

North Korean Strategy Post-Park Geun-hye:
Navigating Between a Liberal South Korea and Trump Administration

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The Park Problem: What's Next?

Since the vote to impeach President Park Geun-hye in December, South Korean politics has faced unprecedented upheaval. Corruption charges have shaken the Asian order, sending the president of one of America's most crucial allies to prison.¹ Division among conservatives and liberals has grown dramatically since the scandal, with her supporters believing she was wrongly defamed.² As the daughter of military dictator Park Chung-hee, Park's downfall from "political princess" to disgraced criminal signals a new era on the Korean Peninsula. The next leadership of South Korea must grapple with the aftermath of the greatest political scandal in the nation's democratic history.³ Yet, domestic issues in the Republic of Korea (ROK) are the least of the next administration's worries.

With an upcoming election predicted to shift power to the liberal Democratic United Party, the future of North Korea policy is subject to change. Facing no significant challengers at the polls, Moon Jae-in is the presumed Democratic nominee, and therefore the next president.⁴ To understand the ideological split, Korean conservatism most closely aligns with the American consensus stance against North Korea for the past several decades, while liberal leaders have repeatedly attempted openness and economic exchange while in power. Moon, bridging a gap between liberal ideals and the harsh reality of nuclear threat and domestic division, seems to be on the cusp of uncharted territory. The U.S. Department of Defense and Executive Branch will also need to consider this new reality in determining future strategy.

New Moon: What a Reset Means for THAAD

As opposed to the aloof and unpopular Park, Moon has described himself as a would-be "Gwanghwamun president", as a reference to the public square in Seoul where millions rallied for Park's impeachment. According to Gallup, over a third of Moon's supporters identify as centrist.⁵ Moon has publicly spoken out against the escalation of tensions as a result of the implementation of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), in addition to engaging North Korea in reconciliation talks, and re-opening the Kaesong Industrial Park – a joint manufacturing facility which was the last area of cooperation between the North and South only

¹ Choe Sang-hun, "Park Geun-hye's Life in Jail: Cheap Meals and a Mattress on the Floor," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2nHmTvh>

² Katharine H.S. Moon, "Park Leaves Behind a Divided South Korea," *Foreign Affairs*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-korea/2017-03-17/park-leaves-behind-divided-south-korea>

³ Choe Sang-hun, "Ouster of South Korean President Could Return Liberals to Power," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2muCoG6>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "The loser in South Korea's last presidential race has another go," *The Economist*, March 30, 2017, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21719809-moon-jae-set-profit-impeachment-his-nemesis-park-geun-hye-loser-south>

miles from the Demilitarized Zone, closed by Park in 2016 as part of enforcing international sanctions.⁶

THAAD is currently a flashpoint for tense Sino-US relations in the Northeast.⁷ China asserts that its implementation is a threat to its own national security, since the THAAD radar monitoring North Korea “would be powerful enough to track some Chinese missile warheads in flight” and allowing the US access to exclusive information on the possible flight paths of Chinese missiles.⁸ China has thus far retaliated against South Korean businesses, imported goods, the tourism industry, canceled K-pop concerts and removed Korean soap operas from mainland Chinese media.⁹ Very quickly, the tension between the ROK and China could devolve unintentionally into a security dilemma. A shift from Park’s strong alignment with Washington on implementing THAAD to Moon’s willingness to resolve with Beijing could repair Chinese relations which is advantageous to South Korea’s economy and partnership on North Korea. However, a strained relationship with the U.S. could be on the horizon as a result of THAAD.



IMAGE: 문재인 (MOON JAE-IN), FACEBOOK

The simultaneous rise of opposing ideological forces – Moon and Trump – calls into question which way US-ROK relations will tilt as a result. With Moon trying to rebuild from political turmoil, and Trump falling straight into the same, South Korea may find itself less beholden to American hawks and experts.

⁶ Denny Roy, “South Korea’s Incoming President Could Be Headed for a Clash with Trump,” *Fortune*, March 14, 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/03/14/south-korea-president-park-moon-north-china-thaad-u-s/>

⁷ Benjamin Lee, “South Korea’s THAAD Dilemma Continues” *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/south-koreas-thaad-dilemma-continues/>

⁸ Li Bin, “The Security Dilemma and THAAD Deployment in the ROK,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 3, 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/08/03/security-dilemma-and-thaad-deployment-in-rok-pub-64279>

⁹ Josh Rogin, “Will Trump stand up for South Korea with China’s Xi Jinping?” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2017, <http://wapo.st/2oijZLO>

