



South Korea Votes for Change: What It Means for the United States

BY DANIEL C. SNEIDER

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Months of political tumult in South Korea, leading to the impeachment and ouster of President Park Geun-hye, have now culminated in the return to power of the progressives, ending a decade of conservative rule. The election of Minjoo (Democratic) Party leader Moon Jae-in has taken place amid an intensification of tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Relations with North Korea have certainly been discussed in this election. But South Korean voters, particularly among the younger generation, were driven mainly by outrage over the perception of a society riven by corruption, elite privilege, abuse of power, and inequality. Months of mass protest over charges of corruption forced the National Assembly to impeach President Park and pressed the Constitutional Court to unanimously uphold that decision. Park now sits in jail, awaiting trial on charges of sharing secrets with an old friend and colluding with her to extort money from large Korean companies. The boss of South Korea's sprawling conglomerate, Samsung, is also behind bars, accused of providing money to Park's friend in return for government favors.

President-elect Moon has gained office riding a wave of demand for social justice and a reform of democratic governance in South Korea. These are the issues that are certain to consume his attention and

that of voters. U.S. policymakers need to be mindful that the domestic factors that led to this shift in power in South Korea will remain paramount.

Shifts in South Korean Policy

That said, the return to power of South Korea's progressives augurs a significant shift in several areas of policy that will have a clear impact on alliance relations with the United States. During the campaign, Moon articulated an approach toward inter-Korean relations that consciously echoes the engagement strategy—the so-called Sunshine Policy—adopted by progressive icon Kim Dae-jung in the late 1990s and continued by his ideological successor, Roh Moo-hyun, whom Moon served as chief of staff. While pledging to preserve the security alliance, Moon seeks to strengthen South Korea's independent defense capacity, notably in the area of missile defense. Finally, he opposes the agreement reached in 2015 with Japan to settle the wartime history issue of compensation and apology

DANIEL C. SNEIDER is the Associate Director for Research at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University.

for the Korean women forced into sexual service by imperial Japan, the so-called “comfort women.”

Moon outlined his approach toward North Korea in a statement issued on April 23, calling for a “bold blueprint to overcome today’s crisis.” He supports resumption of the six-party talks with North Korea, aiming toward a staged negotiation of a “mutual arms control agreement” to establish a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. In an interview with *Time*, Moon indicated that the staged approach could begin with a freeze on further nuclear testing.

These negotiations are paired with a broad resumption of economic ties with the North aimed at encouraging the process of internal change, a concept that underlay the original Sunshine Policy. South Korean progressives understand that they cannot simply return to the past, that North Korea’s advance toward nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems has limited the prospects of fostering change simply through engagement. But they remain committed to the idea that such engagement is essential to averting conflict.

Moon’s policy statement advocates regular reunions of separated families, another feature of the Sunshine Policy, along with allowing South Korean NGOs to resume humanitarian assistance in the North. This plan then calls for enactment of an inter-Korean cooperation agreement. As a possible initial step, this may mean reopening the closed industrial park in Kaesong, where some 50,000 North Korean workers were employed by South Korean firms. Beyond that, Moon sets the goal of “economic unification” of the two Koreas.

Effect on Regional Security and Cooperation

Implicitly, this blueprint runs counter to the current policy of tightening economic sanctions against North Korea and cutting the flow of capital into Pyongyang’s coffers. Moon is also skeptical of the current U.S. approach of relying on China to bring about a change in North Korean policy, though he is careful to stress

a desire to coordinate closely with Washington. Like many Koreans, Moon and his advisers worry about deepening China’s influence in the North, and on the peninsula more broadly, and warn against any approach that would effectively bypass South Korea.

“I do not see it as desirable for South Korea to take the back seat and watch discussions between the U.S. and China and dialogues between North Korea and the U.S.,” Moon told the *Washington Post*. “I believe South Korea taking the initiative would eventually strengthen our bilateral alliance with the U.S. However, when I say ‘take the initiative,’ I do not mean that South Korea will approach or unilaterally open talks with North Korea without fully consulting the U.S. beforehand.”

This desire to assert South Korean leadership is reflected in Moon’s defense policies. Moon had opposed the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries by the United States, including the accelerated deployment of the first battery ahead of the election. More recently, he stepped back from that position, though he continues to signal the possibility of reopening discussion on the deployment of THAAD. In the long run, Moon and the progressives support the establishment of an indigenous Korean Air and Missile Defense system, which would not be linked to the U.S. and Japanese missile defense architecture, along with a preemptive-strike system armed with South Korean ballistic missiles.

On this and other issues, the election of Moon is likely to test the limited progress made during the Park administration toward trilateral cooperation with Japan and the United States. The foundation of that progress was the “comfort women” agreement, but it also included the signing of a trilateral pact on intelligence sharing. Moon opposed both agreements and has vowed to reopen the “comfort women” issue, pointedly visiting a memorial in Busan whose erection prompted Japan to temporarily withdraw its ambassador from Seoul. As Moon knows well, anti-Japanese sentiment remains deeply entrenched in South Korea, fed by the expansion of Japan’s

regional military role, with the encouragement of the United States.

Engaging the U.S. Administration

In the midst of the South Korean elections, the Trump administration generated increasing uncertainty about its policy intentions. The combination of vague threats of military action against the North and reliance on China to impose severe economic sanctions has alarmed many South Koreans. The widespread view of the U.S. president in South Korea is of a leader who is both unpredictable and unreliable. Threats to abort the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement and demands to have South Korea pay \$1 billion for deployment of the THAAD system have reinforced that perception.

This raises fears that the advent of the Moon presidency will bring a redux of the chasm that opened up between Kim Dae-jung and the incoming Bush administration in 2001. The election of Roh in 2002, propelled in part by a wave of anti-Americanism following the accidental death of two schoolgirls during a military exercise, heightened that tension. In the early phases of the six-party talks, Seoul was often more aligned with Beijing than with Washington and Tokyo. It took considerable time and patience from both sides to restore cooperation between the two allies.

President-elect Moon, who takes office immediately, seems well aware of the dangers of an

open break with Washington. He will likely seek an early opportunity to meet President Trump and open lines of communication. Hopefully an early crisis—one propelled, for example, by a North Korean provocation—will not occur, providing the two leaders time to establish some mutual understanding.

It is likely, however, that the clear differences between Seoul and Washington will emerge into the open and pose the greatest challenge to alliance management since the early years of the Bush administration. It is imperative that U.S. policymakers demonstrate a readiness to listen to South Korean concerns and policy ideas. They should not reject out of hand concepts of engagement, or even the idea of Seoul's leadership of a process of negotiation with Pyongyang. The United States needs to place a priority on maintaining close policy coordination with its principal ally. In addition, Washington needs to put pressure on Japan to demonstrate patience with the new South Korean administration and avoid overreaction to the idea of reopening the "comfort women" agreement.

Alliance management requires understanding that allies have their own domestic politics. It is far from clear that the Trump administration understands what is coming, or is prepared to respond without widening the potential divide. But managing the U.S. alliance with South Korea is the foundation for dealing with the security threat posed by North Korea. That is equally true for Seoul. ∞

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1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300
SEATTLE, WA 98105 • 206-632-7370

1819 L STREET NW, NINTH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036 • 202-347-9767

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