

New South Korea leader Moon Jae-in set to change policy on North as liberal wins election

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Former human rights lawyer vows to move quickly to solve national security crisis and bring lasting peace to peninsula.

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Willing to meet Kim in North

South Korea's new president, Moon Jae-in, has said he would be willing to go to North Korea to meet the country's dictator, Kim Jong-un, if it meant bringing lasting peace to the Korean peninsula.

In an early sign of a clean break with the hardline approach of his conservative predecessors, Moon said he was prepared to travel the world to bring about a peaceful resolution to Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programme.

"I will quickly move to solve the crisis in national security," Moon told the national assembly in Seoul after he was sworn in as successor to Park Geun-hye, who is awaiting trial on corruption and other charges after being impeached late last year.

Moon, who won Tuesday's election by a landslide, added: "I am willing to go anywhere for the peace of the Korean peninsula if needed. I will fly immediately to Washington, I will go to Beijing and I will go to Tokyo. If the conditions are right, I will go to Pyongyang."

The former human rights lawyer said he would also "negotiate sincerely" with the US and China over the recent deployment of Thaad, a US missile defence system designed to thwart attacks by North Korea.

Moon has vowed to review Thaad, which was installed in the South Korean countryside weeks before Tuesday's election. China has urged the new president to scrap the system, claiming its powerful radar could be used to spy on its missiles.

But Moon's first actions as president will be more mundane than possible negotiations with Pyongyang. He must first choose a prime minister - who would then have to be approved by parliament - and make other senior appointments in an attempt to bring a semblance of stability to South Korean politics after months of uncertainty under a caretaker president.

Moon, 64, a left-leaning liberal with a record of supporting engagement with North Korea, did not have the luxury of the usual two-month transition period afforded new South Korean presidents.

The election was called after Park was impeached last year then arrested in March in connection with a corruption and abuse of power scandal involving her longtime confidante.

Park – whose father, the former dictator Park Chung-hee, imprisoned Moon while he was a student activist – left office months before her single five-year term was up, and faces life in prison if convicted.

Moon, who had taken part in mass protests calling for Park's dismissal, reached out to conservatives in the national assembly, where his Democratic party holds only 120 of the 300 seats.

He praised the South Korean people for their "greatness" during months of political turbulence characterised by public anger directed at the political establishment and the heads of the country's powerful chaebol conglomerates.

"In face of the impeachment and arrest of an incumbent president, our people opened the path toward the future for the Republic of Korea," said Moon, using the country's formal title.

Addressing his political opponents, he added: "We are partners who must lead a new Republic of Korea. We must put the days of fierce competition behind and hold hands marching forward."

Later, during a customary visit to the national cemetery in Seoul, Moon wrote in the visitors' book: "A country worth being proud of; a strong and reliable president!"

The US was among several countries to congratulate Moon. The White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, said the US looked forward to continuing to "strengthen the alliance" and "deepen the enduring friendship and partnership".

The Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Japan's prime minister, Shinzō Abe, also sent congratulations.

While Moon and Trump have voiced a willingness to meet Kim, the South Korean leader's more conciliatory tone towards North Korea has prompted concern that any premature attempt to engage Pyongyang could anger hardliners in Washington.

In response, Moon has committed to improving national security and has said he would be prepared to meet Kim only under certain conditions – most likely a pledge by North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programmes.

As a former chief of staff under South Korea's previous liberal president, Roh Moo-hyun, Moon is expected to consider goodwill measures towards the North, including the reopening of the jointly run Kaesong industrial park and the resumption of aid.

But analysts say he is unlikely to weaken sanctions or reduce diplomatic pressure, given the much higher risks presented by North Korea after a decade of nuclear tests and vast improvements in its missile technology.

Seoul's policy towards the North will change "substantially", according to Robert Kelly at Pusan National University, "but less substantially than many people on the South Korean left and Moon himself would like".

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't talk to North Korea," Kelly said, adding that if Moon planned to resurrect the "sunshine policy" of engagement with Pyongyang, "he's going to collide with the American government, where there is a pretty solid consensus right now that North Korea is a genuine global menace".

Moon faces similarly tough policy challenges at home, having vowed to build a fairer South Korea, where growing inequality and youth unemployment threaten the gains that turned the once war-ravaged country into the world's 11th largest economy.

He will also come under pressure to honour a campaign pledge to rein in the power of the *chaebol* – once-revered companies that, in light of the Park scandal, are now seen as a symbol of the country's domestic ills.

