



TO DRIVE FORWARD AT HIGH SPEED LOOK BACKWARDS



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I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, Peter Hayes and Leon Sigal argue that historical insight is essential to understanding the current political turmoil in the ROK and its implications for the incoming Trump Administration's policies towards the DPRK. It also marks the posting of the latest searchable *DPRK Annual Chronology* produced by Leon Sigal and covering from 1967 to 2024, available [here](#)

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II. NAPSNET POLICY FORUM BY PETER HAYES AND LEON SIGAL

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When driving on a freeway and changing lanes, it is important to glance in the rear-view mirror. The same precaution applies to current US relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK).

When President Yoon Suk-yeol invoked martial law on December 3 2024, he drove ahead recklessly trying to take an exit ramp from Korean democracy at high speed. Yoon was reportedly entranced by faux historical accounts of the blessings bestowed on Koreans during the prior period of martial law,^[1] but his action immediately reminded most Koreans of the country's long experience with dictatorship and military rule. They reacted viscerally to his attempt to shut down the National Assembly by rushing to the streets by the tens of thousands to defend democracy. Elected representatives voted swiftly in the middle of a winter night to reverse martial law and not long after, voted to impeach the president not once, but twice.

South Koreans had looked in their rear-view mirror and remembered what Yoon chose to ignore: General Chun Do-hwan's usurping power and evoking martial law to shut down the legislature in May 1980. Like Yoon attempted, Chun cited rumors of North Korean infiltration, compelled the Cabinet to extend martial law throughout the country, closing universities, abolishing political parties, banning political activity, curbing the press, arresting prominent opposition politicians like Kim Dae-jung along with thousands of citizens, and rigging his election for president. He then crushed a pro-democracy protest in Kwangju, killing hundreds.^[2]

In 1987, barred from another term as president, Chun anointed his successor, General Roh Tae-woo. This attempt to maintain iron-fisted military rule revived the pro-democracy movement, which staged rallies across the country. In June 1987, Seoul was enveloped in a haze of tear gas attacks

that culminated in the killing of Yonsei University student Lee Han-yeol when he was struck in the head by a tear gas canister. Chastened by the citizen uprising, Roh pledged a more democratic constitution and the first direct elections in sixteen years, which he won with a plurality. The South Korean people had struggled to bring democracy to the country and they had won.

Last December, the lessons of that history were not lost on South Koreans. Many remembered not only the brutal repression but also that US Forces Korea did not object to removal of Korean special forces from the US-ROK combined command which were redeployed by Chun to Kwangju to put down dissidents leading to a massacre of hundreds of protesters.[3]

In contrast to South Korean popular and elite revulsion at Yoon's declaration of martial law 45 years ago, Washington's reaction was noticeably tepid. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell was the first to react on December 3, 2024: "We are watching the recent developments in the ROK with grave concern." He went on to say, "I do want to underscore that our alliance with the ROK is ironclad, and we stand by Korea in their time of uncertainty. I also want to just underscore that we have every hope and expectation that any political disputes will be resolved peacefully and in accordance with the rule of law. We'll have more to say as the situation develops." [4] The State Department spokesman's response two days later was equally telling:

[W]e were concerned, are concerned about the situation we saw unfold earlier this week on December 3rd. There are many questions that need to be answered regarding the decisions surrounding those developments. We're encouraged by the democratic resilience of the Republic of Korea during a period of testing and, candidly, uncertainty, and we're continuing to expect that the Republic of Korea's democratic system and democratic process will prevail. And most importantly, we reaffirm the accomplishments we've made in our bilateral relationship, and will continue to advance all of those priorities with the ROK, as well as advance our robust trilateral partnership with Japan as well. These efforts, in our point of view, they're at the core of our shared values, and we think that they're vital to prosperity and stability in the Indo-Pacific.[5]

Washington's reluctance to condemn martial law as Korean democracy hung in the balance revived doubts that the US-ROK alliance is based on shared democratic values rather than *realpolitik* calculations of geopolitical security.

Indeed, Washington had grounds for concern about the fallout from Yoon's bizarre declaration of martial law. Its Asia policy—nurtured in particular by Campbell—aimed to promote a trilateral US-ROK-Japan alliance against China. This strategy required firming up South Korean relations with Japan, which Yoon embraced enthusiastically. That policy is deeply unpopular in the ROK, where memories of decades of Japan's colonial occupation of Korea remain vivid. Although most Koreans support the US-ROK alliance, they also favor a more accommodating policy toward China than Japan or the United States and resent the adverse effects on the ROK of US economic sanctions on their neighbor and leading trading partner. With Yoon now utterly discredited, the trilateral cooperation fostered by the Biden Administration and aimed at buttressing US extended deterrence in the region—including nuclear deterrence—may founder once Donald Trump is sworn in as US president.

What is remarkable in all this is the almost complete disinterest in the United States in the historical dimension of the ROK's reaction to Yoon's martial law declaration. One would be hard put to find members of Congress, apart from a handful of Korean-Americans, who even know where Kwangju is, let alone what happened there in the 1980s. As Henry Ford put it pithily, for many Americans "History is bunk."

The past forty years suggests that the citizens of the ROK have done more to defend democracy than

their American allies—especially when compared to the aftermath of the January 6, 2024 attempted insurrection in Washington. The Trump presidency may further tarnish Washington’s democratic credentials in Korea.

Yoon’s impeachment, if confirmed by the ROK Constitutional Court, would free Trump to reshape US policy on the peninsula. Whether or not he intends to withdraw US troops from the ROK, he is unlikely to run the risk of the provocative military exercises that Yoon favored and that could cause a deadly clash with the DPRK.

