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## SEOUL AND WASHINGTON: AVOIDING A CLASH OVER MISSILE DEFENCE

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South Korea's new President Moon Jae-in could find himself stuck between a rock and hard place in the months ahead. Indeed, dealing with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un on the one hand and US President Donald Trump on the other could be the cause for a number of sleepless nights for Seoul's new president. While the former is still announcing that he will turn the Korean Peninsula into a 'sea of fire' on a regular basis, the latter – at least so he announced the other day – wants 'his' money back. Actually, 'his' money, is the money Washington's previous administration agreed and signed on to invest in the US' Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system deployed on South Korean territory. Furthermore, Trump has also announced that he wants to renegotiate the US-South Korean bilateral free trade agreement, which he in his usual ill-informed and abrasive manner refers to as 'horrible.'

For now, however, Trump's Washington has found out that requesting Seoul to pay for the US' Terminal High-Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system deployed on South Korean territory will continue to fall on deaf ears. Indeed, the South Korean Ministry of Defence has several times confirmed that the existing

agreement will stay in place and that Seoul still counts on Washington to invest \$1 billion in the deployment of THAAD on South Korean soil. A deal is a deal, Seoul policymakers seem to suggest, although Moon has already (and more than once) hinted at the fact that he is not really interested in the missile defence system in the first place. Certainly music to ears in Beijing, where the deployment of THAAD has led to serious bilateral Chinese-South Korean frictions and nationwide boycotts of South Korean-made products in China over recent months. THAAD, Beijing (wrongly) maintains, is aimed at China and part of US-led containment policies towards China. Moon Jae-in and his aides have in the recent past referred to the move by the U.S. military to deploy elements of the THAAD anti-missile defence as 'regrettable' and 'inappropriate' as it deprived the new government of the right to decide on the controversial missile defence system. Consequently, the new president could indeed consider at least delaying the complete deployment of THAAD.

But THAAD and, in Trump's view, unfair South Korean trade practices are not the only problems on the bilateral agenda. South Korea-US policies towards Pyongyang could be headed for a 'train-wreck', John

Delury of the Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul said in a recent interview with the BBC. While Seoul under Moon will want re-engagement with Pyongyang, Delury points out, Washington wants more sanctions and pressure on North Korea. To be sure, it does not help that Trumps still talks about unilaterally ‘solving’ the nuclear crisis with military force.

Moon for his part wants none of the violence and is – at least on paper and for now - strongly in favour of North Korea’s denuclearization through the resumption of the Six-Party Talks framework of the early 2000s. Furthermore, Moon has announced that he wants to promote intra-Korean cultural and sports exchanges, and a gradual reunification that would begin with the formation of a single market. All of this, however, is currently nowhere to be found on the bilateral South-North Korea policy agenda. In fact, currently there is nothing even resembling a South-North Korean policy agenda at all and while the resumption of low-level or soft exchanges between the North and the South such as joint cultural or sports events can not be excluded in the months ahead, Pyongyang will certainly not be willing to talk about denuclearization with South Korea, or anybody else for that matter. In fact, the opposite is the case: Pyongyang continues to invest enormous resources in its missile and nuclear programmes and anybody who thinks that Pyongyang will agree to resume the Six-Party Talks with the objective of dismantling Pyongyang’s nuclear programme will have to think

again. Indeed, Seoul under Moon will – unless there is a fundamental change of Pyongyang’s approach towards Seoul – find out very quickly that his plans to talk to and engage with North Korea will be far easier said than done. This is when the reality of bilateral South Korean-US relations could start to set in. Actually, what the reality of collaboration between the liberal Moon and the not-so-liberal Trump will look like will be very interesting to observe in the months ahead. Including in Pyongyang, which, at least so it seems for now, is given the options of agreeing to resume dormant South Korean engagement policies or having Washington unilaterally ‘resolve’ the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula with military force.

To be sure, Trump’s unpredictability also leaves the ‘burger option’ on the table: Trump’s earlier suggestion to talk about ‘everything’ with Kim Jong-Un over a burger. For now, however, North Korea’s dictator Kim Jong-un will have to get in line and his counterpart in the South will most probably have that honour before him. Moon [said](#) in a recent interview with The Washington Post that he would meet with Trump at the earliest possible opportunity to discuss North Korea. Despite widespread misgivings in South Korea about Trump’s belligerent rhetoric, Moon is reported to have said, “I believe President Trump is more reasonable than he is generally perceived.” However, not many political leaders around the globe share such an optimistic assessment.