

MARTIAL LAW AND POLITICAL POLARIZATION: WHAT'S IN STORE FOR SOUTH KOREA?

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On December 3, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared emergency martial law, shocking both the country and the rest of the world. However, the martial law was only in place for a few hours before being rescinded by the National Assembly. Yoon's decision to impose martial law sparked protests in both civic society and the opposition, with many urging that he and his supporters accept responsibility for their actions. Following weeks of uncertainty and a lack of consistent action to deal with the fallout from the martial law debacle, the National Assembly impeached Yoon on December 14, stripping him of presidential powers while the Constitutional Court conducts an investigation. The long-term implications, both domestic and external, will be significant, as South Korea continues to face uncertainty due to radical changes in leadership, prolonged political polarization, and an unclear foreign policy direction over the next 6-12 months.

Photo credit: Jo Hyun-seo

On December 3, South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared emergency martial law, shocking the country and the world alike. Yoon stated that it was critical to protect the liberal South Korea (ROK) from threats posed by North Korean (DPRK) communist forces in the opposition parties, and to eradicate anti-state elements. However, the martial law was only in effect for a few hours before being repealed by the National Assembly (the

parliament), with 190 votes out of 300 in favor of the abolition.¹ With the collective memory of the country's authoritarian history still fresh in people's minds, Yoon's decision to declare martial law has sparked protests in both civic society and the opposition demanding that he accept responsibility for his actions by resigning.² Following weeks of uncertainty and a lack of consistent action to deal with the fallout from the martial law disaster, the

National Assembly impeached Yoon on December 14, stripping him of presidential powers while the Constitutional Court investigates. With the ROK facing international challenges from both the incoming Trump administration and from the increased cooperation between the DPRK and Russia, the ROK cannot afford political instability due to increased domestic political polarization. The timing could not have come at a worse moment.

Martial Law and an Authoritarian Past

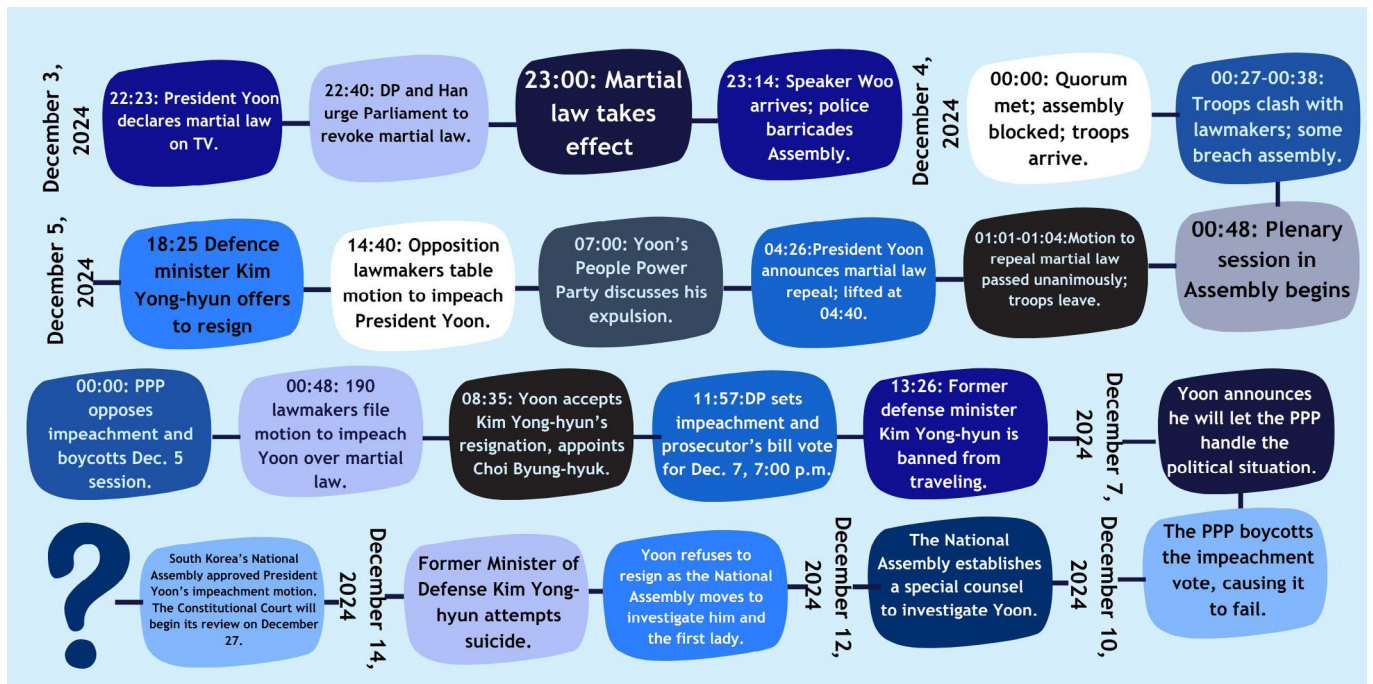
According to the ROK constitution, the president may invoke the Martial Law Act in the event of armed conflict or other national emergencies judged similar in intensity, with the goal of maintaining public safety and order. In the ROK, the martial law legal framework is divided into two categories: security martial law and emergency martial law. Yoon employed emergency martial law, which gave the military commander government powers, including the ability to limit media freedoms, prohibit public meetings, and overturn civilian court processes. Fundamental safeguards for imposing martial law exists, with the president's obligation to swiftly notify the National Assembly, who has the right to remove martial law with a majority vote. If the parliament demands its termination, the president is legally obligated to comply.³

