

New Crises and Old Coalitions? Foreign Policy Challenges and Issue Ownership Changes in South Korea*

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In this study I explore the changes and challenges confronting conservatives in South Korea when it comes to party reputation over national security. First, this paper addresses the notion of credibility and flexibility related to the dilemma of party change and elaborates on the reality of party transformation in South Korea. Then, by analyzing polling results and policy details, I monitor how the Korean public perceives President Moon Jae-in's coping with North Korea's denuclearization. Additionally, I examine how and why conservatives in South Korea are forced to search for new ideas to recover their old coalitions when confronted with new crises, ranging from those involving North Korea to failed presidents. Concluding remarks include some reform agendas for South Korea's foreign policy-making in the post-Candlelight Era. This paper sheds new light on the how and why national security crises and challenges would often shape the reinvention of partisan coalition-building in domestic politics.

Keywords: issue ownership, North Korea nuclear crisis, party reputation, presidential approval ratings, domestic politics

* This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2016-S1A3A2925063).

I. Introduction

Voters are regularly asked, which party is most adept at handling certain policy issues. It is not uncommon that one party strong on national defense does not enjoy a good reputation when it comes to environmental protection. The cleavages over ideologies and interests normally create distinct partisan coalitions. And yet, it is often the parties themselves that seek to build their own policy character.¹ By putting party politics in perspective, the theory of issue ownership explains the processes and consequences of party reputation-building.

According to Petrocik, candidate strategies and voter responses combine to determine which party wins an election.² Then, the co-partisans within the legislature unite amongst themselves to build solid policy coalitions and to assume ownership over the issues. In short, party reputations over policy achievements produce party labels, which guide voters to evaluate problem emphases as well as candidate capabilities. Some argue that the issue of ownership misleads the relationship between parties and the public, as partisan elites adhere too closely to their proprietorship.³ To be certain, so long as perception and reputation persist, issue ownership rarely changes in party politics.

With state and government enjoying power dominance for so long, conservatives and liberals in South Korea do not differ much regarding various policy areas, except when it comes to issue of national security. Over the past decades, conservatives in South Korea

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1. Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins, *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); James M. Snyder Jr. and Michael M. Ting, "An Informational Rationale for Political Parties," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46 (2002), p. 90–110; Jonathan Woon and Jeremy C. Pope, "Made in Congress? Testing the Electoral Implications of Party Ideological Brand Names," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 70 (2008), p. 823–36.
 2. John R. Petrocik, "Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1996), p. 825–850.
 3. Patrick J. Egan, *Partisan Priorities: How Issue Ownership Drives and Distorts American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

have enjoyed the upper-hand regarding policy geared towards considering North Korea a security threat. Having portrayed liberals as weak on security, conservative party coalitions have successfully claimed that a so-called “security gap” exists in the domestic politics of South Korea.⁴ Nonetheless, the nuclear crisis initiated by the staunch leader of North Korea, but handled by the liberal president of South Korea seems to have turned the Figures.

President Moon, a former human rights lawyer, working closely with the Republican President Trump in the United States, has sought to take the driver’s seat in coordinating efforts to reduce nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula.⁵ With conservative parties being defeated back to back in the presidential and local elections, since the inauguration in May 2017, the Moon administration has enjoyed a strong approval rating. Rather generally, how does the notion of issue ownership play out in new democracies like South Korea? More specifically, has the issue of military defense arguably owned by conservative coalitions simply disappeared in the new security environment on the Korean Peninsula?

This paper explores the changes and challenges confronting conservatives in South Korea when it comes to the party reputation over national security. First, I address the notion of credibility and flexibility related to the dilemma of party change and elaborate on the reality of party transformation in South Korea. Then, by analyzing polling results and policy details, I track down how the Korean public is responding to President Moon’s handling of North Korean denuclearization. Additionally, I examine how and why conservatives in South Korea are forced to search for new ideas to restore old coalitions when they confront new crises, ranging from North Korea to failed presidents. Concluding remarks include some reform agendas for South Korea’s foreign policy-making in the post-Candlelight Era. This paper sheds

4. Hannah Goble and Peter M. Holm, “Breaking Bonds? The Iraq War and the Loss of the Republican Dominance in National Security,” *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 62 (June 2009), p. 215–229.

5. Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

new light on the how and why national security crises and challenges would shape the reinvention of partisan coalition-building in domestic politics.

