

The Park Geun-hye Presidency and the Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance

Current Issues in U.S.-ROK Relations

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New South Korean president Park Geun-hye of the Saenuri Party is the focus of great interest. This curiosity extends to her presidency, as she enters into office with outstanding issues with the United States and domestic concern about South Korea's relations with China and North Korea.

On February 25, 2013, Park was inaugurated as the Republic of Korea's (ROK) eighteenth president. Park is the first female South Korean president and the first president to be elected by a majority of the country's voters. She is also the daughter of the late authoritarian leader and president Park Chung-hee.

Park is likely to pursue a foreign policy that emphasizes continued cooperation with the United States. She is relatively empowered to do so, having the support of her majority party in the parliament, but her efforts may be obstructed by an increasingly influential minority party and civil society.

Most newly elected South Korean presidents begin their tenure evaluating and criticizing their predecessor's diplomatic policies. Former ROK president Lee Myung-bak, however, is credited with successfully consolidating the U.S.-ROK alliance. Park is likely to continue many of Lee's policies toward the United States and pursue a strengthened bilateral relationship.

In particular, she is expected to facilitate the administration of the current South Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). Whereas the opposition candidate Moon Jae-in called for renegotiating the agreement with regard to its investor-state dispute (ISD) provision, Park has argued that this issue can be resolved through the agreement's existing coordination mechanism.

Park will also sustain close military cooperation with the United States and support the 2015 planned transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from United States Forces Korea (USFK) to the ROK military. While emphasizing that the transfer take place without weakening South Korea's defense posture, Park has stated that all steps should be taken to ensure that the transfer is effectuated in a systematic and swift manner without another delay.

Park has also shown firm support for U.S. leadership on key global issues such as fighting climate change, countering international terrorism, and helping to shape a new economic world order in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Consequently, Park's administration is likely to continue building robust ties with the Obama administration. She is likely to take advantage of U.S. support for South Korea's growing global role, as Lee did to host the 2010 Group of Twenty and 2012 Nuclear Security summits.

Park will also, however, confront U.S.-ROK issues over which the two countries are likely to disagree, such as the ROK burden-sharing budget for host-nation support of USFK and the renegotiation of the U.S.-ROK nuclear cooperation agreement. Though Park will continue to stress the importance of sustaining the bilateral alliance, she will emphasize South Korea's economic interests on these contentious issues during negotiations.

Although the aforementioned aspects of Park's policies will be similar to those of Lee, her administration will try to differentiate itself through its initiatives toward China and North Korea. In South Korea there is significant concern about the worsening of ROK-China relations during the Lee administration. As the Obama administration stresses a U.S. rebalance to Asia, it continues to emphasize U.S. ties with close allies in the region, including South Korea. In the context of the U.S.-China relationship and their respective roles and influences in Asia, Park has maintained a very clear stance; she plans to sustain the already existing comprehensive strategic alliance with the United States while upgrading Seoul's cooperative partnership with China. In this way, Park believes that South Korea should enjoy cooperative ties with both great powers, and that the ROK need not choose one over the other.

With regard to North Korea, Park enters office amidst debate. Although consistent, her predecessor's hardline position was as unsuccessful in bringing about change in North Korea as the engagement policy of his predecessors. In South Korea this failure is juxtaposed with the alarming perception that North Korea is increasingly more likely to merge economically with China than unify with South Korea. Consequently, Park suggests an "alignment policy" that incorporates the strongest elements of both the hardline and engagement policies to deal with North Korea and bring about peace. Since any South Korean policy toward North Korea will be closely related to U.S.-ROK and U.S.-North Korea relations, maintaining a strong U.S.-ROK alliance will be an important precondition for Park to ensure

peace on the peninsula. Focus, however, will be on cooperating not only with the United States, but with China as well.

As South Korea's president, Park will lead in managing relations with the United States. Her ability to do so is strengthened domestically because of the critical role she played in securing her party's majority in the current National Assembly. Remaking the party's policies and programs, leadership, and electoral strategy, Park led the Saenuri Party to victory in the April 2012 parliamentary elections. With relative ideological coherence in the Saenuri membership, especially in support of the U.S.-ROK alliance, the position of many in the legislative body should align with Park's policies toward the United States. This is supported by a Korean Party Studies Association and JoongAng Ilbo survey in June 2012, which found that 90 percent of Saenuri Party assembly representatives believed that South Korea's alliance with the United States should continue as the "backbone" of South Korea's foreign relations.

Despite this support from the Saenuri Party and the majority of the National Assembly, Park may still face political challenges. First, the ROK National Assembly adopted some significant changes in legislative procedures in early 2012 that fortified the opposition party's veto power. Once governing and opposition parties at the subcommittee level agree to define a bill as "contentious," a super-majority vote of two-thirds is now required for the subcommittee to pass the bill and put it to plenary voting. Another enhanced mechanism that provides greater leverage to the minority party comes from a new legislative procedure that requires three fifths of a super-majority to end any filibustering. As the opposition—the Democratic United, United Progressive, and Progressive Justice parties—hold 147 out of 300 seats in the National Assembly, they may be able to thwart, delay, or veto significant foreign policy bills proposed by the Park administration. (Unlike the United States, the ROK president may propose a legislative bill to the National Assembly.) Thus, if Park proposes a North Korean human rights bill to the National Assembly as she has stated in her policy manifesto, opposition parties may be able to delay or veto the bill with their large minority vote in the parliament.

Second, political activism among liberal nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in South Korean society could organize resistance to Park's foreign policy initiatives, although such moves would be highly situation specific and subject to numerous factors. Over the past several years, liberal NGOs have risen to be significant actors in South Korea's foreign policy making process. Their power to mobilize civic participation and to frame political issues toward liberal perspectives has become influential. In the spring of 2008 when the Lee government was just a few months in office, liberal NGOs showcased their ability to mobilize the population against the government's decision to re-allow the import of U.S. beef and stymie the initiative. Thus, Park will have to deal with the opposition party and powerful NGOs when she launches new initiatives on foreign relations like the North Korean human rights bill. Her administration will have to combine her formal foreign policy making authority

as invested in the power of the presidency with adroit political skills for negotiating with and persuading the political opposition.

As Park begins her tenure as head of state, it seems likely that her administration will continue strengthening South Korea's relationship with the United States. Her policy positions should sustain relative stability in bilateral relations. However, serving as president of a vibrant democracy, the success of her initiatives will depend on the skill of her administration to overcome domestic political challenges.

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