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South Korea: 'US-China tensions have erased any space for struggle'

Saturday 18 November 2023, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2023).

Youngsu Won is a socialist and coordinator of the International Forum in South Korea. Speaking to Federico Fuentes, from *LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal*, he discusses how rising tensions between the United States and China impact South Korean politics.



Federico Fuentes - South Korea recently took the unprecedented step of participating in a trilateral meeting with Japan and the US. South Korea has also announced its intentions to participate in another trilateral meeting with Japan and China. What are the government's motivations and intentions with these seemingly contradictory moves?

Youngsu Won - Let's begin with the fact that the South Korean government is led by Yoon Suk-yeol, a highly controversial and maverick politician who was elected president in 2022. Yoon's populist politics are highly unpredictable and rarely understood. Since taking power, Yoon's disapproval rating has hovered at about 60% and he remains in power solely due to his ultra-conservative and quasi-fascist support base.

His politics basically represent a reaction against the previous liberal Democratic Party government, which still dominates parliament with an absolute majority. When it comes to foreign diplomacy, Yoon has revived the worst type of Cold War politics — pro-US and Japan, strongly opposed to China and Russia. It is impossible to understand his actions without understanding his obsession with ultra-conservative Cold War politics.

Yet economically, South Korea is intertwined with China. This means talks with China are unavoidable. But no one knows what kind of cards Yoon has up his sleeves. Furthermore, his friendly approach towards Japan has little popular support and is strongly opposed even by his own support base. Most Koreans oppose reconciliation with Japan, which shows no intention of changing its policies on issues such as paying compensation for atrocities committed against "[comfort women](#)" during World War II or the release of [nuclear-contaminated water](#) from the Fukushima power plants.

Growing US-China tensions are of great concern. How do you view the US' military strategy in the region? Conversely, how do you view China's actions towards the US and its regional neighbours?

Tensions between the US and China are primarily due to the US' failure to contain China's rise.

China's economic growth and military expansion have set off alarm bells for hawkish US policymakers. This led the US to turn its back on its previous policy of loose cooperation with China. It reverted to a policy of protectionism and sanctions against China.

At the same time, China's rapid growth has created problems for its neighbours. For South Korea, China's aggressive, expansionist and sometimes militarist approach and discourse has greatly inflamed anti-Chinese sentiment, which was already strong here for historical reasons. This has been fuelled by recent conflicts over the [THAAD missile systems](#), debates regarding ethnic Koreans in northeast China, and China's nationalist impulses. Many South Koreans view China's aggressive foreign policy as heralding the return of the old Chinese Empire, which invaded Korea many times throughout history.

Moreover, many on the South Korean left have strong concerns regarding so-called "Socialism with Chinese characteristics", even if some still regard China as a socialist country. Some suggest that within China's hybrid regime, the existence of state-owned enterprises and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) tight grip on power represent "socialist characteristics". But pro-China leftists are silent on the fact that the country's economic prosperity has been made possible by the super-exploitation of low-wage farmer-workers who are denied basic labour rights. Meanwhile capitalist billionaires are thriving through cooperation with corruption-ridden CCP bureaucrats.

How have US-China tensions impacted upon politics and struggles in South Korea? And how does the issue of North Korea influence domestic politics?

US-China tensions have erased any space for politics and struggles as it is impossible to point to any good aspects of China's economy and politics that warrant support. South Koreans see the Chinese government as unpredictable. Quite accustomed to North Korea's rhetoric, many South Koreans see China's discourse as resembling North Korea's way of thinking.

In terms of North-South relations, these are currently on ice. North Korea completely ignores South Korea and refuses any kind of contact or dialogue. This change of attitude began after Kim Jong Un's failed talks with former US president Donald Trump. Trump saw US-North Korea talks as a mere game: the maverick president was completely ignorant when it came to North Korea and had little genuine interest in the Korean peninsula. However, North Korea has its own logic when it comes to South Korea.

When the Korean War ended with a truce in 1953, then-South Korean president Syngman Rhee insisted on continuing the war. As a result, the only signatories to the truce agreement were the US, the United Nations, China and North Korea — South Korea did not even participate in peace talks. This was used by North Korea as proof that South Korea was not an independent country, but a puppet regime of US imperialism. There is some truth to this claim, but it is no reason to refuse any dialogue or contact. However, North Korea has ever since insisted on pursuing direct dialogue with the US.

Most South Koreans want peaceful relations with North Korea, though there are differences in approaches. But the present government has no interest in re-establishing relations with North Korea, preferring to stoke antagonisms. This policy only benefits North Korea's regime and South Korea's anti-Communist extremists and Christian fundamentalists, who are Yoon's core base.

While Ukraine is the key flashpoint in the US-Russia conflict, Taiwan appears to be a key flashpoint in US-China tensions. What is the stance of the left in South Korea towards Ukraine and Taiwan?

For historical reasons, Koreans, both in the South and North, have strong inclinations toward nationalism. Thus Koreans, including those on the left, generally have a poor conception of foreign relations.

While having little direct contact with the [South Korean left](#), North Korea has a strong influence over those associated with the National Liberation (NL) tendency — who are largely pro-North Korean nationalists. Also only a minority of those associated with the People's Democracy (PD) tendency are critical toward North Korea.

In general, Koreans criticise Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but those from the NL tendency and sections of the PD tendency implicitly side with Russia by seeking to justify Russian President Vladimir Putin's action. The left criticises both Russia and the US, though acts of concrete solidarity are very rare. This reflects the state of the South Korean left more generally.

In this context, what kind of peace initiatives could the left in South Korea and the region promote?

In theory, the South Korean left supports peace initiatives. But the reality is that such initiatives are seldom promoted. China, Japan and Korea are not just close geographically but also culturally. In the first half of the past century, there was a great deal of mutual exchange and influence among the three countries. But Cold War politics destroyed these links in the second half of the century, especially in South Korea.

After the Cold War — which never really ended in the Korean peninsula — some contacts were re-established between the South Korean and Japanese left. But these contacts have been limited. Expressions of solidarity and exchanges exist at a level well below those of the 20th century. Sporadically, some intellectuals and civil society groups in Korea and Japan attempt certain symbolic initiatives for peace in East Asia. We have even seen recent attempts and initiatives at the grassroots level but, unfortunately, none have been strong enough to produce tangible results or impact the course of politics.

In South Korea, the political left and labour movement face multiple crises: politically divided, fragmented and marginalised, they are on the defensive and have failed to develop any fight back or alternative. While the previous militant generation gets older, younger generations are increasingly attracted to identity politics and internationalist perspectives tend to fade away. This slow, but steady, process of deradicalisation is a serious concern for the future of the left.

P.S.

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