The People Power Revolution that toppled former South Korean President Park Geun-hye was historic and unprecedented. Among other things, it represented a visceral call by the public for clean government and an accountable democracy. The tasks now facing newly elected President Moon Jae-in are daunting and urgent.

ESSAYS BY
Yoonkyung Lee 8
John Nilsson-Wright 18
Myung-bok Bae 24
Sang-young Rhyu 30
Jae-jin Yang 36
Wonhyuk Lim 42
Kyungsoo Choi 48

PLUS
Inauguration speech by President Moon Jae-in 14
Navigating Turbulent Waters: Foreign-Policy Challenges for South Korea’s New Government

By John Nilsson-Wright

South Korea’s new administration inherits a host of unenviable foreign-policy difficulties, beginning with the continuing North Korean missile tests and the threat of yet another nuclear test.

Those challenges, along with many others, will require President Moon Jae-in to be careful in dealing with Pyongyang, plus various political constituencies at home and the foreign policy goals of China, the US and Japan.

It is very early, but so far he has shown an understanding of the arduous tasks ahead of him, writes John Nilsson-Wright.

MOON JAE-IN’S election as president of South Korea on May 9 represents, by most accounts, a pivotal moment in the country’s history. On the back of massive popular opposition to the conservative administration of Park Geun-hye, ordinary citizens became united in their hostility to a president judged to have been corrupt, incompetent and sharply out of touch with the electorate. This public outcry not only helped facilitate the country’s first successful impeachment of a sitting president, but also paved the way for the election of a progressive politician fiercely committed to a new style of leadership, both at home and abroad.

As the heir to the reformist tradition of past progressive presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, Moon is expected to break sharply with the hawkish posture toward North Korea of the outgoing administration and pursue a foreign policy centered on engagement and dialogue with Pyongyang in a manner consistent with the “Sunshine Policy” associated with his past political mentors.

COMPLEX CHOICES

Framing the foreign-policy options of the new administration as a simple Manichean choice between confrontation and engagement, parallel to the country’s ideological split between conservatives and progressives, is a convenient but not very illuminating perspective. For one, it distorts the historical record, overlooking the extent to which past conservative leaders have sought to reach out to North Korea. It was, after all, President Roh Tae-woo, the former general, who initiated Nordpolitik toward Pyongyang in the late 1980s; conservative Lee Myung-bak, as president beginning in 2008, initially sought a constructive Grand Bargain with North Korea, and even Park herself sought through her so-called Trustpolitik in 2013 to appeal to the mutual interests of both Koreas in developing a less confrontational relationship. More importantly, it mischaracterizes the approach of past and present South Korean progressive leaders as a zero-sum choice between accommodation or confrontation with North Korea.

A similarly distorted binary choice is often used to represent other foreign policy issues, with progressives frequently depicted as more critical toward the United States than their conservative counterparts, or more receptive to an Asia-centric approach principally involving greater accommodation with China, and greater reliance on multilateral policy initiatives consistent with South Korea’s “middle power” status.

In the few weeks since forming his administration, Moon has skillfully resisted being pigeonholed by simplistic characterizations. While a candidate, he indicated a willingness to reach out to North Korea, including embracing a possible visit to Pyongyang, he has been sensibly cautious about not rushing ahead precipitously. Instead, in his first week as president, he focused on the broader foreign policy interests of the country and wisely sought to compensate for the foreign-policy paralysis associated with the impeachment crisis by dispatching five handpicked special envoys to the United States, China, Russia, Japan and Europe.

In each case, Moon turned to experienced individuals — Seok-hyun Hong, a former ambassador to the UK; Chung-in Moon, former ambassador to the UK; and Hee-sang Moon, a parliamentarian with considerable experience in fostering political ties with Japan, sent to Tokyo.

Reaching out to foreign capitals sends a sensible message of reassurance — allowing the new president to signal that he is serious about engaging in dialogue with a wide range of partners. In this, Moon appears to have learned from the negative experience of his late friend and mentor, President Roh Moo-hyun, whom he served as chief of staff. Unlike Roh, Moon has steered clear of allowing combative campaign statements to box him into rigid policy positions. He has also avoided doctrinaire or factional alignments, both through his rhetoric — making it clear in his inaugural address that he plans to govern for all Koreans — and by his actions — not appointing campaign advisors and confidants to key policy positions.

In some cases, Moon has stressed the importance of bureaucratic continuity, by, for example, keeping in his post Sung-nam Lim, the widely respected vice-minister for foreign affairs; in other cases, he has brought into his administration individuals with direct experience of working with both conservative and progressive politicians. His two key advisers for unification, foreign affairs and security: Chung-in Moon, distinguished university professor of Yonsei University and editor-in-chief of Global Asia; and Seok-hyun Hong of Joongang Ilbo, are experienced and thoughtful individuals with extensive connections across the ideological spectrum in both policy-making and business circles.

