



THE GORDON CHANG REPORT

PRESENTED BY THE
PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

VOLUME 1, NO. 7

Will South Korea Survive?

by Gordon G. Chang | January 2025

On December 27, the National Assembly, South Korea's unicameral legislature, passed a motion impeaching Acting President Han Duck-soo, the first impeachment of an acting president in the history of the Republic of Korea.¹

Now, nothing less than the continuation of democracy on the Korean peninsula—and the survival of the South Korean state itself—are at stake. Also at risk is stability in East Asia and America's alliance system in the region.

Han, the country's prime minister, became acting president upon the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol on December 14. Yoon was removed from office because of his declaration of martial law on the 3rd of the month, the first such declaration in the South since 1980. Yoon justified

his action—the declaration was in force for only six hours—by saying he was exercising his powers to break a deadlock and stop “anti-state activities plotting rebellion.” “The martial law is aimed at eradicating pro-North Korean forces and to protect the constitutional order of freedom,” he stated in a televised address.²

Yoon's opponents, led by the leftist Democratic Party of Korea, accused Yoon and “accomplices” of “insurrection.”³

Yoon's case is now before the Constitutional Court, which has 180 days from the impeachment motion to decide whether to remove the 13th president of the Republic of Korea. If the court decides to do so, the constitution provides that an election must be held within 60 days.

With the impeachment of Acting President Han, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, also the finance minister, became the country's third president in a month. The turmoil in South Korea may not be over because Choi, in the words of Reuters, "may also face removal if he too clashes with the opposition-led parliament."⁴

Reuters was prescient. Minjoo, as the Democratic Party of Korea is known, threatened in early January to impeach and arrest Choi. "I believe that the acting president should be held accountable for disrupting order and committing acts of insurrection," said Lee Jae-myung, the opposition party's leader. Lee charged that Choi did not move forcefully enough to execute an arrest warrant issued against President Yoon for the crime of insurrection.⁵ Choi appears blameless because, among other reasons, the agency initiating the warrant, the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, did not have authority to investigate allegations of insurrection.

In South Korea, law does not matter to the country's legislature. The opposition-led National Assembly, dominated by Minjoo, has effectively seized power. However one views Yoon's martial law declaration—it appears most South Koreans think his action was unjustified—Han clearly did nothing meriting removal. The former acting president was not an "acting insurrection leader"⁶ as Minjoo's Lee charged.

On the contrary, Han was a cautious politician trying to stabilize a volatile situation by maintaining that he should not appoint three additional justices to the Constitutional Court until the governing and

opposition parties had agreed he had the power to do so—he pointed out that such appointment appeared to be beyond the power of an acting president—and in any event he maintained no appointment should be made until there was a consensus as to the composition of the slate of justices among the parties.⁷

Han, after the vote impeaching him, said he would step down "to avoid further confusion and uncertainty."⁸ That was conciliatory but also a mistake. Article 65 of the South's constitution requires that an impeachment of a president be approved by at least two-thirds of the total membership of the National Assembly—200 of the 300 total seats—and that an impeachment of a prime minister requires an affirmative vote of a majority of such seats. Leftist Woo Won-shik, the National Assembly speaker, ruled the lower threshold applied.⁹ That is almost certainly an incorrect reading because Han was impeached for an act taken in his capacity as president of the republic, not for an act in his role as prime minister. South Korean constitutional scholars, therefore, believe Han was improperly removed:¹⁰ Only 192 voted to impeach him.

In any event, Han did not appear to have "violated the Constitution or other Acts in the performance of official duties," the constitutional standard.

Impeachment, however, has become Minjoo's weapon of choice. Yoon in his televised address cited 22 impeachment motions during his presidency, which began in May 2022.¹¹ Before the end of December, Minjoo filed seven more such motions.¹² Conservatives speak of "chain

**Minjoo, as conservatives charge,
has also been using criminal charges
to destroy opponents.**

impeachment,” “endless impeachments,” and “serial impeachment disease,”¹³ and Yoon talks about “legislative dictatorship.”¹⁴

Minjoo, as conservatives charge, has also been using criminal charges to destroy opponents. For instance, in addition to the charges against Yoon, it has filed charges of insurrection against National Assemblyman Choo Kyung-ho of Yoon’s People Power Party merely because Choo engaged in parliamentary maneuvers that impeded the lifting of the martial law declaration, something Choo had every right to do as a legislator.¹⁵