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Martial law has historically been employed by political figures in the ROK, particularly during the turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1980s, as a means to carry out state coups to achieve authoritarian rule of the country. As a result, the collective memory among the South Korean population associates martial law with politicians wielding military authority to establish and prolong authoritarian rule, typically at the expense of civil liberties. For example, in 1972, President Chung-hee Park attempted a state coup to secure himself dictatorial powers by using martial law.⁴ All these memories are still very strong in the public sentiment and generally the public exercise the hard won democratic liberties in a peaceful manner.

December 2024 – Timeline

Around 10:30 p.m. on December 3, 2024, President Yoon declared emergency martial law in the ROK after asserting that the main opposition, the Democratic Party (DP), was being a “*legislative dictatorship*” that has trampled on the ROK’s constitutional order and committed “*anti-state activities*”. Furthermore, Yoon emphasized this by citing how the opposition’s repeated impeachment motions and unilateral budget reductions were undermining state operations.⁵ Yoon nominated Army Gen. Park An-su as the martial law commander, who issued an edict prohibiting any political activity and deployed special operations personnel to the National Assembly compound. Only 10 minutes later, the main opposition (DP) convened an emergency parliamentary session, with leader Lee Jae-myung requesting the National Assembly to lift the martial law. However, around midnight, going into December 4, the assembly’s main chamber was sealed from the inside to prevent the parliament from assembling and hence lift martial law. Armed forces penetrated the assembly’s main building around 00:40 a.m., allowing the parliament to convene and revoke the martial law around 1 a.m., with 190 of the 300 parliamentarians voting in favor of the motion.⁶ Yoon issued a declaration around 4:30 a.m., formally lifting the emergency martial law, thus acknowledging the parliament’s bipartisan vote.



As a result of the eventful night, at 2:40 p.m. on December 4, the main opposition, along with the DP and five other minor parties, presented a motion to impeach President Yoon to the bills office at the National Assembly.⁷ Not long after submitting the motion against Yoon, the DP likewise presented a motion to impeach then Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun. Additionally, civil society and members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), one of South Korea's largest umbrella labor groups, took to the streets to protest and demand that Yoon accept responsibility for his actions by resigning.⁸

For the first time since his failed attempt at martial law on December 3, President Yoon delivered a televised address on December 7, the day of the first impeachment vote, in which he declared that he would allow his party (PPP), and it's then leader Han Dong-hoon, to take charge of the situation by stabilizing the political situation and determining the issue in relation to the remainder of his presidential term.⁹ Later that day, Yoon's party, the People Power Party (PPP), boycotted the first impeachment vote, resulting in the motion being scrapped due to not enough lawmakers participating.¹⁰ The opposition

needed at least eight votes from Yoon's party (PPP) to get the two-thirds majority required to impeach the president. PPP lawmakers left after voting on a different resolution, with only three of them casting votes.

