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# [Column] Has the Moon administration's foreign policy really been a failure?

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## The president has made substantial achievements toward inter-Korean peace and stability



Moon Chung-in

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Time moves quickly. The Moon Jae-in administration has just a year and five months now left in its term. The past three years and seven months have been a rollercoaster. From the crisis year of 2017, we created a year of hope in 2018, only to see a deep chill descend on the peninsula again when the North Korea-US summit in Hanoi broke down in February 2019. There are no easy exits in sight. The situation has been reflected in domestic and overseas critiques of the Moon administration's foreign policy, which have continued to intensify.

The most prominent of these has been the argument from some Korean media outlets that Seoul's foreign relations have been a failure. It's difficult to agree. It is true that the Moon administration has yet to achieve the goals it initially set out in terms of denuclearizing the peninsula and establishing a peace regime. But there should also be no need to point out that neither of those things can be accomplished in a short time.

Moreover, many things have been accomplished as we've proceeded along that path. This includes the adoption of the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations and the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) — thanks to which we haven't seen military crises like the ROKS Cheonan sinking, the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, or wooden-box landmine explosions. It was also no mean feat for us to affirm the North Korean leadership's commitment to denuclearization both orally and in writing, thus paving the way for the North Korea-US summits in Singapore and Hanoi. What previous administration can boast such achievements since North Korea truly began pursuing nuclear armament? This is why we shouldn't underestimate the diplomatic efforts of 2018 and their attempts to achieve denuclearization and peace.

The supposedly "ruined" South Korea-US alliance is still in robust shape, and we haven't had particular issues in our relations with China. In addition to bilateral diplomacy, we've also realized a number of achievements in multilateral diplomacy. We would have had more room to maneuver had it not been for the COVID-19 pandemic. It's not over until it's over.

Next, certain Japanese journalists and conservative commentators have claimed that Moon's "populism" has ruined relations with Japan. The underlying premise here is that he has been "exploiting" the forced labor and comfort women issues for domestic political ends. This is contrary to the facts. Moon has maintained a consistent stance ever since the early days of his term, when his approval ratings were sky high.

From the start, Moon has emphasized that historical issues remain part of the South Korean public's collective memory and trauma, and that healing takes time. He has consistently been in favor of resolving historical issues gradually with the support of the public, and discussing cooperation on urgent strategic matters such as the North Korean nuclear issue, the rise of China, and the economy. His idea has been that achieving successful cooperation in these areas will make it easier to win the public's support.

## The unproductive stance of Japanese leadership

The Japanese leadership, in contrast, has maintained that no bilateral cooperation is possible without a prior resolution of historical issues. Consider Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who said he would be willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un without any preconditions — yet when a trilateral summit with China was scheduled to be held in Seoul last December, he insisted that he could not go unless the forced labor issue was resolved. South Korea is a democratic nation with a clear principle of separation of powers. The executive cannot simply overturn the judiciary's decisions. Moreover, Moon has emphasized the principle of victim-centered resolutions ever since his days as a human rights attorney. It's hard to see the “populism” in this foreign policy approach, which is grounded in democratic institutions and principles.

A third criticism has recently emerged in the US media. An amendment to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act that was passed by the National Assembly last year — which banned attempts to send anti-North propaganda across the inter-Korean border — sets a broad scope in terms of the standards, targets, actors, and methods involved in propaganda distribution, and the argument is that this unduly restricts the basic rights of both South Korean and foreign citizens.

Some have raised objections to this with the Constitutional Court, and we will have to wait and see what the final judgment is. But the assessment certainly changes when we consider the aims behind the legislation. The lives and safety of the two million residents near the border are every bit as important as the universal values of freedom of expression and promoting human rights in North Korea.

### **The safety of residents near the border is just as important as freedom of speech**

The lawmakers who proposed this amendment have noted that South and North Korea reached an agreement not to slander one another — an agreement that also extends to propaganda distribution. They insist that there need to be laws in place to enforce this agreement. The efficacy of propaganda distribution has also been the focus of criticism for a long time. Not only do we have no way of knowing how many leaflets, CDs, and dollar bills actually reach North Korea, but the practical reality is that residents fear punishment and will immediately report any leaflets they find.

Would it be proper for our administration to simply allow this kind of activity to continue, with all of its clear limitations — accepting the fears of residents along the border as the price we pay for the freedom of expression of a few people? It's difficult not to conclude that framing the issue as a “clash between international human rights norms and South Korean sovereignty” is a gross exaggeration.

Criticism is a cornerstone of democracy, but it also needs to be grounded in facts. Criticism in the service of prejudice, speculation, and condemnation does little more than to turn democracy into a tragic power battle. Do we want to see South Korean diplomacy achieving more results over the next 17 months? If so, then it's essential that we criticize in a responsible way.

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