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# ROK-US POLICY BRIEF

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THE U.S. PERSPECTIVE  
ON KOREAN DEMOCRACY:  
SEOUL'S POLITICAL CRISIS AND  
WASHINGTON'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

BY JOSH ROGIN



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Josh Rogin is a columnist for the Global Opinions section of the Washington Post and a political analyst with CNN. He is also the author of *Chaos Under Heaven: Trump, Xi, and the Battle for the 21st Century*, released March, 2021 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. Previously, Josh has covered foreign policy and national security for Bloomberg View, Newsweek, The Daily Beast, Foreign Policy magazine, Congressional Quarterly, Federal Computer Week magazine, and Japan's Asahi Shimbun. His work has been featured on outlets including NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX, MSNBC, NPR, and many more. Josh has been recognized with the Interaction Award for Excellence in International Reporting and as a Finalist for the Livingston Award for Young Journalists. He has also received journalism fellowships from the Knight Foundation, the East-West Center, and the National Press Foundation. Josh holds a BA in international affairs from the George Washington University and studied at Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan. He lives in Washington, DC with his wife Ali Rogin of the PBS News Hour.



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# THE U.S. PERSPECTIVE ON KOREAN DEMOCRACY: SEOUL'S POLITICAL CRISIS AND WASHINGTON'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

**JOSH ROGIN**

WASHINGTON POST

January 2025

South Korea's ongoing leadership crisis is impacting the U.S.-South Korea relationship at a time of political transition in the United States, as President-elect Donald Trump prepares to return to office. These parallel political dramas in Washington and Seoul have injected unprecedented uncertainty into the alliance, reversing its previously upward trajectory. President Yoon Suk Yeol's December 3 declaration of martial law and the ensuing chaos stands to undermine the reliability of the South Korean government and Washington's confidence in the relationship. Meanwhile, Seoul has no leader to engage with Trump, placing it at a diplomatic disadvantage as the new administration forms its policies.

**This article argues South Korea's ongoing political upheaval increases the risk of strategic and diplomatic distance between Washington and Seoul, which could have negative implications for the bilateral relationship, the regional balance of power, and South Korea's role in global issues.**

This article argues South Korea's ongoing political upheaval increases the risk of strategic and diplomatic distance between Washington and Seoul, which could have negative implications for the bilateral relationship, the regional balance of power, and South Korea's role in global issues. Alliance supporters in both capitals should redouble efforts to reinforce the relationship

and bolster its support among their domestic populations, to avoid long-term damage. But until or unless South Korea's leadership struggle is resolved, such efforts are unlikely to succeed.

## **Washington's View of the Martial Law Fiasco**

Yoon's surprise actions on December 3 launched a nationwide constitutional crisis that left most Americans shocked and confused. Yoon's attempted power grab by force contradicted the carefully constructed image he had cultivated

in Washington as a reliable democratic leader. Yoon hosted a [“Summit for Democracy,”](#) last March, one of President Joe Biden’s signature diplomatic initiatives. The Biden administration also credited Yoon for playing a key role in repairing relations with Japan, which enabled unprecedented U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation, as displayed during the [Camp David summit of 2023](#).

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Although Yoon’s foreign policy faced headwinds at home, U.S. lawmakers in both parties in Washington admired his willingness to stand with the West, for example by [deepening](#) South Korea’s relationship with NATO and [\(indirectly\) helping Ukraine](#) fight off Russia’s invasion. His viral rendition of the song [“American Pie”](#) at his White House State Dinner endeared him to Americans. Most Washingtonians were not following his domestic political fights or his wife’s [alleged corruption scandal](#). Against this positive image, his attempt to impose martial law was all that more surprising.

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The sudden crisis in Seoul also marked a breakdown in communications between the U.S. and South Korean governments. The U.S.-government not notified in advance. The U.S. Embassy in Seoul could not reach South Korea’s foreign ministry with urgent questions about the situation. The South Korean embassy in Washington, also in the dark, could not respond

to State Department inquiries. Considering the close integration of U.S. and South Korean military forces, an attempted military takeover directly impacts U.S. security planning. But there was no communication, much less coordination, for several hours. This set a worrying precedent that adversaries surely noticed.

“It exposed communications weaknesses within the alliance,” said Jenny Town, senior fellow at the Stimson Center. “Yoon completely undermined every image of the relationship that he tried to build up over the last three years.”

