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South Korea's Foreign Policy after the March 2022 Election: Between Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, and Pyongyang

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Key Issues

- On 9 March 2022, South Korea is electing a new president.
- The two main contenders are Lee Jae-Myung from the ruling progressive Democratic Party of Korea and Yoon Seok-Yeol from the opposition conservative People Power Party.
- In the lead up to the election, foreign policy issues have taken on a partisan dimension.
- Three issues are key: Seoul's relationship with North Korea, its position on US-China rivalry, and its relationship with Japan.

With a little less than three months to go until election day on 9 March 2022, South Korea's presidential hopefuls are pulling out all the stops to woo potential voters. Presidential elections in the Republic of Korea (ROK) are determined by a single round based on the first-past-the post rule. The ROK's current President Moon Jae-In is constitutionally restricted to a five-year term and hopes to pass the baton on to Lee Jae-Myung, a retired civil rights attorney and former governor of the Gyeonggi Province, who was nominated by the ruling progressive Democratic Party of Korea (DP). Lee's main competition at the ballot box will be Yoon Seok-Yeol, a former public prosecutor and the nominee from the opposition conservative People Power Party (PPP). While several other smaller parties – like the Justice Party and newly established People Party – also have nominees for

the presidency, they failed to register support that surpasses the single digit. With Lee and Yoon as main contenders, what will Seoul's foreign policy look like post-March 2022?

Admittedly, as is the case in most countries, foreign policy and national security are not the main topic in Korea's electoral race. Instead, rising housing prices, a shortage of stable and well-paying jobs, and themes related to fairness and justice are receiving most of the attention. These issues are particularly important to younger swing voters who are by many believed to be the key demographic in deciding the election. The presidential race has moreover been marked by a seemingly never-ending series of scandals and allegations of abuse of power. Neither Yoon nor Lee have been formally charged for any wrongdoing, but they are repeatedly accused

of involvement in corruption scandals by their rivals. Although South Korean political campaigns have a reputation for being fierce, observers say that personal issues have rarely been this central in the political process. As both candidates seem preoccupied with trying to undermine each other's chances of making it to the Blue House, their campaign rhetoric on foreign affairs should surely be taken with a grain of salt. That said, it still remains possible to derive some broad expectations for the future of ROK foreign policy under President Lee or President Yoon. Three issues are especially salient for ROK foreign policy going forward: Seoul's relationship with North Korea, its position on US-China rivalry, and its relationship with Japan.

As the candidate of the DP of President Moon Jae-In, Lee can be said to represent the current administration, although he is not considered to be part of Moon's inner circle and has sought to distance himself from some of the current government's policies. Under Moon, Seoul famously sought to achieve greater reconciliation with North Korea. Moon held three summits with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and helped broker the first ever US-North Korea summit between Kim and then-President Donald Trump in 2018. One key outcome of Moon's diplomacy was the 2018 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). It includes steps to scale down and eventually eliminate the risks of military escalation along the Military Demarcation Line, which separates the two Koreas, and to turn the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) around this line into a peace zone. While Moon repeatedly emphasised the need to assure dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, it is an open secret that his administration was more interested in peace than in denuclearisation. Moon's latest effort to make a breakthrough on inter-Korean relations is his push for a formal declaration of the end of the Korean War.

Just like Moon, Lee wants Seoul to be in the driving seat on Korean Peninsula affairs and to act as a mediator between Washington and Pyongyang. Lee also supports Moon's efforts to sign an end-of-war declaration, despite conservative reluctance about the issue. Lee further acknowledges that the vast majority of the current population of both North and South Korea have no experience of the Korean

War and that it will not suffice to refer to shared history and ethnicity to achieve public support for unification. Rather than pursuing some sort of grand deal that requires Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons as a precondition for progress on anything else, Lee proposes a "pragmatic approach" to achieving unification based on small deals on concrete issues, such as inter-Korean economic development. Such an approach would include the possibility of employing so-called snapback sanctions, that is sanctions that are automatically re-imposed if North Korea does not comply with any agreement made.