II. Credibility vs. Flexibility: Coalition-building and Party Change

According to Schattschneider, “Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties.”⁶ In addition, Rossiter earlier claimed “No America without democracy, no democracy without politics, no politics without parties, no parties without compromise and moderation.”⁷ On top of the critical role played by political parties for democratic governance, scholars have long debated whether parties should change positions. A party shifts positions too often to gain credibility could backfire resulting in the party losing credibility in the eyes of the voters. If a party shifts positions too seldom to show flexibility, voters would also not be pleased with the party. Policy positioning in light of credibility and flexibility is a major dilemma facing political parties in representative democracies.

The famous definition of a party by Burke points to the value of stable policy coalitions in political competitions. Burke was a conservative, utilitarian, and classical liberal.⁸

According to the first great framer of the modern conception of representative government, the party as an institution is not merely the aggregate of its present members but reflects the memory and history of society. Burke’s party was “a body of people united for promoting by their joint endeavors, national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.” Until the norm of universal

6. E. E. Schattschneider, *Party Government: American Government in Action*. (New York: Rinehart and Co, 1942), p. 1.

7. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 117.

8. Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*. vol. I (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1889).

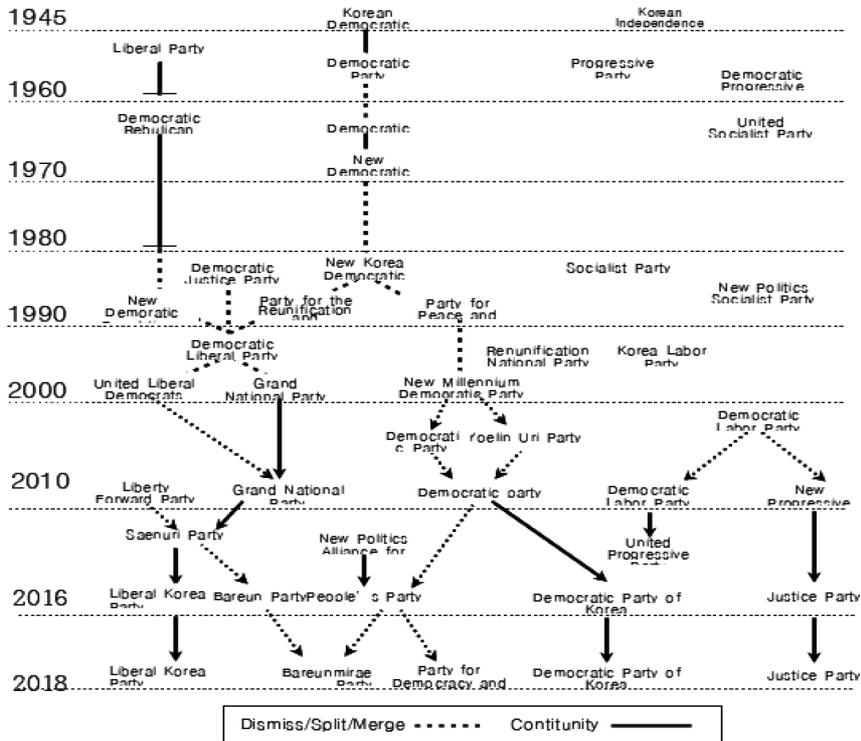
voting rights was widely adopted, parties in western democracies played the pivotal role of organizing debates and orchestrating policies. Indeed, the party was a credible political institution conducting a noble mission.

On the other hand, Downs offers a new definition of political parties in representative governance.⁹ According to the economist, a party is “a team of people seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a duly constituted election.” With the election victory agreed upon as the sole purpose of parties, party leaders and members should see no reason why parties must stick to their previous positions. Downs’ party cares more about flexibility than credibility. The median voter theorem by Downs posits that political parties would pursue policies that appeal most to the median voter. It explains why political parties often promote the same policies, even if they break from their own policy positions in the past. Obviously, one big condition for the median voter theorem is related to the ideological distribution of voters. The theorem works if voters’ ideological distribution is a normal distribution. It will not work if voters’ ideological distribution is bimodal.

