

## How Korea can prepare for Trump 2.0

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for POLICY STUDIES  
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2024.06.18

The U.S. presidential election is just over four months away. President Joe Biden, who trailed former President Donald Trump by about 5 percentage points in polls late last year, narrowed the gap to about 1 percent. However, U.S. election experts say it is still anyone's guess. Recently, I spoke to a few people who served in high-ranking positions during Trump's first administration about his possible second term and his Korean Peninsula policy.

First, they said that Trump is very unpredictable. Stanford Professor Stephen Kotkin, an authority on the Soviet Union and Russian studies, said in an interview that he found Trump's behavior much harder to predict than that of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Then how should the Korean government prepare for a possible second term of Trump? We should think through all the issues that could come up between Korea and the United States and prepare for various scenarios. For example, it is very likely that Washington will ask Seoul for an increase in Korea's defense cost-sharing for the U.S. forces in Korea. The United States is also likely to demand a reduction of Korea's trade surplus with America. The more thoroughly prepared we are, the more resourceful and swift our response will be.

Second, Trump cherishes personal relationships. He tends to value relationships with state leaders much more than policy or strategic considerations. Recognizing this, the late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe traveled to New York City to meet with Trump shortly after his election victory in 2016. Many Koreans frowned at Abe's move, but he was able to maintain a close relationship with Trump throughout his presidency. According to the memoirs of former White House National Security Advisor John Bolton, Trump often turned to Abe, not Korea, when North Korea staged provocations. Seoul officials must keep this in mind.

Third, I asked about the prospect of the withdrawal of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). Withdrawing troops from Korea has long been Trump's agenda, but sources remained tight-lipped about it. They indirectly said that it would largely depend on how cooperative Seoul will be with the second Trump administration's demand to increase its contributions for the stationing cost.

As Trump's negotiating style is to start with a demand for a very high price, Korea's working-level negotiation strategy is very important. Korea needs to pay enough to satisfy the United States, but also needs to have a list of additional things it wants to get from the country. For example, former State Secretary Mike Pompeo and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy Elbridge Colby said that Washington has no objection to Korea acquiring plutonium reprocessing technology or uranium enrichment technology like Japan.

We cannot rule out the possibility of a reduction in U.S. troops in Korea. If the United States does not send a new brigade of 6,000 soldiers, the USFK will be substantially scaled down. Although Congress has put legal mechanisms in place to limit the reduction of U.S. troops overseas, the president has the option to reduce the number if he so chooses, they said. But they believe a complete withdrawal is not likely to happen.

Fourth, they said that Trump still has favorable feelings toward North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, so the possibility of resuming negotiations with Pyongyang is open. Pompeo noted that when he was leading the negotiations with Pyongyang in 2018 and 2019, Kim always met with Chinese President Xi Jinping before meeting with Trump. Because Kim would still be under Xi's influence, the likelihood of a successful deal between Pyongyang and Washington is not high, Pompeo said. If the U.S.-North negotiation resumes, Seoul must thoroughly prepare diplomatic options and negotiation strategies toward the United States to ensure that South Korea's security is guaranteed.

Fifth, the former U.S. officials largely agreed that the trilateral cooperation of Seoul, Tokyo and Washington will continue. The United States already sees all foreign affairs issues through the prism of confrontation with China. This will be especially true in the second Trump administration. They said Trump will likely accept his aides' argument that maintaining the trilateral cooperation is better for the competition against China.

Trump's re-election will be a step toward a world where naked self-interest takes center stage over ideology, values, alliances and trust. Korea's diplomatic style and contents must become more nimble, fierce and skillful in this world.

\* The view expressed herein was published on June 17 in the *JoongAng Sunday* and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.