



## Prospects & Perspectives



South Korea is in the middle of an extraordinary political imbroglio, involving no less than a declaration of martial law from President Yoon Suk Yeol, his subsequent impeachment, and a warrant issued for his arrest. The country is now already onto its second acting president. What happens next will have important implications for the security of the region, including Taiwan. Picture source: Republic of Korea, May 10, 2022, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/koreanet/52062297122/>>.

### **Yoon's Martial Law**

## **Damaged South Korean Democracy — and Regional Security**

*By Joel Atkinson*



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### **Korean Drama**

The inciting incident itself was over in a matter of hours. On December 3 — to the astonishment of late-night TV watchers — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol announced martial law. Citing crisis-level obstruction to the executive and judicial branches from the opposition-controlled legislature, Yoon declared: “To safeguard the Republic of Korea from the threats posed by the North Korean communist forces and to eradicate the shameless pro-North, anti-state forces that have robbed our citizens of their freedom and happiness, I hereby declare martial law to protect our constitutional order.”

The martial law proclamation prohibited all political activities, presumably including constitutionally sanctioned votes in the national assembly to revoke martial law. Special forces personnel arrived by helicopter, proceeding to make haphazard efforts to obstruct legislators from accessing the national assembly and apparently even entering to remove them.

Investigators would later allege Yoon gave orders to “Break down the National Assembly’s doors with guns if you have to” and “Drag all the lawmakers out of the National Assembly now.”

Nevertheless, a sufficient number of lawmakers convened to vote down the declaration, including with support from the head of Yoon’s own right-of-center People Power Party (PPP). Very quickly, the soldiers complied and withdrew. Some hours later, Yoon and his cabinet announced that martial law had been rescinded.

Yoon subsequently stepped back from decision making. With support from some PPP members, the legislature then impeached him on December 14, suspending his presidential powers.



The final decision on whether he will resume his duties will depend on the constitutional court. Reaching that decision could take months, with constitutional rules on impeachment decisions and appointing additional judges to the court complicating the process.

### **Foreign Policy Repercussions**

The timeline has important political effects. To start with, left-of-center opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DP) leader and presumptive presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung is involved in multiple ongoing criminal trials. Plausible accusations suggest that relative to his peers, he is unusually corrupt — and of unusually poor character. Still, having now received a boost from Yoon's action, he stands a very good chance of claiming over half the vote if the election is held before a final criminal conviction bars him from office. Even if Lee does not run, the longer the election is delayed the more it will likely help the PPP recover from Yoon's deep unpopularity to mount a credible challenge.

Who that next president is will have a considerable impact on South Korea's foreign policy alignment. Yoon is not a China hawk, and neither are the likely presidential candidates from his side of politics. But the right's view of North Korea as more threats than partner and the U.S. alliance as something to lean more into rather than away from — orients the party as more pro-Japan and Taiwan and less pro-China in practice than the DP. If forced to choose between acceding more to Pyongyang's demands and weakening the bond with the U.S. or making China somewhat angrier, the right has increasingly chosen the latter.

The calculation for the DP is different. It understands that the public is afraid of North Korea and wants to maintain U.S. forces on the peninsula for that reason. Rather than opposing the U.S. alliance, its pitch to voters is to try to limit the U.S. to playing the role of South Korea's bodyguard. It calls for reducing U.S. military exercises and sanctions on North Korea. It wants to reduce the burden of the alliance on South Korea in terms of money, off-peninsula commitments, and pressure to compromise on history issues with Japan. Above all, it very loudly objects to the U.S. putting demands on South Korea that would bring friction with China and Russia, particularly involvement in the security of Taiwan and Ukraine.

The problem of course is that friction with North Korea, China and Russia



is inevitable if their demands are not met. While some South Koreans may feel comfortable joining with Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin to remake the regional and global order, most voters value their liberal democratic freedoms. Rather than risking the alternative, most would probably rather stay aligned with the U.S., warts and all.

### **Taiwan Loses an Ally**

But it is a close call. While the South Korean public has a profoundly unfavorable view of China and is positive about the US, fears of war and lost export opportunities, and repugnance to letting Japan off the hook on history and the territorial claim to Dokdo, mean the left's foreign policy vision has real electoral appeal.

This is why Yoon has been so disastrous for the effort to more include South Korea in the coalition of “like-minded partners and allies” alongside Taiwan. It is deeply ironic that Yoon ostensibly pushed hard for South Korea's inclusion with his “values-based” diplomacy. However, his abysmal political acumen meant he failed to build public support and domestic coalitions around that project. Rather, his domestic and international blunders have tainted it. And now, by declaring martial law while talking about liberal democracy, he has cast the whole endeavor of partnering with fellow democracies and protecting South Korea's liberal democratic order as the cynical ploy of an aspiring authoritarian.

All of this means that the period of unusual strategic alignment between South Korea and Taiwan will now end, at least for the medium term. And the president who was objectively the most pro-Taiwan security since the Cold War has turned out to be no friend of the Taiwan-South Korea relationship.

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