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South Korea Leadership Crisis

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April 2025

Just a month ago, myriad changes made by the Trump administration to domestic and international affairs could not have been predicted. But one constant has remained as a clear global hotspot – South Korea.

Historical Overview

Located between Japan and China, as shown in the map,^[i] Korea was invaded, influenced, and fought over by its larger neighbors throughout most of its history. The “Hermit Kingdom’s” longstanding closed-door policy, adopted to ward off foreign encroachment, applied to all but China, under which it existed as a vassal state. After Japan defeated China and Russia in wars in 1895 and 1905, it became the dominant power on the Korean Peninsula and in 1910, fully annexed Korea as a colony.

For the next 35 years, Japan ruled Korea in a manner that was strict and often brutal. They seized Korean farmlands and forced Koreans to work their former land and in Japanese-controlled factories and mines, for

Japanese profit. An estimated 800,000 Koreans were forced laborers, including and perhaps most infamously, the Korean women enslaved for sex — so-called “comfort women.”

Grotesque though it was, Japan's occupation of Korea left a legacy of modern infrastructure and capability industries such as steel, cement, and chemical plants that were set up in Korea during the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the northern part of the peninsula where coal and hydroelectric resources are abundant. During World War II, Koreans were forced to work in Japanese factories and sent to the front lines of the military. By the time Japanese colonial rule ended in 1945, Korea was the most industrialized country in Asia, second only to Japan itself.

Known as the 1945 Yalta Conference near the end of World War II, three major allies — U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin — agreed to establish a four-power trusteeship for Korea under the U.S., U.K., U.S.S.R., and China as a temporary administrative measure pending election of a democratic Korean government. In the final days of the war, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. agreed to jointly accept the Japanese surrender in Korea with the Soviet Union occupying Korea north of the 38th parallel and the U.S. occupying the area south until an independent and unified Korea could be established. This resulted in the division of Korea into two separate occupation zones (much like East and West Germany). The emerging



Map of Korean Peninsula

Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, combined with political differences between Koreans in the two occupation zones, caused a breakdown in negotiations over a unified Korean government.

On Aug. 15, 1948, the Republic of Korea was established and U.S.-backed Syngman Rhee became its first president. In response, on Sept. 9, 1948, the Soviet-supported Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in the north under Kim Il Sung. Both claimed to be the only legitimate government on the peninsula, creating a situation of extreme tension and armed clashes along the 38th parallel.^[ii] The U.S. withdrew its occupation forces in 1949, leaving behind a small military advisory group of 500.

South Korea's Struggle to Establish Democratic Norms

On June 25, 1950, North Korea, backed by the U.S.S.R., invaded South Korea and attempted to unify the peninsula by force. Under the United Nations flag, a U.S.-led coalition of 16 countries came to the assistance of South Korea. The Soviet Union backed North Korea with weapons and air support and the People's Republic of China, consolidated on the mainland in 1949 under Mao Zedong, also intervened on the side of North Korea with hundreds of thousands of ground troops.



Map of Demilitarized Zone on Korean Peninsula

In July 1953, after 2 million deaths and enormous physical destruction to the country, an armistice was signed, ending the fighting at about where it had begun, with North Korea and South Korea still divided at the 38th parallel. This Demilitarized Zone still forms the boundary between North Korea and South

Korea. To this day, a peace agreement has not been signed. Technically, both sides are still at war and saber rattling continues. More on North Korea in a future post.

North Korea evolved into the nominally communist, closed autocracy we know today, now ruled by three generations of the Kim dynasty. South Korea, greatly influenced by the U.S., became a free market economic powerhouse in just a few decades, fully integrated into international systems and trade.

In 1960, after faulty elections in favor of President Syngman Rhee, student protests ensued, forcing Rhee to step down and go into exile. His fall was immortalized in Billy Joel's song "We Didn't Start the Fire."^[iii] Thereafter, Maj. Gen. Park Chung Hee led an army coup against the succeeding government and assumed power in 1961. After two years of military rule under Park, civilian rule was restored in 1963. Park then retired from the army, was elected president and reelected in 1967, 1971, and 1978 in questionable elections.

The Park era was marked by rapid industrial modernization and extraordinary economic growth, but because much of it was financed by foreign capital, largely from the U.S., the economic benefits of South Korean growth generally did not accrue to the average citizen, causing widespread discontent. In 1972, Park changed the constitution according to his "Yushin" theory, to accrue autocratic powers and stay in power indefinitely. South Korea's continued economic expansion put it on course by the 1990s to become one of the four speedily growing Asian Tigers, along with Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan.