Following the failed impeachment vote, the National Assembly enacted a bill on December 10 establishing a permanent special counsel to examine the insurrection¹¹ allegations against Yoon, including imposing a travel ban on the president.¹² On December 12, Yoon changed his mind about allowing Han and the PPP to handle his resignation, stating that he was not accountable for the insurrection charges raised against him and that he will fight until the end to maintain his presidency.¹³ The National Assembly also passed a motion allowing a special counsel to investigate Yoon and the events of December 3, as well as a bill recommending a special investigation of the first lady.¹⁴

Finally, on December 14, the National Assembly decided to impeach Yoon and passed the motion 204 to 85. The matter was afterwards transferred to the Constitutional Court, which has 180 days to

investigate the claims, and if Yoon is found guilty, a presidential election in the Republic of Korea is expected to take place as early as next summer. The political scene is undergoing rapid transition as key players are stepping down, accepting responsibility for the country's upheaval after the martial law debacle. Among these is PPP party leader Han who announced his retirement from the party on December 16.

Consequently, the future political leadership of the ROK remains uncertain, as growing tensions caused by political polarization continue to produce political instability in the country.

Political Polarization – the Evil of Instability in the ROK?

Yoon allegedly attempted a self-coup, defined as when a person who “*obtained power through constitutional means overturns that same constitutional system in order to perpetuate or permanently extend his or her authority,*” by declaring emergency martial law.¹⁵ In the days that followed, then PPP leader Han revealed evidence exposing Yoon's ambition to arrest major political individuals, including DP leaders and Han himself, on the grounds of being anti-state forces and supporters of the DPRK, and to capture legislative control in the country.¹⁶ However, Yoon's reasoning for cracking down on the opposition lacks substance since the DPRK has of late not substantially increased its military activities against the ROK as well as not providing any evidence supporting his claims. On the contrary, a very troubling fact has emerged, asserting that Yoon and his supporters instructed the ROK Chief of Defense to “provoke” the DPRK before martial law was imposed, by carrying out military maneuvers over North Korean territory, which he apparently refused to do.¹⁷

Nonetheless, Yoon had been suffering politically in the run-up to December 3, due to increased tensions with the opposition, which now owns the majority of seats in the parliament and is blocking

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him from passing legislation as a result of increased political polarization between the parties. Yoon and his wife are also embroiled in scandals, with him reportedly manipulating public polls for personal gain, eroding his legitimacy and credibility with the people. Prior to the declaration of martial law, public polls indicated that 58 percent of the South Korean populace wanted Yoon to resign, despite the fact that he was only halfway through his presidential term. With Yoon both struggling to get his motions through parliament and public opinion deteriorating, he may have viewed martial law as the last way of holding power.¹⁸

The claim that this was Yoon's goal is further reinforced by his attempt to neutralize the National Assembly by denying members admittance and preventing them from carrying out their constitutional right to revoke martial law. Numerous evidence supporting this has emerged. Lt. Gen. Kwak Jong-keun, chief of the Army Special Warfare Command, confirmed that then Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun issued an order for the military to prevent 150 lawmakers, the number of legislators

required to carry out a majority vote, from gathering at the National Assembly on President Yoon's directives.¹⁹ Additionally, evidence implying that just three hours before Yoon declared martial law, a meeting was held at a presidential safehouse with Kim Yong-hyun and Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency Chief Kim Bong-sik, during which Korean National Police Agency Commissioner Cho Ji-ho and SMPA Chief Kim were instructed to send personnel to 10 locations, including the National Assembly, and block them. Both Cho and Kim claim that they did not obey orders, with Cho telling investigators that he refused to arrest Yoon's political opponents even after he was contacted multiple times.²⁰

The mounting evidence that Yoon planned martial law and intended to prevent the National Assembly from revoking it, supports the present charges that Yoon is accountable for insurrection. On December 9, a parliamentary committee approved a motion designating a permanent special counsel to examine treason allegations against President Yoon, with

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him facing criminal charges for insurrection.²¹ The ROK legislation defines insurrection as any attempt to “*overthrow government organs established by the Constitution or to render their functions impossible through the use of force.*”²²

Changing Minds and Political Ambitions

Ultimately, in the aftermath of the martial law debacle, political polarization continues to cause instability in the ROK, with both the PPP and the DP employing various maneuvers to attain their own political goals. Similarly, the PPP and Yoon's constant change of mind on how to handle the immediate crisis just prolonged it, and even made the leadership of the PPP appear “unconstitutional” in its attempt to develop some form of “hybrid-rule”, not supported by the constitution.