Yoon, for his part, has criticised the approach of the DP for being too deferential to North Korea. He has also demonstrated a willingness to renege on the 2018 inter-Korean CMA if North Korea does not change its behaviour, a move that was heavily criticised by Lee. The DP and PPP continue to disagree over the effectiveness of the agreement. Whereas the former insists that the CMA has been instrumental in easing tensions in the DMZ, the latter has raised scepticism, citing Pyongyang's provocations in violation of the agreement. Yoon has further emphasised that he views the ROK as an important stakeholder, but not the key driver, in Korean Peninsula affairs. He has made the case for closer collaboration with neighbouring countries to achieve the denuclearisation of North Korea. In this very vein, Yoon has proposed to establish a trilateral diplomatic office in Panmunjom with representatives from the two Koreas, and the United States, to run a dialogue channel on a permanent basis. This format would exclude China, Japan, and Russia, the three former participants of the Six-Party Talks that ran from 2003 to 2009. Despite these differences, both Yoon and Lee have signalled a willingness to meet with Kim. While Yoon has taken a stronger stance than his opponent on the need for denuclearisation, he has also pledged to provide humanitarian assistance to North Korea and to expand cultural and personal exchanges, separate from nuclear talks.

Critics of the Moon administration – like the PPP – often dismissively called him a dove because of his preoccupation with inter-Korean reconciliation. Yet, despite Moon's reputation as a dove, he actually presided over an impressive military buildup on

the peninsula. Moon entered office committed to increase the ROK's ability to defend itself against a potential North Korean attack without US help. Since he entered office in 2017, the ROK's defence budget has increased by an average of 7.4 percent annually. This military buildup is likely to continue after Moon's tenure ends, irrespective of whether Lee or Yoon takes office. Lee shares Moon's commitment to increasing national self-defence capabilities. He also wants to continue Moon's efforts to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korea, and this requires the ROK to invest in readiness. For now, it remains the case that if war erupts on the Korean Peninsula, an American commander would assume OPCON and lead the fight. According to Lee – and other proponents of an OPCON transfer – a transfer would better deter North Korean aggression and

in the activities of the so-called Five Eyes Plus, an intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (The Five Eyes) plus the ROK, Japan, and France. Yoon made the headlines in September 2021, when he demanded the US to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea and devise a nuclear-sharing arrangement in the style of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He later rescinded this position though, saying that it would be unrealistic and in violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Yoon has also signalled that he is considering the deployment of additional interceptors for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, an American anti-ballistic missile system deployed in Seongju. This would go against assurances given by the Moon



The Moon administration has increased the defence budget by an average of 7,4% annually – a trend expected to continue under a Lee or Yoon administration.



enable South Korea to become a security provider in the region. Opponents of the transfer, in contrast, view the existing arrangement as useful insurance against US abandonment. The South Korean public remains divided on the issue. While the split is largely partisan, it also appears that younger generations are generally in favour of a transfer.

Yoon also wants to improve military readiness, but he has framed this primarily as a means to strengthen the US-ROK alliance to build deterrence against North Korea. He further advocates cooperation with the United States and Japan to monitor North Korean activities and enhance regional security. The precise modalities of such advanced cooperation remain unclear for now, as the ROK and Japan already have an intelligence sharing pact, known as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). Moreover, since 2019, the ROK has reportedly been participating

administration to China under the so-called “three-no’s policy” after the deployment of the system in 2017. Beijing vehemently opposes THAAD, calls it a threat to its national security, and undertook a series of economic retaliatory actions against South Korea, in response to the US Forces Korea-ROK joint decision to deploy THAAD in 2016. To assuage Beijing’s concerns and restore relations, the Moon government at the time pronounced three no’s: no additional THAAD deployment, no participation in the US missile defence network, and no creation of a trilateral military alliance with Washington and Tokyo. According to Yoon, the three no’s are not a formal agreement and merely represent the position of the current administration. Lee, in contrast, said that he will keep the THAAD battery established in Seongju, but he is against any additional deployments and considers it unwise for the ROK to step back on diplomatic commitments made by previous ROK governments. This is a departure from

his stance a couple of years ago, when he opposed the THAAD deployment altogether.

In fact, more broadly speaking, Lee has advocated walking a careful line between the US and China. He does not propose a position of equidistance between Washington and Beijing, but he is also careful not to appear fully aligned with the United States. While he has stated that he values the United States as a military ally and an economic partner, he has at times raised eyebrows with some of his more daring public comments about the US. For instance, he has described the US troops who entered the Korean Peninsula after 1945 “occupation forces”. He also said that the US consented to Japan’s colonisation of Korea in 1905 through the so-called Katsura-Tufts agreement between Washington and Tokyo. In navigating US-China tensions, he has proposed a balanced foreign policy that seeks constructive relations with both Washington and Beijing. In this regard, he has argued that the ROK can and should leverage its position as a leading producer of semiconductors and EV batteries to gain concessions from other countries. During a meeting with the Chinese ambassador to the ROK Xiang Haiming, in November 2021, Lee emphasised the economic interdependence between the two countries and reaffirmed that Seoul needs Beijing as a partner to advance peace and denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula.