Unfortunately, this massive growth was undergirded by a *chaebol*, or "money clans"^[iv] system of elite economic control. Chaebol business culture values loyalty and has a strict workplace hierarchy. Chaebols tend to guarantee lifetime employment to an elite group of employees, but those who do not obtain these prized secure positions, usually gained through family, school, or hometown connections, often become disaffected.

Since the chaebols effectively wield monopolistic power over their suppliers, workers at smaller businesses that depend on the large conglomerates for revenue often suffer from depressed wages and tough working conditions —exacerbating income inequality. Some of these companies are shown in the graphic.^[v] Young people compete for a small pool of prestigious jobs at the chaebols and if not successful, they have to accept lower-paid work at smaller businesses or may not find jobs at all.



South Korean chaebols or money clan-owned firms

While often promised during political campaigns, making significant changes to the chaebol system is not easy and cannot be quick, given the scale and importance of these conglomerates to the economy. Although the public blames the opaquely operated chaebols for a series of political and business scandals and for holding back the country's economic opportunities, the chaebols continue to hold considerable political power. Their controlling families have been adept at finding ways to keep control, even as they face increasing challenges from high inheritance taxes, unhappy outside investors, and their own internal family squabbling. Major reforms require action from the National Assembly, which pro-business lobbies are likely to continue to strongly oppose.

In 1974, Park survived an assassination attempt, during which his wife was killed, allegedly on the orders of a pro-North Korean organization based in Japan. After her mother's death, Park ordered his 22-year-old daughter and the future president, Park Geun-hye, to quit her studies in France and to return to South Korea to act as "first lady." By 1979, as global economic challenges triggered double-digit inflation, President Park came under increasing political pressure. As student protests mounted, Park was assassinated by the head of his own Central Intelligence Agency at a private dinner party in Seoul.

In 1993, after more than a decade of political infighting and sometimes violent protests, Kim Young-sam, became president through peaceful transition of power, indicative of a shift in South Korean polity away from coup and

assassination as the means of transition. Elections and the rule of law determined governmental transition was further tested and upheld in presidential politics until 2024.

One notable exception, however, was the presidency of Park Geun-hye, daughter of the assassinated former president and former acting first lady. Elected in 2013 and the first democratically elected female leader of an East Asian country, she became the central figure in a wide-ranging corruption scandal by 2016 in which Park and a childhood friend were accused of conspiring to pressure companies to donate tens of millions of dollars to two nonprofit foundations. Samsung, for one, donated close to \$70 million. Prosecutors charged the company's acting head, Lee Jae-yong, with bribery, embezzlement, and perjury in exchange for business favors from Park and Choi that included help in taking control of the company. Lee was sentenced to 5 years in prison but only ended up serving one.

Park's presidential powers were suspended December 2016, and the prime minister was named acting president until elections could be held in May 2017. After convicting Park Geun-hye and spending years arguing over the length of her prison sentence, in January 2021, South Korea's top court upheld a 20-year prison sentence, bringing a seeming end to the case.

Moon Jae-in was elected president in May 2017 in a landslide. A former human rights lawyer, Moon was from the center-left Democratic Party and the son of refugees from North Korea who fled aboard a U.N. supply ship in 1950. During his campaign, Moon took a tough stance on the chaebols, vowing to punish chaebol leaders found guilty of crimes and challenging the collusive relationship between politics and big business. Moon pledged to create 810,000 public sector jobs and subsidize living expenses for young people during job searches, but many economists were skeptical as to how this could be financed.

Moon also named Kim Sang-jo, an economist who advocates for shareholder rights and chaebol reforms, as chief of the Fair Trade Commission. Kim, known as the "chaebol sniper," would seek to restore the fairness lacking in South Korea businesses and which saps the dynamism of its economy.

So much for anti-corruption campaigning. In 2021, President Moon Jae-in announced that former President Park would receive a pardon. Moon cited Park's deteriorating health and the need to "overcome unfortunate past history and promote national unity" as reasons for the pardon. She was released from prison, and Moon's successor, President Yoon Suk-yeol, invited Park to his inauguration ceremony in May 2022.

As for Lee, in mid-2021, the United States Chamber of Commerce joined Korean business groups to urge the president to pardon Lee, arguing that the billionaire

executive could help strengthen then-U.S. President Joe Biden's efforts to end American dependence on computer chips produced overseas amid the 2020-2023 global chip shortage. Lee was released on parole in August 2021 with the South Korean government arguing that it was in the nation's best interest. Koreans seemed to agree that what is good for Samsung is good for Korea with 70% of those polled in 2022 agreeing with the move.

