

All eyes on Korea - and Trump

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By Ned Forney

“If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs . . .” In light of our tumultuous times, the words of Rudyard Kipling may be the best advice we can give ourselves and our leaders.

With social media platforms, YouTube channels, and the old stand-by, newspapers, constantly reminding us of terrorist attacks, political unrest, environmental disasters, and the threat of AI and impending wars, Kipling’s famous poem, “If–,” penned over 120 years ago, should be on our mandatory reading list.

As U.S. President Donald Trump arrives in Seoul and tensions across Northeast Asia continue to rise, the hard working, “bali bali” citizens of the Republic of Korea are understandably concerned. The American leader’s un-presidential tweets and bellicose speeches have made the world uneasy. Even Kim Jong-un seems a bit unnerved.



During his stay, the world’s politicians, pundits, and anyone with a social media account will be giving advice and recommendations to President Trump. But as a former US Marine Corps officer, I don’t feel comfortable giving America’s current commander-in-chief instructions or a laundry list of things he should or shouldn’t do while visiting the ROK. It would be naive and pretentious of me to think he or anyone else on his staff would be interested in or amused by such a memo.

More to the point, I am not experienced or knowledgeable enough to give a government official a lecture on how to behave, what to say, or how to use a pair of binoculars (really, Jeffrey Miller?) when he or she makes a state visit. There’s too much at stake—millions of lives for starters—to turn Trump’s visit into a soapbox of personal or political vendettas.

I have lived in Seoul for only 30 months, but during this time, I’ve tried to observe, listen to, and empathize with the people I’ve met, and as President Trump and his team visit Korea over the next two days, it is my hope they will do the same. The more they talk with and listen to Korea’s politicians, business leaders, military and security officials, and activists, the better.

I also hope Trump will get the opportunity to take a helicopter tour of Seoul to see how vast, modern, and populated the city is and gain a better appreciation of how close those of us living in South Korea’s capital are to the DMZ. Secretary of Defense James Mattis flew over Seoul a few days ago and was apparently very impressed by what he saw.

It’s also important for Trump and ROK President Moon Jae-in to spend as much time together as possible, developing their personal relationship and reaffirming their countries’ strong alliance. Despite contested issues involving KORUS, the THAAD deployment, and the OPCON transfer, the political, economic, and military bonds between the US and ROK, forged in blood over sixty years ago, are as strong as ever. North Korea, China, and Russia should have no doubts about this as the two-day summit ends.

And finally, it would be wonderful if in the next few days the US commander-in-chief unveiled a new policy for dealing with Kim Jong-un: the “speak softly and carry a big stick” policy. Made popular by America’s 26th president, Theodore Roosevelt, the strategy would change the dynamics between North Korea, South Korea, and the United States—for the better.

The “rocket man” and the world know exactly what will happen if the paranoid and ruthless Pyongyang regime launches more than just verbal threats against the US or its allies. There’s no need to reiterate this position. America and South Korea’s stance on this is perfectly clear. Our actions—not our tweets—should be proof enough of what will happen if Kim miscalculates his provocations.

We are in the midst of a dangerous and potentially catastrophic game of cat and mouse. Leaders on both sides must be cautious. As most experts agree, the status quo won’t continue much longer. Something will give.

With that in mind, the ROK and US must maintain—and more appropriately increase—their vigilance and military preparedness. Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump both agree on this point. But they should also continue to tighten the screws on the North Korean regime through sanctions (strict and enforced) and increased pressure on China. Only then, if ever, will Kim Jong-un come to the negotiating table.

As the editorial board of The Korea Times stated last week, President Trump’s visit to Korea is “pivotal to the two countries’ alliance and regional peace and stability.” I agree whole-heartedly. Let’s hope that with Trump and Moon working together, cooperation and trust between America and South Korea will increase, and the threat of war will decrease.

If this happens, Trump’s visit will have been productive and worthwhile. If it doesn’t, the summit will simply be written off as another lost opportunity. Koreans on both sides of the DMZ and Americans, an ocean away, deserve better.

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