

CHALLENGES YOON FACES AT THE END OF 2024

by
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Yoon Suk-yeol, the president of South Korea (ROK), and his administration are currently dealing with both domestic concerns pertaining to Yoon's credibility among Koreans as well as international challenges brought on by the re-election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States of America (U.S.) and North Korea's (DPRK) cooperation with Russia. With 2024 drawing to a close and Yoon's presidential term being at its halfway point, it is imperative that Yoon reassess strategies and make preparations to tackle these challenges in the days ahead.

Domestic Obstacles

Yoon and his wife have been involved in several scandals throughout his presidency. However, currently Yoon's legitimacy and credibility have been called into question due to him allegedly [manipulating public polls for personal gain](#), thus violating the ROK's [political funding laws](#).

The accusations apply to both Yoon's own presidential campaign and [the People Power Party's \(PPP\) nominees for the 2022 parliamentary elections](#). Evidence supporting the claims include [recordings](#) of Yoon, the then-president-elect, requesting the PPP nomination committee to consider Kim Young-sun's, a former lawmaker for the PPP, candidacy. Furthermore, according to witnesses, Yoon and his wife paid [Myung Tae-kyun](#), the owner of a public polling company, to influence surveys in favor of Kim and Yoon during each of their campaigns.

Public prosecutors in Korea have [issued arrest warrants](#) for Kim and Myung, while the opposition parties are petitioning for [a special counsel bill](#) to investigate the accusations made against Yoon's wife. In his speech marking the halfway

point of his presidency, [Yoon acknowledged](#) his errors and voiced regret yet affirmed that he was [unwilling](#) to carry out the opposition's suggestion for a special counsel bill. Such a legislation, Yoon contended, would not be a "legal method" to probe such problems and would instead be "political propaganda" for the opposing parties. Yoon's current refusal to investigate the claims has led to [public demonstrations](#) in which Koreans have expressed their outrage of Yoon misusing his power to shield his wife from legal repercussions that might arise from a potential investigation as well as [demanding Yoon's resignation](#). In addition to the demonstrations, the scandals have exacerbated political tensions within the ROK parliament, which has impeded its operations.

Yoon needs to reevaluate his current approach to handling the scandals involving him and his wife as they showed to have a detrimental effect, on almost all political issues. Yoon's administration and presidency might be forced to stand down if further action isn't taken, which might lead to political instability at a time when the ROK is facing significant financial and military difficulties.

Challenges to ROK-U.S. Relations under Trump 2.0

Trump's most well-known election pledge revolves on [improving the U.S. economy](#), which he could pursue by leveraging [the ROK's increased reliance on the U.S.](#) for [trade](#) and military support. Trump has previously described the ROK as a "[money machine](#)" and a "very wealthy country," underscoring the likelihood of this occurring and hence the creation of future financial and military challenges Yoon will have to face under Trump 2.0.

The Trump administration's [protectionist trade policies](#) include the desire to put 10-20 percent tariffs on imports, ostensibly to benefit domestic businesses and to generate revenue for the U.S. government. Given that [the U.S. currently is the ROK's largest export destination](#), the imposition of these tariffs ultimately would be unfavorable to the country's economy. To avoid the cost of tariffs, ROK companies may have to increase their on-site manufacturing

expenditures, by moving parts of their production to the U.S., which would cost the ROK approximately [\\$44.8 USD billion in lost export earnings](#).

Additionally, Trump may also threaten to withdraw the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) as leverage to pressure the ROK to increase its financial contribution to [the Special Measures Agreement \(SMA\)](#). During his last administration, Trump called the ROK a freeloader of the American military and requested a significant [increase in its SMA contribution](#) to as much as \$10 billion, roughly nine times what they presently pay. Just days before the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the U.S. (under the Biden administration) and the ROK signed [the 12th SMA cost-sharing agreement](#), seemingly in an effort to make the alliance more [resistant to the re-election of Trump](#). The agreement should continue until 2030 with the ROK paying \$1.19 billion in 2026, an increase of 8.3 percent from 2025.

