



America and South Korea

Obama's most improved bilateral alliance

SEOUL

South Korea has quietly become a model American ally. Will it stay that way?

BARACK OBAMA says he learned the Korean word *jeong* last year when South Korea's president, Lee Myung-bak, visited the White House. *Jeong* is tricky to translate, but it is better than "man-crush", as The New York Times once described their personal chemistry. It can mean both love and love-hate. But to Koreans, there can be no true loyalty without it. After two years of tension on the Korean peninsula, Mr Lee and Mr Obama appear to have developed *jeong* with each other.

This week, Seoul became the foreign capital Mr Obama has visited most often as president. He praised South Korea for its outward-looking policies-exemplified by its hosting of a nuclear-security summit on March 26th-27th that was Mr Obama's brainchild. He has just nominated Jim Yong Kim, who was born in Seoul, to be head of the World Bank. To Mr Obama, South Korea has become a model ally.

Mr Lee, who like his opposite number comes from modest origins but unlike him is a business-friendly conservative, reciprocates the warmth. The two men have concluded the first free-trade agreement between America and an East Asian country. They have stood shoulder-to-shoulder over North Korea despite murderous provocations. In a country that used to blow hot and cold over America, Mr Lee has never wavered-even when he faced anti-

American riots over beef in 2008.

To the United States, the appeal of the relationship lies in what Mr Obama calls "Global Korea"-a country that looks beyond the security of the peninsula to contemplate the world's problems, from war in Afghanistan to nuclear terrorism and financial stability. A pivotal moment came in January 2011, when South Korea's navy commandos liberated one of their country's cargo ships, held hostage by Somali pirates. America is pleased, too, that the country has 350 troops in Afghanistan.



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Scott Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations, a New York think-tank, who has edited a new book on the alliance, argues that South Korea has developed "from a consumer of security to a producer of security". He notes that, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, South Korea's military spending in 2010 exceeded that of Australia and Canada, which are better known for their military outreach. As a share of GDP, South Korea's military spending is bigger than China's Japan's and Brazil's.

The country's vibrant democracy and liberal economics makes it more like one of America's European allies, Mr Snyder says. This is perhaps just as well. Japan-long the cornerstone of American security policy in Asia—now has a more fraught trans-Pacific relationship.

What is more, South Koreans, who have been infuriated by illegal acts by American servicemen in the past, have become less opposed to having American bases since North Korea was suspected of sinking a naval vessel, the Cheonan, two years ago, with the loss of 46 lives. In 2010 Mr Obama agreed—at Mr Lee's request—to postpone the planned transfer to the South of American wartime command over allied South Korean troops, from 2012 until 2015.

But there are several factors that could strain the alliance. However popular Mr Lee may be in Washington, the president is increasingly isolated in his own country. Even his ruling party has distanced itself from him in the run-up to presidential elections later this year in which, because of a single-term limit, he cannot run.

One of the South Korean leader's most resolute-and controversial-decisions has been a refusal to talk to North Korea until its government shows a commitment to ..

• stopping its nuclear-weapons programme. The Obama administration has backed him to the hilt. But, says John Delury of Yonsei University, that may become a problem if the next South Korean president has more of a "sunshine" approach (meaning a stance favouring engagement and investment). North Korea, which is threatening to conduct a proscribed satellite launch in mid-April, wants to drive a wedge between the allies.

Seoulmates

For all his kudos in Washington, Mr Lee has not secured everything he wants from America. So far it has resisted his pleas to revise a 38-year-old treaty preventing South Korea from reprocessing nuclear waste, as Japan does. Seoul believes such a "fuel cycle" is essential if it is to become a bigger user—and exporter—of nuclear power. America fears this would send all the wrong signals to Pyongyang.

Another potential challenge comes from China. Historically, South Korea has taken a conciliatory attitude towards the giant to its north, which is also its largest trading partner. Even today, though China is North Korea's main backer, the South is reluctant to antagonise the government in Beijing. So if America's relationship with China worsens, that could put South Korea in an awkward spot. For all these reasons, there is little confidence that the ties with America will get much closer. Jeong, for Presidents Lee and Obama, may have reached its maximum intensity.

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