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## **The Revolution of Light and Korea's Democratic Triumph: Why Washington Should Pay Attention**

One of the most consequential missteps in US Korea policy under the Biden administration was the failure to engage with South Korea's domestic political realities, particularly the widespread public opposition to President Yoon Suk-yeol's increasingly authoritarian rule. By relentlessly propping up Yoon to serve Washington's geopolitical agenda and its escalating Cold War posture toward China, the Biden administration not only ignored Korean public sentiment but also fueled domestic unrest. Domestic outrage against Yoon's regime came to a head with his attempted imposition of martial law on December 3, 2024—a move that exposed the fragility of his position and deeply damaged Washington's credibility in the region.

Backing unpopular authoritarian leaders for strategic gain is hardly new in terms of US foreign policy, but as Korea's experience shows, subordinating democratic values to geopolitical priorities carries real costs. Moving forward, US policymakers—and Western media—must begin by acknowledging the historic democratic uprising that put an end to Yoon's martial law and led to the election of Lee Jae-myung on June 3. His presidency reflects a clear popular mandate that Washington can hardly afford to ignore.

The historic disconnect between US policymakers and Korean popular democratic sentiment was made painfully clear during last week's White House press briefing, when Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt was asked whether the administration had a response to South Korea's historic election. "Yes, we do!" Then, flipping through her notes, she hesitated and admitted, "Um, we do not... but I will get you one." That pause said it all: the United States had no prepared remarks on one of the most significant democratic movements in East Asia in decades. When a response finally arrived, it fell short of the moment. And the White House briefly called the election "fair" before pivoting to vague claims of Chinese

interference in democracies worldwide. There was no mention of Yoon's illegal martial law declaration, of the tanks in the streets, or the millions who stood unarmed to defend their democracy.

Rather than honoring Korea's democratic achievement, the official statement simply reaffirmed the US-ROK "ironclad alliance," emphasized trilateral military ties with Japan, and invoked boilerplate references to "shared democratic values." For many Koreans, this rang hollow—especially given the Biden administration's quiet backing of a regime that had nearly dismantled those very principles. Across the Pacific, Korea's Revolution of Light was met not with solidarity, but with strategic discomfort, silence, and at times, what felt like dismissal or even contempt. While millions of Koreans rose to defend and reclaim their democracy, Washington remained entangled in the rhetoric of power politics—issuing statements that conveyed, at best, indifference, and at worst, implicit threats. Veteran journalist Tim Shorrock, who has covered Korea for over 30 years and helped expose US complicity in the suppression of the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising, went so far as to brand the White House response to Lee's election "a vicious slander of South Korea's hard-won democracy."

### **Resisting Dictatorship, Defending Sovereignty**

On June 3, Koreans elected Lee Jae-myung, the candidate of the Democratic Party of Korea, as the nation's 21st president, delivering not just a victory at the ballot box but a powerful mandate for democracy, justice, and popular sovereignty. This was not just an election. It was a revolution, albeit a peaceful and democratic one.

The extraordinary snap presidential election triggered by the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol turned out voters in record numbers. Of 44.39 million eligible voters, 35.24 million cast their ballots, representing a staggering 79.4% turnout, the highest in nearly three decades. Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party won 49.42% of the vote—the highest share in any presidential race since South Korea's democratization in 1987—and became the first Korean president to receive over 17 million votes. His far-right opponent, Kim Moon-soo of the People Power Party, trailed with 41.15%. But the numbers tell only part of the story. This election was a national reckoning—a referendum on Yoon's unconstitutional seizure of power, the people's unyielding determination to reclaim their democracy, and above all, their sovereignty.

While former president Yoon and his collaborators continued to sow instability and chaos, the Korean people responded with extraordinary discipline, reaffirming their refusal to return to Korea's authoritarian past. Despite a deeply entrenched conservative base—about 30% of

the electorate that reliably supports right-wing candidates regardless of who runs—and Washington’s consistent favoritism toward conservative leadership, voters ultimately propelled opposition liberal candidate Lee Jae-myung to victory.

### **A Movement, Not Just a Mandate**

What happened in the wake of Yoon’s illegal martial law declaration was one of the most disciplined, rational, and nonviolent democratic uprisings in modern history. Millions of Koreans—students, workers, women, and the elderly—resisted not with weapons but with law, protest, and truth. Several dynamics shaped the unprecedented electoral outcome that followed:

**Broad-Based Support:** Despite a last-minute conservative surge, centrist and progressive voters overwhelmingly backed Lee. Exit polls showed nearly 60% of voters supported candidates who endorsed Yoon’s impeachment. The result was a clear mandate to dismantle the remnants of Yoon’s autocratic and insurrection regime.