“Under the pretext of ‘saving democracy’ and opposing what they term an ‘insurrection,’ left-wing groups and activists, headed by the Democratic Party of Korea, are attempting to exploit the martial law crisis to take power and purge all conservatives from office, including even those who had nothing to do with the less-than-six-hour martial law episode,” Lawrence Peck, advisor to the North Korea Freedom Coalition, said to me.¹⁶

Minjoo is making a grab for total power. “The Democratic Party of Korea is employing gangster tactics to seize control of all branches of government,” Peck also told me.¹⁷ “Pundits have been praising South Korean democracy in the aftermath of the impeachment of President Yoon,” Greg Scarlatoiu, president of The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea,” said in e-mail comments. “What the Democratic Party of Korea is now doing, however, is not an exercise in strengthening democracy but in dismantling it. By impeaching Yoon and Han, the party is undermining checks and balances and the very fabric of democracy.”¹⁸

The impeachment crisis has far-reaching consequences. Apart from destabilizing the world’s 13th largest economy, the events in South Korea could disrupt efforts to maintain peace in already volatile North Asia. Even if Yoon survives the impeachment crisis—unlikely, given sentiment throughout the country—the episode is undoubtedly the end of his most important, most courageous, and most unpopular accomplishment. Yoon, during his short time in office, was instrumental in building a security partnership with Japan.

The South Korean leader traveled to Camp David in August of last year to meet President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. There, the three leaders issued “The Spirit of Camp David,” a joint statement to “inaugurate a new era of trilateral partnership.”¹⁹ The grouping of the three states is now known by the acronym JAROKUS.

Biden in the Camp David statement commended Yoon and Kishida for their leadership in “transforming relations between Japan and the ROK,” but the real credit goes to Yoon, the hero of that moment. There has been extreme animosity in South Korea toward Japan, due to the Japanese annexation of Korea at the beginning of the 20th century and Tokyo’s brutal rule through the end of the Second World War.

Today, Japan and the United States are treaty allies and South Korea and the U.S. are treaty allies, but Japan and the South are not allied. Both Tokyo and Seoul, and especially Seoul, have treated the other as an adversary and sometimes an enemy. It has been longstanding U.S. policy to get the two

Yoon, during his short time in office, was instrumental in building a security partnership with Japan.

capitals to work closely, but it was not until Yoon's presidency that there was sustained progress.

One of the first casualties of Yoon's political demise, therefore, will be cooperation with Japan. "If Yoon is no longer president, then Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the leftist Democratic Party of Korea, is likely to become the next president of South Korea," Tara O of the East Asia Research Center pointed out in comments to me. "Lee is pro-Communist Party of China, pro-North Korea, anti-South Korea, anti-U.S., and anti-Japan. He and his supporters constantly stir up anti-Japan sentiment in South Korea."²⁰

Lee's first impeachment motion, which failed, complained that Yoon's "Japan-centered policy antagonizes North Korea, China, and Russia," David Maxwell of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Asia Pacific Strategy points out. "This is the problem with the political opposition in South Korea. They view the trilateral ROK-Japan-U.S. cooperation negatively and will likely try to undo it when they come to power, which they are likely to do in the next election."²¹

"The members of the opposition are under the naïve belief that South Korea can appease North Korea, China, and Russia," Maxwell, who served five tours of duty as a U.S. Army Special Forces officer in Korea, also said. "They would rather weaken the ROK-U.S. alliance and trilateral cooperation with Japan and the U.S. to send a message that they do not have a hostile policy toward North Korea, China, and Russia. The political opposition in the South does not seem to acknowledge that it is North Korea, China, and Russia that have hostile policies toward the South." Maxwell also believes, correctly,

that Pyongyang, Beijing, and Moscow might execute those hostile policies more vigorously because of a shift to appeasement in Seoul.²²

"If Lee Jae-myung becomes South Korea's next president, he would likely fast track South Korea into the spheres of influence of China and North Korea," Ms. O told me. "Not only would Lee pursue the same pro-China and pro-North Korea policies of Moon Jae-in, the former president from the same party, but he would accelerate them."²³

Lee, as Ms. O suggests, is a more extreme version of Yoon's immediate predecessor, Minjoo's Moon Jae-in. Moon during his presidential term, for instance, did everything he could to sabotage defense ties with Tokyo. Most notably, in 2019 he announced he was terminating the General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan. He ultimately relented, but only just a few hours before the pact was to expire and under intense pressure from, among others, Washington.

South Korea's cooperation with Japan is not the only thing in jeopardy. After the impeachment vote, the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, Philip Goldberg, tweeted that America's alliance with South Korea "is and will remain ironclad."²⁴ America's commitment is certainly ironclad, but with a leftist in charge South Korea's embrace of the alliance will not be.

