

This Is What Moon Jae-in's Election Means to U.S. Interests in Korea

As with most presidential elections, South Korean voters predominantly voted their pocketbooks in Tuesday's national election.

While the election featured the usual struggle between a conservative market-based growth strategy and liberal redistributionism, voters this time were driven in large part by a desire to end their nation's endemic political corruption.

After 10 years of conservative presidency—South Korean presidents serve a single five-year term—it seemed a foregone conclusion this year that the pendulum would swing to a liberal candidate.

This natural trend was reinforced by the impeachment of conservative President Park Geun-hye, who abused her power by colluding with a friend to fleece the country's large conglomerates.

Moon Jae-in, a left-of-center candidate, handily won the election. He previously served as chief of staff to President Roh Moo-hyun, whose term was marked by tense relations with Washington over policy differences on North Korea, as well as Roh's demand for more autonomy in the alliance.

During the campaign, Moon tacked to the center on national security issues to gain conservative votes, but it remains uncertain how he will actually implement his foreign and security policies.

He has described himself as "America's friend" and said that

the U.S. alliance is the “most important foundation for our diplomacy and national security.”

Yet Moon also advocates being able to “say no to the Americans,” strengthening South Korea’s independent defense capabilities and regaining wartime operational control of South Korean military forces from the United States. Currently, control of South Korean military forces will be turned over to the U.N. commander (always a U.S. general) when the two presidents decide a state of war exists.

He called for South Korea to “take the lead” on Korean matters rather than taking a back seat as the U.S. and China discuss North Korean policy.

Moon is no doubt looking to resurrect many of Roh’s liberal policies, yet North Korea’s increased belligerence since Roh’s presidency may constrain how vigorously he pursues unconditional engagement with Pyongyang.

Some South Korean experts believe North Korea’s hostile actions in recent years—its development and testing of nuclear weapons, its attacks on South Korea in 2010 and its recent assassination of North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un’s half-brother—have erected a “wall” that will prevent Moon from moving too far left.

Other pundits reject that out of hand, saying that “if a wall exists, Moon will jump over it or dig under it so he can be as far left as Roh.”

While Moon originally opposed the U.S. deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense system in South Korea, he shifted during the campaign to sitting on the fence, saying he was “open to both possibilities” (of deploying or withdrawing THAAD) and would “pass the issue to the next government.”

He favors maintaining South Korea’s own missile defense system

independently from the broader allied network.

Moon sees economic engagement with North Korea as a means of bringing the north back to the negotiating table and eventually achieving “economic unification” of the two Koreas. Rather than making North Korea make the first concession to resume denuclearization negotiations, he said he would “try to make both North Korea and the U.S. act simultaneously.”

Moon also advocates reopening the Kaesong joint economic venture with North Korea as part of broader economic largesse to Pyongyang. Kaesong was a South Korean attempt to provide massive economic benefits in order to induce North Korea to implement economic and political reform and moderate its foreign policy. The economic experiment failed.

Doing so, however, would likely be a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

U.N. Resolution 2094 (paragraphs 11-15) requires U.N. member states to prevent financial services that could contribute to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs.

U.N. Resolution 2321 (paragraph 32) goes even further in restricting economic ventures with North Korea, prohibiting any financial support to Pyongyang unless it is specifically approved in advance by the U.N. 1718 Committee.

Moon will more eagerly engage with and offer economic inducements to North Korea at a time when the United States and international community are more rigorously implementing U.N. sanctions and enforcing U.S. law.

If the U.S. and South Korea end up pursuing divergent policies, it may undermine efforts to pressure Pyongyang and will increase the potential for friction within the Korea alliance.

In addition, Moon has also promised to renegotiate South

Korea's 2015 agreement with Japan on "comfort women" (referring to women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese in World War II). Doing so will only increase strains in that relationship.

Keeping Washington, Seoul and Tokyo all pulling in the same direction to address common threats will require deft diplomacy as the new South Korean president and President Donald Trump fill their administrations and formulate policies.

The path ahead could be rough, but North Korea and China will undoubtedly act in their typical confrontational way, which will remind South Korea of who its true friend and protector is. {eo}

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