**Regional Breakthroughs:** Lee achieved historic gains in traditionally conservative strongholds such as the southern province of Busan and the central Chungcheong region, outperforming all previous liberal candidates. His success signals a shift among moderate voters and points to a potential realignment of the electorate and a critical juncture in South Korea’s electoral history.

**Progressive Unity:** For the first time in years, Korea’s democratic-progressive parties stood united. With the exception of the Labor Party, progressive parties, mindful of the fateful 2022 election, when Yoon was elected by a razor-thin margin of 0.7%, chose not to field their own presidential candidates to minimize vote-splitting among minor progressive candidates. Civil society and grassroots organizations mobilized, and millions rallied behind Lee Jae-myung as the only viable path to end the insurrection and restore constitutional order.

Amid mass mobilization and a strong democratic resolve, and after three years of incompetent, chaotic, and failed leadership under Yoon, Koreans made a clear choice based on competence and leadership rather than ideology.

### **Koreans Voted for Responsibility in Leadership**

Lee Jae-myung trajectory is one of both personal triumph and political transformation. Born into poverty, the former child laborer rose to become a human rights attorney, a reformist mayor, and the governor of Gyeonggi Province. After narrowly losing the 2022 presidential race, he faced unprecedented repression under Yoon’s “republic of prosecutors”, with 250 elite prosecutors assigned to investigate him and over 350 raids conducted on his offices.

Undeterred, Lee continued to challenge Yoon's autocratic rule by unifying his party under progressive leadership and systematically confronting the regime's abuses.

His leadership reached its defining moment on the night of December 3, during the martial law crisis. In a contemporaneous YouTube live broadcast from the National Assembly, Lee directly appealed to the public, urging them to gather there to demand the withdrawal of martial law. His calm, resolute handling of this critical moment in the face of personal danger exemplified the highest standard of public service and leadership, deeply resonating with voters.

In a pre-election poll, 35.3% of voters cited "experience and competence" as their top priority. Having campaigned as a policy expert, a public servant, and a survivor of Korea's harshest inequalities, Lee embodied these qualities. "If anybody is up to the job, he is... He is a pragmatist with a track record of getting things done. He would hit the ground running," observed Kyung-wha Kang, President and CEO of Asia Society.

Lee wasted no time after winning the election. With no transition committee in place, he assumed official responsibilities immediately on June 4, stepping into a presidential office stripped bare by the outgoing regime, and lacking computers, documents, and even pens. Lee compared the presidential office to a tomb, an image that speaks volumes about the Yoon administration's legacy of corruption, incompetence, and institutional neglect. Lee inherits a nation still reeling from institutional sabotage. The judiciary remains opaque. Political prosecutors continue to stall investigations. Collaborators from Yoon's failed coup still hold office. And the national security apparatus remains tethered to the US-Japan military order relentlessly pushed by Biden and eagerly embraced by Yoon.

Rebuilding Korea's democracy will take more than a new president. It demands sustained civic engagement and deep structural reform against a persistent insurrectionist bloc that is actively regrouping. Lee cannot govern alone, and the people who brought him to power must remain vigilant. This urgent call for accountability extends beyond Korea's borders.

### **A Reckoning for Washington and Western Media**

Lee's victory also forces hard questions on Washington and the role of Western media in shaping the narrative around Korea's democracy. For three years under the Biden administration, the US propped up Yoon as a loyal ally while escalating tensions with North Korea, expanding trilateral military drills with Japan, and subordinating Korean sovereignty to US goals.

Yoon's attempt to impose martial law was not a rogue act, but rather the culmination of a broader authoritarian drift, fueled by powerful far-right forces and quietly enabled by the

Biden administration, which offered Yoon uncritical support, despite mounting warnings about his systematic erosion of civil liberties. To claim that the Biden administration, with its extensive influence over Korea's domestic and foreign affairs, was unaware of Yoon's martial law plot is not only implausible, but disingenuous. Yoon's failed coup revealed not only his own desperation but also the Biden administration's deeper anxiety over safeguarding its top strategic objective: advancing a new Cold War posture against China through the Korea-US-Japan alliance.

Throughout the crisis, Biden officials focused on the preservation of this alliance, a cornerstone of US military dominance in the region, rather than supporting Korea's democracy and sovereignty.

This posture was made clear in a U.S. Congressional Research Service report released shortly after Yoon's impeachment in December 2024. The report criticized Lee for warning against the risks of abandoning Korea's balanced foreign policy between the U.S. and China. At the same time, the report praised Yoon's foreign policy record during the martial law crisis, framing Lee's position as opposition to Yoon's staunchly pro-American, pro-Japanese, and anti-North Korea and China stance.