Following the failure of the motion to impeach Yoon on December 7 in the National Assembly, the then PPP leader, Han, stated that President Yoon had agreed to be relieved of his duties for the remaining of his term and that he, as party leader, would take responsibility for national governance, including foreign affairs and national defense, alongside Prime Minister Han Duck-soo. Han had laid down the party line by advocating for voting against the first impeachment motion, arguing that having him and the prime minister taking over would be a more orderly solution to Yoon's resignation as president. The opposition, led by the DP, opposed this solution, claiming that it was only a means of delaying Yoon's fate while Han attempted to guarantee his own political lifeline by assuming control of the government, thus intending a second self-coup.²³

However, on December 12, Yoon and Han changed their minds once again. Yoon attempted to argue in a televised speech that his actions in imposing martial law were constitutional and that he was not guilty of insurrection. He also changed his mind on letting Han and the PPP handle his resignation,

contradicting his earlier commitment to relinquish decision-making authority over his term and state matters, asserting that he would fight until the end. Han also revised his former stance on Yoon's "orderly exit" and declared support for his impeachment, urging his party's members to vote according to their own convictions for the second impeachment vote on December 14. Han also suggested that Yoon's speech should be interpreted as a confession to insurrection, and that an impeachment motion was the last resort.²⁴

Despite the DP's appearance of walking a righteous path in holding Yoon accountable for his conduct, the party nevertheless has its own political goals in wanting the President to resign soon and a presidential election to be held in the near future. Lee Jae-myung, the DP's leader, ran for president alongside Yoon in 2022 and still aspires to be elected as president. However, as appears to be the trend with South Korean legislators, Lee is facing multiple different trials on corruption and other claims, which, if found guilty, would prevent him from running for president in the 2027 election.²⁵ It would thus be advantageous for Lee if the presidential elections were held earlier, with Yoon impeached or resigning, as his criminal charges would not have been tried in court as yet, potentially precluding him from announcing his candidacy. Following the PPP's recent unpredictability and lack of a firm stance in dealing with Yoon, a public poll conducted by Gallup Korea revealed that support for the PPP fell 3 percentage points from the previous week to 24 percent, while support for the main opposition DP increased 3 percentage points to 40 percent. It reflects the most significant disparity in support for the DP and the PPP since the current administration began.²⁶ Yoon won by a narrow margin in 2022, and the PPP's present unpopularity bodes well for Lee and DP's chances of winning a presidential election, if held in the nearest future.

Accountability and Internal Implications

With the impeachment vote passed by the National Assembly on December 14, the political future of South Korean democracy is now back on the constitutional path. However, several parallel legal proceedings are underway against members of the PPP, the military and the police; already several senior officials have resigned or been forced to resign. Evidently these proceedings will take time and leave uncertainties about the outcome, and the new appointees need time to return the affected institutions to full and professional functioning. Trust is something that does not come with just an appointment, it needs to be earned.

Military implications

For South Korea's military readiness, the public sentiment or support for the military and its long-term combat capability including its alliance with the U.S., the martial law declaration and its aftermath will have major implications. Two different observations can be made. First, several leading officials/generals, like the former Minister of Defense, the Chief of Defense Intelligence, the Commander of Capital Defense Command and the Commander of the Special Warfare Command have been forced to leave their positions. Even if successors are appointed soon, it still leaves a period of uncertainty before the newly appointed have earned the trust and respect of both their men, their superiors and not the least, their U.S. counterparts. One of the most critical areas for a successful alliance is the almost absolute trust needed in each other's commitment and reliability. Already several very senior ROK officers have been implicated in the "coup-attempt" and to rebuild that trust with their U.S. counterparts will take time, be difficult and require that the ROK "new" military leadership clearly distance itself from the martial law attempt. Within South Korea calls for more independent, civilian (parliamentary) oversight over the military, the intelligence and the police are possible outcomes.