## **Trump’s History and Views on the U.S.-South Korea Relationship**

South Korea’s political crisis comes at an unfortunate time for the bilateral relationship, as Washington is distracted by its own political transition. The lame duck Biden administration issued [bland statements](#) urging South Korean leaders to resolve their disputes “peacefully and in accordance with the rule of law.” Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.), the retiring chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, issued a statement saying he was [“monitoring”](#) the situation. The incoming Trump administration has said nothing about the issue.

Meanwhile, the government in Seoul has no clear leader to offer for a direct meeting with Trump. Without knowing which party will emerge on top, even lower-level incoming Trump officials are unlikely to take meetings with South

Korean officials. Shinsegae Group Chairman Jeong Yong-jin [visited Mar-a-Lago](#) in late December, becoming the only senior South Korean figure to meet with Trump since his election victory. This bodes poorly for South Korea's ability to gain access and influence with the incoming administration.

Trump's skepticism of the U.S.-South Korea alliance is well-documented. During his first term, Trump repeatedly pressured Seoul to increase its contribution under the Special Measures Agreement that governs South Korea's hosting of U.S. troops. Trump [struck a temporary deal](#) in 2019 with President Moon Jae-in, which was finalized by the Biden administration in 2021. In October, the Biden administration [agreed to terms](#) for renewing that deal ahead of schedule - an attempt to avoid it becoming an irritant in the relationship should Trump return to office. But Trump

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may reopen the issue anyway. During his 2024 campaign, Trump made new threats and [demanded a ten-fold increase](#) in Seoul's financial obligations.

Trump may also revive [his threats](#) to significantly draw down the number of U.S. troops in South Korea. In his first term, alliance-focused members of his senior national security team were able to dissuade Trump from following through. In his second term, less alliance-friendly officials

may be in the room. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and incoming National Security Adviser Mike Waltz are supporters of the troop deployments, but their ability to steer Trump's thinking remains to be seen.

"He is going to try to do the things he couldn't do in the first term, like draw down U.S. troops in South Korea." said Victor Cha, Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "For the South Koreans to be effectively leaderless when Trump is coming in is the worst-case scenario for U.S.-ROK relations."

## **Diplomatic Implications of a Leadership Change in Seoul**

Yoon's foreign policy initiatives, while controversial domestically, were popular in Washington and other Western capitals. His downfall and the possible ascendance of Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) government has regional and global implications. In Washington, many view the DPK as more skeptical of the U.S. alliance, more conciliatory toward North Korea, more nationalist toward Japan, and inclined to seek more balance between Washington and Beijing.

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A DPK-led South Korean government could be less willing to cave to Trump's pressure regarding cost sharing. A DPK government could be more amenable to Trump's desire to reduce the U.S. troop presence in South Korea, albeit for

different reasons. Some believe that a DPK government might also be more aligned with Trump on engaging North Korea, because it was under the Moon government Trump pursued diplomatic negotiations with Kim Jong Un. Those negotiations ultimately failed and now Pyongyang seems less inclined to engage. But if Trump decided to offer North Korea incentives to resume talks, a DPK president might be more cooperative.

Regarding China, the prospects for U.S.-South Korea cooperation going forward are less clear. Although the incoming Trump team has sent mixed signals about how it will approach Beijing, China hawks occupy most of the senior national security positions. Even Trump officials who are skeptical of U.S. intervention in places like Ukraine, such as incoming Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby, believe that China's military buildup, nuclear expansion, and threatening moves toward Taiwan demand more U.S. and allied attention and investment. They are likely to view any "balancing" attempts by Seoul as unhelpful.

"It's ironic that Trump may be more in alignment with South Korean progressives than conservatives in some areas," said Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation. "But the biggest source of tension between the two camps would be on China."

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## The Way Forward

The biggest risk posed by South Korea's ongoing political turmoil is that the United States could disregard Seoul completely in favor of engagement with Beijing, Tokyo and others - a 2025 version of "[Korea passing.](#)" Lack of momentum in the U.S.-South Korea relationship could compromise important joint projects, such as reorienting global supply chains away from dependence on China (known as "[friendshoring](#)"), deterring Chinese and North Korean aggression, and producing munitions Ukraine needs to resist Russian aggression.

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Unlike its predecessor, the incoming Trump administration is not likely to prioritize promotion of shared values like democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. But Trump will be interested in making deals with any government that can advance shared interests. South Korea needs a seat at that table but currently has no leader to sit in it. Until South Korea sorts out its political future, its own interests as well as the credibility of the U.S.-South Korea relationship will suffer.

*The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.*

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