

*South Korea has been more successful than almost any other country in combating Covid-19. Now it's sharing vital testing equipment with its ally, the United States. However, as **Duncan Bartlett** reports, the US-South Korea alliance has come under pressure during the presidency of Donald Trump.*

Many world leaders are impressed by South Korea's handling of coronavirus, including President Donald Trump.

He has made several phone calls to President Moon Jae-In, during which they have discussed the steps South Korea has taken to tackle the disease.

Initially, South Korea had more infections than anywhere else in the world, except for China. But it quickly flattened the curve through extensive testing. It also collated information from banks and mobile phone networks to trace the spread of the virus.

It helps that South Korea has a well-resourced medical system, which has long been geared up for crisis, or war - including the threat of a biological weapon attack by North Korea.



A woman enters a Covid-19 testing booth outside the Yangji hospital in Seoul. Photograph: Ed Jones/AFP via Getty Images

Helping the world

The South Koreans are eager to help other nations. After the government deemed that enough face masks and testing kits had been made available to meet the needs of its citizens, it encouraged companies to export their surplus capacity.

The United States, which has become the worst-hit country by a coronavirus, was eager to get hold of the equipment. The US state of Maryland managed to secure 500,000 testing kits from South Korea, independently of the federal government.

The deal involved extensive discussions between the Korean ambassador to the United States, Lee Soo Hyuk, and the wife of Maryland's governor, Yumi Hogan, who was born in South Korea, but moved to America when she was young. It was fortunate that she was able to communicate in her native language with the Korean medical companies, just as the virus was spreading.

"We convened countless calls, nearly every night, sometimes it seemed like all night. She truly is a champion of Operation Enduring Friendship," her husband Larry Hogan [told CNN](#). However, as CNN pointed out, Yumi Hogan is not a professional diplomat, nor an expert on medical procedures. She is an artist; an abstract painter whose work is typically centred on nature and is done on *hanji*, paper made from native Korean trees.

The president's resentment

President Donald Trump's relationship with South Korea has been marred by resentment relating to the cost of defence. The United States has 28,500 military personnel permanently stationed in South Korea. South Korean legislators claim they were asked to pay up to \$5bn a year for US military protection, on the direct orders of President Trump. They refused, saying the demand was exorbitant.

They are now attempting to agree to an incremental increase in South Korea's contribution, but negotiations are sometimes disrupted by interventions from President Trump. In the past, he has even threatened to exit the alliance. During the 2016 presidential campaign, he vowed: "If we have to walk, we have to walk."

Military bargain

Such rhetoric alarms Bruce Klingner, a senior research fellow for Northeast Asia at The Heritage Foundation. “Alliances are not transactional relationships. They are based on shared values and goals. They are the sword that deters aggressors and the shield of security and stability that allows countries under that shield to flourish. The US-South Korean alliance was forged in blood during the crucible of the Korean War. Its enduring motto is *katchi kapshida* “we go together”, not “we go together if we are paid enough,” Mr Klingner told the conservative website, [the National Interest](#).

When Donald Trump was about reports that he was negotiating a reduction of US troop numbers with President Moon Jae-in, he appeared to reject this, replying: “It’s not a question of reduction, it’s a question of, will they contribute toward the defence of their own nation? We’re defending nations that are very wealthy. South Korea’s a very wealthy nation – they make our television sets, they make ships, they make everything.”

The former President of the US-Korea Business Council, Tami Overby, is critical of Mr Trump’s bartering. “North Asia can be a very scary place and there is no better partner for the United States in the region than the Republic of Korea,” she says.

“We should not at this stage be pressing the South Korean people to spend a lot more money on defence because the financial impact of this crisis is going to be enormous and their economy will be profoundly affected,” said Ms Overby.



North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un/ Image: KCNA

North Korean threat

President Trump has held two [face-to-face summits with the North Korean leader](#), Kim Jong-Un, although no more meetings are scheduled. In March, the North Koreans continued with weapons tests and they are refusing to talk with representatives of the South Korean government.

Rory Green, a North Asian analyst at TS Lombard, believes the North Koreans are hoping for more attention from the American president. "I think since their summits with Mr Trump, they want to maintain that sort of high-level dialogue, rather than come back down to hold further meetings with Mr Moon. They see the most potential from talking to Trump. Dialogue with South Korea only offers a limited payback."

As North Korea presses on with missile testing and its nuclear programme, its enemies remain prepared for the threat of aggression. However, the military in the region is being hammered by a coronavirus. Exercises have been scaled back, amid concerns the virus could spread among soldiers.

There is also speculation that disease has ravaged the North Korean army. And in April,

reports emerged suggesting Kim Jong-un was gravely ill, following heart surgery. Donald Trump dismissed the rumours as “fake news.”

Whether or not Kim is healthy, North Korea remains one of the most dangerous flashpoints in Asia. It is for this reason that the United States has committed a huge army to defend South Korea on the basis that it will be a strong deterrent to aggression. The South Koreans are eager to help their key ally in a time of crisis, lest they need the help of the Americans in the face of another emergency.

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