The second observation is the fact that soldiers and lower ranks were reluctant to carry out orders that they obviously deemed unlawful. It is a credit to many within the armed forces that apparently hold a very different view than part of its leadership, about the military's role in domestic tasks. Or in the words of Lt. Gen (ret) Chun In Bum, former Commander of the Special Warfare Command. *"Amid this turmoil, one institution has surprisingly garnered public praise: the Republic of Korea's military. While the military leadership is in disarray, soldiers on the ground have conducted themselves with professionalism, earning the respect of the public."*²⁷

Implications for the ROK's economy

The full impact of the consequences from December 3 on the ROK economy are yet to be discovered. The extended political instability, however, may eventually undermine the trust of investors, buyers, and consumers, emphasizing the significance of stable political leadership to resurface in Seoul.²⁸ The South Korean Business Administration has expressed particular concern about the ongoing political uncertainty and how it may hinder corporate activities. With the uncertainties surrounding Yoon's presidency and internal battles within the PPP party, the business associations have sought out the opposition and DP. This apparent step could be regarded as a pre-emptive action to prepare for a DP administration, given Yoon's impeachment. As a result, on December 13, six business associations requested an emergency meeting with the DP to discuss potential future measures with a DP president, including requesting the DP to reconsider its corporate governance reforms.²⁹ Korea has relied on *chaebols* (conglomerates) to power its rapid economic growth for decades, but the DP's proposed corporate governance reforms may ignite a surge in foreign inflows, bringing the country closer to achieving a long-coveted developed market status. The implementation of these measures would consequently not benefit the *chaebols*, reducing their clout over the country's lawmakers and potentially lowering their domination on the country's GDP.³⁰

Public trust in their legislators

Around 70 percent of Koreans saw Yoon's actions as an abuse of power, leading to widespread peaceful protests demanding accountability for Yoon and his accomplices.³¹ Only about 10 percent of the people still see Yoon as a defender of the Republic. This is Yoon's lowest disapproval rate on record. Yoon's party, the PPP, has lost public support as a result of their failure to listen to public opinion with the party boycotting the impeachment vote on December 7. Also, with the majority of the party not supporting the impeachment motion on December 14, public attitude towards the PPP is likely to deteriorate further, raising concerns about how the party will survive the growing unpopularity as well as change in leadership, with among others, its leader Han resigning. Nevertheless, considering how the public has handled the situation, democratic values remain strong among the South Korean populace. It can be argued that the country's legislators, motivated more by personal party goals than national unity, may undermine the country's democratic institutions, if they do not compromise and introduce bipartisan agreements.

Furthermore, there is a growing rift between civil society and elected lawmakers, and in order to restore trust in the country's democratic institutions, the political parties need to reconsider how they are represented by allowing for greater diversity of representatives. The parliament election in April of this year resulted in the country's oldest-ever legislature, with sitting members averaging 56.3 years old. Furthermore, women account for only about 20 percent of the National Assembly, and despite being the highest number in the ROK's democratic history, this does not ensure adequate representation of the public. As a result, the country still has a long way to go toward achieving more diverse representation. Furthermore, with approximately 86 members (almost 30 percent) of the National Assembly having at least one criminal conviction, the public's distrust in its legislators is understandable.³²

Drastic changes in PPP leadership

Following Yoon's effort to impose martial law, factional strife emerged inside his party, the PPP. With only a small minority (12 law makers) supporting the impeachment vote, the division within the party is obvious.³³ Prior to the impeachment vote, there has been a growing rift between Yoon loyalists and those who quit supporting the president and voted for his impeachment on December 14, prompting fears that the party majority still appears to accept Yoon's actions. As a direct result of the party's internal struggles, its leader, Han Dong-hoon, announced his resignation on December 16, claiming that the party's Supreme Council made it impossible for him to carry out his duties.³⁴ The Supreme Council supported President Yoon throughout the martial law crisis, and as a result of Han's shift to support the impeachment vote on December 14, critics claim that Han failed to protect the party's interests. Before stepping down, Han was regarded as a strong PPP candidate for the 2027 presidential race; his departure poses a new challenge for the party in determining another presidential candidate.

Furthermore, as a result of the PPP's boycott of the impeachment vote on December 7, and by placing party interests ahead of state concerns and widespread public opinion, their popularity rate has dropped. With a declining approval rate, PPP constituents are unlikely to forget the party's lack of action in the near future. This requires PPP MPs to change their existing tactics and listen more to the people if they do not want to lose additional support.

In the short term, the PPP's political influence will likely be further reduced and in an early presidential election, any PPP supported presidential candidate will have an uphill struggle to be elected. In the longer term, without major internal changes of leading party officials and policies, it may even jeopardize its current position as one of the major political forces and open the door for new political parties to gain a more prominent role.

Due to the party's troubles with public opinion, it may attempt to rebrand and potentially rename itself, as it happened following the impeachment of previous conservative President Park Geun-hye in 2016. It might also split in two, with one side backing Yoon and his political ambitions, and prospective Han Dong-hoon supporters quitting the party in solidarity to form a new party with him as leader. The future is unsure, but one thing is sure, the PPP has to make many changes to remain a strong political power.

