

UPF Europe and the Middle East ILC2022 Focuses on New Korean President

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April 6, 2022



Europe and the Middle East - Session I of an International Leadership Conference (ILC2022) invited Korea experts to discuss prospects for peace following the election of a new South Korean president.

"Post-Election South Korea: Implications for the Wider Region" was held jointly on April 6, 2022, by the Europe and Middle East (EUME) and the Japanese branches of UPF and its International Media Association for Peace (IMAP).

The first three sessions of ILC2022 were held on April 6 and 7 under the theme "Contemporary Challenges to the World Order: The Search for Solutions."

A fourth webinar, "The International Peace Highway Project and Eurasia," was held on April 12, organized by UPF-Russia.

Session I had approximately 130 viewers on Zoom, 110 on Facebook, and the recording on Vimeo and YouTube continues to attract viewers.



[Mr. Jacques Marion, Co-chair, UPF Europe and Middle East, France](#) The ILC and its first session were opened by Jacques Marion, the co-chair of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, who explained that the ILC in June Jacques Marion, the UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East, welcomed the participants to the webinar and explained that ILC2022 was being held not only in Europe and the Middle East but also simultaneously in Asia, Africa, and North and South America.

He explained that each of the ILC2022 sessions would focus on an issue that is central to world peace: "the reunification of the Korean Peninsula; a re-empowerment of the United Nations; and the development of a prosperous economic zone in Northeast Asia which would benefit every continent."

Mr. Marion continued, "At a time when the deeply rooted conflicts of the 20th century seem to re-emerge and lead toward a new era of confrontation and division in the world, we hope that ILC2022 will allow us to see beyond the conflict and point toward peaceful solutions."



[Ms. Rita Payne, Former Asia Editor, BBC World News \(TV\), President emeritus, Commonwealth Journalists Association](#) The moderator of the session was Rita Payne, the former Asia editor for BBC World News and current president emeritus of the Commonwealth Journalists Association from the United Kingdom, a former Asia editor of BBC World News (TV) and the president emeritus of the Commonwealth Journalists Association, was the moderator.

"These are challenging times for anybody who is fighting for peace," Ms. Payne said. "At the same time, Universal Peace Federation always gives us hope that, no matter how bad the situation is, some sort of solution can be found."

Introducing Session I, Ms. Payne said that on March 9 the Republic of Korea had elected a new president, Suk-yeol Yoon, the nation's former chief prosecutor, to succeed President Jae-in Moon. She explained that the webinar's "distinguished panel of journalists from Asia and the West" would discuss likely changes that the new president and his administration would bring, especially in South Korea's relations with its neighbors North Korea and Japan, as well as with the United States and China.



[Mr. Michael Breen, Author and Commentator based in South Korea; CEO, Insight Communications Consultants; former correspondent for The Washington Times and The Guardian](#) Michael Breen, a British author and commentator based in South Korea and the CEO of Insight Communications Consultants, explained that Suk-yeol Yoon, who represents the conservative People Power Party, is not a conservative in the way that Westerners understand the term. In South Korea, a conservative is someone who is loyal to South Korea, and therefore Mr. Yoon's vision of Korean reunification is that the North would adopt the economy and way of life of the South. This is opposite to the view of South Korean liberals, who believe that North and South will merge into a completely new kind of nation.

"Besides that, in my opinion there's no conservatism or liberalism," Mr. Breen said. "It's just pragmatism, or doing the opposite of what the predecessor did."

He predicted that "the most obvious changes under Yoon will be in foreign policy."

Although usually South Korean leaders "like to give mixed signals and keep on good terms with all sides," he said that Mr. Yoon "seems to want to drop the ambiguity and expand the already close relations with the U.S. beyond security cooperation. This could lead to difficulties with China, but it is nevertheless good news, in my opinion, because it means that Yoon is willing to place Korea firmly in the democratic, free-market camp, where it should be."

Mr. Breen said: "Relations with Japan will certainly improve under Yoon. That won't be hard to do, simply because Moon Jae-in's policy was idiotic and destructive."

Regarding Seoul's approach to North Korea, he said, "We can expect some changes." The previous administration's efforts to "forge a breakthrough with North Korea bore no fruit. Why? Not because it was wrong. ... But because, as they say, it takes two to tango, and North Korea is like the guy who is too scared to walk onto the dance floor."

Mr. Breen explained that in the new president's ideology, "Korea is already a great country. It's not a country waiting to be born, with him just elected as the midwife. This difference of outlook allows him to see the reality - that North Korea is not ready and probably won't be until [North Korean leader Kim Jong Un] is removed, either by natural means or, more likely, by a palace or military coup."

