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## **South Korean Election: Return of the Conservatives?**

*By Sean King*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*South Korea's presidential election this week is turning out to be a nail-biter. Incumbent Moon Jae-In is out of the race as the law only allows for one five-year term. The conservatives look set to come back, but whoever wins, there are foreign policy and regional security implications.*

### **COMMENTARY**

SOUTH KOREA'S conservatives are suddenly in a much stronger position to retake the country's presidency after the centre-right spoiler candidate from a minor party, Ahn Cheol-soo, quit the race — with just days to go before the 9 March 2022 election. Ahn declared support for the main opposition contender Yoon Suk-yeol.

Earlier locked in a neck-and-neck battle with ruling Democratic Party of Korea standard bearer, the former governor of Gyeonggi Province Lee Jae-myung, the newcomer Yoon has now largely strengthened his position. Yoon made his mark when he was Prosecutor-General by putting former conservative President Park Geun-hye in jail. While this election has been fought mostly over domestic issues and personalities, its result will nonetheless have important foreign policy and regional security implications, especially should Yoon win.

### **Prospects for a Yoon Presidency**

Liberal incumbent Moon Jae-in cannot run again, as Republic of Korea (ROK) presidents are limited by law to one five-year term. Lee, the candidate from Moon's party, thus must answer for housing and job market complaints, as well as COVID-19 pandemic fatigue, otherwise directed at Moon.

This year's first presidential television debate earned a 39% viewership rating, the second-highest in Korean history. That's bad news for Lee, as an overly engaged electorate generally portends trouble for any candidate identified with the status quo.

Yoon has had difficulty rallying some holdout conservatives to his cause not only because Ahn, a [perennial political wannabe](#), medical doctor and software mogul, stayed in the race so long but also because of Yoon's popularity as a tough corruption buster. Park, [pardoned in December](#), has yet to encourage her supporters to get behind Yoon. [Her recently published book based on her jailtime correspondence](#) makes clear her resentment of Yoon.

Observers tend to emphasise the North Korea factor in any South Korean election. But North Korea has not been much of an issue this time, while there has in fact been more talk of corruption allegations, gender issues, candidates' family controversies and their many gaffes.

### **The North Korea Factor**

North Korea itself will not welcome either candidate's victory because Pyongyang views any South Korean leader as an American puppet. Witness Kim Jong Un's recent run of weapons tests and his June 2020 demolition of the Kaesong inter-Korean liaison office (all during the liberal Moon's term). Kim announced [a five-year weapons modernisation plan](#) only last year. He will keep testing whoever wins.

Kim's intended audience, aside from [the masses on both sides of the Korean Demilitarized Zone](#), is America. North Korea sees the United States — not South Korea — as its counterparty. Pyongyang derides the South as a "Yankee colony".

Kim's key takeaway from his 2019 Hanoi summit flop with former US President Donald Trump is to come back better-armed next time to scare Washington into offering him real strategic concessions. Some of these concessions include a reduction in US assets or troops in the Korean Peninsula, and the removal of South Korea from the US nuclear umbrella.

### **The China Factor**

One foreign policy issue that could be substantively impacted by this election is Seoul's relations with Beijing. [South Koreans now view the People's Republic of China \(PRC\) less favourably than they see historical rival Japan](#). They prefer the US over mainland China.

South Koreans did not always feel this way but a key turning point was when [Beijing mercilessly punished South Korean economic interests](#) for their government having allowed America to deploy its anti-missile system known as the Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defence (THAAD) on a golf course south of Seoul in 2017.

Beijing complains that THAAD's radar can peer into northeastern mainland China while Seoul insists THAAD is there to defend against incoming North Korean projectiles.

Current South Korean gripes about the PRC include cross-border air pollution, its mass detention of Uighurs and Hong Kong's draconian National Security Law. There are also [charges of cultural appropriation](#) over the use of a traditional Korean garment, the hanbok, in last month's Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony, suggesting that perceptions will not improve anytime soon.

Yoon says he would prioritise US relations, stressing the need for a rules-based international order — code for resisting PRC intimidation and bullying. Yoon says he would accept additional THAAD units in South Korea (if offered) and insists Beijing is more interested in North Korea's preservation than its denuclearisation. To Yoon, the PRC fears a US-allied, united Korea on its land border.

Yoon has accused Moon — and by association, Lee — of engaging in “[pro-China submissive diplomacy](#),” although, it is worth noting Moon's [May 2021 summit's joint statement](#) with US President Joe Biden which mentioned freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Yoon nonetheless called for an end to what he calls Seoul's “equidistant diplomacy” between Washington and Beijing, saying he would clearly stand with America.

### **Quad Lite?**

But Yoon would not formally bring South Korea into what is known as the Quad, the strategic dialogue which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the US that seems to have evolved into a regional check on Beijing. That is because South Korea has long seen itself as a [shrimp among whales](#), always wanting to retain some degree of manoeuvrability and flexibility vis-à-vis larger powers.

Rather, Yoon would keep South Korea's Quad participation limited to ad hoc initiatives and working groups on technology, climate, health, and the like. *Quad Lite* if you will. But Yoon's obvious bias would be toward the US.

If elected, Yoon would also presumably slow down [Moon's drive to wrest wartime operational control](#) of South Korea's military forces from the US. He has expressed his desire to improve his country's long tortured relations with Japan. He would certainly speak out more than his liberal predecessors on North Korean human rights abuses.

South Korea's political Left, which is more ethno-nationalist than its Right, is not anti-American per se. It is worth remembering that former liberal President Roh Moo-hyun sent troops to Iraq and negotiated the South Korea-US (KORUS) free trade agreement.

But Yoon, as president, would presumably often go that extra mile in the name of better relations with the US and would prove a valuable partner for Washington not only in traditional security areas but also when it comes to things like supply chains, technology and democracy promotion. If so, he would be right in step with the [77% of South Koreans](#) who view the US favourably.

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