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[Column] America's 3 schools of thought on Korea's political situation

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If the Cold War anti-communists get in Trump's ear, it could mean crisis for the alliance



Supporters of President Yoon Suk-yeol wave the flags of South Korea and the US as they rally in the street near the president's residence on Jan 12, 2025. (Jung Yong-il/Hankyoreh)

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Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol used to be Washington's "darling," an ardent supporter of Korea's alliance with the US and trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan. He had also been the most faithful partner in the US-led coalition of democracy.

That's why Americans find it so mind-boggling that Yoon would have threatened Korea's constitutional order with his unjustified declaration of martial law. American perspectives on Yoon's actions and the resulting political crisis generally fall into three groups.

The liberal internationalists represented by the Biden administration have been harshly criticizing Yoon in an emotional response akin to having been betrayed.

US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, who had been a major patron of the Yoon administration, was one of the first to respond to martial law after it was lifted, remarking that Yoon had “badly misjudged” the situation.

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s visit to Korea was canceled, and a scheduled tabletop exercise with the Korea-US Nuclear Consultative Group was postponed.

Jake Sullivan, the White House national security adviser, remarked that Yoon’s declaration of martial law was “shocking” and “wrong.”

The former US ambassador to Korea, Philip Goldberg, who recently retired, said that the martial law declaration was an unfortunate development he’d hoped never to see but praised Korea’s robust democratic procedures in regard to the National Assembly voting to lift martial law and passing a bill of impeachment against Yoon.

There has also been vigorous criticism of Yoon from members of the US Congress. Democratic lawmakers such as Sen. Andy Kim and Rep. Brad Sherman, who sponsored a resolution calling for an end-of-war declaration and a peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula, said that the martial law declaration had damaged not only democracy and the rule of law, but also the Korea-US alliance.

Given their principled positions and the value they place on democracy, mainstream figures in US society have criticized the martial law declaration and lauded the resilience of Korean democracy.

In contrast, US President Donald Trump and his close advisers haven’t commented on Yoon’s martial law declaration over the past month and a half, even though Yoon has been impeached and is on the brink of being removed from office.

That’s fairly predictable given Trump’s transactional nature. Trump prioritizes the national interest over values and opposes needless meddling in the affairs of other countries.

When the government of Bashar al-Assad collapsed in Syria in December, Trump said, “This is not our fight,” adding that the US should “not get involved.”

Trump’s lack of comments about Yoon also suggests that Korea isn’t a big foreign policy priority for Trump in his second term in office. Trump relishes making “deals” with powerful leaders of the likes of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un. He has little reason to bother with leaders with a cloudy political future, such as Yoon.

Matt Schlapp, the head of the American Conservative Union and reportedly a close ally of Trump’s, is said to have held a closed-door meeting on Dec. 14 with Yoon, who had already been suspended from his presidential duties. And Paul Manafort, chairman of Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, reportedly visited South Korea to meet with figures from Yoon’s party including Daegu Mayor Hong Joon-pyo and floor leader Kweon Seong-dong.

But given Trump's leadership style, these figures' actions don't seem to carry much weight. Trump will decide US policy toward South Korea on his own.

Finally, there are some in the US who support Yoon's martial law declaration and oppose the political forces behind his impeachment. Those are the far-right conservatives who still champion the anti-communism of the Cold War era.

Perhaps the best-known of these is US Rep. Young Kim, a Republican lawmaker who was recently named chair of the House Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific.

"The forces behind impeachment favor a policy of appeasement with North Korea and submission to China, which is likely to be disastrous for stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the entire region," Kim said in an interview with the Chosun Ilbo on Friday. She also asserted that these same political forces had been trying to damage Korea's trilateral partnership with the US and Japan and its alliance with the US, which she regards as vital for security in the Indo-Pacific.

Steve Bannon, a former senior strategist in the White House and one of the leading figures in Trump's MAGA ("Make America Great Again") movement, has expressed concerns about rumors of Chinese involvement. Bannon said that if Yoon steps down because of demonstrations and political uncertainty, China could exploit the resulting power vacuum to damage the Korea-US alliance.

These figures also sympathize with the drive to "eliminate pro-North Korean figures" championed by South Korea's far-right conservatives.

In short, American society is generally critical of the martial law declaration and welcoming of progress on Yoon's impeachment in accordance with the constitution and law. Trump's approach is to wait until the Korean political situation clears up and the next leader takes the stage.

But the problem is America's anti-communist cold warriors. It's worth noting that if such figures can forge a transnational coalition with South Korea's "Taegeukgi brigade" and other far-right forces here and influence Trump while meddling in South Korean politics, it could bring about an unheard-of crisis in bilateral relations.

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]