

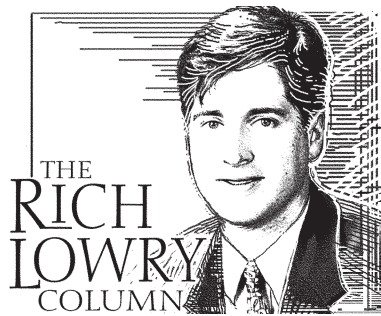
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THE RICH LOWRY COLUMN

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By Rich Lowry



Trump's fondness for Kim Jong Un sends the wrong signal

It's hard to believe that Kim Jong Un is really this charming. President Trump touted his fond relationship with the North Korean dictator in a Truth Social post calling for scaling back a long-running annual military exercise with the South Koreans.

"Based on my very good relationship with Kim Jong Un," Trump wrote, "I am not happy with the fact that the United States has, long ago, agreed to participate in Joint Military Exercises with South Korea." According to Trump, the exercises "send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile, to a Country that, as long as Donald J. Trump has been President, has been unthreatening and respectful." Then he added that South Korea had recently declined to take a role in the Iran war, clearly irking Trump, as he subsequently explained to reporters at the White House.

The joint exercises have been a key element of the U.S.-South Korea military alliance for decades. They are meant to ensure that the two countries are prepared in the event of a North Korean assault, and perhaps now have an added importance given the experience North Korea has gained in high-intensity modern warfare by bolstering Russian forces in Ukraine.

Much more important than the practical effect of Trump's fusillade, though, is the signal it sends, yet again, that he is easily disenchanted with longtime allies whose friendship should be considered a strategic boon to the United States.

Whether musing about making Canada the 51st state, briefly campaigning to take control of Greenland, imposing tariffs on friend and foe alike or hammering NATO, Trump has been careless of the goodwill of our allies.

They need us more than we need them, which means they are willing to put up with a lot, but sowing dissension unnecessarily is a foolhardy game at a

time of growing international threats.

South Korea has been a treaty ally since 1953, and is a wealthy, technologically advanced democracy that occupies strategically important ground in Northeast Asia. It is obviously both threatened by and a bulwark against potential North Korean adventurism.

Pete Hegseth visited South Korea last year and said, "Our alliance is stronger than ever before, 72 years strong." He described the inspiring sight of U.S. and South Korean soldiers standing "shoulder to shoulder working together." South Korea has been committed to increasing its defense spending to 3.5% of GDP. In light of this, Hegseth subsequently averred, "Model allies that step up, like Israel, South Korea, Poland ... will receive our special favor."

Such assurances by administration officials are always subject to change, depending on Trump's animosities at any given time. It's certainly true that South Korea owes its existence to us. We fought to preserve its independence at a great cost in blood and treasure during the Korean War, and we have nearly 30,000 troops on the peninsula to deter North Korea from assaulting the South again. Seoul has lent support to recent U.S. military operations, typically in noncombat roles, but it's understandable that it wouldn't be enthused about taking part in an Iran war that hasn't gone as planned and that has no clear endgame.

As for the North, it isn't our friend. It is firmly within the China-Russia axis, and has been developing its nuclear and missile arsenal apace. There is no reason to believe that any blandishments from Trump will change its behavior, and Kim has been clear that the U.S. needs to abandon its "obsession" with denuclearization.

What we most need from South Korea is for it to be as strong as possible to deter North Korea, and we shouldn't be lending any credence to its claim that U.S.-South Korean exercises are provocations, or sowing doubt about our commitment to allies.

Such diplomatic episodes, though, are an inherent part of Trump's governance. To paraphrase the Roman writer Publilius Syrus: Prosperity makes friends, adversity tries them, and Trump distresses them — unnecessarily.

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

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