

Shifting Sands: South Korea's Future and Navigating Trump 2.0

What implications might the South Korean president's impeachment hold for American policy in east Asia?

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Dec 27, 2024 12:03 AM

On December 14, South Korea's President Yoon Suk-yeol was impeached by parliament following his [abortive martial law decree](#) earlier that month. With Yoon's fate now hinging on a [pending Constitutional Court decision](#), speculation of possible early presidential elections is rising.

If the court upholds the impeachment motion against conservative leader Yoon, South Koreans will head to the polls within 60 days to elect a new chief executive. In such a scenario, liberal opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, who currently [dominates the poll](#), would likely ascend to the helm.

This could spell troubles for South Korea's indispensable ally, the United States. Lee has previously shown misgivings about the bilateral alliance with Washington, even [referring](#) to the American troops stationed in Korea after the peninsula's 1945 liberation as "occupation forces."

As the political climate grows uncertain, questions emerge about whether Yoon will survive his impeachment and what the future could hold under Lee's presidency. To better understand the shifting landscape, we spoke with Dr. Moon Chung-in, a James Laney Professor at Yonsei University and editor-in-chief of Global Asia. He served as senior adviser for three presidents in South Korea and is widely recognized for his expertise in inter-Korea relations and East Asian security.

Was President Yoon justified in [declaring martial law](#) on December 3 to eliminate "anti-state forces" and root out "pro-North Korean agents"?

No, his rationale cannot be justified. There was no war or war-like emergency to warrant the declaration of martial law. Another issue lies in Yoon's interpretation of "anti-state forces" and "pro-North Korean agents." Yoon appeared to label anyone opposing his policies as anti-state. For him, members of the National Assembly who passed impeachment motions against his

cabinet, cut government budgets, or enacted bills unfavorable to his administration were deemed anti-state forces.

Legislative gridlock, however, is a natural part of the democratic process in mature democracies like the U.S. and many European countries. Yoon showed little tolerance for such democratic practices. The term “pro–North Korean agents” is a problematic one. The Yoon administration branded antiwar protesters and supporters of engagement policies and peace initiatives as pro–North Korean sympathizers or agents. This approach is arbitrary and unacceptable.

If Yoon was convinced of their illicit actions, he should have applied the local National Security Law—which is stringent, I admit—to those he deemed anti-state and pro–North Korean agents. But he didn’t, as there were no legal grounds to charge them. This reflects the president’s autocratic-style leadership, in which he views himself as the state—*L’etat, c’est moi*—and labels those who oppose him as anti-state forces or pro–North Korean agents. It’s possible that his indulgence in [ultra-right-wing YouTube content](#) played a negative role in shaping this approach.

The U.S. government appeared somewhat displeased by the lack of “prior notice” regarding Yoon’s martial law. Do you believe Washington has a valid concern, or is this a display of imperialist overreach?

The declaration of martial law was illegal in and of itself. So how could Yoon issue the Biden administration a “prior notice”? I think Washington’s concern was valid, and the American protest was not an act of imperialist overreach. It was a normal and legitimate function of Seoul’s staunchest ally.

It’s not just the Biden administration’s emphasis on “value diplomacy” to promote democracy and human rights, but also a sense of betrayal stemming from Yoon’s erratic behavior—if, indeed, the American side felt any displeasure at all. Yoon has been one of the most vocal and loyal partners in the U.S.-led coalition of democracies. Washington viewed him as a beacon of freedom and democracy in Asia, with Yoon positioning himself as a global crusader for these values by advocating for a “value alliance” with the U.S.

It should have been unthinkable, therefore, for him to threaten the constitutional order of the Republic of Korea by declaring martial law, attempting to seize control of the National Assembly, and using military force to arrest political opponents. This must have been an extremely disappointing moment for Washington.

South Korea’s parliament impeached President Yoon on December 14. What does this mean for the future of South Korea's security and foreign policies?

I do not foresee any major changes in South Korea’s security and foreign policies in the short term. Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, now acting president, will likely maintain the status quo.

He values the ROK-U.S. alliance and will continue the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation mechanism. But he would likely pursue a more defensive policy on North Korea and aim to avoid any military clashes with the North.

If the Constitutional Court formally dismisses Yoon, a presidential election must be held within 60 days. If Lee Jae-myung, the progressive and most popular candidate now, is elected, he is likely to pursue a foreign and national security policy significantly different from that of the Yoon government.

Should Washington be concerned about Lee Jae-myung's presidency?

Lee is a progressive political leader who will prioritize peace over conflict, economic growth with redistribution, and a focus on welfare and fairness. His policies will stand in stark contrast to those of Yoon. Unlike Yoon, who was ideologically rigid and politically inexperienced, Lee is a seasoned pragmatist with extensive political and administrative experience. He knows how to navigate conflicting interests and find compromises. While his overarching goals are progressive, he takes a practical approach to policy implementation. As a long-time human rights lawyer, Lee is also a skilled and tough negotiator. His eight years as mayor of Seongnam City and four years as governor of Gyeonggi Province are a testament to his ability to lead pragmatically and effectively.

