not care about the security of Taiwan. If the United States abandons engagement in Ukraine under the second term of Trump, it could be interpreted as a weakened U.S. determination to protect Taiwan and push Chinese President Xi Jinping to expedite the unification of Taiwan.

The U.S. democracy, too, will shake substantially. The America First Policy Institute, a think tank devoted to getting Trump re-elected, is devising a strategy to control bureaucrats and the judiciary branch which were defiant under Trump’s first term. The Economist even projected the United States to become an “illiberal” democracy — like Poland and Hungary, for instance — when it goes under Trump again.

What impact will Trump’s re-election have on South Korea? Washington will most likely pull out U.S. forces. Trump has long argued that a country well-off like South Korea did not need U.S. military forces. South Korea with no nukes will be pushed into a security vacuum without the U.S. forces stationing there, not to mention catastrophic political and economic ramifications. Even if the U.S. and North Korea resume denuclearization talks, the results cannot be favorable for South Korea given the uncertainty over how much Trump would reflect its position. During the first North-U.S. summit in Singapore in 2018, Trump decided to stop joint military exercises with South Korea without any prior consultation with the ally.

South Korea has benefited greatly from the liberal international order over the past 70 years. Despite its relatively weak economic and military power, it could develop its democracy and economy without interference from strong neighbors and a physical threat from North Korea — all thanks to the solid shield from a rule-based international order upholding territorial sovereignty and self-determination. Under the open global economic order, South Korea flourished through trade. The country would be stranded in the jungle of power dynamics if all these disappear due to the void in international leadership.

Many intellectuals in South Korea criticized the double-face of America for supporting the military regime and condoning the massacre of civilians in Gwangju under president Chun Doo Hwan in the early 1980s. They lambasted that Americans ignored democracy of its ally for its

own national interests. The perspective still dominates the psyche of the liberals in Korea. But the world has changed upside-down. After four decades, South Korea faces a greater danger from a weakened U.S. leadership than the abuse of its power.

We cannot afford to go on fighting amongst ourselves by drawing the line between liberals and conservatives, or the left and the right. We must unite to rigorously find a best possible way to save us all.

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