That alliance is crucial to the defense of the American homeland. Since the 19th century, Washington has drawn its western defense perimeter off the coast of East Asia. The Republic of Korea, on the tip of the Asian continent, anchors the northern end of that forward line of defense.

America's commitment is certainly ironclad, but with a leftist in charge South Korea's embrace of the alliance will not be.

Moon Jae-in did not terminate the alliance with America, but he did everything he could to undermine it, even allowing senior aides to turn public opinion against the arrangement by mischaracterizing the command structure of alliance forces. Moon's officials, beginning soon after his inauguration in May 2017, publicly complained that a U.S. general would command South Korean troops in the event of a North Korean attack when he knew or should have known that was not in fact the case.

Furthermore, Moon took steps to make it more difficult for the U.S. to defend the South. In the summer and fall of 2018, for instance, he unilaterally authorized the taking down of barbed-wire fencing and observation posts in the Demilitarized Zone, the 160-mile-long strip separating the two Koreas. He also ordered the demolition of tank traps, meant to slow North Korean armor racing to the South Korean capital of Seoul. He proposed to significantly cut the number of army divisions and reduce the period of conscription to 18 months from 21.

Moon also was behind a 17-page military agreement inked in September 2018 with Kim Jong Un during Moon's visit to Pyongyang. The deal's enlargement of the no-fly zone over the DMZ and border waters reduced the South's warning time of an attack. The withdrawal of South Korean artillery from islands in the Yellow Sea, or West Sea as both Koreas call it, also drew the concern of military analysts. Some South Koreans called the September agreement "a surrender document" because it looked like Moon was attempting to abandon the defense of the Republic of Korea.

And Moon undermined the defense of his homeland in even more insidious ways, always supporting China against the U.S. Siding with Beijing, he issued at the end of October 2017 the infamous "Three Nos": no to the hosting of additional air-defense batteries, no to participating in an integrated missile defense system with the United States, and

no to joining a South Korea-Japan-U.S. alliance. These three negative commitments undermined an effective defense of the Republic of Korea and were publicly issued, in the words of Maxwell, "without any apparent or known consultation with Washington."²⁵

In short, Moon's accommodation with Beijing, called a capitulation to "Chinese bullying" by the conservative *Chosun Daily* newspaper, was inconsistent with the alliance with America.²⁶

The continued existence of the South Korean state is also at risk. Moon's highest priority goal as president was to reunify Korea, separated at the end of the Second World War, by merging his Republic of Korea and North Korea, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, even if that was accomplished on the North's terms.

Moon acted as if his government did not exist, often refusing to mention the name of the South Korean republic and going out of his way to downplay the legitimacy of the country he was elected to represent. Another Minjoo president, as Ms. O suggests, will undoubtedly continue Moon's approach.²⁷

Public opinion prevented Moon Jae-in from abolishing his own country then, but Lee Jae-myung is a more ruthless version of the previous Minjoo leader. Anything, including the end of the South Korean state, can now occur.