Moon vowed to govern for all South Koreans, regardless of their political loyalties. "I will make a just, united country," he said. "I will be a president who also serves all the people who did not support me. I will become a president who is at eye level with the people."

Justin McCurry in Kyoto and agencies

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/10/south-korea-new-president-moon-jae-in-meet-north-kim-jong-un>

South Korea set to change policy on North as liberal wins election

Moon Jae-in has won presidential election comfortably after predecessor ousted in corruption scandal.

Moon Jae-in, a left-leaning liberal who favours engagement with North Korea, has won South Korea's presidential election, raising hopes of a potential rapprochement with Pyongyang.

The former human rights lawyer won 41.4% of the vote, according to an exit poll cited by the Yonhap news agency, placing him comfortably ahead of his nearest rivals, the centrist software entrepreneur Ahn Cheol-soo and the conservative hardliner Hong Joon-pyo, both of whom have conceded defeat.

South Koreans who backed Moon, 64, will be hoping the election result will mark a clean break from the corruption scandal surrounding his disgraced predecessor Park Geun-hye.

Hours before polls closed, the national election commission forecast that turnout would exceed 80% – the highest since Kim Dae-jung was elected in 1997.

During a campaign in which Moon sought to add conservative voters to his liberal support base, the Democratic party candidate captured the public mood with vows to reform South Korea's powerful chaebols – family-owned conglomerates – and tackle rising inequality and youth unemployment.

Moon has called for a more conciliatory approach to North Korea, after weeks of tensions over the regime's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programmes.

Park, who narrowly beat Moon in 2012 to become South Korea's first female president, was impeached last December and faces possible life imprisonment for alleged bribery, extortion and other charges involving her secret confidante, Choi Soon-sil.

Hours before he won the presidency, Moon said: "I gave all my body and soul to the very end. My party and I invested all our efforts with a sense of desperation, but we also felt a great desire by the people to build a country we can be proud of again."

While much of the campaign capitalised on public anger over the collusion between chaebols and politicians that was exposed by the Park scandal, it also offered hints that Moon would move to calm a tense Korean peninsula.

Moon, a former student activist who was imprisoned in the 1970s for protesting against Park's father, the former dictator Park Chung-hee, declared a decade of hardline policy towards Pyongyang a failure.

His calm demeanour and moderate rhetoric on the issue stands in sharp contrast to Donald Trump's pugnacity. But Moon has also made it clear he will not tolerate advances in Pyongyang's nuclear programme, warning that any attack on South Korean soil would invite a devastating military response.

Once Moon has appointed a prime minister, which requires parliamentary approval, he is expected to adopt the more conciliatory approach towards North Korea advocated by the Nobel peace prize-winner Kim Dae-jung and another former president, Roh Moo-hyun, whom Moon served under as chief of staff.

That could mean negotiations to reopen the Kaesong industrial complex, a symbol of intra-Korean cooperation until its closure in early 2016, and the resumption of aid shipments cut off by Park and her predecessor Lee Myung-bak.

Conservative critics have said Pyongyang could attempt to exploit Moon's moderation and that attempts at rapprochement could drive a wedge between Seoul and its allies in Washington.

But recent comments by Moon and Trump indicate that they may not be as far apart on North Korea as some have suggested. Trump recently described Kim Jong-un as a "smart cookie" and said he would be "honoured" to meet the North Korean leader under the right circumstances.

Moon, meanwhile, has said that he and Trump are "on the same page", but has spoken of his desire for South Korea to seize the policy initiative from Washington after months of drift under a caretaker president. He favours a dual strategy of dialogue alongside diplomatic pressure and sanctions.

"South Koreans are more concerned that Trump, rather than ... Kim Jong-un, will make a rash military move, because of his outrageous tweets, threats of force and unpredictability," said Duyeon Kim, a visiting fellow at the Korean Peninsula Future Forum in Seoul, in Foreign Affairs magazine.

"It is crucial that Trump and the next South Korean president strike up instant, positive chemistry in their first meeting to help work through any bilateral differences and together deal with the North Korean challenge."

Moon will be sworn in after the country's national election commission confirms the result on Wednesday morning. His term will begin immediately, rather than after the customary two-month transition period – an arrangement forced by Park's abrupt departure.

For many voters, the desire for stability and domestic reform took precedence over North Korea. "Moon wasn't my favourite candidate in terms of policies, but I voted for him because he represented the best chance to switch government power and that's the most important thing over anything else," said Lee Ah-ram, a 39-year-old Seoul resident. "We need a leader who could restore

the people's trust in government that had been damaged by Park's scandal."

