

UPF Colorado: Experts Consider Impacts of Turmoil in South Korea

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South Korea's Political Crisis: A View from the North

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MAP, USA – South Korea is currently facing political turmoil, with its president impeached and detained and its people deeply divided. How is this impacting the country's neighbor to the north? The International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) USA held a webinar on January 28, 2025 focused on North Korea's reactions to the political crisis in South Korea.

The panel included **Dr. Joseph Terwilliger**, professor of neurobiology at Columbia University and former visiting professor at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology; **Ms. Jenny Town**, senior fellow at the Stimson Center and the director of Stimson's Korea Program as well as co-founder and director of 38 North; and **Mr. Jacco Zwetsloot**, host of the popular NK News Podcast in South Korea. The panelists explored the impact of the crisis on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the implications for regional stability and the reactions in North Korea to the ouster of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol.

Ms. Town reminded listeners that this is not the first time a Korean leader has been impeached, President Park Geun-hye having faced the same situation in 2016. Although all panelists agreed that anything that

makes South Korea look bad is good for North Korea, they pointed out that the crisis has been scantily reported in the DPRK, which has taken a hands-off approach, seeing no benefit in disrupting the process. Although South Korean President Yoon initially accused his political opponents of being anti-state and pro-North Korea, this narrative failed to gain traction. Instead, there has been a shift to blaming China and the Chinese Communist Party for interfering in elections, which has resonated with members of President Yoon's party.

Mr. Zwetsloot suggested that North Korea may not have a desired outcome in the current situation. He noted that North Korea's leadership prefers stability and is more interested in the relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin than with South Korea's president. Dr. Terwilliger agreed, stating that North Korea doesn't really care what happens in the South as long as it doesn't bother them. Ms. Town put forth the possibility that a new South Korean government, less closely aligned with the U.S. administration, might open up gaps in that relationship that the DPRK could seek to exploit.

On the topic of North-South unification, Ms. Town noted that North Korea has given up unification as a goal and is focused on its own sovereignty. Mr. Zwetsloot added that, having sent troops to support Russia's war in Ukraine, North Korea's leaders are focused on that and are not interested in renewed negotiations with the South. Ms. Town emphasized that the South Korean vision of unification, rapprochement and gradual democratization, is incompatible with North Korea's desire for peaceful coexistence. Therefore, by disavowing unification, the North is eliminating an existential threat. Also, the bonds between South and North Koreans are rapidly diminishing due to the aging of those with living relatives in North Korea, Mr. Zwetsloot added.

Dr. Terwilliger emphasized that more interchange of information between North and South on a people-to-people level could do much to reverse the dehumanization of their neighbors that exists on both sides of the border. Ms. Town pointed out that before the first summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean President Kim Jong Un in 2018, the DPRK took very substantial steps such as returning American detainees, partially demolishing nuclear facilities and removing anti-U.S. propaganda from the media, but that this resulted only in disappointment and a lack of progress.

In conclusion, Dr. Terwilliger suggested that the conversation between the United States and the DPRK be restarted, and that the United States not simply demand irreversible abandonment of nuclear capabilities, but also offer some kind of lasting benefit in return. Ms. Town agreed that the United States will have to be more agile in its negotiations if any progress is to be made.

Both Ms. Town and Mr. Zwetsloot emphasized the importance of a speedy return to normalcy in South Korea, as the current political crisis is destabilizing and may have lasting impacts. Mr. Zwetsloot also suggested that the United States and North Korea open liaison offices in each other's capitals to ensure ongoing dialogue between them.