Cloudy 'Sunshine' Policy: Limited Options for Seoul and Washington

Despite conservative fears of a complete reversal on policy to the North, Moon is actually quite restrained. Not only does he have to rationally handle a volatile North Korea's nuclear weapons, but also work between two great powers: China and the United States. Moon will undoubtedly shake up the order in an opposite direction from conservatives Trump and Xi, however his popularity as opposed to Park could be a much-needed jolt to Northeast Asia. Duyeon Kim, Research Fellow at the Korean Peninsula Future Forum, said that while Moon may want to engage with the North, "it's currently unclear whether he would swing back to the old 'sunshine policy' in its entirety, given how today's security situation is much worse."¹⁰ The purpose of the so-called sunshine policy was to facilitate the denuclearization of North Korea through openness, however the constant insecurity of the Kim regime has led to a stockpiling of weapons with the intent to compel the US "to sit down at the negotiating table, to recognize the regime in Pyongyang, sign a peace treaty and legitimize Kim Jong-un's dictatorship."¹¹ Given the current situation and ideologically divided South Korean populace, it is unlikely that a liberal administration would fully open up to a nuclear state despite the precedent of past liberal governments. But both North Korea and the U.S. seem to be signaling to cast aside the collapsing norms of isolation and "strategic patience", therefore Moon's liberal ideals might serve to act as a counterweight to provide an alternative to seemingly inevitable military conflict.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has suggested during his recent trip to Asia that "all options are on the table" in regards to North Korea policy.¹² This is worrying for ROK in multiple ways. The decision to not engage North Korea in diplomatic measures, would nearly guarantee increased frequency of nuclear tests and direct threats to South Korean and American lives.¹³ The window for denuclearization seems to have shut, as Kim has defined nuclear weapons in terms of national identity, as "the tools by which the regime will be preserved and by which it will defeat attempts to overthrow it."¹⁴ Antagonizing feeds into the narrative pushed by North Korean propaganda that South Korea and the United States are co-conspirators, undermining US-ROK power and leaving all implementations of sanctions and pressure to Beijing, which has not worked. This dangerous game with China was described in a Brookings report as "subcontracting America's security to a Beijing that is increasingly inclined to sympathize with Pyongyang" underscoring why US-ROK strength is so vital to beneficial long-term options.¹⁵

¹⁰ Matt Stiles, "South Korea's upcoming presidential election could reshape its relations with North Korea — and the U.S." *The L.A. Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-south-korea-election-20170314-story.html>

¹¹ Julian Ryall, "Can Park's potential leftist successor mend ties with North Korea?" *Deutsche Welle*, March 29, 2017, <http://dw.com/p/2aDoU>

¹² David Welna, "Rex Tillerson Says 'All Options Are On The Table' With North Korea," *NPR*, March 17, 2017, <https://n.pr/2mDYhR4>

¹³ John Delury, "Trump and North Korea" *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-02-13/trump-and-north-korea>

¹⁴ Evans J.R. Revere, "2017: Year of decision on the Korean peninsula," *The Brookings Institution*, March 2, 2017, <http://brook.gs/2lr126U>

¹⁵ Ibid.

Barack Obama had warned Trump that North Korea would be the most pressing foreign policy problem inherited as commander in chief, and experts agree that Pyongyang now possesses a larger nuclear force than at the beginning of the Obama administration.¹⁶ Whether Moon and Trump can find common ground may be what defines US-ROK relations for decades to come.

Recommendations

Any staffer in Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, or Washington would agree that North Korea presents an increasingly terrifying situation with no straightforward or pleasant solutions. However, a Moon administration does have a path forward which would better suit the dire international situation in Pyongyang, without compromising opposition to the status quo. More than anything, **Moon's approach requires a rational mix of liberalism and conservatism to unite a divided South Korean populace and confront an imminent threat.** Washington will need to face this truth. Unchecked militant escalation, including a possible incident involving THAAD, is not going to deter Kim Jong-un from continuing to ramp up nuclear capability, but instead remove “all options” as Tillerson remarked, except for nuclear conflict in the most densely populated and economically prosperous regions of the world.



IMAGE: ASSOCIATED PRESS, NEW YORK TIMES

Provoking Kim Jong-un has real consequences for the people of Seoul, who would likely be the first targets of a nuclear retaliatory strike. US-ROK relations rely on this understanding. If regime change and forcing Pyongyang's hand are not possible, preventing another Korean War in 2017 requires the difficult political task of diplomacy.

Therefore, for US-ROK relations and partnership with China to endure, Moon should **prevent THAAD from dividing the Asian powers** by negotiating adjustment of THAAD radar to alternative systems which would monitor North Korea without encroaching Chinese

¹⁶ Jonathan D. Pollack, “The Trump administration contemplates its North Korea strategy” *The Brookings Institution*, January 13, 2017, <http://brook.gs/2jdlKu2>

borders. Addressing China's concerns sooner rather than later would lay the groundwork for long-term cooperation with Beijing, helping the U.S. as a consequence.

In the immediate future, Moon and Trump will need to **put aside ideological differences** to rationally confront North Korea as a united coalition, to prevent a power vacuum where Kim could use tense US-ROK relations or destabilized alliance to his advantage. To avert a security dilemma or armed conflict, Moon should advocate for the US to **engage in diplomatic talks** regarding the North Korean nuclear program with the Chinese, contrary to what Sec. Tillerson has said publicly. In the absence of any other favorable options, even engaging through backchannels could reduce some imminent danger of nuclear attack in the Korean Peninsula or the continental United States. North Korea policy will determine whether Trump's dealmaking can withstand its most complex test, in addition to how Moon will resolve domestic turmoil and handle South Korean foreign policy in relation to the great powers. These complexities will also test whether South Korea, China, and the U.S. can overcome disorder rather than be defined by it. It is two minutes to midnight and the clock is running fast.