Now, I understand American concerns about his leadership. Lee's criticism of the U.S. in the past has contributed to crafting his anti-American populist image. But, by and large, Lee is a realist. His top priority is preventing war on the Korean Peninsula, and he recognizes that South Korea needs the U.S. alliance for nuclear deterrence against the North. As a result, he will continue to emphasize the importance of this alliance.

That said, Lee will seek to enhance peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula through various diplomatic channels, including with Beijing and Moscow. He will be a tough negotiator with the U.S. on defense cost-sharing and trade protectionism. Frictions may arise over the issue of threat perception regarding China. While the U.S. will want to include both North Korea and China in its regional deterrence strategy, South Korea, under Lee's leadership, will focus more specifically on the North Korean threat. Lee will likely pursue a policy to harmonize the Seoul-Tokyo-Washington trilateral relationship with the Seoul-Beijing-Tokyo trilateral relationship. In an era marked by the revival of bloc politics, such efforts will be a herculean task.

Would Lee be able to form a working relationship with Trump?

Yes, Lee understands that establishing a strong working relationship with President Trump and his circle is essential for South Korea's national interests. He will approach Trump with sincerity and an open mind, with the outcome largely contingent on Trump's readiness for serious negotiations. If Trump is willing to engage in meaningful dialogue, Lee will reciprocate, and vice versa.

How should South Korea approach the incoming Trump administration?

We have four major concerns. First, there is a fear that Trump 2.0 could disrupt or weaken the ROK-U.S. alliance, either by making excessive demands for defense cost-sharing or by threatening to reduce or withdraw American forces from South Korea. Considering the thrust of the MAGA policy platform, these scenarios cannot be dismissed.

The second concern regards the possibility of President Trump striking a direct deal with North Korea. Despite the setback of the 2019 Hanoi Summit, Trump is known to have maintained contact with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. South Korea would be alarmed if Trump were to negotiate an agreement exchanging U.S. sanctions relief and diplomatic normalization for North Korea's suspension or reduction of its nuclear forces and related activities, coupled with incremental denuclearization. The prospect of Washington recognizing Pyongyang's nuclear weapons status and the fear of being sidelined in U.S.-DPRK negotiations would deeply unsettle Seoul, potentially undermining the future of the bilateral alliance.

Third, differing threat perceptions of China between South Korea and the U.S. will be another source of tension. A second Trump administration will likely escalate its hardline policy toward China and seek Seoul's active participation in countering Beijing's influence. Even the mission of American forces stationed in South Korea could shift toward deterring China. While prioritizing the North Korean threat, however, Seoul may be reluctant to fully align with Washington's strategy to encircle and contain China. This discrepancy is poised to become another friction point.

Finally, Trump's trade pressures present yet another problem for South Korea. The potential imposition of universal tariffs, the termination of subsidies for South Korean firms heavily invested in the U.S., and the introduction of non-tariff barriers such as quantitative restrictions could exacerbate Seoul's anxiety.

In addressing these challenges, South Korea has three potential options: complying with American demands to maintain amicable relations with a Trump 2.0 administration, raising its voice and engaging in tough negotiations, or defying U.S. demands and seeking alternative strategies. None of these paths are without difficulty. The first option, a loyalty-based approach, risks triggering immense domestic political opposition. The second, asserting its voice, may prove ineffective with a president as adept at transactional deals and bluffing as Trump. The third, an exit strategy, appears too far-fetched. Whatever options South Korea chooses, it will encounter a serious policy dilemma.

Any advice to President Trump in dealing with nuclear North Korea?

Regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons, we need to make a distinction between recognition and awareness. We can never recognize the country as a nuclear weapons state since we must comply with the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty]. But we need to be aware of North Korea's possession of these weapons. That is a naked reality that we cannot deny.

In this sense, the idea of CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement) seems unrealistic. As Dr. Sigfried Hecker has been suggesting, our operational goal should be more practical, like “halting, rolling back, and a long-term, incremental dismantling” of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs. Placing denuclearization at the entrance will be a non-starter. It is essential to lower expectations and restore cognitive empathy toward North Korea. For instance, in April 2018, Pyongyang voluntarily put a moratorium on nuclear and ballistic missile testing and didn’t undertake any tests until 2020. But instead of rewarding North Korea for this “good” behavior, the Trump administration imposed over 18 additional sanction measures on the North. The logic behind this seemed to be that two summits were sufficient rewards for Kim Jong Un. That’s bad, unilateral reasoning without any strategic empathy. Pyongyang should have felt bitter and betrayed. If a sanction is a tool to change North Korea’s behavior, it should be more flexibly utilized. I understand that all sanctions are codified and legally binding. But Washington should have found ways to ease that rigidity and used sanctions as more adaptable bargaining tools.