

A Change in Direction for Seoul? The Impeachment of South Korea's President

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On March 10, 2017, South Korea's Constitutional Court unanimously voted to uphold the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye, nearly 11 months before her term was due to end. The decision was the latest development in a corruption scandal that has engulfed South Korean politics and the business world since October 2016, and comes against the backdrop of North Korean missile tests, Chinese anger at the deployment of a U.S. missile defense system in South Korea, and uncertainties about the direction of U.S. foreign policy under the Trump Administration. By law, South Korea must hold an election for a new president within 60 days. Early opinion polls have been dominated by candidates to the left of the conservative Park government, and in many cases these candidates support policies toward North Korea, China, and Japan that differ in significant ways from U.S. approaches. Should South Korea change course, it would end a period in which U.S. and South Korean policies, particularly on North Korea, have been largely in alignment.

The Impeachment

South Korea's National Assembly impeached Park in December 2016, on [charges of "extensive and serious violations of the Constitution and the law"](#) stemming from a corruption scandal. From October to December, millions of South Koreans filled the streets in weekly anti-Park protests, which became the largest demonstrations in the country's history. By early March 2017, according to one poll, [77% of Koreans favored her removal from office](#). Following the court decision, thousands of Park's supporters protested, [leading to clashes with the police and reportedly resulting in two deaths](#).

While in office, Park was immune from criminal prosecution. A special prosecutor has [recommended Park's indictment](#) on charges that include receiving \$38 million in bribes from Samsung, South Korea's largest business conglomerate.

Thus far, 30 people have been indicted in the case, [including the de facto head of Samsung, Lee Jae-yong](#). If a prosecution is initiated, Park would be the fourth South Korean president to be subject to a criminal investigation since the country became a democracy in 1988.

What Happens Next?

South Korea's Prime Minister, Hwang Kyo-ahn, who has served as acting president since the December impeachment, is to continue in this role until the election. Hwang was appointed by Park, and could become a candidate. South Korea's political parties must nominate candidates by the end of March. Immediately after the election, which must be held by May 9, the newly elected president is to assume office.

Implications for the United States

Park's removal from office is likely to have short- and medium-term implications for U.S. interests in Northeast Asia. Until the May election, the interim government—tainted by its association with Park—is unlikely to pursue significant foreign policy initiatives as the condensed presidential campaign plays out. Meanwhile, North Korea has become increasingly belligerent, the Trump Administration is undertaking a review of U.S. North Korea policy, and [China has sharpened its criticism of the initial deployment of a ballistic missile defense system](#), called Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), in South Korea. Over the medium term, the impeachment has fueled momentum for South Korea's opposition parties, which traditionally have been more critical of U.S. initiatives—particularly attempts to escalate pressure on North Korea—as well as of recent [South Korean agreements to improve relations with Japan](#), which the United States supported.

Positions of Major Presidential Candidates

Four of the top five declared or presumed presidential candidates are from opposition parties: the Minjoo (Democratic) Party, South Korea's largest, and the People's Party. Most candidates are expected to call for ways to address economic disparities and reforms to South Korea's economic system, themes that resonated before the political scandal broke.

For weeks, the front-runner in opinion polls has been the Minjoo Party's **Moon Jae-In**, who narrowly lost to Park in the 2012 presidential election. Moon has [pledged to visit North Korea as president](#), and to reopen and expand twenty-fold the Kaesong Industrial Complex, an inter-Korean industrial park located in North Korea that Park shut down in 2016 to increase pressure on Pyongyang. Arguing that a "sanctions-only" policy has made North Korea more dependent on China, Moon has said that [Seoul must improve inter-Korean relations while simultaneously imposing sanctions on Pyongyang](#). Moon's Minjoo party has opposed the Park government's conclusion of two agreements with Japan: one to address the "comfort women" controversy and the other a military information sharing pact. On some issues, Moon has adopted a more centrist position. He has expressed support for the U.S.-ROK alliance and in early 2017 [backed away from earlier suggestions that the THAAD deployment be suspended](#), instead saying that it should be deferred to the next president.

Among other leading Minjoo Party candidates, South Chungcheong Province governor **Ahn Hee-jung** has [adopted a harder line toward North Korea](#) than Moon, placing more emphasis on punishing North Korea. In contrast, Seongnam City mayor **Lee Jae-myung**, another Minjoo Party member, is [campaigning to Moon's left on foreign policy issues](#), openly opposing the deployment of THAAD, calling for largely unconditional engagement with North Korea, and promoting greater foreign policy independence.

Ahn Cheol-Soo, the leading politician from the People's Party, South Korea's third-largest, has emphasized dialogue with Pyongyang to complement sanctions and [called for a resumption of multilateral talks](#) to freeze North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Ahn also has supported increasing South Korea's military spending, and [has indicated that the THAAD deployment should proceed](#).

Meanwhile, as of March 10, South Korea's more conservative political parties did not have a major declared candidate polling more than the low single digits, a reflection of conservative forces' disarray since Park's impeachment. In December, Park's former Saenuri (New Frontier) Party split in two. The larger of these groupings renamed itself the Liberty Korea Party (LKP, sometimes translated as the Freedom Korea Party) and in late February [was polling at around](#)

10%.