Yoon, in contrast, has displayed a willingness to align more closely with the United States, and relatedly, to take a more confrontational stance against China. He has raised questions about cooperation with China, for China is allied with Pyongyang, the ROK’s main “enemy”. Yoon wants to formally join the US-led Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue – “the Quad” – working group, with the option of the ROK becoming a “fully fledged” member. The Moon administration has so far been somewhat ambivalent about the Quad because the grouping is by some viewed as “anti-China”. While the Moon administration has participated in several Quad Plus meetings that included the formal Quad members (the United States, Australia, India, and Japan), as well as representatives from New Zealand and Vietnam, Moon has refrained from formalising Seoul’s membership. Yoon, however, does not seem to be too concerned about antagonising China. He

has emphasised that he wants Seoul to continue cooperation with the Five Eyes – a position that will undeniably upset Beijing. Despite his reputation as a China hawk, Yoon also wants to initiate a “new era of respect and cooperation with China” based on a regular “high-level strategic dialogue”. He therefore proposes a foreign policy for the ROK that revolves around two separate axes: a Japan-ROK-US axis and a China-Japan-ROK axis. This approach dovetails with the proposed approach of the two former conservative governments under Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017).

Yoon’s broader willingness to improve the ROK’s political relationship with Japan promises an important shift from the policies of the Moon era. Diplomatic relations between Seoul and Tokyo reached a low point in 2019 following a South Korean court ruling that instructed Japanese companies to pay reparations for forced labour of Korean workers during World War II. In response, Japan put export controls on chemicals indispensable to South Korea’s semiconductor industry. Seoul and Tokyo also continue to disagree about the Korean “comfort women” who were sexually abused under Japan’s occupation of the peninsula. Yoon has accused Moon of leveraging simmering anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea for domestic political gain. While he promised an assertive stance on issues of history and territory, he also described Japan as a neighbour who shares values of liberal democracy and free markets. In this spirit, with the election of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in October 2021, Yoon recalled the Japan-South Korea Declaration of 1998, made between then-South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung and then-Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, which expressed both countries’ willingness to overcome the past and build new relations. He wrote on his Facebook page that “Japan is a neighbour that cannot be moved to another place on Earth. That is why, whether we like it or not, we need the wisdom to co-exist”.

While Lee has countered critics who call him an “anti-Japan” politician, it is true that his stance on Japan is similar to, if not more outspoken than, Moon’s and hence more critical than that of Yoon. Lee wants to improve relations with Tokyo, but only when Japan shows a different approach to historical and territorial issues. He has argued that

Yoon has a flawed understanding of the Kim-Obuchi declaration and claims that it was based on the sincere apologies from a Japanese leader and a willingness to take full responsibility for historical conflicts. He further caused concern in Tokyo when promising that Korea would “surpass” Japan during his nomination speech. Nonetheless, he remains formally committed to seeking to rehabilitate soured ties with Japan, above all, by addressing Tokyo’s removal of South Korea from a “white list” of trusted trade partners that receive preferential treatment in the aftermath of the 2019 South Korean court ruling on Korean wartime labour.

In the lead-up to the 9 March 2022 presidential election, discussions about Seoul’s future foreign policy seem to have taken on an increasingly

partisan dimension. Should Lee win the election, he is likely to continue Moon’s pro-engagement policy vis-à-vis North Korea, his efforts of walking a fine line between Washington and Beijing, and a harsh(er) stance vis-à-vis Tokyo. Yoon, in contrast, promises a more confrontational policy toward Pyongyang, has appeared more inclined to criticise China, clearly aligns with the United States, and is likely to have a better chance at improving relations with Tokyo. With three months to go until South Koreans cast their ballots, both sides will surely continue to update and refine their positions. Nonetheless, with the broad contours of their foreign policy platforms drawn, other actors in the region, and beyond, would be wise to prepare for varying South Korean foreign policy directions accordingly.



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