This alignment-focused approach was further underscored by Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Seoul in early January, even as impeachment proceedings against Yoon were still unfolding. Rather than expressing solidarity with Korea's democratic movement, Blinken's presence reinforced Washington's fixation on military alliance over democratic legitimacy.

After Yoon's impeachment and Kishida's resignation, the Biden administration's priority remained fixed on reinforcing the "Axis of War" represented by the US-Japan-South Korea alliance rather than safeguarding Korea's democracy. Just ten days after Blinken's visit, as millions of Koreans were braving freezing temperatures to resist Yoon's insurrection, the US staged joint aerial military exercises in Korean airspace, turning the skies above the democratic uprising into a theater for US-led military force.

Then, on January 16, the Biden administration formally objected to an opposition-led investigation into the national security risks posed by Yoon's aggressive promotion of the US-Japan-South Korea alliance. In Korea, this alliance has been widely perceived as escalating regional tensions and compromising national sovereignty. Biden officials questioned why diplomatic "achievements" like the trilateral pact were cited in the articles of impeachment against Yoon and pressured Korean lawmakers to forgo investigating Yoon for heightening the potential of future conflict with North Korea and China via his involvement

of Korea in Washington's trilateral military pact. In short, the Biden administration succeeded in curtailing the process of holding Yoon accountable for his insurrection in order to serve its own ends.

These events revealed the sobering truth that the gravest threat to Korean democracy may no longer come from within the country, but from a Washington security establishment increasingly disconnected from the political realities on the ground, and driven by a foreign policy shaped by a flawed and misguided vision. Seen in this light, Yoon's failed coup represents not only the collapse of an authoritarian leader's ambitions but also the failure of the Biden administration's Korea policy, which was heavily influenced by pro-Japanese security advisors and anti-China hawks like Kurt Campbell.

Yoon Suk-yeol's collapse highlights a simple truth: any US policy in Korea that ignores Korean public opinion is bound to fail. The Trump administration has the opportunity to reset US-South Korea relations by acknowledging Korean interests and realities. A unique asset that President Trump brings is his past outreach to North Korea, which, while ultimately unsuccessful, was widely supported by Koreans and broke with Washington orthodoxy. More than 80% of Koreans supported Trump's engagement with North Korea during his first term, viewing it as a bold step toward peace on the Korean Peninsula. A 2025 poll by the American Friends Service Committee shows continuing strong public support in the US as well, with 70% favoring renewed talks and 75% backing cooperation to repatriate Korean War remains. These figures suggest strong backing for diplomacy over escalation, and for a policy that aligns with both American and Korean hopes for peace.

### **The “Revolution of Light”**

Western media outlets have continued to echo hollow narratives about Korea's democratic uprising and the ensuing election, with major news organizations such as *The New York Times*, BBC, and CNN failing to highlight the real threat: tanks deployed by an authoritarian faction backed by the United States. Even after Lee Jae-myung's decisive victory, much of the coverage framed him not as the embodiment of Korea's democratic will, but as a potential risk to the US alliance. This framing is both condescending and irresponsible. It reduces Korea's democratic choice to a footnote in the American strategic calculus and erases the deeper meaning of a grassroots movement led by ordinary citizens whose rallying cries were democracy and sovereignty rather than US military priorities.

But the so-called “Revolution of Light” that brought Lee Jae-myung to the presidency transcends the dismissive portrayals offered by foreign media. For 124 days, from December 3, 2024, to April 4, 2025, millions of Korean people stood unwavering. More than ten

million marched to defend the National Assembly, facing down soldiers and tanks. They resisted authoritarianism and oppression, and above all, they voted. One protester said it best: “Even when soldiers forced their way in, we followed legal procedures, removed the leader, and elected a new one. This is democracy.”

Lee’s election marks not just an end to authoritarianism, but also the dawn of Korea’s democratic revolution. The future of Korea belongs to its people, and as Washington charts a new path with Korea’s incoming president, it should be guided by the words of John Adams, who centuries ago keenly observed that “*the right of a nation to govern itself is the most sacred of all political rights.*”

Simone Chun is a researcher and activist focusing on inter-Korean relations and U.S. foreign policy in the Korean Peninsula. She currently serves on the Korea Policy Institute Board of Directors and the advisory board for CODEPINK. She has over 20 years of teaching and research experience in the United States and has been a central contributor to the creation of a number of interdisciplinary Asian and Korean Studies degree programs. She has served as an assistant professor at Suffolk University, an associate-in-research at Harvard University’s Korea Institute, and a lecturer at Northeastern University. Follow her on Twitter at @simonechun.

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