

Where the Center Holds: The 2012 Election in Korea and U.S.-ROK Relations

Current Issues in U.S.-ROK Relations

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Because the Republic of Korea (ROK) has a single-term, five-year presidency, presidential election cycles in South Korea rarely coincide with those of the United States. But nearly simultaneous elections will occur in late 2012, creating the rare possibility that the two countries will undergo concurrent leadership transitions. In recent years, the pendulum swing of democratic power transitions between conservative and progressive forces in both countries has posed particular challenges for policy coordination between Washington and Seoul. This makes the two election results potentially quite significant for U.S.-South Korea relations.

South Korea's political rhetoric underscores the "South-South conflict" (in Korean, *nam-nam galdeung*) between ROK progressives and conservatives over policy toward North Korea and other social issues. Despite this dynamic, South Korea's 2012 presidential election is shaping up to be a contest for the middle.

Though it sometimes seems as if South Korean and American political parties are competing to see which country's politics can be most polarized, South Korea's political landscape currently resembles the 1992 U.S. presidential election (which had three major candidates) more than the 2012 U.S. race. The platforms of the ruling conservative New Frontier (Saenuri) Party and the liberal opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) are converging, and both parties face a centrist "third party" challenge from a successful entrepreneur, Ahn Chul-soo, who has tapped into public frustration with the stranglehold of established parties on political power. The result has been a move to the middle.

Several factors have contributed to this shift. First, the severity of the pendulum swing from

conservative to progressive and back to conservative governments is moderating. Current president Lee Myung-bak was hardly as conservative as former presidents Kim Young-sam and Roh-tae-woo, or military leaders before them. Likewise, DUP candidates are not likely to find political space for a North Korea policy that will match those espoused by progressive predecessors such as Kim Dae-jung or Roh Moo-hyun.

New Frontier Party candidate Park Geun-hye, who formally won her party's nomination on August 20, has moved to co-opt traditionally progressive issues by centering her campaign on welfare issues and questions of economic justice. DUP candidate Moon Jae-in, who won his party's nomination on September 16, has sought to distance himself from the legacy of his political mentor, Roh Moo-hyun. And businessman and professor Ahn Chul-soo has shaken up the race with a progressive economic agenda coupled with what at first blush seems to be a conservative approach to foreign policy.

Park Geun-hye remade the image of the deeply unpopular Grand National Party through a series of bold moves in early 2012, including renaming it the New Frontier Party. One sign of her success was the party's victory in the April National Assembly elections, hailed in the media as the "Resurrection of the Queen of the Elections, Park Geun-hye." In her rebranding of the party, Park did more than change its name, logo, and colors; she also recruited a younger and more moderate cohort of candidates.

The DUP has faced dramatic changes of its own, albeit less due to leadership by any one individual than to the disintegration of its alliance with the Unified Progressive Party (UPP). The alliance between the DUP and the UPP in advance of April's general elections was designed to win progressive control of the National Assembly. But this marriage of convenience with the UPP put the DUP in the awkward position of calling for the repeal of the South Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) and opposition to plans for a naval base on Jeju Island—initiatives that began during the Roh Moo-hyun administration under the leadership of many currently in the DUP.

The DUP-UPP alliance has since foundered on a scandal within the UPP that exposed pro-North Korean leanings and has split the coalition. The end of any formal alliance with the UPP may free the DUP to further moderate its positions before the December 19 election. But the bigger problem for the DUP is that its only path to power is likely to form by backing the independent candidacy of Ahn Chul-soo. Such an awkward alliance will have complicated political implications in the event Ahn actually wins the presidency.

South Korea's one-term presidency and the resulting early lame-duck status of President Lee Myung-bak, not to mention the looming U.S. presidential election, has already had an impact on issues related to U.S.-ROK relations. The prospects for South Korea joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade negotiations, the unfortunate last-minute cancellation of a much-needed General Security

of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between South Korea and Japan, and the almost certain punting of the difficult negotiations over the U.S.-ROK Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreement to after the elections are but a few of the many issues that will face new leadership teams in both Washington and Seoul in early 2013.

Regardless of the outcome of the two elections, several issues will prove to be challenging for U.S.-ROK alliance managers. First and foremost, the movement to the middle by the three leading South Korean candidates suggests a more moderate approach to North Korea, and there is wide anticipation of early postelection initiatives from Seoul, including the restart of the Diamond Mountain tourism project in North Korea and further expansion of both humanitarian aid and economic investment. Coordinating these efforts in the face of likely continued North Korean intransigence on its nuclear program will provide an early test for diplomats in Washington and Seoul.

Another early challenge will be the negotiation of a revised nuclear cooperation agreement between Washington and Seoul, something that needs to be concluded by the beginning of summer 2013. Although seemingly unrelated, ongoing U.S.-ROK negotiations over so-called new missile guidelines threaten to set the context for the nuclear cooperation agreement talks. As the missile negotiations have dragged on, the issue of whether or not South Korea will be able to amplify the range of its missiles has increasingly been portrayed in the South Korean media and in some political circles as a question of U.S. respect for South Korea and relative fairness—particularly in terms of North Korea's provocative and unfettered program. Should negotiations over U.S.-ROK nuclear cooperation become defined by a narrative of "fairness" and "respect" rather than focused on strengthening international regimes and South Korea's interests as a nuclear exporter, the first major negotiations between a new administration in Seoul and a potential new administration in Washington will be exceedingly difficult.

The recent deterioration in relations between South Korea and Japan poses yet another challenge for Seoul-Washington coordination. As a treaty ally of both Japan and South Korea, the United States needs and strongly encourages increased cooperation between them. However, the recent increase in tensions over historical legacy issues including comfort women (sex slaves) and the Dokdo/Takeshima Island has served to strengthen more nationalistic elements in both countries. Ordinarily the more internationally minded Saenuri Party might be expected to take the lead in tamping down such sentiments and pushing for closer cooperation with Japan as part of alliance coordination with the United States. However, given Park Geun-hye's personal legacy as the daughter of former president Park Chung-hee, who was educated in Japan, her susceptibility to criticism that she is "too pro-Japan" may make this more difficult in the coming years.

The pendulum swing of parties is an unavoidable characteristic of democracy in both the United States and the Republic of Korea. While the swing in South Korea may be less severe than in years past, it will

not be clear for three more months whether in this year of shared elections the U.S. and ROK pendulums are swinging in tandem.

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