

Trump's tariff war is a tactic to cover up the ills of American society.

Trump's tariff tyranny has damaged 70 years of trust. Can the Korea-US summit restore it?

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South Korea is preparing for the South Korea-U.S. summit on August 25th. The Trump administration's unilateral approach, evident in the tariff negotiations, will now shift to the security realm, the heart of the South Korea-U.S. alliance. Key topics at the summit will be the South Korea-U.S. defense cost-sharing issue, the role of U.S. forces in Korea, and South Korea's demand for an increase in defense spending. These are all sensitive issues directly related to the very essence of the alliance.

The dangers of defense cost-sharing and pressure on defense spending

Of particular concern is the US demand to expand the "strategic flexibility" of USFK. This implies an intention to utilize USFK troops and strategic assets beyond the defense of the Korean Peninsula to contain China and Russia. Given the geopolitical reality of bordering China and Russia, an overtly hostile policy of positioning oneself as a frontline military base targeting these two military powers directly contradicts national interests and would be foolish, forcing aside a diplomatic asset: peaceful coexistence with neighboring countries.

It would be a grave mistake to view defense cost-sharing negotiations solely as a bargaining chip for short-term gains between the two countries. Rational negotiations should be based on the trust built over 70 years in the ROK-US alliance. The Trump administration is demanding an increase that completely disregards the existing burden-sharing framework, as if it were viewing the alliance as a "protection service" commodity. This is an act that denies the history of agreements reached through countless discussions between the two countries over the past several decades. Respecting the results of previous defense cost-sharing negotiations and maintaining the current framework demonstrates a commitment to honoring past mutual trust and maintaining a healthy future for the alliance. A significant shift in the burden-sharing ratio demanded by Trump would send a dangerous signal that the alliance is being reduced to a transactional relationship.

The demand for increased defense spending is also a one-sided pressure that ignores Korea's current reality. Korea already spends the highest level of defense spending relative to its GDP in the world. Furthermore, countless young men are being mobilized for mandatory military service with minimal compensation. Considering the enormous personal economic losses incurred by conscripted soldiers, we must not forget that Korea's actual defense spending is significantly higher than its current level.

It's also questionable how much political reward these defense cost-sharing or defense budget negotiations will bring to Trump. Perhaps it's precisely this uncertainty that is driving Trump's outrageous demands for increased defense spending and increased burden-sharing.

Resuming North Korea-US dialogue as a diplomatic solution that goes beyond Trump-style pressure.

However, contrary to this trend, by adding new options for improving North Korea-US relations, we can expect a path forward-looking consultation that preserves the trust in the ROK-US military alliance. In the current international climate, with ongoing conflicts and military clashes in Russia, the Middle East, and Iran, diplomatic gains with North Korea could yield significant political rewards for Trump. If the new administration's vision and specific implementation policies for establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula serve as a catalyst for resuming dialogue between North Korea and the US, opening the possibility of improving North Korea-US relations, this could also be an attractive diplomatic achievement for the Trump administration.

While further discussions may be forthcoming, the broad outlines of the hectic Korea-US tariff negotiations have been concluded. While the immediate fire of the "tariff bomb" has been extinguished, it is clear that US allies like South Korea, Japan, and the EU will have to pay a heavy price unlike anything they have ever experienced. The issue is not simply economic. These negotiations have deeply damaged the intangible assets of mutual respect and trust that have been rooted between the US and its allies for over 70 years since World War II. The multilateral trade norms that the global economy has long built have been dismantled, and the free trade agreement system agreed upon by the peoples of both South Korea and the United States has collapsed.

Donald Trump claims the United States is suffering from unfair trade practices and losing manufacturing jobs. According to this narrative, the United States is the victim, and China is the perpetrator. Even traditional allies like South Korea, Japan, and Europe are perpetrators. This framing seriously distorts the truth. It's a dangerous deception that shifts the focus from internal problems to external ones.

The United States is the biggest beneficiary of the free trade system.

Contrary to Trump's logic, the greatest beneficiary of the free trade system of the past several decades has been none other than the United States. The United States has consistently maintained one of the highest GDP growth rates among OECD member countries, and its rapid national wealth growth stems from a shift in its industrial structure toward high-value-added, cutting-edge technologies. Inexpensive manufactured goods and necessities produced globally have played a crucial role in suppressing inflation and increasing consumer purchasing power in the United States. Compared to the early 2000s, American per capita GDP has significantly increased, and the income gap between the United States and most developed countries has widened to an unprecedented level. The "average American" enjoys a far more affluent life than ever before. Free trade has not been the primary culprit in America's decline; rather, it has been a key driver of its prosperity.

So why are so many Americans, especially white workers in the Rust Belt of the Midwest, so angry? The source of their deprivation doesn't lie beyond our borders. The root of the problem lies in the failure of American politics and systems to fairly share the benefits of growth. The fruits of globalization have been concentrated among Wall Street's financial capitalists and Silicon Valley's tech elite. While they

accumulated wealth, manufacturing workers lost their jobs and communities crumbled. This is the result of the government's neglect to expand the social safety net, establish retraining systems, and redistribute wealth amidst the massive shifts in automation and industrial structure. The deepening income inequality and class divide that have plagued American society over the past several decades are the true "enemies."

Trump is employing a tactic of politically exploiting this anger. He's chosen the easy way out: turning the arrows externally. Addressing internal structural problems is complex and politically costly, while identifying and attacking external enemies is effective in rallying support. Ultimately, Trump's tariff war is nothing more than a shallow ploy to mask the deep-seated ills of American society and to solve internal problems by emptying the pockets of other countries and foreign corporations.

Trump's protectionism will lead to a global economic downturn.

However, this approach will not only fail to substantially improve the lives of American workers, but will also increase their burden by driving up import prices. Furthermore, it will undermine international trade norms and trust built over decades, plunging the world into unpredictable chaos. This is why major international organizations, including the IMF, World Bank, and OECD, unanimously warn that Trump's protectionism will lead to a global economic downturn.

With the indiscriminate destruction of the multilateral trading system established after World War II, the world is now entering an era of unpredictable chaos. This is not simply a trade dispute between a few countries; it is an act that completely destroys the intangible assets of trust, norms, and principles built through a history of brutal war and exploitation over the past century.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of South Korea's liberation. While the Cold War may have ended long ago, it remains lingering on the Korean Peninsula, where it began. I hope the leaders of South Korea and the United States will forge a valuable agreement that will put an end to the history of aggression, brutal war, and tragedy that have permeated this land. The South Korea-U.S. alliance holds immense historical achievements that cannot be measured in monetary terms. Peace on the Korean Peninsula and improved U.S.-North Korea relations are in the national interest of both South Korea and the United States for the next 100 years. There will be no greater diplomatic achievement for Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) campaign.

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