Gordon G. Chang is the author of *Plan Red: China's Project to Destroy America* and *The Coming Collapse of China*. Follow him on X @GordonGChang.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lee Seul-ki, Lee Shin-hye, and Park Su-hyeon, “South Korean Lawmakers Pass First-Ever Impeachment of Acting President,” *Chosun Daily* (Seoul), December 27, 2024, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/12/27/BE2GS74UWRBFJGBAGKXRBOOC7E/>.
- 2 Kim Eun-jung, “(2nd LD) Yoon Declares Emergency Martial Law, Accusing Opposition of ‘Anti-State Activities,’” Yonhap News Agency, December 3, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241203012152315>.
- 3 Yi Wonju, “(Yoon Impeachment) Main Opposition Hails Yoon’s Impeachment Motion Passage as ‘Victory for People, Democracy,’” Yonhap News Agency, December 14, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241214004200315>; Kim Bo-yeon, Song Bok-gyu, and Lee Jung-soo, “Democratic Party Leader Urges Immediate Suspension of President Yoon,” *Chosun Daily* (Seoul), December 6, 2024, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2024/12/06/SFGKS5RG3ZFUDOWHITV36FR3PA/>.
- 4 Hyunsu Yim and Joyce Lee, “South Korea’s Acting President Han Duck-Soo Impeached as Yoon Goes On Trial,” Reuters, December 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-acting-president-faces-impeachment-vote-court-meets-martial-law-2024-12-26/>.
- 5 Joo Hee Yeon and Lee Jae-eun, “Lee Jae-myung Slams Acting President Over Yoon’s Arrest Failure,” *Chosun Daily* (Seoul), January 7, 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/01/06/2D BOFBOQGJHAJJLEY7VCNAJ2LA/>. A president, in addition to being impeached, may be criminally charged for committing an act of insurrection.
- 6 Lex Harvey, Yoonjung Seo, and Gawon Bae, “South Korean Parliament Votes to Impeach Acting President Han Duck-soo,” CNN, December 27, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/27/asia/south-korea-impeachment-vote-acting-president-intl-hnk/index.html>.
- 7 Lee Haye-ah, “(LEAD) Han Says Will Not Appoint Constitutional Court Justices Until Rival Parties Reach Compromise,” Yonhap News Agency, December 26, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241226004451315>.
- 8 Harvey, Seo, and Bae, “South Korean Parliament Votes to Impeach Acting President Han Duck-soo.”
- 9 Lee, Lee, and Park, “South Korean Lawmakers Pass First-Ever Impeachment of Acting President.”
- 10 @DrTaraO, X, 9:23 AM on December 27, 2024, <https://x.com/drtarao/status/1872649606133428612?s=61>.
- 11 Kim, “(2nd LD) Yoon Declares Emergency Martial Law, Accusing Opposition of ‘Anti-State Activities.’”
- 12 “[Editorial]: 29 Cases of ‘Serial Impeachment Disease’ The Democratic Party Is Also Largely Responsible for This Whole Situation,” *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), December 28, 2024, <https://www.chosun.com/opinion/editorial/2024/12/28/JOIINNVSZONGURCVO6QS3HCEVU4/>.

- 13 “Editorial: Endless Impeachments Threaten to Paralyze South Korea’s Government,” *Chosun Daily* (Seoul), December 29, 2024, <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2024/12/29/RUSTYRDQPNBNTHZ7R6PQWGPIP4/>.
- 14 Kim, “(2nd LD) Yoon Declares Emergency Martial Law, Accusing Opposition of ‘Anti-State Activities.’”
- 15 Yi Wonju, “Ruling Party Elects Pro-Yoon Lawmaker as New Floor Leader Amid Martial Law Turmoil,” Yonhap News Agency, December 12, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20241212006500315>.
- 16 Lawrence Peck, e-mail message to author, December 20, 2024.
- 17 Lawrence Peck, telephone interview by author, December 29, 2024.
- 18 Greg Scarlatoiu, e-mail message to author, December 30, 2024.
- 19 “The Spirit of Camp David: Joint Statement of Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the United States,” White House, August 18, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/08/18/the-spirit-of-camp-david-joint-statement-of-japan-the-republic-of-korea-and-the-united-states/>.
- 20 Tara O, e-mail message to author, December 10, 2024.
- 21 David Maxwell, e-mail message to author, December 9, 2024.
- 22 David Maxwell, e-mail message to author, December 9, 2024.
- 23 Tara O, e-mail message to author, December 28, 2024.
- 24 @USAmbROK, X, 6:46 AM on December 14, 2024, <https://x.com/usambrok/status/1867898964227539004?s=61>.
- 25 Gordon G. Chang, “How Does Trump Deal With North Korea When He Can’t Trust South Korea?” *Daily Beast*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-does-trump-deal-with-north-korea-when-he-cant-trust-south-korea/>.
- 26 “Gov’t Has Capitulated to Chinese Bullying,” editorial, *Chosun Daily* (Seoul), November 1, 2017, <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2017/11/01/AT2QWD2LSYCWKVT04NBTVQYCWU/>.
- 27 For a discussion of Moon Jae-in’s policies toward the United States, South Korea, and North Korea, see Gordon G. Chang, *Losing South Korea*, Encounter Broadside No. 58, March 2019, <https://www.amazon.com/Losing-South-Korea-Encounter-Broadsides/dp/1641770686>.



www.pacificresearch.org

MAILING ADDRESS

PO Box 60485
Pasadena, CA 91116

Tel 415-989-0833

SACRAMENTO OFFICE

2110 K Street, Suite 28
Sacramento, CA 95816
Tel 916-389-9774

PASADENA OFFICE

680 E. Colorado Blvd., Suite 180
Pasadena, CA 91101
Tel 626-714-7572

CONNECT WITH US

 facebook.com/pacificresearchinstitute

 [@pacificresearch](https://twitter.com/pacificresearch)

 youtube.com/pacificresearch1

 www.linkedin.com/company/pacific-research-institute

 [pacificresearchinstitute](https://instagram.com/pacificresearchinstitute)