External Implications

ROK- EU- Ukraine relations – what now?

Foreign policy has been Yoon's most successful policy area throughout his administration, particularly in terms of increasing the ROK's bilateral relations with the European Union (EU). However, as political turmoil in the ROK persists with a possible presidential election in the coming six months, Seoul's current focus on internal matters and external uncertainty about the direction of its foreign policy, will hinder its ability to address common security concerns with the EU and Ukraine.³⁵ Just weeks ago, the ROK sought to strengthen its collaboration with the EU by signing a security and defense agreement, in order to implement collective actions to deal with the DPRK, as a result of it now being a belligerent in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine.³⁶ The new agreement's aim is to identify and coordinate additional collaboration in vital sectors like nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, maritime security, and fighting hybrid threats. However, it is probable that any implementation of tangible measures from the agreement will be put on hold until the situation in Seoul has stabilized.

Similarly, major policy decisions, like Seoul potentially deliver weapons to Ukraine, will likely be deferred. So far, Seoul has limited its support for Ukraine to indirect military support by sending half a million 155mm shells. However, rising feelings of insecurity in Seoul caused in part by the martial law debacle and by the DPRK's receipt of military

technologies, foreign currency, and anti-aircraft missiles from Russia is unlikely to change its current position and thus help Kyiv with armament.

ROK-Japan relations – will it survive?

ROK-Japan relations have for decades been strained because of the Korean Peninsula's history under Japanese colonial authority. However, Yoon's efforts and emphasis on building and forging deeper ties with Japan have resulted in enhanced bilateral cooperation, as well as trilateral cooperation with the U.S., since taking office in 2022. The shared interests of Japan and the ROK, particularly concerning geopolitical threats from North Korea and China, have been the driving force as has strong U.S. interest in promoting and supporting the relation. The obvious security overlap between Seoul's first Indo-Pacific strategy (the Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region) and Japan's new National Security Strategy, is a clear testament of these shared interests. Shigeru Ishiba, the Japanese Prime Minister, was planned to visit Seoul in January to discuss potential collaborative security measures with Yoon; but, due to the uncertainties surrounding Yoon and his administration, Ishiba's trip has been formally

postponed.³⁷ As Yoon has been the driving force behind repairing Seoul's relations with Tokyo, it is uncertain if a new president will either maintain the current status quo or abandon Yoon's efforts and shift alignment toward the DPRK and China. South Koreans are still haunted by memories of Japanese war crimes committed during its colonization, notably the treatment of comfort women. As a result, many ROK citizens and politicians remain antagonistic towards Japan and thus would favor less alignment with Tokyo. It is difficult to predict the direction a new presidential administration will take on Japan, but even a DP affiliated President will likely only make minor changes.

US-ROK relations – what is the reaction in Washington?

For the U.S., the improved trilateral partnership is a major benefit of Yoon's policy and it is important for Washington's overall Indo-Pacific policy. In the recently approved Defense Authorization Act, Washington confirms and emphasizes "strengthening alliances with nations like South Korea and Japan is critical to preserve the US's strategic edge in its rivalry with China." For the next 6-12 months, before the impeachment process is completed and a likely presidential election is finalized, uncertainty about Seoul's foreign policy priorities will be a major concern. With Trump eager to kick-start his presidential term, he may find it difficult to get clear and reliable answers from Seoul on a range of issues, from North Korea, China, the Alliance to economic cooperation. But the most pressing issue for Seoul will be to re-establish trust in Washington. This is because most indications from the declaration of the martial law point to the troubling fact that neither Washington nor the U.S. military leadership in South Korea were informed, prior to the declaration. Equally disturbing is information that Yoon tried to orchestrate provocation on North Korea territory, provocation that may have resulted in a North Korean counter attack—attacks that would have put U.S. soldiers in harm's way and attacks that would have caught the U.S. military leadership on the ground off guard.

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Looking Ahead – Impeachment and Insurrection Investigations

The Constitutional Court

Following the passage of the impeachment vote by the National Assembly on December 14, the case has been moved to the Constitutional Court, which will formally begin investigating on December 27. From there, the court has 180 days to make a ruling. However, the court currently lacks three judges, complicating the process. The constitutional court normally consist of nine judges: three proposed by the National Assembly, three by the president, and three appointed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.³⁸ The court is currently short on the justices nominated by the Assembly due to increased political polarization in the parliament, having resulted in a political deadlock over appointments.

