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A new arms race on the Korean peninsula?

South Korea's new president, Yoon Suk-Yeol, revives the failed North Korea policy of his conservative predecessors — and risks a new arms race

With the inauguration of new South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol, a different North Korea policy is also taking hold – and it should make observers in Europe and beyond sit up and take notice.

Already during the presidential election campaign, Yoon emphasised that he would take a harder line towards the leadership in Pyongyang than his predecessor Moon Jae-In. For instance, Yoon stressed that he would expand military cooperation between South Korea and the US. Moreover, he would only hold talks with North Korea's ruler Kim Jong-Un given a realistic prospect of concrete results. What measures would be taken to generate such prospects, however, remained unclear.

In his inauguration speech on 10 May, President Yoon has finally hinted at what his policy towards North Korea will look like: economic support in return for complete denuclearisation as well as decisive political and military reactions to further provocations from Pyongyang. The similarities with the – failed – policy approaches of previous conservative governments are striking.

In particular, the administration headed by Lee Myung-Bak from 2008 to 2013 had tried to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme by offering economic incentives and to dissuade it from further developing military capabilities by threatening with a harsh response. Based on President Yoon's inaugural speech, it is to be expected that the next five years of South Korea's policy towards North Korea will focus primarily on these goals.

The continuation of failed policy

Unfortunately, Yoon does not seem to realise that the conditions for its

success are anything but in place. Instead, his goals and methods seem to be motivated less by current political realities, but rather by ideology and a visible demarcation from the Moon government. This kind of policy threatens, unwittingly or not, to fuel the burgeoning arms race in East Asia.

Furthermore, President Yoon's stated goal – the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula – is inconceivable without a political change in Pyongyang.

It is highly unlikely that North Korea will respond to economic incentives from South Korea. For one, Yoon has already stressed that there will be economic aid only after steps towards nuclear disarmament, which North Korea has always rejected. For another, even former US President Donald Trump – from the far stronger negotiating position of the US – failed to reach an agreement with North Korea based on economic cooperation. Kim Jong-Un can simply afford to refuse economic aid.

Furthermore, President Yoon's stated goal – the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula – is inconceivable without a political change in Pyongyang. The system led by Kim Jong-Un needs nuclear weapons to deter potential enemies. Moreover, nuclear weapons symbolically secure the political system: they embody protection from an external threat, they justify the dictatorial political system, and they are mythologised as a gift from the Kim family to the North Korean people. Nuclear weapons sustain the North Korean system and will therefore not simply be exchanged for economic support.

Growing tensions in East Asia

President Yoon's North Korea policy also has implications beyond the region. In the past, cooperation between the US and South Korea on the deployment of missile defence systems already led to disgruntlement with China. If President Yoon abandons the – at least rhetorical – policy of balance and turns towards the US, this will increase tensions in East Asia.

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Moreover, South Korea tested its own missile in March 2022 – a few days after the launch of a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile. The development of its own missiles and nuclear submarines was already pushed forward under Moon Jae-In. Neither sanctions nor the Covid-19 pandemic have substantially prevented North Korea from further developing nuclear weapons and delivery systems. The arms

race now emerging on the Korean peninsula should be a cause for concern in Brussels.

The war on Ukraine has shown Europe how regional conflicts can have a severe effect on the global economy. The Korean peninsula has long been one of the most important world trade hubs. The South Korean city of Busan hosts one the busiest ports in the world, and South Korea is one of the ten largest economies globally. While the destructive potential of conflict is enormous, fortunately there is currently no actor in the region seriously seeking to redraw national borders by military means. Nevertheless, arms races and aggressive rhetoric increase insecurity. Therefore, the EU has an interest not to react late to developments on the ground, but to act now instead.

A new wave of Covid-19 in North Korea

The current rapid increase in the number of Covid-19 cases in North Korea is a cause for concern – less because of the political than because of the humanitarian consequences. The North Korean regime has often shown strong political resilience in times of crisis. It is therefore unlikely that a wave of Covid-19 infections will trigger political change. In the worst case scenario, the North Korean leadership's policy of isolation and denial to date – coupled with the inadequate health system – will lead to a high number of deaths.

The EU could use its diplomatic capital to create momentum for dialogue channels with North Korea's political leadership on the basis of humanitarian aid.

Nevertheless, it is quite possible that North Korea will seek help abroad in view of rising incidences. For South Korea, however, this situation would be complicated. On the one hand, President Yoon promised North Korea support in fighting the pandemic during US President Joe Biden's visit to Seoul on 21 May.

On the other hand, local elections will be held in South Korea on 1 June, which are seen as the first test of the Yoon government's support. If Yoon wants to raise his political profile, he will avoid giving his political opponents ammunition by 'rewarding' North Korea with vaccines. And if South Korea and the US also expand their joint military manoeuvres, then the region will go down a familiar path that traditionally ends in North Korea rejecting dialogue.

In this situation, the EU could use its diplomatic capital to create momentum for dialogue channels with North Korea's political leadership on the basis of humanitarian aid. It is obvious that the EU cannot single-

handedly bring about the denuclearisation of North Korea or a change of course in Seoul. However, it can try to exert a de-escalating influence on Pyongyang through political networks. And it can use the partnership with Seoul to advance further possibilities for cooperation. Even if the new president in Seoul does not seem interested at the moment in finding a long-term diplomatic solution to the current problems, now is the time – given the hardening fronts in East Asia – to actively prepare such possible tracks of dialogue.



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