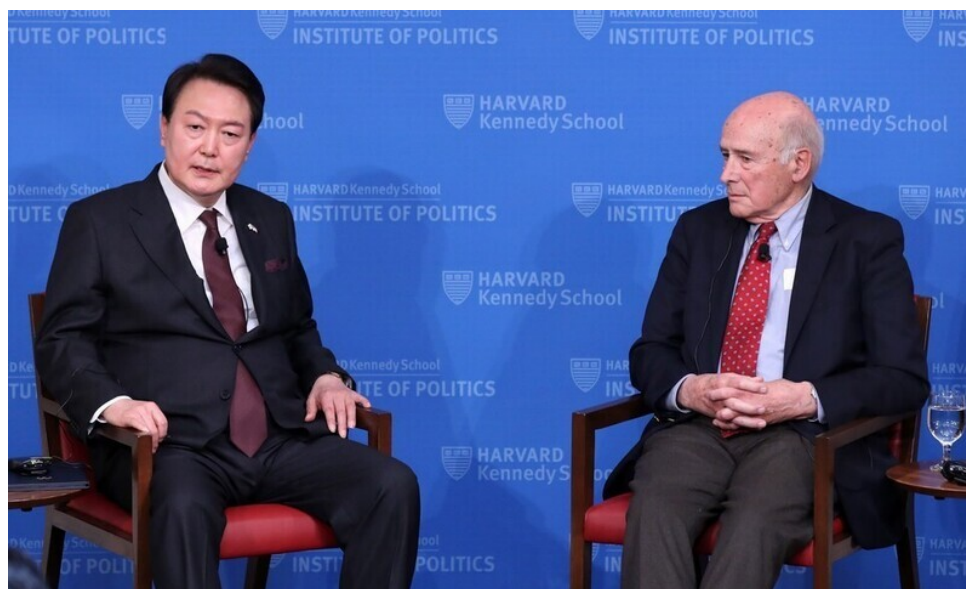


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[Column] Does Yoon's year of values diplomacy deserve a passing grade?

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If Yoon continues to struggle to find a sensible balance between values and the national interest and to open a new horizon for crisis management and preventive diplomacy, his national security policy and foreign policy seem doomed to fail



President Yoon Suk-yeol of South Korea takes part in a forum with Professor Emeritus Joseph Nye of Harvard University following the former's address to the Harvard Kennedy School on April 28. (Yonhap)



By Moon Chung-in, Yonsei University professor emeritus

South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol concluded his state visit to the US in late April with a speech titled "A New Journey toward Freedom" at Harvard Kennedy School. In his speech, he argued that freedom and democracy have been endangered by anti-intellectualism and totalitarianism, while declaring that Korea would stand with the US in the vanguard of values diplomacy.

Yoon's speech made clear his vision as a leader of moral diplomacy. In a forum following the speech, both the moderator of the forum — Joseph Nye, a professor emeritus at Harvard — and ordinary audience members showered praise on Yoon's values diplomacy.

Nye, a well-known scholar of international relations who served in the US government under President Clinton, published a book titled "Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump" in 2020. In that book, he graded the moral diplomacy and leadership of American presidents since World War II on three criteria: their intentions, their methods, and the consequences of their decisions.

First, Nye asked about the appropriateness of a leader's intentions. How appealing was the moral vision they offered, and how prudently did they pursue that vision so as to minimize risks and maximize the national interest?

Second, he asked how discerning and proportional a leader was when using force as a method of foreign policy and whether they complied with domestic and international laws and institutions and respected the rights of other countries in the use of force.

Finally, he assessed the consequences of a leader's foreign policy by asking whether the leader succeeded at building credibility at home and abroad through national consensus and acceptance, consideration of other countries' global interests, and good-faith persuasive arguments.

Under those three criteria, what grade would the Yoon administration receive for its foreign policy and national security policy over the past year? I'm not sure how applicable Nye's criteria are for an administration that has barely been in power for a year, but the Yoon administration has already set the basic direction of its foreign policy and national security policy and is rapidly implementing those policies. As such, it should be possible to carry out a provisional assessment.

First, we will examine the appropriateness of Yoon's intentions. Since his inauguration, he has treated universal values as the basis for foreign policy. He has continued to emphasize freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and the rules-based international order.

While Yoon's values orientation has its appeal, the story changes when we consider whether Yoon has been prudent in his pursuit of that vision. If Korea is excessively hostile to China, Russia and North Korea, or adopts a stance that's even more rigid than Washington while attempting to align its values with those of the US, Korea's national security and prosperity are bound to suffer serious and genuine harm. Yoon is unlikely to score well on the virtue of prudence, which requires him to balance values with the national interest.

A similar assessment can be made of the second criterion of a leader's method. Yoon has condemned the previous administration's Korean Peninsula peace process as a "false peace" and insisted that the only solution is "peace through strength." Along with strengthening Korea's own deterrent, he has devoted considerable energy to holding joint military drills and exercises with the US, encouraging the forward deployment of American strategic assets and boosting the US' extended deterrence.

In contrast, there are few signs that the Yoon administration has prioritized the kind of preventive diplomacy that could minimize the risk of war and manage and stabilize potential crises. Yoon has emphasized a coordinated response with the US and Japan to the North Korean nuclear threat, but hasn't tried using multilateral diplomacy to reopen negotiations. That suggests a serious imbalance between diplomatic solutions and the threatened or actual use of force in regard to his foreign policy toolkit.

According to Nye, a national consensus is needed for foreign policy since the president is the person a nation has chosen to carry out policy on its behalf. But Yoon's leadership has only consisted of decisive action, without any apparent effort to build a national consensus about that action. Yoon's failure to deliberate with the political community, including the opposition, is nearly without precedent.

Significantly, there's something very wrong with Yoon's vision of Korea playing a pivotal role in a divisive foreign policy that splits the world into a democratic coalition and an authoritarian axis. Such us-and-them thinking could gravely damage the global and regional order and endanger the Korean Peninsula's geopolitical status. As evident in his summit diplomacy with Japan, Yoon's disinterest in winning over the public, his unilateral actions, and his repeated failures to stay on message have seriously undermined his credibility and legitimacy.

Under Nye's assessment criteria, Yoon is unlikely to receive a high score for his national security policy and foreign policy in his first year in office. Considering that we're not on the brink of a military clash with North Korea and that China and Russia still haven't responded with explicit hostility, I suppose he shouldn't get a failing grade, either.

But if Yoon continues to struggle to find a sensible balance between values and the national interest and to open a new horizon for crisis management and preventive diplomacy, his national security policy and foreign policy seem doomed to fail.

Without painstaking efforts to win over stakeholders and build a national consensus, inter-Korean relations could deteriorate and Korea could be sucked into the quagmire of bloc diplomacy, with unimaginable consequences.

And those consequences, we would do well to remember, would fall squarely on the shoulders of everyday Koreans.

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