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Yoon Suk-yeol's Foreign Policy: Style or Substance?

By Sean King

SYNOPSIS

Yoon Suk-yeol won the South Korean presidency, promising to get tougher on rivals and closer to friends. He faces immediate foreign policy challenges, from Russia's Ukraine invasion to North Korea's recent ICBM test. Whatever actual new moves he makes, Seoul's tone under Yoon will at least be more in line with Washington's.

COMMENTARY

SOUTH KOREA'S President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol waged his sometimes contentious campaign on, among other things, an unapologetic foreign policy platform of even closer relations with the United States; a firmer line on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea; and some level of rapprochement with historical rival Japan.

His February call to internationalist norms in [Foreign Affairs](#) read like an Obama era, Asia Pivot manifesto. Many leaders come into office with the clearest of intentions only to be pulled in unexpected directions by unforeseen events. US examples include George W. Bush as regards terrorism. And now, Joe Biden on Ukraine. Therefore, how many real changes can we expect to see from Yoon?

Seeing Beijing as Part of the Problem

In South Korea, conservative Lee Myung-bak (currently in jail) took power in 2008, after ten years of liberal rule, only to be borderline immobilised during his earliest days in office by [mass protests over US beef imports](#). And his conservative successor, Park Geun-hye (also jailed but since pardoned), spent her first few years cosying up to Xi Jinping in the hope he would assist with North Korea. Park even went so far as to [stand next to Vladimir Putin at Xi's 2015 military parade](#) to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two.

From what he has said so far, Yoon sees Beijing as part of the problem on North Korea. Russia's Ukraine invasion affords him the *moment* to be who he professes to be right out of the gate.

In Yoon's perception, [Xi's excuses for Putin's](#) military actions in Ukraine only draw into even starker relief the lines between the free world and authoritarianism. Nuance is out as children die while Xi himself tightens his own already firm grip at home and acts tough with Beijing's neighbours, particularly in the South China Sea.

Northeast Asian blocs are hardening between those who choose their leaders and those whose unelected governments choose for them. On the classically liberal, US-friendly side, there's Japan and Taiwan. In the other corner, the PRC and North Korea. South Korea is the neighbourhood swing vote that has never wanted to fully commit one way or the other.

But Yoon's explicit pro-US language, the [South Korean public's souring on](#) China, and Russia's war in Ukraine may lead him to take some very clear steps after his 10 May inauguration.

North Korea: Less Patience for Kim Jong Un?

Yoon didn't talk much about North Korea on the campaign trail nor did voters. But judging by his comments, [he will have less patience for Kim Jong Un](#) than did outgoing liberal President Moon Jae-in.

Yoon will drop Moon's [push to formally declare an end to the Korean War](#) and will speak up more on North Korean human rights, not [declining to co-sponsor related United Nations](#) resolutions as Moon did. He will not send Pyongyang aid for aid's sake and will not try selling Washington on Pyongyang as Moon sometimes did with Donald Trump.

Yoon's resolve on North Korea will be tested, as Kim's only in Year Two of a five-year weapons plan that's already yielded two hypersonic missile tests. And [North Korea has just resumed testing intercontinental ballistic missiles](#) as of 24 March 2022.

COVID-19 restrictions notwithstanding, Yoon will restore US-Republic of Korea (ROK) military exercises to their fullest levels possible last seen before [Trump cancelled them in 2018](#).

China, Japan and Southeast Asia

Yoon is open to hosting additional units of America's Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defence (THAAD) system, in and around the Seoul metropolitan area, which Beijing opposes because of THAAD's radar reach into mainland China. After finally giving up on Xi, Park signed off on THAAD in 2016. Beijing's retaliation led to severe South Korean economic losses.

Moon went through with THAAD's deployment but also acquiesced to [Xi's Three Noes](#) whereby South Korea agreed not to deploy additional THAAD batteries, not to participate in any US regional missile defence network and not to enter into any form

of trilateral military cooperation with the US and Japan. Yoon may well renounce these pledges and is unlikely to care what Beijing says, especially as it [refouls North Korean refugees](#).

Washington hopes Yoon can get along better with Tokyo. The two sides may not settle their many historical grievances but Yoon has hinted they can put their more difficult issues to one side while cooperating on areas of shared economic and military interest. Yoon will face pressure at home on this, however, as South Korea's political Left (which controls the National Assembly) takes a [harder line on Japan](#).

Having won the presidency by only 0.8%, Yoon will need to choose his battles. He would also be well advised not to encourage, beyond what is necessary, Korea's vicious cycle of revenge politics against former officials. [As a former career prosecutor who took on both sides](#), he will have the credibility to forgive and move on where possible. Such magnanimity could buy him some more space to operate abroad.

Yoon may have less interest in ASEAN but he will need to spend time with Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) members Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam [after South Korea applies to join the CPTPP](#). Like Park, he will urge ASEAN members to cut off [any remaining trade with North Korea](#). And as he will be tight with Washington on many key issues, he is likely to speak out on the South China Sea.

Fortifying the US-ROK alliance

Moon expanded Seoul's defence capabilities in pursuit of satisfying [a key condition to assume wartime operational control of South Korean forces](#) from the US, a longtime cause of liberals who strive for greater autonomy from foreign powers. Yoon will slow down this transfer while continuing to bolster his country's defences but [as Korea Society Van Fleet Non-resident Senior Fellow Dr. Katrin Katz says](#), for reasons different from Moon's.

Yoon's focus will be America and his immediate environs. Moon left behind a good enough roadmap in the form of his [May 2021 summit joint statement](#) with US President Biden. Yoon will at least step up Seoul's rhetorical game, embracing terms like *Free And Open Indo-Pacific*, and sound more in sync with Washington's own worldview. Looking ahead, Beijing may therefore have just lost one of its more pliable US treaty allies as Yoon seeks to further strengthen the US-ROK alliance.

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