Moon's other foreign policy priority will be to repair relations with China, which opposes the deployment in South Korea of a US missile defence system – known as Thaad – and says Seoul should stop joint military drills with the US to encourage Pyongyang to halt its nuclear programme.

Liam McCarthy-Cotter, a specialist in East Asian politics at Nottingham Trent University, said the Moon campaign gave voters a clear route out of their current situation.

"The corruption and scandal that brought an end to Park Geun-hye's presidency has left a vacuum in South Korea at a most inopportune time," he said. "There is a need for South Korea to re-establish its strength both domestically and in the face of increasingly hostile posturing from North Korea.

"Moon is arguing for a new approach to both foreign and domestic policy that will signal a departure from the strategies deployed by his more conservative predecessors. Recent polls suggest that the population are ready for such a change, and Moon is likely to have a clear mandate to start reshaping the politics of the peninsula."

Justin McCurry in Kyoto and agencies

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What were the issues in the South Korean election?

Despite tensions running high with the North, the campaign focused largely on the economy and the bribery and abuse of power scandal that brought down Moon Jae-in's predecessor, Park Geun-hye.

The Park scandal played into frustration over widening inequality in wealth and opportunities. South Korea enjoyed rapid growth from the 1970s-90s, but the rate slowed as the economy matured, and unemployment among under-30s now stands at a record 10%.

Voter anger was often directed at chaebols, the massive, family-run conglomerates that dominate the economy and are seen by many as exemplifying a cosy relationship between business and government.

Who is Moon Jae-in, South Korea's new president?

Veteran politician, 64, positioned himself as candidate qualified to reunite the country after divisions of Park Geun-hye's era.

Having lost to Park Geun-hye in South Korea's 2012 presidential election, Moon Jae-in has become the chief beneficiary of the abuse-of-power scandal that engulfed his erstwhile opponent.

Moon's victory in the race to the presidential Blue House in Seoul could herald an era of rapprochement with North Korea, and an unlikely meeting of minds with Donald Trump over Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

The 64-year-old left-leaning liberal positioned himself as the only candidate qualified to reunite the country after the bitter divisions that opened up over Park's allegedly corrupt relationship with her longtime friend and confidante Choi Soon-sil.

While Park sat in detention awaiting trial on charges that could lead to her being sentenced to life in prison, Moon tapped into the country's appetite for change, opening up a double-digit lead over his closest rival, the centrist Ahn Cheol-soo.

In a month of rising tensions on the Korean peninsula over Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, Moon has criticised the hard line pursued by Park and her predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, pointing out that a decade of conservative rule had done nothing to arrest the regime's nuclear programme.

Significantly, North Korea indicated that Moon was its favoured candidate, with state media recently calling on South Korean voters to "punish the puppet group of conservatives" associated with Park.

Eager to court the older conservative voters who consigned him to a narrow defeat five years ago, Moon has shown himself to be a pragmatist. He has stopped short of overtly criticising Trump's aggressive tone during the most recent crisis on the Korean peninsula, and has declared that he and the US president are "on the same page" in regarding the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" as a failure.

Working-level "talks about talks" with North Korea are a possibility, according to Moon's foreign policy adviser, but, like Trump, he has so far ruled out a summit with Kim Jong-un unless the regime commits to abandoning its nuclear ambitions.

Although Moon was critical of Washington's "undemocratic" rush to deploy its missile defence system in a South Korean village late last month, he has said only that he would "review" its future if elected president.

He also supports the reopening of the Kaesong industrial complex, a joint North-South project that was regarded as a symbol of cross-border cooperation until it was "temporarily" closed in early 2016.

Given the speculation that North Korea could be preparing to conduct its sixth nuclear test in just over a decade - a move that the White House has hinted could invite military retaliation - it is easy to forget that Tuesday's vote, called seven months early, was initially prompted by issues closer to home.

Moon has promised to reform South Korea's family-run conglomerates - or chaebol - whose shady ties to senior politicians were exposed by the Park scandal, and to address pressing domestic problems such as rising inequality and youth unemployment.

The eldest son of a refugee from North Korea, Moon can claim to have played a role in significant moments in South Korea's modern history.

As a young conscript in South Korea's special forces, he took part in a mission following the infamous axe murder incident inside the demilitarised zone in 1976.

After a career as a human rights lawyer, he served as chief of staff to the then president Roh Moo-hyun, whose pursuit of his predecessor Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" of engagement with Pyongyang Moon hopes to emulate – this time as South Korea's leader.

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