

South Koreans Elect a New President

March 15, 2022

On March 9, 2022, South Koreans narrowly elected former chief prosecutor Yoon Suk-yeol as their next president. The victory by Yoon, who represents the conservative People Power Party (PPP), will change party control of South Korea's [Blue House](#), as the president's office and residence compound is known. His win also likely signals greater alignment with the United States on a number of issues followed closely by many Members of Congress, including policy toward North Korea, China, Japan, and the Indo-Pacific. In May, Yoon will replace current president Moon Jae-in, from the progressive Minjoo (Democratic) Party. The constitution of South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea, or ROK) limits presidents to one five-year term.

Key Features of the Election

The 2022 election was the closest in South Korea's history. Yoon garnered 48.6% of the vote, about 0.7% more than the Minjoo Party's Lee Jae-myung, a former Gyeonggi province governor. Turnout was a [near-record high](#) of just over 77%, notwithstanding widespread voter sentiment that this election was a choice between two [“unlikeable” candidates](#). Yoon's lack of a clear mandate, combined with the Minjoo Party's control of the National Assembly, likely will challenge his administration. Exit polls indicated domestic issues such as anemic job growth and soaring real estate prices [dominated voters' choices](#). The election revealed a stark [gender divide](#) among younger voters, with around 60% of men in their 20s supporting Yoon, who appealed to [“anti-feminist” elements](#), and a comparable percentage of 20-something women supporting Lee.

Yoon's Background

A political newcomer, Yoon had a nearly three-decade career as a prosecutor who developed a reputation for independence by investigating a number of high-profile South Korean executives and politicians. In 2016, he helped lead the investigation into a [corruption scandal](#) that led to then-President Park Geun-hye's impeachment and removal from office. Moon later appointed Yoon as Prosecutor General of South Korea, only to clash with him after Yoon [launched investigations](#) into major figures in Moon's government. Yoon resigned in March 2021 and announced his candidacy for the Presidency in July 2021.

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Implications for U.S. Policy

Yoon's statements over the course of the campaign and a [foreign policy document](#) his transition team issued after his victory indicate he endorses the expansive agenda for U.S.-ROK cooperation President Moon and President Joseph Biden outlined in their May 2021 joint statement. In a number of areas, however, Yoon's statements also suggest he may pursue policies more in line with Washington's than his predecessor.

North Korea

During the campaign, Yoon criticized the Moon government for being insufficiently committed to North Korea's denuclearization and reacting in a "[subservient](#)" manner to Pyongyang's bellicose actions. Instead, he said he would expand the ROK's [defense and deterrence capabilities](#) in conjunction with the U.S. alliance, including offensive strike capabilities and enhanced missile defense. In past ROK-DPRK military clashes, the United States often pressured South Korea to rein in its military response, which could conflict with some of Yoon's pledges. In remarks widely interpreted as a dismissal of Moon's efforts to preemptively offer a U.S.-ROK peace declaration to North Korea, the incoming president said he will only pursue a [peace treaty](#) "when and if North Korea makes active efforts in complete and verifiable denuclearization."

Yoon [proposed](#) making economic aid to North Korea and inter-Korean economic cooperation conditional upon North Korea's progress in denuclearizing. He also argued that humanitarian aid to ordinary North Koreans be provided unconditionally, and pledged to set up a permanent North-South-U.S. liaison office in the truce village of Panmunjom inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. Yoon further vowed [to normalize U.S.-ROK military exercises](#). Large-scale exercises have been curtailed since 2018, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to former President Donald Trump and Moon's cancelation of drills to [promote dialogue with North Korea](#).

China

In recent years, ROK officials generally have appeared reluctant to raise objections to Chinese behavior, most likely due to China's status as South Korea's top trade partner and its perceived importance to ROK diplomacy with North Korea. Yoon has criticized Moon's "[strategic ambiguity](#)" on U.S.-China competition, saying it had created an impression that Seoul is tilting toward Beijing. He accused Moon of being "[overly accommodating](#)" to China in 2017, when Beijing imposed harsh penalties against ROK companies in response to South Korea's agreement to deploy a U.S. terminal high altitude area defense (THAAD) unit in the ROK to protect against North Korean missiles. Following a series of North Korean missile launches in 2022, Yoon pledged to [deploy additional THAAD units](#), which would reverse one of Moon's promises to Beijing. Yoon's more assertive stance toward China resonates with increasingly [negative attitudes towards China](#) among South Koreans, particularly among those in their [20s and 30s](#).

Yoon has expressed eagerness to [increase South Korea's participation](#) in elements of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Following the election, Yoon's transition team said he eventually would seek [formal membership in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#) (the Quad) among the United States, India, Japan, and Australia. In the meantime, he will have South Korea participate in the Quad's vaccine, climate change, and emerging technology working groups.

Japan

ROK-Japan relations are perennially fraught because of a territorial dispute and sensitive historical issues from Japan's colonization of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945. Since 2018, a series of actions and

retaliatory countermeasures by both governments involving trade, security, and history-related controversies have caused South Korea-Japan relations to plummet, eroding U.S.-ROK-Japan policy coordination. ROK and Japanese leaders have not held a bilateral summit since 2019. Calling attention to Japan's "[strategic importance](#)" to South Korea, Yoon has proposed resuming [shuttle summitry](#) and establishing high-level comprehensive talks about issues of cooperation and friction. He says Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Yoshio will be [the second foreign leader he meets](#), after President Biden. Key areas to watch are whether Yoon reverses Moon's reluctance to participate in military exercises with the United States and Japan, and whether Japan welcomes South Korea's expected spring 2022 application to join the 11-member Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

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