Current Political Crisis

In May 2022, Yoon Suk-yeol was elected president of South Korea. Born in Seoul and with law degrees from Seoul National University, he played a key role in convicting former president Park Geun-hye of abuse of power as chief of the Seoul Central District Prosecutor's Office.

During the 2021 primary election, Yoon was often criticized for numerous controversial statements. In one, Yoon advocated for a 120-hour work week while criticizing President Moon's policy of a 52-hour maximum work week. Yoon also advocated deregulating food safety standards because, in his opinion “poor people should be allowed to eat inferior food for lower prices” Yoon also has implied that South Korea's feminist movement was a significant contributing factor to the nation's low birth rates. Later that same week, Yoon claimed in an interview that there was “basically no radiation leak” from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster because “the reactors themselves didn't collapse.”^[vi] Yoon was elected in March 2022.

During then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to South Korea in August 2022, part of a larger Asian tour, Yoon snubbed a meeting with her, saying that he wanted to enjoy his vacation.^[vii] Yoon discarded Moon's dovish approach to North Korea, vowing stronger security cooperation with Washington to counter accelerating North Korean efforts to expand its nuclear weapon and missile programs.

In a bombshell that rocked the world, on Dec. 3, 2024, President Yoon declared a state of emergency martial law to “safeguard a liberal South Korea from the threats posed by North Korea's communist forces and to eliminate anti-state elements.” After an early morning vote in the National Assembly, 190 lawmakers present voted unanimously to lift martial law, which Yoon formally ended about six hours after it had been declared.^[viii]

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo assumed the role of acting president pending the Constitutional Court's decision on whether to remove Yoon from office. On Dec. 7, an impeachment motion put to a parliamentary vote failed because members of the Yoon's ruling People Power Party boycotted the vote, ensuring the required quorum was not obtained.

The Democratic Party of Korea filed its second motion to impeach Yoon on Dec. 12, with the vote scheduled for Dec. 14. Many who had either not participated or had voted against the first motion changed their votes so that 204 of 300 legislators voted to impeach Yoon. Numerous other officials were threatened with impeachment, and many resigned over the declaration of martial law investigation.

On Dec. 27, the DPK voted with a simple majority, rather than the usual two-thirds majority to also impeach acting President Han Duck-soo for vetoing two special counsel bills that sought to investigate President Yoon and his wife for corruption and the martial law declaration. The DPK also cited Han for blocking the appointment of three nominees to fill vacancies in the Constitutional Court that would hear Yoon's impeachment. Han agreed to accept the outcome and Han lasted just two weeks as acting president. Finance minister Choi Sang-mok was then tasked with leading South Korea.

Korea's Constitutional Court has 180 days from the passage of the impeachment motion to review it. However, there was a further crisis due to the court not having the required number of justices to conduct the review and confusion over who would appoint new ones during the ongoing crisis. Yoon dragged out the process by not appearing in court and with other tactics and his defense even cited the United States Supreme Court's 2024 ruling in *Trump v. United States* to claim Yoon had immunity from prosecution.

On March 24, 2025, Han Duck-soo was reinstated as the nation's acting president with immediate effect after the Constitutional Court dismissed his impeachment. Seven of the Constitutional Court's eight judges had overturned or dismissed Han's impeachment, arguing the accusations against him either did not constitute legal violations or were not severe enough to justify removing him from office.^[ix]

Under the constitution, if Yoon's impeachment is upheld, the president is permanently removed from office and a new presidential election must be held within 60 days of removal. If the court takes the full 180 days to decide and removes Yoon from office, a new election might not take place until as late as August.

Ongoing Wind-Driven Wildfires Destroy Cultural Treasures

In addition to political crises, in late March, the South Korean population was dealing with massive, wind-driven wildfires that are among the country's worst ever, having ravaged the country's southern regions, killing 24 people, destroying more than 300 structures and forcing 28,800 residents to evacuate. The government's emergency response center reported that damage includes vehicles,

houses, and factories destroyed. The wildfires have burned over 40,000 acres so far. In a televised address, newly reinstated acting President Han Duck-soo said the wildfires that began on March 21 were worse than many previous ones.

The blaze also destroyed an ancient Buddhist temple complex originally built in 681 and within it many additional irreplaceable Korean cultural treasures. Government officials suspect human error caused several of the fires. This may have been through the use of burning while clearing overgrown grass in family tombs or from welding sparks.[x]

After the 2008 presidential election during the global financial crisis, when Barack Obama defeated fellow Sen. John McCain, a common joke at the time was that the winner wanted a recount, as no one would want to be responsible for managing the crisis. I imagine that might be a bit how South Korean acting President Han may feel this week.

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