On the question of North Korea denuclearizing as a condition for negotiations, Mr. Breen said: "Yoon has firmly aligned himself with the U.S. He says abolition of nukes is a prerequisite for future engagement. As we speak, North Korea is pumping up the rhetoric, and I expect they will try some provocation to see how serious Yoon is on this."

"So I think we may be in for a rough ride this year. This is a common pattern generated by the North. But, ironically, if Yoon sticks to his position and refuses to engage unless the North shows willingness on the nuclear front, it's possible that under this so-called conservative administration we may see a real breakthrough. Let's hope."



[Young-jin Oh, the president and publisher of The Korea Times](#) Young-jin Oh, the president and publisher of the English-language newspaper The Korea Times, began by joking that the previous speaker, his friend Michael Breen, had said most of what he was planning to say - "so, thank you for ruining my presentation!"

Mr. Oh mentioned that so far, "the biggest brouhaha" concerning Mr. Yoon has been his promise to not live in the Blue House, which traditionally has been the president's residence. Mr. Oh reminded the audience that the outgoing president, Jae-in Moon, also had promised during his campaign not to live in the Blue House, but went back on his promise once he was elected because he said the move would cost too much and because there were few suitable alternatives.

Mr. Oh then speculated about what the Democratic Party candidate, Jae-myung Lee, would do following his loss to Mr. Yoon. Noting that Mr. Lee has been "hibernating" since his election loss, Mr. Oh said, "Don't take his conspicuous absence as a sign that he's gone for good. He got only a quarter million votes short of a victory, out of 44 million eligible votes. That's enormous political capital."

The likeliest scenario, Mr. Oh said, is that Mr. Lee will try to gain control of his party as the party chairman and then select the candidates for the 2024 general elections while preparing to make another bid for the presidency in 2027.

As for Suk-yeol Yoon, Mr. Oh said that he is "a clean slate, a prosecutor through and through. He didn't have any credit as an administrator or as a legislator. Nor did he have any foreign affairs experience. So predicting how the Yoon administration will run its diplomacy requires considering two factors.

"First is his disposition. He's hard-headed, stubborn, as is required for any successful prosecutor." The president-elect graduated from a top South Korean university and passed the bar exam, "so he's very smart. So, he's a clean slate, but he can learn very quickly. He would rely on his advisors on diplomatic issues, at least for the first couple of years."

Mr. Oh said that Mr. Yoon's advisers, who likely will be appointed to ministerial positions, are pro-U.S. The president-elect has spoken of bringing in more U.S. missiles. So South Korea is moving from a pro-Chinese stance under the previous president to a pro-American stance under Mr. Yoon.

"During his campaign, Yoon talked about Koreans' dislike of the Chinese. He was not wrong. Pro-American sentiment appears more prevalent now among Koreans," Mr. Oh said. South Korea is in a strong alliance with the United States, now more than ever, he said.

This may bring about a backlash from China. "If Korea tries to join the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), a U.S.-led effort to counter China whose other members are Australia, India and Japan, how would China react?"

"Like any change," Mr. Oh said, South Korea's change from pro-Chinese to pro-American "would surely upset the status quo. Any change creates new energy, and that means instability."

Turning his attention to North Korea, Mr. Oh said that Pyongyang is now testing intercontinental ballistic missiles to gain U.S. attention. "It's their habit. At the start of any U.S. administration, they would resort to brinkmanship to gain attention from Washington." The outcome would be greater uncertainty, he said.

"Choppy water ahead of Korea and Mr. Yoon. Korea will look to the inexperienced skipper - that's Mr. Yoon - for leadership. And I pray that he will steer us from harm's way."



[Prof. Dr. Rovshan Ibrahimov, Professor, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, College of Oriental Studies, South Korea](#) Professor Dr. Rovshan Ibrahimov from Azerbaijan, a professor at the College of Oriental Studies of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in South Korea, observed that because South Korean presidents may serve for only one five-year term, "a president doesn't have time to make long-term policies." Another result is that presidents "try to act carefully."

"If we look back to the period of independence after the Korean War, during the last 70 years Korea has changed three generations," Dr. Ibrahimov said. "The three generations are completely different in societal components.

"The first generation is traditional. The second, thanks to industrialization, is modern society representatives, and the third and current generation - who are currently my students - are postmodern society representatives. They are part of high technological achievements and development."

Dr. Ibrahimov said that among the three nations in the world that boast "unique, unbelievable economic development" - Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea - the most conservative is South Korea.

The election of a conservative as South Korean president has several reasons, Dr. Ibrahimov said. First, "despite the fact that Korea is economically postmodern, politically it is not past this stage. It is still between a traditional and a modern society."

He noted that there are regions of South Korea that always vote for progressives and others that always vote for conservatives, no matter who the candidate is.

The new generation currently has no candidate who can reflect or represent them in the following five years, he said. "They are not hearing what they're really waiting for - for example, economic reforms, social changes, [answers to] sociological problems."

