



## South Koreans Narrowly Choose Conservative as Next President

### US Should Let Him Lead His Nation to Security Independence

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Almost lost in the tsunami of information on the Russo-Ukraine war was the transformational election result in the Republic of Korea. Prosecutor Yoon Suk-yeol, a political novice, won an exceedingly narrow victory in a race dominated by domestic issues. However, the greatest divergence between the two candidates was over security questions.

Yoon, of the conservative People Power Party, said he would tighten his government's alliance with America and strengthen the military. Most ROK candidates say the first. Outgoing progressive President Moon Jae-in even did the second. However, Yoon promised to be tougher on North Korea, emphasizing deterrence. He was much more critical of China, supporting the addition of THAAD missile defense batteries that had previously angered Beijing. He also indicated his willingness to attack the North preemptively if necessary to prevent a missile attack.

Although the Biden administration made no endorsement, it is likely to get along well with Yoon. Some observers might expect a progressive US president to prefer a South Korean progressive president, but that rarely has been the case. American policymakers care little about the ROK's domestic policies on, for instance, income distribution and housing prices.

In contrast, most US administrations, Democratic and Republican, prefer conservative Seoul governments, which are simultaneously hawkish (doing more militarily, confronting the North) and submissive (doing as they are told, backing US policy). Moreover, whatever their rhetoric, most nominal American progressives like Biden are as committed to an aggressive, globe-spanning foreign policy as typical neoconservatives and other conservative hawks. Occasional narrow differences, over Afghanistan and Iran, for instance, pale in comparison to their shared commitment to spend ever more money, risk ever more lives, and fight ever more wars to defend Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. It was Donald Trump, not Barack Obama or Joe Biden, who offered the sharpest break from George W. Bush's catastrophic tenure.

Indeed, the Biden presidency is proving to be a boom time for the Washington War Party – with Russia's revival as a major enemy alongside the ever more fearsome Chinese colossus, even

more money is guaranteed to flow into the military-industrial-think tank-media-lobby complex. Given their druthers, the most fervent ivory tower warriors, Republicans like Sen. Roger Wicker and Democrats like Evelyn Farkas, would already have America in a nuclear war with Moscow. A kettle of other determined Ukraine advocates and fervent war hawks is pushing policies, such as "no-fly zones," weapons shipments, and airplane transfers, that threaten broader hostilities. And virtually the entire establishment elite, whose members did so much to turn Russia into an enemy, are disclaiming any responsibility for the death and destruction to which they have helped unleash, just like in Iraq.

What that means for the Korean peninsula is yet unclear. In theory, Kim Jong-un's swing away from Trump buddy to archetypal adversary should enthuse the War Party. For the briefest moment the Trump administration undermined North Korea's role as permanent enemy. However, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea now is back as a convenient *bête noire* for Washington: architect of the Korean War, highly repressive state, caricature of the bizarre and evil, emerging nuclear power, impossible interlocutor, and persistent threat.

Indeed, the North's once more limited threats are going mainline. So far this year Pyongyang has tested a dozen missiles. The Pentagon concluded that the last two were longer-range, though not likely capable of hitting America. Unfortunately, Kim has indicated that his voluntary moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile and nuclear testing is over and rejected Biden administration proposals to talk. Increasingly it looks like he plans to move forward on the long list of weapons under development which he made public last year.

In just a few years the North could become a mid-level nuclear power. The fearsome forecast from the Rand Corporation and Asan Institute is "that, by 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons. The ROK and the United States are not prepared, and do not plan to be prepared, to deal with the coercive and warfighting leverage that these weapons would give North Korea."

With so many missiles topped with multiple nuclear warheads the DPRK could target South Korea and Japan, wreck American bases throughout East Asia, devastate US territories throughout the Pacific as well as Hawaii, and incinerate cities in the mainland. Kim is not suicidal and has done nothing to suggest that he wants to leave this life atop a radioactive funeral pyre in Pyongyang. However, if the US intervened in another Korean war and threatened to oust him, Kim could demand an American retreat else he would loose his arsenal. If so, would even such an irresponsible warmonger as Lindsey Graham refuse to retreat, since this time the war would be "over here"?

With how many crises are Biden, and whoever follows him in the Oval Office, prepared to cope, especially amid America's ongoing fiscal collapse? Federal debt (held by the public) already has topped 100 percent of GDP and is rapidly heading toward the record of 106 percent set at the end of World War II. The Congressional Budget Office warns that debt could break 200 percent by 2050. Unless Uncle Sam starts living within his means, financial panic and collapse are likely to occur well before then.

At some point Washington won't be able to pay the benefits it has promised its own citizens. It certainly won't be able to underwrite the defense of a bevy of European dependents, Middle Eastern royal dictatorships, and increasingly wealthy Asian states. Moreover, what human price will it be prepared to pay? Forever facing down nuclear-armed Russia and China would be burdensome enough. But adding a new nuclear DPRK superstate as an enemy should be an atomic bomb too far.

For Biden the Yoon presidency could offer a vital way out. Washington should effectively turn the "North Korea problem" over to Seoul. Historically the Korean peninsula was of little interest to America. The US got involved in a devastating war there only because of the Cold War, and Washington's fear of the conflict's potential global impact at that time. Today the ROK is a vibrant democracy with one of the world's largest economies and the financial strength to field whatever size military is required for its defense. Biden should welcome Yoon's commitment to a stronger South Korea with a plan for a gradual US military withdrawal. Ultimately, Seoul would make its own foreign policy and military decisions.

That would end America's immediate obligations for the conventional defense of the ROK. Equally important, it would minimize the North Korea nuclear threat to the US, since Pyongyang's only interest in threatening Washington, with its overwhelming nuclear deterrent, is defensive, that is, to forestall US involvement "over there." Otherwise, North Korean threats will multiply along with the increase in the DPRK's nuclear arsenal. And despite the War Party's hyper-activism to the contrary, protecting the American people remains Washington's primary responsibility.

More than Russia is in play today. North Korea, despite its many domestic infirmities, appears to be determined to turn itself into a Weltmacht. However, the South's newly elected conservative president is devoted to a stronger South Korean military and increased international role. The Biden administration should encourage his incoming government to take over responsibility for the ROK's defense.

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