DETERRENCE HAS A ROLE

In confronting the immediate challenge of North Korean leadership that seems intent on pursuing military modernization through an apparently unremitting series of missile tests, Presi-
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Moreover, Moon must surely recognize the danger of alienating Japanese opinion when it comes to jointly addressing the challenge of North Korea.

GETTING ALONG WITH TRUMP AND THE REST

In this context, no country matters more than the US, South Korea’s key ally. President Donald Trump’s transactional “American First” approach to diplomacy, his apparent preference for military brinkmanship with North Korea, and his public suggestion that the South Korea-US Free Trade Agreement should be renegotiated, exposes the country to real economic and security uncertainty. For that reason alone, Moon has been right to prioritize getting the relationship with Washington right. His officials have made it clear that Washington will not be “surprised” by Seoul’s policy toward Pyongyang, and Moon’s anticipated likely first visit abroad to Washington in late June reflects a realistic recognition that he will need to commit time and resources to keeping the US firmly on side. This is by no means assured, given the tensions over the delayed deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile batteries. So far, Moon appears to have finessed the issue — using the need for an environmental assessment process to reassure the South Korean public that the national interest will not be sidelined, while also publicly and privately reminding the Americans that the delay in deployment is only temporary.

Delaying THAAD also has the added benefit of ameliorating the concerns of China, which sees the system as undercutting its strategic interests. President Xi Jinping’s use of coercive diplomacy and unslable economic pressure to punish the Park administration threatened to destabilize ties between Seoul and Beijing and foster rising anti-China sentiment on the part of the South Korean public. Moon must not appear to be intimidated by Chinese actions, but by delaying the THAAD decision to the end of the year, he may have offered Xi some face-saving political space in the run-up to the Chinese Communist Party Congress in the autumn (where Xi will want to trumpet his foreign-policy successes), thereby opening the door to warmer bilateral ties. It is too early to say if this approach is working, but the recent resumption of commercial flights between Cheongju, South Korea, and Yanji, China, and the dispatch of a Democratic Party delegation to the Belt and Road Conference in Beijing in May, are early indicators of an improvement in bilateral ties.

Managing bilateral tensions with Japan is also of key importance. Candidate Moon was very clear that he was opposed to the December 2015 “Comfort Women” agreement negotiated between President Park and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. That deal offered a 1 billion yen official Japanese contribution to a South Korean fund to compensate former colonial-era Korean sex slaves and was supposed to “irrevocably” end this long-standing historical dispute. Moon, in his May 11 phone call with Abe, noted his opposition to the deal and the sharp opposition of the South Korean public to the agreement, but he has been careful not to insist on a renegotiation of the accord — a position that Tokyo adamantly opposes. Moon has little leverage on this issue and is walking a tightrope between satisfying domestic public opinion while not damaging South Korea’s diplomatic credibility by appearing to resile unilaterally from a good-faith, binding international agreement.

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addressing the challenge of North Korea. There are signs that some government officials in Tokyo consider a much tougher posture toward Pyongyang, even if it materially raises the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula, a viable approach.

Given the exposure of Seoul to an unprovoked attack from Pyongyang, President Moon would be wise to reinforce ties with Tokyo not only to minimize security risks on the Peninsula, but also to enlist support from Japan in working co-operatively with the US. In the past, North Korea has been a key source of regional instability. To this must now be added the uncertainty associated with an erratic and unpredictable Trump, who has managed simultaneously to raise fears of both abandonment and entrapment in Tokyo and Seoul. Closer South Korea-Japan co-operation should be focused on lowering such fears, while allowing Moon to advance his foreign policy priorities.

MANAGING THE HOME FRONT
Finally, it is worth noting that crafting a successful foreign policy over the next five years is not merely a case of building constructive relations with Korea’s neighbors. It also requires strong support at home. For now, Moon can count on unprecedentedly high personal approval ratings, with some 80 percent of South Koreans expressing confidence in his leadership. Such support, however, is potentially fragile, as demonstrated by the controversy surrounding Kyung-hwa Kang — a former UN official and the first woman to be nominated as South Korea’s foreign minister. The opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) has been eager to exploit ethical questions surrounding Kang to attempt to discredit Moon’s progressive agenda. In responding, the president must demonstrate his authority as president in staffing his administration, while also creating a new basis for bipartisanship and co-operation between the president and the National Assembly — a sharp contrast to the more executive-centered approach of the Park administration.

Such tensions are a reminder that ultimately “all politics is local,” and that in developing a long-term foreign-policy strategy, the intense public sentiment that propelled him into office may also be a source of future instability. South Korean public opinion, given the country’s long history of subjugation to foreign powers, has frequently been suspicious and critical of external actors, and in offsetting this suspicion, the new president will need to take pains to keep the public informed of the method and goals behind his approach.

South Korea’s pivotal election has created an opportunity to chart a new foreign policy course through some especially turbulent diplomatic waters — a course that for now appears reassuringly non-ideological. Given the challenges ahead, it will undoubtedly require careful and focused navigation, but for now at least, President Moon appears to be moving both cautiously and deliberately in the right direction.

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