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OPINION

Korea: under the influence of 'Moonshine'

The country's new president, Moon Jae-in, must act delicately on defence so as not to alienate his U.S. ally.



Moon Jae-in speaks at his inauguration ceremony as the 19th president of South Korea on May 10 in the country's capital, Seoul.

Jeon Han photograph courtesy of Korea.net/Korean Culture and Information Service



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The North Korean problem and the policy that the new South Korean government of President Moon Jae-in will pursue to address it were the dominant themes of a major annual gathering of regional security experts known as the Jeju Forum, which wrapped up in South Korea earlier this month.

Having criticized the previous administration for trying to outsource the North Korean issue to other governments, President Moon in a message to the forum promised: “We will take the lead in dealing with Korean Peninsula issues without relying on the role of foreign countries.”

He stated that he would “bring North Korea out to dialogue through persuasion and pressure and resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.” Such a feat is, of course, easier to say than to do, but it speaks to a more proactive policy towards the North, one combining pressure with engagement that has already been dubbed the “Moonshine” approach.

President Moon will need to navigate between some perilous diplomatic shoals, represented by delicate relations with China, Japan, and the United States, in embarking on a new policy tack.

Prominent amongst the issues he must manage is the future status of the U.S. ballistic missile defence system known as THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) recently deployed in South Korea pursuant to an agreement concluded by the previous government.

Already, this system has provoked a domestic controversy as the defence ministry has been accused of withholding information during a briefing about the true number of systems in the country (six as opposed to the publicly acknowledged two). President Moon has now suspended further deployment of the system beyond the two already positioned.

President Moon is set to have an initial meeting with President Donald Trump sometime later this month.

While the THAAD deployment has been presented as a prudent defensive action in the face of North Korean missile threats, it has provoked tensions with China as Beijing claims that the systems’ powerful radar enables it to “look” deeply into Chinese territory and poses a national security threat. China has backed up its diplomatic protests with discouragement of touristic traffic to South Korea and the closure of Korean-owned Lotte department stores in China, a retaliation that has already had significant economic repercussions for Seoul.

President Moon will have to be careful not to alienate his U.S. ally in handling the THAAD issues, especially given the earlier off-the-cuff remarks by President Trump to the effect that South Korea should pick up the tab for the missile defence system. While Trump’s national security adviser, General H.R. McMaster, subsequently “corrected”

this stance, it is clear that Washington could easily take offence if the new South Korean government appears ambivalent or ungrateful for the deployment of this missile defence system.

A visiting Democratic senator (Dick Durbin, ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee for Defense) pointedly stated after a meeting with President Moon “if South Korea doesn’t want the THAAD missile system, it is \$923-million that we can spend some other place.”

Beyond the immediate problem posed by THAAD, there is also the more fundamental issue of how to address the growing North Korean missile and nuclear threat. Pyongyang has not made it easy for President Moon, greeting his new administration with a ballistic missile launch a week since he assumed office. In the absence of any diplomatic traction with the North Korean regime for years, leading states may have to settle for something less than the full commitment to denuclearization that had been set as a pre-condition for resuming talks.

The combined effect of at least six UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on North Korea for its ballistic missile and nuclear weapon testing has not brought Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. Several security experts at Jeju suggested a “freeze” on these programs by the North was a more realistic condition for renewing negotiations, which would take on a phased approach with denuclearization remaining the ultimate goal.

Others noted the difficulties with this approach, including the inability to adequately verify a freeze, and the problem of appearing to accept North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state.

There remains debate over the true aims of North Korea, with some disputing the proposition that the regime has determined that it requires nuclear weapons to deter an attack against it, by arguing that the North’s conventional military capacity (e.g. the estimated 10,000-plus artillery tubes within range of Seoul) constitutes sufficient deterrence. These analysts suggest that the North’s strategic programs are designed to compel the U.S. to normalize its relations with Pyongyang or to serve as “regime consolidation” measures for the youthful leader Kim Jong-un.

Canada, as a country with significant ties to Korea, cannot be indifferent to the crisis on the peninsula.

In her June 6 foreign policy statement, Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland referred to the challenge posed by “the dictatorship in North Korea” to the liberal democratic world that Canada espouses. Of particular relevance to the evident strains in South Korea-U.S. relations was her acknowledgment of an American retreat from global leadership and her call for “middle powers” to “implicate themselves in the furtherance of peace and security.”

The new administration in Seoul creates an opportunity for the middle powers of Canada and South Korea to assume a greater role in countering threats to the “multilateral order” they both uphold.

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