Yoon’s departure would also free Trump to renew his presidential diplomacy with Kim Jong Un. Trump, who cares little about democracy or human rights, clearly sees the opportunity for re-engaging Kim, leaving Seoul out in the cold. Indicative of his possible intentions are appointment of two officials who were intensively involved in negotiations with the DPRK during his first term in the White House—Alex Wong who has been named his principal deputy national security adviser and Joseph Yun who is to be *charge d'affaires ad interim* in the US embassy in Seoul. Incoming US Secretary of State Marco Rubio prefigured engagement of Kim Jong Un at his confirmation hearing by emphasizing the need for risk reduction to avoid inadvertent war in the Korean peninsula^[6] while Trump nominee Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called the DPRK a “nuclear state” implying possible belief that denuclearization is no longer plausible and a characterization promptly rejected by the South Korean government.^[7]

Whatever Trump’s hopes, the terms of trade for negotiating with Pyongyang have undergone fundamental change since Trump left the White House in 2020. Frustrated by Washington’s response, Kim seems to have given up on hedging against China’s rise by reaching out to Washington and instead turned to Moscow. In turn, the US goal of denuclearization seems increasingly remote. Much will depend on the terms of possible US-Russian deals to end the Ukraine war and its effect on Russian-DPRK strategic cooperation which may in turn reduce the value of the DPRK to Putin’s Russia.

If negotiating with Kim Jong Un becomes a blind alley, Trump may lose interest and hand off Korea policy to others on his security team who favor the rhetoric of “fire and fury” and actions to promote regime change in the DPRK. This outcome would spark tensions not only with Pyongyang but also Yoon’s likely center-left successor in Seoul.

A third possibility for the Trump administration would be to make common cause with progressives in the ROK to change the DPRK’s strategic calculus over time to detach it from its alliance with Russia and China. The latter is the strategy that should in principle be favored by realists such as Elbridge Colby, Trump nominee for Deputy Secretary of Defense for Policy. Admittedly, they may instead choose to recast the alliance and back an ROK nuclear weapons program to put maximum pressure on China and the DPRK at the same time.

The former strategy requires combining historical insight with a regional vision of what lies ahead on the strategic freeway. The chance that such a strategy would realize a peace treaty and eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is slim, but even trying to achieve it is likely to reduce the risk of military conflict in Korea. More likely, it would result in a typical muddle-through outcome, a policy gridlock with which freeway drivers in the United States and the ROK are all too familiar.

The latter strategy would stimulate nuclear proliferation in East Asia, with massive reverberations in Japan, Taiwan and Australia. Because it would weaken US leadership and increase tension between East Asian allies, especially the ROK and Japan, this pathway would be distinctively unattractive to anti-China hawks and is even less likely to unfold than engagement with the DPRK.

Still, such policy paralysis may be a better outcome than resuming the roller-coaster ride of hot rhetoric and nuclear standoffs last seen in 2017, let alone a deadly clash with the risk of escalation to nuclear war in Korea.

As noted above, Koreans and Americans have radically different temporal horizons and orientations to the past. Koreans cannot forget their origins and terrible past within living memory. Americans cannot afford to forget or ignore their presence and role in the unfolding of this shared past. It is therefore crucial that Americans have an easy way to access the most important moments of this shared history.

It is with a view to providing such access that Nautilus Institute has created a rearview mirror for policy analysts and practitioners concerned with the Korea conflict and the DPRK nuclear threat. These are annual chronologies containing key documents from 1967-2024 in an easily searchable and downloadable format found [here](#) and updated annually by Leon Sigal.

III. ENDNOTES

[1] B. Engel, "Making Sense of South Korea's Senseless Martial Law Declaration," Asia Pacific Journal/Japan Focus, December 28, 2024, at: <https://apjff.org/2024/12/engel>

See also Moon Chung-in, "The maddening farce of Yoon Suk-yeol's presidency" *Hankyoreh*, December 16, 2024, at: https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/english_editorials/1173602.html

[2] For documentation of US prior knowledge of Chun's intended use of ROK special forces detached from Combined Forces Command without US approval to suppress the Kwangju uprising, see T. Shorrock, "THE CHEROKEE FILES REVEAL U.S. POLICY MAKING DURING KWANGJU," *Sisa Journal*, February 1996, at: <https://timshorrock.com/documents/korea-the-choke-ee-files-part-one/>

[3] Shorrock, *ibid*

[4] Deputy Secretary of State Kurt M. Campbell at a Preview of the USA Pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka, Remarks, Benjamin Franklin Room, Department of State, Washington, December 3, 2024 at: <https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-kurt-m-campbell-at-a-preview-of-the-usa-pavilion-at-expo-2025-osaka/>

[5] Department of State Press Briefing, Principal Deputy Spokesman Vedant Patel, December 5, 2024 at: <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-december-5-2024/>

[6] "Rubio says he'll explore how to lower risks of 'inadvertent' inter-Korean war, keep other states from seeking nuclear arms," Korea Times, January 16, 2025 at: <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10399907>

For a full-fledged version of such an engagement strategy written before the US presidential election, see John Delury, Morton Halperin, Peter Hayes, Chung-In Moon, Leon Sigal, Tom Pickering, "REVISITING THE COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY ROADMAP TO REDUCE THE RISK OF WAR ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA", NAPSNet Special Reports, April 19, 2024, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/revisiting--he-comprehensive-security-roadmap-to-reduce-the-risk-of-war-on-the-korean-peninsula/>

[7] "Seoul rejects Pete Hegseth's 'nuclear power' label for North Korea," Korea Herald, January 15, 2025, at: <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10391105>

IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSE

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