However, the Court has temporarily suspended Article 23 of the Constitutional Court Act, allowing for six judges to render a ruling. Nevertheless, with only six justices currently serving, a unanimous decision is required. With the Court currently consisting of two conservative, two progressive, and two moderate justices, its balance makes the outcome uncertain regarding Yoon's final impeachment.³⁹

The DP is, at the moment, moving forward with filling the remaining three seats with two of its own nominations, potentially to reduce this uncertainty and consequently tip the balance in their favor. The desire to have two of its own nominees deviates from the norm, as each party normally recommends one candidate and the remaining one through bipartisan agreement in the National Assembly. However, in response to the DP's push, the PPP has contended that Acting President Han Duck-soo does not have presidential authority to designate constitutional justices, wanting the Court to finish Yoon's impeachment case with its current six judges.⁴⁰ Given the current difficulties in parliament, it is questionable whether the National Assembly will be able to reach an accord and fill the remaining seats during Yoon's impeachment trials.

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Insurrection and treason

In addition to the impeachment case, the police and the Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) are investigating Yoon for insurrection and abuse of power. Consequently, the Supreme Prosecutors Office has established a special investigation bureau once more, the last time being in 2016 in response to corruption charges against then President Park. Yoon has already been deemed a suspect by the police, prosecutors, and the CIO, and while presidents in other areas are immune from prosecution, the ROK Constitution makes exceptions for acts of insurrection and treason.⁴¹ Besides Yoon, former defense minister Kim Yong-hyun, former interior minister Lee Sang-min, and army chief Park An-su, who was named martial law commander, face criminal charges for their roles in the preparation and execution of the martial law. Other high-ranking officials, including military generals and top police officers, have also been suspected of playing a part on December 3.

Following the start of the inquiry, Yoon has not been cooperative, having had his personal security service block his office from police investigation and previously failing to appear for questioning. South Korean investigators have now requested that Yoon appear for questioning on December 21.⁴²

If convicted of insurrection Yoon could face life in jail or the death penalty. His supporters, who

participated in the insurgency plot or engaged in other connected actions, might face life imprisonment, the death penalty, or incarceration without prison labor for at least five years. People who simply participated in the martial law conspiracy, on the other hand, may face imprisonment for no more than five years, with or without prison labor. Yoon and his followers' fates are unlikely to be resolved in the near future, given that the inquiry has only recently begun, evidence is still resurfacing and many persons are still being probed.

Conclusion

The attempt by President Yoon to introduce martial law failed and he has now been impeached. This is the second conservative president to be impeached in less than 10 years. The long-term consequences, both domestic and external, will be profound. Very strong peaceful, popular demonstrations and a determined opposition managed to put an end to the attempt to introduce martial law. The question then arises if the conservative political forces included in the failed attempt can overcome the major divide that now exists between the people and those forces. The internal rift within the PPP is likely to increase and its political clout will decrease. Only by making major changes to its policy and its representation will it regain trust and support.

In the next 6-12 months, Seoul's foreign policy direction will be unclear. This at a crucial time when Seoul faces multiple challenges, from DPRK, from a new U.S. President, from China and from an economy that is struggling. Even, with a victory for the opposition in an upcoming presidential election, it will take time before Seoul's new foreign policy is clearly articulated. From previous statements, a DP administration would likely shift the ROK's engagement more toward China and focus more on inter-Korean relations, in contrast to Yoon's foreign policy, which focused on the ROK's bilateral relations with the U.S., Japan and the EU. Such a policy shift would hamper EU cooperation with Seoul on crucial geopolitical concerns, including DPRK soldiers in Ukraine and strain relations with Japan.

Maybe the most pressing foreign policy issue for Seoul will be North Korea. With Trump soon moving into the White House and looking for a foreign policy "victory", one option is to re-engage in dialogue with North Korea, at a time when Seoul is focused on internal infighting.

The actions of President Yoon, the PPP and their supporters have undermined South Korean democracy and its reliability as a partner. However, the South Korean people have demonstrated growing faith and an impressive resilience in their democratic values by performing peaceful protests, but it will take a long time and require major changes to South Korea's institutions and political representation, to regain the trust of its people and its foreign partners.

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