



Key Findings

Comparative Connections Roundtable: South Korea's Presidential Election *February 23, 2022 (US) | February 24, 2022 (Asia)*

On Feb. 23, 2022, Pacific Forum organized a Comparative Connections Roundtable that discussed South Korea's presidential race, the results of which may cause a shift in Seoul's relations with the US, China, and Japan. The session was moderated by Ralph Cossa (Pacific Forum), and featured Dr. Mason Richey (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul), Mr. Scott A. Snyder (Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, DC), and Dr. Ji-Young Lee (School of International Service, American University in Washington, DC). The following are the key findings from the session.

An Overview of the South Korean Presidential Candidates

The upcoming South Korean election is a window into the state of democracy in the country. There has been limited policy discussion; instead scandals and “mudslinging” have characterized the election. Voters see both candidates as problematic due to their actions in and outside of office. The campaigns of People Power Party candidate Yoon Seok-yeol and Democratic Party candidate Lee Jae-myung have been overshadowed by a real estate speculation scandal in Seongnam (a satellite city of Seoul), in which both have been implicated. Yoon, Korea's former prosecutor general, lacks charisma and experience and his campaign has been plagued by disorganization, bizarre scandals and rumors, as well as pandering to angry young male voters. For instance, Yoon has denied that there is gender discrimination in the country (which has the highest gender pay gap in the OECD), and his wife has threatened to jail journalists who challenge Yoon should he be elected. Meanwhile, Lee, the former Gyeonggi Province governor, has been accused of a role in the Seongnam land scandal, as he was mayor of the city during the time in which politically connected investors (some of whom were connected to Lee) received astronomical profits from a city-licensed redevelopment project. Moreover, Lee's campaign has been plagued by infighting, including about his foreign policy vision.

Overall, this election points toward growing cracks in South Korea's liberal democracy, which is moving away from pluralism toward more populist and illiberal sentiments. These trends are still in their infancy but becoming increasingly prevalent due to the nature of the presidential candidates' platforms and conduct. There is a growing sense of xenophobia and nationalism in both parties. The candidates and their parties lack solutions for, or even an inclination to address core issues in South Korea, such as the rising cost of housing and gender discrimination. Lee seeks to continue most of incumbent President Moon Jae-in's policies, but is perhaps less ideological in his approach to North Korea. Yoon seeks to foster friendlier relations with Japan and strengthen the US-ROK alliance. Domestically, policy stances between Lee and Yoon show

divergence in some areas, but the differences are often relatively circumscribed and more about the path to action rather than objectives per se. Although Yoon is predicted to win narrowly, he would likely have to negotiate extensively with the Democratic Party, which still controls the National Assembly.

The Presidential Election and ROK–China Relations

China usually does not involve itself in elections abroad, but there have been allegations that Beijing seeks to interfere with and influence South Korea’s election results. Relations with China have been a key concern in the election as an increasing number of Koreans view China negatively. One recent survey found that 83% of Koreans view China as a security threat. Anti-China sentiment has increased recently due to accusations of China appropriating Korean culture in the opening ceremony of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics where performers were seen wearing hanbok, which is traditional Korean clothing. Additionally, China was accused of cheating when Korean speed skaters were disqualified while a Chinese athlete won gold in the same event. Nonetheless, South Korea did not join the diplomatic boycott of the Olympics and sent the minister of sports and culture to the Games, which resulted in public backlash against the Moon administration and claims that it is pro-China.

Candidates Yoon and Lee have taken differing approaches in how South Korea should address China-related issues. Yoon seeks to enhance security relations with Japan and the US while Lee advocates for more South Korean strategic autonomy and follows the precedent set by Moon, including the 2017 “Three Noes” agreement with China that halted further THAAD deployment, a trilateral military alliance with Japan and the US, and participation in US missile defense systems. As is the case for many Indo-Pacific countries, China is South Korea’s main economic partner, and the US is its main security partner. President Joe Biden, however, wants to challenge this framework by strengthening economic ties and securitizing sensitive technology. South Korea is a middle power, and middle powers tend to focus on multilateral relations, yet South Korea has begun emphasizing its bilateral ties.

The Future of ROK–Japan Relations

Japan–South Korea relations are at their worst since the two countries normalized relations in 1965. In 2019, a South Korean court ordered Japanese companies to financially compensate forced laborers used during World War II. Soon after, Japan restricted exports to South Korea. South Korea responded in kind, threatening to leave the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA). These tensions have weakened the two countries’ joint efforts to deter North Korean missile testing. While relations between the two were once described as “cold politics, hot economics” due to their historical distrust but flourishing trade relationship, this has been replaced by “cold economics, cold politics.” Even after Kishida Fumio became prime minister last October, there has been little momentum to thaw relations, even though past changes in power have been seen as an opportunity for a restart. Improving relations with Japan is a priority for both presidential candidates, but they disagree on how it should be done. Lee seeks to continue Moon’s approach vis-à-vis Japan, taking a tough stance

on territorial and historic issues. He believes Japan should comply with the 2019 Korean court order while Yoon does not. Yoon wants to prioritize Japan as a regional partner and look at historic issues holistically, rather than on a case-by-case basis. South Korea may need to take the first step in fostering the desired positive relationship with Japan as Japan is unlikely to “apologize” yet again for historic transgressions.

The candidates’ other foreign policy stances show more explicit divergence. Lee believes that South Korea should offer North Korea positive incentives to denuclearize, while Yoon states that North Korea should denuclearize before any positive rewards are offered. Yoon is more vocal about supporting the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy and a rules-based international order. For now, it is not clear what South Korea’s vision of an Indo-Pacific Strategy is, but, in relation to Japan, it is important for both sides to resolve historic issues, particularly forced labor, in order to improve relations.

Other Dimensions of the Election

Despite concerns about North Korea, it is unlikely that Pyongyang will interfere with South Korea’s election since it is plagued by internal concerns. The Democratic Party in Korea faces the challenge of a split party. One half of the party is more economically and socially left, while the other trends more conservative and wishes to appease a growing nationalist and anti-feminist movement. This has forced Lee to back away from his more left-leaning platform, including his support for a universal basic income. Some still see Lee as too left-leaning for the average Korean voter, while Yoon is seen as a traditional Korean conservative.

The main voting issues, housing and employment policy, are key. Additionally, female voters are increasingly becoming alienated from South Korean politics. This is largely attributed to the high cost of living and the societal pressure placed on women, which has caused many to opt out of having children. Despite being a possible swing vote, women in their 20s remain apathetic towards voting.

Regarding Japan’s reaction to a potential Yoon victory, Tokyo recognizes that relations need to improve and is already changing the “landscape” despite excluding Korea from its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. Many Koreans are critical of President Moon’s foreign policy and view the “Three Noes” agreement with China as damaging to Korean sovereignty. As a result, Yoon wants to boost relations with the US to counter China. Finally, if Yoon is elected, some think Moon may be prosecuted due to Korea’s history of prosecuting former presidents.