
South Korea's Presidential Stakes

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Editor's Note: This piece was written shortly before the election of Park Geun-hye to the presidency.

South Korea's presidential campaign reaches its climax on December 19 when voters choose between conservative ruling Saenuri party candidate Park Geun-hye and progressive opposition Democratic Unity Party (DUP) candidate Moon Jae-in. Both campaigns have focused on domestic economic issues and they have obscured their foreign policy differences as they converge to the center.

This reflects public consensus on foreign policy fundamentals, such as strong public support for the alliance with the United States, support for renewed dialogue with North Korea to stabilize inter-Korean relations, growing concern about the impact of a rising China, rising discomfort with the direction of politics in Japan, and support for sustaining South Korea's contributions to the global agenda.

North Korea and the "North Wind" Non-Factor

The clearest foreign policy dividing line in the Park and Moon platforms is over the degree of engagement the candidates would pursue with North Korea. The Moon campaign has embraced an approach that might be called "Sunshine Policy 2.0," designed to build on the policies of former presidents Roh Moo-Hyun and Kim Dae Jung. Moon has proposed unconditional engagement and economic assistance to the North with the goal of establishing an inter-Korean economic union and a Korean Peninsula Infrastructure Development Organization, while pledging to hold an inter-Korean summit within his first year in office.

In parallel with renewed inter-Korean economic relations, Moon proposes to address North Korean denuclearization together with discussions of a Korean peninsula peace regime. By promoting North Korea's economic transformation and integration with the region, Moon expects North Korea to become non-threatening to its neighbors.

The Park campaign also seeks the restoration of inter-Korean dialogue through what Park terms "trustpolitik" and the restoration of some economic projects and provision of humanitarian aid

regardless of political tensions. However, Park insists that North Korea meet its prior commitments to denuclearization as a prerequisite to major infrastructure assistance. While Park's approach offers front-end economic benefits to the North and promotes the need for greater inter-Korean dialogue, her conditional approach to denuclearization is conceptually similar to the current policy embraced by both Seoul and Washington.

Although both candidates condemned North Korea's satellite launch, it is a likely non-factor in the election. North Korea has a history of undertaking provocative actions that could potentially influence South Korean election outcomes, but South Korean voters are accustomed to this game, and North Korea is not a primary issue for most voters.

Asan Institute polling at the time of the April 2012 National Assembly elections, which coincided with North Korea's previous failed launch, revealed that only 6 percent of voters rated North Korea's then-impending--and subsequently failed--missile launch as having an impact on their vote. Park appears to have maintained a slight edge over Moon on the question of which candidate is most capable of handling relations with North Korea, with no clear evidence that the launch is having an impact on South Korean voter preferences.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance, China, and Japan

Either Park or Moon would seek to maintain a strong relationship with the United States, further bolstered in the past year by passage of the South Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. But Moon would try to redefine the terms of the relationship with Washington so as to assert leadership on issues such as North Korea and China that directly influence South Korea's security. Either candidate would implement a transition in operational control arrangements that puts South Korea in the lead by December of 2015, and U.S.-ROK negotiations over issues such as sharing the cost of the U.S. military presence in Korea--roughly 30,000 U.S. troops--and a new bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement will be difficult.

However, both leaders would try to position South Korea's respective relations with China and the United States so that they are not perceived in zero-sum terms in either Washington or Beijing.

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A Park administration would try to strengthen relations with China while also maintaining a strong relationship with the United States, while a Moon administration will be more inclined to loosen the relationship with the United States to pursue a more harmonious relationship with Beijing. In both

cases, the elusive strategic goal of an improved Sino-South Korean relationship is to win Beijing's acquiescence to inter-Korean reconciliation and eventual reunification.

Likewise, the return of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to power will complicate South Korea-Japan relations regardless of whether Park or Moon wins the election, especially if Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visits Yasukuni shrine, walks away from the 1993 Kono statement apologizing for the Japanese military's mistreatment of "comfort women" during World War II, or continues to emphasize Japan's claim to Tokdo/Takeshima.

A Moon administration may also resist trilateral U.S.-Japan-ROK policy coordination efforts toward North Korea out of concerns that it might lead to alienation of North Korea and China, as well as spark a second Cold War in Northeast Asia. The U.S. role as a bridge in Japan-ROK relations is likely to become both more important and more difficult to the extent that Japan-ROK relations deteriorate.

Korea and the World

Conservative South Korean presidents have traditionally placed emphasis on strengthening South Korea's global role, while progressive South Korean presidents have sought to promote regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. Both conservatives and progressives have sought to raise South Korea's prestige and international reputation. Although the terms "Global Korea" and "green growth" are associated with the Lee Myung-bak administration, South Korean successors have historically continued their predecessors' winning policies while changing the name of the policy itself.

South Korea's export dependency has deepened as a result of its highly successful strategy of pursuing free-trade agreements globally; Moon may challenge investor-state dispute resolution mechanisms included in South Korea's FTAs and strengthen governance rules for South Korea's conglomerates, but is otherwise unlikely to reverse a strategy that has been so successful to South Korea's economic well-being. The South Korean economy grew at around 3.9 percent and was the thirteenth-largest economy and eighth-largest exporting country in the world in 2011.

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Since South Korea was selected as the host of the Global Climate Fund (GCF) in an international competition with several European cities last October, expect this initiative to survive as a Korean priority regardless of who wins the election. Likewise, to the extent that South Korea's international peacekeeping operations and anti-piracy contributions in the Gulf of Aden have enjoyed strong public support, they are likely to continue under a new South Korean president.

Expect South Korea to supplement its traditional major power-centered diplomacy with a middle power concept that prioritizes strengthening of relations with emerging regional powers both within Asia and around the world.

South Korea has developed a reputation as a vibrant democracy with an unpredictable, no-holds-barred political culture. The process has been extremely competitive, with high passions and mobilization efforts on both sides that, when they become overheated, have run afoul of Korean ethics and election laws. But on balance, the 2012 presidential election has produced two main candidates who appear to be qualified leaders and have run respectable campaigns.