



What Next for South Korea? by Duyeon Kim

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South Korea has been engulfed by the biggest political crisis in recent memory. The nation is in a precarious situation, caught between a perfect storm of scandals, decisions about its future, and threats by a hostile country. The question for South Korea and its US ally is whether both countries can emerge from the most savage presidential campaigns in a generation with the political resources and will to deal with the volatile, tension-filled world around them.

In South Korea, the Constitutional Court is reviewing the legality of President Park Geun-hye's impeachment, a bill containing 13 charges for allegedly violating constitutional and national laws. The Court has 180 days to deliver a verdict. The state prosecutor and special prosecutor are also conducting investigations. The Court typically rules in favor of public sentiment for high-profile political cases, and this one is no exception – the justices are under immense pressure from an outraged nation that has been demanding Park's ouster every weekend in massive candlelight rallies since October. The practical limitations on the rule of law from public pressure are a remnant of South Korea's difficult break from past military dictatorships.

Despite Korea's hard-built democracy, the rule of law has become moot for most South Koreans in this case. Anger and betrayal have passed the boiling point and the public is uninterested if Park, in fact, committed any evidence-based legal crime because their pride has been severely damaged. For them, their democratically elected president has made Korea look like an underdeveloped country by entrusting the nation to a close female friend – a middle-aged nobody who, along with her family, have illegally amassed fortunes, dictated state affairs, and peddled influence while the rest of the country struggles with economic difficulties. As a result, today, "democracy" for South Korean protestors means heeding their demands: removing Park and putting her behind bars.

The country will now be focused on its political landscape, consumed with how leaders establish order after the current political crisis until a new president is chosen in next year's elections. Even that ballot will only mark the beginning of a long clean-up process; all the while the new government will try to implement reforms to reclaim, or rather, reconstruct, Korea's democracy and institutions yet again.

During this pivotal time, it will be difficult, if not almost impossible, for South Korea to pay close attention to foreign relations and challenges.

Unfortunately, the world has a clock of its own and South Korea is at the center of a regional hotspot that is already on the radar of an unpredictable and unconventional new US president set to take office in a few weeks' time. North Korea continues to develop its nuclear and missile capability at an alarming rate. South Korea is sandwiched between an increasingly assertive China and a brash, "pro-Russia" US president-elect, raising concerns in Seoul that the North Korean problem may be compromised and that South Korea would have to absorb any shocks emanating from a Washington-Beijing power game. Worse, there is fear that the Peninsula may become another battleground for big power politics. Trumpeting an "America First" policy, Donald Trump has made provocative and inconsistent comments regarding US commitments to its allies that further fuel South Korean fears of abandonment. China has returned to its centuries-old habit of bullying its South Korean neighbor, both politically and economically, over Seoul's decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense system against North Korea's missile threats; Beijing claims THAAD threatens its strategic deterrent. Military buildups in China and Japan could also get out of hand if left unmanaged.

Such uncertainty raises many questions about Korea's political future and regional survival: how is the country being governed and is there a power vacuum? What does uncertainty mean for Korean politics and selecting a new president? Finally, what does it mean for Seoul's alliance with a Trump White House and relations in the region?

First, it cannot be said that there is a power vacuum in Seoul because Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn has command as acting president, despite demands by opposition lawmakers that he step down because he is "Park's man." The national security apparatus is also intact and there has been no change to the national security staff or the chain of command. Because the prime minister had focused largely on domestic affairs until now, the roles and advice of the defense minister, foreign minister, and National Security Council have become especially important.

There are, however, questions in Seoul about the acting president's competency and the extent of his powers. Hwang's authority is, in fact, limited on issues that require approval by the opposition-dominated National Assembly. In emergency or crisis situations on national security, however, it can be safely assumed that he can and will have to exercise the full range of presidential powers. If there is full-blown combat, for example, both acting South Korean and US presidents would need to approve their Joint Chief of Staff's advice to raise the

country's defense preparedness to "DefCon3." This means Hwang would direct any major commands should conflict break out while the generals would call the day-to-day shots. However, if there is a cross-border skirmish, brief exchange of fire, or another North Korean shelling of South Korean territory, then the generals would be the first responders in command. Even though this system is in place, whether it will function properly and well in an emergency is a separate governance matter, regardless of who sits in the presidential chair.

Second, as the country awaits the Constitutional Court's decision on Park's fate and the results of ongoing investigations, all eyes are fixed on the upcoming presidential elections. If the Court approves the impeachment motion, the South Korean people will have 60 days to choose their next president in snap elections. The newly elected president will begin his term the day after the vote count without a transition period, which could invite another unstable period during the transfer of power.

Ruling and opposition parties are far from ready for snap elections and political uncertainties have taken another turn, however. With the anti-Park faction of the ruling Saenuri Party announcing plans to break from the conservative party next week, South Korea will see a four-party system for the first time in 28 years, although mergers may occur as the election date draws near. The opposition already split earlier this year into two progressive parties. Moon Jae-in, former head of the main opposition Minjoo Party, has announced his bid for the presidency and is the current frontrunner in polls. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon trails him and has also announced his willingness to run on a ticket but has yet to specify a party. Lee Jae-myung, the mayor of Seongnam city outside Seoul and known as "Korea's Trump," is currently placed third. But no one can claim to know the script or cast of characters for Korean politics, and it is too soon to handicap a race that has too many variables.

One thing is clear, however: the economy will be at the top of the agenda in next year's election and the Korean people will choose someone who will offer to narrow the income disparity, lower unemployment, and reform the country's governance, which has been rocked by the Park-Choi corruption scandal. The mid-career generation and college graduates are particularly frustrated with the current glass ceiling, which explains the growing Lee Jae-myung phenomenon, which taps into public sentiment.

Third, legitimate concerns have risen about possible instability in the US-ROK alliance. South Korea's foreign policies and approaches to North Korea will remain unchanged while Hwang is acting president. The concern here is the Trump factor with all its unpredictability. This situation means the US bureaucracy and Congress must play bigger roles, as difficult as it may be to grab the ear of the next president. If Seoul's North Korea policy remains unchanged until a new South Korean president takes office, then Trump's North Korea policy will determine the extent of the allies' alignment or divergence in approach, and in turn, how well they can together deal with the North Korean nuclear-missile problem.

This question will arise again next year with a newly elected South Korean president – the smoothness of the transfer of power in both governments could become another key factor. Given the many unknowns and variables in both configurational stages of the alliance, it is even more critical to ensure that there is no daylight between the allies, no room for North Korea to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul, and no room for China to throw its weight around to the detriment of America's allies.

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