In the 2020 elections, for the first time 18-year-olds were allowed to vote, and they voted for the Democratic Party. However, since then elections have been very close, signaling that the Democratic Party has lost trust.

Dr. Ibrahimov predicted that the Democratic Party will be divided within the next five years, with a new party emerging that will appeal to young people.

"In general, young Koreans are apolitical," he said. Also, in the recent presidential election, most Koreans did not really like either of the two main candidates - "like a competition between least possible bad candidates." In the end, he said, Koreans just tried to decide which of the two choices was more acceptable.



[Mr. Yoji Koda, Vice Admiral \(retired\), Japan Maritime Self Defense Force](#) Adm. Yoji Koda, a retired vice admiral in the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and a writer on maritime affairs and military history, said that although Japan and Korea are close geographically, since the end of World War II the security relationship between the two nations has been "not so close."

Until the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, "the only open channel between the two nations was the intelligence and information exchanges concerning North Korean willful maneuvers," he said. There were no strategic exchanges or mutual military visits.

However, with the changes in the world that followed the demise of the Soviet Union, Japan and South Korea started to "expand our military exchanges."

"So, practically speaking, the relationship between Japanese and South Korean militaries started after the year 1990," Admiral Koda said.

South Korea and Japan both have been in alliances with the United States, although the alliances have been very different. In the Japanese view, Admiral Koda said, the U.S.-South Korean alliance is custom-made against the North Korean threat. The U.S.-Japanese alliance "used to be so," focusing on the defense of Japan against possible Soviet aggression. At some point in the 1990s, Japan and the United States "revised, reviewed and redefined the alliances and expanded the area of responsibility from simply defending Japan to a more positive role in the stability of the region."

In this context, he said, the U.S.-Japanese alliance is "a more value-added alliance. ... So Japan thinks our alliance is a kind of military enabler for the U.S. forces stationed in Japan and operating in this area to the Indian Ocean the Middle East."

Admiral Koda reminded the audience that both Japan and South Korea have neighbors that are nuclear powers: China, Russia and perhaps North Korea. At the same time, Korea does not have access to the open oceans. Korea has to pass through the choke points and is surrounded by the Japanese island chain.

The fact that Japan has direct access to the ocean has helped it to become an enabler of the U.S. military. "Japan always cooperates with the U.S. naval and air forces," Admiral Koda said.

"In today's world after the Cold War, South Korea and Japan are the only two nations that maintain the physical U.S. armed forces. After the end of the Kuwait War [in 1991], the U.S. withdrew all its forces from Europe to the U.S. mainland. South Korea is the only nation that maintains a U.S. Army division on its soil. And Japan is the only nation in the world that maintains U.S. carrier battle groups and amphibian battle groups and U.S. Marines on its soil. So there are striking differences between these alliances and NATO."

What changes can Japan expect from the new Yoon administration? Admiral Koda said, "We expect that there will be changes to the security policy under the new Yoon administration, but the serious question is: Would it be big enough to really change the cool relationship between Japan and South Korea?"

Admiral Koda continued: "Who are the real guardians of stability in the region? That's the United States. And the U.S. has a responsibility to come in this area and to maneuver in case of contingencies with South Korea and the Korean Peninsula or in Japan or the South China Sea or even the Middle East."

He said it is important for Japan and South Korea to give "shoulder-to-shoulder military support to U.S. forces operating in this region. ... And if Japan and South Korea hate each other in the future and ... don't [unite to] support U.S. forces, the result would be devastating. So leaders and people in both countries have to understand this."

Ms. Payne then presented several questions from the audience. To Admiral Koda, the question was put: What is one thing that Japan could do to improve its relations with South Korea - and vice versa?

Admiral Koda replied: "I'm a strong advocate of improving relations between South Korea and Japan. ... It may take a longer time, but the first thing for the two nations to do is to have frequent summit meetings between the two. Maybe the first meeting - no result. Next three continuous meetings - maybe no progress." Saying that a flight between the two countries takes only 90 minutes, he asked, "Why don't we meet frequently?" In the weeks since the Ukraine crisis began, leaders have been meeting almost every day to resolve the situation, he said.

"So if there is just one thing, my response is that they make the summit meetings as frequently as possible," he concluded.

Another question from the audience had to do with the Korean diaspora: If the two Koreas unite, would many of the Koreans living overseas be motivated to return to their homeland?

Michael Breen answered: "People need to work. So they tend to come back when there's something to do their jobs. In recent decades a lot of overseas Koreans have returned to South Korea. And if there were a unified situation and it were to happen quickly, the level of development - North Korea probably would become the most rapidly developed economy in human history. And there would be all sorts of opportunities for people, and it would, I think, electrify the Korean diaspora, and I'm sure a lot of them would come back."