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New South Korean president lines up behind US war drive

On May 10, Yoon Suk-yeol took office as the new president of South Korea. His inauguration marks a return to power of the conservative party, currently known as the People Power Party. Under Yoon, Seoul plans to increasingly integrate itself into United States' war plans aimed at Russia and China.



South Korea's president-elect Yoon Suk Yeol speaks during a news conference at the National Assembly in Seoul, South Korea on March 10, 2022. (Kim Hong-ji/Pool Photo via AP)

While interspersing empty platitudes about freedom throughout his inaugural speech, Yoon made clear that his new administration would conform closely to the interests of US

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imperialism. Without directly referencing Moscow or Beijing, he stated, “We, as global citizens who enjoy real freedom, must never turn a blind eye when freedom is attacked. Freedom abides by the rules and seeks to aid others in need.”

Washington regularly trumpets “freedom” and claims that Russia and China have violated the so-called rules-based order around the world—the post-World War II order dominated by the US and in which it sets the rules—in order to justify ramping up military tensions with China and launching the US/NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. Under the guise of “aiding others,” Yoon is preparing to take part in these conflicts.

In attendance at the ceremony were Douglas Emhoff, the husband of US Vice President Kamala Harris, and Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi. Beijing sent Vice President Wang Qishan to Tuesday’s inauguration ceremony, the highest ranking Chinese official to ever attend a South Korean inauguration.

Yoon held talks with the US and Chinese dignitaries, telling Emhoff that the US-South Korean “comprehensive strategic alliance [was] a top priority foreign policy.” Wang, who is close to President Xi Jinping, invited Yoon to visit China while stating, “China sincerely supports efforts by South and North Korea to improve their relations and seek reconciliation and cooperation.” Beijing undoubtedly hopes to build closer relations with Seoul in an effort to maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.

Yoon however pledged to “bolster” the alliance with the US and to explicitly align Seoul with Washington in opposition to China during his presidential campaign. He has stacked his cabinet with figures having close connections with Washington, including his Foreign Minister Park Jin and Defense Minister Lee Jong-seop.

Park, a former lawmaker, has long-standing diplomatic ties with political circles in Washington. He served as head of the National Assembly’s foreign affairs committee from 2008–2010, which included meeting with US President Joe Biden when the latter served as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He most recently chaired South Korea’s parliamentary diplomacy forum with the US. Park also advocates closer relations with Japan.

Lee, a retired general, worked as a vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tasked with mapping out the US-South Korea joint military posture. He was previously in charge of US policy at the Defense Ministry's office of national defense policy. In addition, he earned his doctorate from Tennessee State University, focusing on the US-South Korea alliance.

Heavily committed to the alliance with Washington, the Yoon administration is adapting to the major shifts in international relations that have taken place since the beginning of the US/NATO-instigated proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. As such, Seoul's foreign and military policies are largely dictated by Washington. The US military personnel and assets stationed in South Korea are deployed in the interests of US imperialism and Seoul is expected to fall in line with the Pentagon's planning.

Yoon has already expressed support for the US retaining wartime operational control (OPCON) of the South Korean military, which means in the event of a conflict, Washington takes control of the latter's large, well-equipped armed forces. He stated on May 7, "Who takes the command should be decided based on the most effective ways of winning a war, not for any causes or ideologies."

This is also what lies behind Yoon's offer of economy assistance to North Korea in his inaugural address, saying, "If North Korea genuinely embarks on a process to complete denuclearization, we are prepared to work with the international community to present an audacious plan that will vastly strengthen North Korea's economy and improve the quality of life for its people."

The approach is similar to that of the former Trump administration, which has not been fundamentally altered under Biden. Washington is attempting to neutralize North Korea or even bring Pyongyang into its orbit as the US turns its attention to waging war first against Russia and then China.

Therefore, while prepared for a conflict with the North, the military build-up, including calls by South Korean conservatives for the deployment of a second Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery and the return of US nuclear weapons to the peninsula are aimed above all at China and the Russian far east.

Foreign Minister Park has called for the resumption of the US-Korea Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG), which has not met since January 2018. The group allows Washington and Seoul to hold discussions on strategic and policy issues regarding so-called extended deterrence, including the use of nuclear weapons.

Speaking during a confirmation hearing on April 30, Park stated, “We will reactivate the EDSCG at an early stage so that the bilateral extended deterrence cooperation between South Korea and the United States can be systematically continued through a permanent consultation mechanism.”

Biden plans to visit South Korea and Japan for summits with Yoon and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on May 21 and 23 respectively. Biden will almost certainly use his summit with Yoon to coordinate Seoul’s position on Russia and China. Yoon’s administration has already claimed that the war in Ukraine has security consequences for South Korea in Northeast Asia and is currently considering expanding so-called “humanitarian aid” to Kiev.

Yoon has also stated that, if invited, he would “positively review joining” the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a quasi-military alliance aimed at China, led by the US and including Japan, Australia, and India. Japanese media reported in April that Yoon requested to attend a Quad summit as an observer on May 24 in Tokyo, but his office denied this.

Yoon is also contemplating taking part in the NATO summit June 29–30 in Madrid, Spain, which could be his first meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida. Yoon has pledged to improve Seoul’s relationship with Tokyo, another key demand from Washington.

The US/NATO proxy war with Russia in Ukraine is ultimately aimed at the weakening and break-up of Russia in preparation for conflict with China, which Washington regards as the chief threat to its global domination. The denunciations of North Korea provide a convenient pretext for Seoul to deepen its integration into US-led war drive.

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