However, given the heightened level of insecurity on the Korean Peninsula due to [DPRK's growing cooperation with Russia](#), Trump might capitalize on the situation to pressure Yoon to renegotiate the cost-sharing agreement. With the additional negotiating leverage, Trump would be able to secure a more favorable agreement. Trump's quest for financial gain, however, would negatively influence U.S.- ROK military and trade relations.

[Yoon must prepare for these scenarios](#), potentially by striving to enhance the ROK's military and trade cooperation with other nations in an effort to counteract the country's growing reliance on the U.S. and therefore reduce some of Trump's leverage.

DPRK troops in Russia Ukraine – How Should Yoon React?

[DPRK and Russia signed a “Comprehensive Partnership” treaty in June 2024](#), formalizing their military ties and extending their military cooperation to a more extensive defense partnership that includes direct military assistance. Consequently, [DPRK has dispatched troops](#) to support Russia in its war of aggression in Ukraine. Yoon and his government

are faced with new security challenges as DPRK stands to gain both militarily and economically in exchange for its military support.

With the possibility of further economic assistance from Russia, possibly in the form of food and energy, the regime can further lessen the effects of international sanctions. Furthermore, reports states that [DPRK soldiers receive USD 2,000](#) each month, thus bringing in foreign currency to its economy. Additionally, Russia has provided the DPRK with [anti-air missiles](#), according to the ROK's National Security Advisor Shin Won-sik, raising further international concerns that it also will provide ballistic missile, nuclear, and [submarine technologies](#).

These technologies would allow the Kim regime to strengthen the state's military capabilities, consequently heightening tension on the Korean Peninsula as well as potentially start a military-technology race between the ROK and DPRK. Likewise, the DPRK will acquire important knowledge about contemporary warfare, by sending its troops to fight in Ukraine, which it may utilize against the ROK later on. DPRK's cooperation with Russia will ultimately see it advance militarily and economically, diminishing the ROK's sense of security.

[On November 27](#), Yoon welcomed a delegation from Ukraine, wherein he expressed hope of the ROK and Ukraine uniting in introducing effective countermeasures to deal with the shared security threat posed by Russia-North Korea military cooperation. Yoon, however, insisted that the key determinant of whether the ROK will supply Ukraine with weapons would be based on the DPRK's military actions in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. It is reasonable that Yoon is hesitant to commit to arming Ukraine, but if he hopes to gain a future ally in Ukraine and, by extension, the rest of Europe, he must be ready to move quickly and reevaluate his current course of action.

Recommendations

In order to manage the challenges posed by Trump

2.0 and the DPRK's growing cooperation with Russia, Yoon must first put an end to the scandals involving him and his wife, securing support from his people and parliament. The public questioning of Yoon's credibility are an unnecessary inconvenience at a time when political stability in the ROK is of utmost importance. In order to satisfy the demands of the Korean people, ensuring them that everyone is treated fairly under the law, Yoon must change his current position and allow an investigation into his wife's possible wrongdoings. This does not necessarily entail supporting the opposition's special counsel measure, but it does include conducting some investigation into the matter. One thing is certain: his current approach of trying to avoid the matter does not work.

Increased interaction with Europe and the European Union (EU), could be a potential means to meet the challenges posed by Trump 2.0 and DPRK-Russia collaboration. Trade-wise, expanding cooperation with the EU would further diversify the ROK's trade relationships, strengthening supply chain resilience and limiting Trump's influence over the ROK's export earnings.

Military-wise, further cooperation with the EU could mitigate some of the insecurities regarding military support from the U.S. The EU and the ROK have already started to deepen their military cooperation in reaction to the DPRK troops' engagement in Ukraine by signing a security and defense agreement on [November 4, 2024](#).

The goal of the agreements policy framework is to identify and coordinate more cooperation in critical sectors such nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, maritime security, and countering hybrid threats. But in order to fully win over the EU and, by extension, a number of NATO nations, Yoon must be more proactive and daring in his support to Ukraine – including sending arms. In conclusion, Yoon should increase the ROK's existing engagement in Ukraine if he wishes to ensure future support from the EU and its citizens in the case of an act of aggression by the DPRK.

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