Over the course of the New Deal era in the United States, the Democratic Party had northern members and southern elites coming together as a dominant congressional majority party. The Republican Party as a “permanent minority” put together a conservative coalition along with some portion of southern Democrats. The American public had no clear choice between the parties showing “not a dime’s worth of difference” until the 1990s. Indeed, the American Political Science Association published in 1950 the report titled “Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System,” which called for the parties to present coherent, yet divergent, packages of policy proposals to the public. Downs’s seminal work in 1957, published only seven years later, put an end to this normative debate of whether a party should or should not change its position. In other words, Downs demonstrates that a rational political party would, in two-party competition, seek out an

9. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957).

Figure 1. Party Title Changes in South Korea¹⁰



ideological position in the middle of the electorate’s preference distribution. Simply put, pursuing a new policy position ultimately shows that the party is flexible.

In the context of new democracies, the notion of new voter demand and party position changes seems to be required for nuanced analyses. Among others, one caveat is that parties in South Korea, for example, do not necessarily revise their positions but often rewrite their labels. The advantages and disadvantages of party credibility and

10. Kyungmee Park, “Korea Assembly and Political Party,” in *Korean Assembly and its Political Processes*, ed. Sung-ho Lim et al. (Seoul: Oruem, 2010), p.237-261, translated by the author. I am indebted to Professor Kyungmi Park for this analysis of party name changes in South Korea.

flexibility are considered only when parties function as a “party-as-a-label.” If political parties keep changing party names from one election to another, voters may be confused about “who’s who” when they consider which party is reliable and responsive. For sure, liberal parties in South Korea hardly use conservative labels and vice versa. Still, it is quite questionable whether the whole debate concerning the advantages and disadvantages of credible versus flexible parties could directly apply in the party politics of South Korea. Figure 1 shows the party changes, not party position changes, over the course of political history in South Korea.

Then, why is it that political parties in South Korea continue to undergo name changes? It has a lot to do with the do-or-die competition for the prize of presidency. Since democratization in 1987, Korean presidents have served a single term pursuant to the constitution. Likewise, there has been no case to date of a sitting president running for re-election in South Korea. Thus, if an incumbent president is very unpopular and the next election is quickly approaching, the ruling party tends to employ a tactic of cosmetic changes such as renewing the party name. At the same time, the opposition party in the course of fierce competition for presidential candidates often ends up having the runner-up defecting from the opposition party. Then naturally, the third opposition candidate builds a new party under a new name.

There are serious problems associate with changing party names in South Korea. One of such problems is that it tends to confuse voters during election campaigns. New names seriously and negatively affect the party-building processes in legislative arenas. A mature party could greatly develop when party members struggle hard for “soul-searching” after they lose the elections. In the midst of balancing efforts to sustain credibility and to show flexibility, political parties shape and reshape their political identities. If political parties continue to correct only labels, and not legacies, then party-building in new democracies is not possible. To a large extent, almost all the parties in South Korea have cleverly survived elections through this long-standing pattern of changing party names.

For now, at least, almost all the pundits and voters in South Korea agree that the current crisis is not just the crisis of the Liberty Korea Party (LKP), but that of conservatives as a whole. In the aftermath of the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, conservative leaders and parties were divided. Then, the back to back presidential election and local elections dealt a fatal blow to conservative coalitions. Now, the progressive President Moon leads the charge for a new era of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The Republican President Trump has cancelled U.S.-South Korea joint military exercise, calling it a “war game” and calls the North Korea leader “terrific and talented.” The effectiveness of the tactic to change a party’s name in the politics of South Korea seems to no longer be effective and consequently the conservative coalition seems to confront the real crises.

III. Security Crises and Foreign Policy-making in the Post-Candlelight Era

In 2017, South Korea experienced the candlelight protest as a dramatic social movement, which called for the impeachment of the sitting president and the punishment of her close aides. As a consequence, President Park was finally ousted, and the new president Moon came to power through the special election held in May 2017. During his early period of governance, the Moon Administration enjoyed an unprecedented level of support for driving the campaign of “draining the swamp.” The past decade of conservative ruling in South Korea came to be portrayed as failed politics. With Moon’s likeability carrying the day, the Korean public gave the new progressive administration high marks on every reform effort. Despite a recent setback caused by poor economic performance, President Moon’s approval rating is still hovering around 60 percent.

The new administration in the first year of 2017, however, simply could do nothing but watch the security environment on the Korean Peninsula drastically deteriorated. The Kim Jong Un regime in North Korea successfully developed its nuclear program and delivery

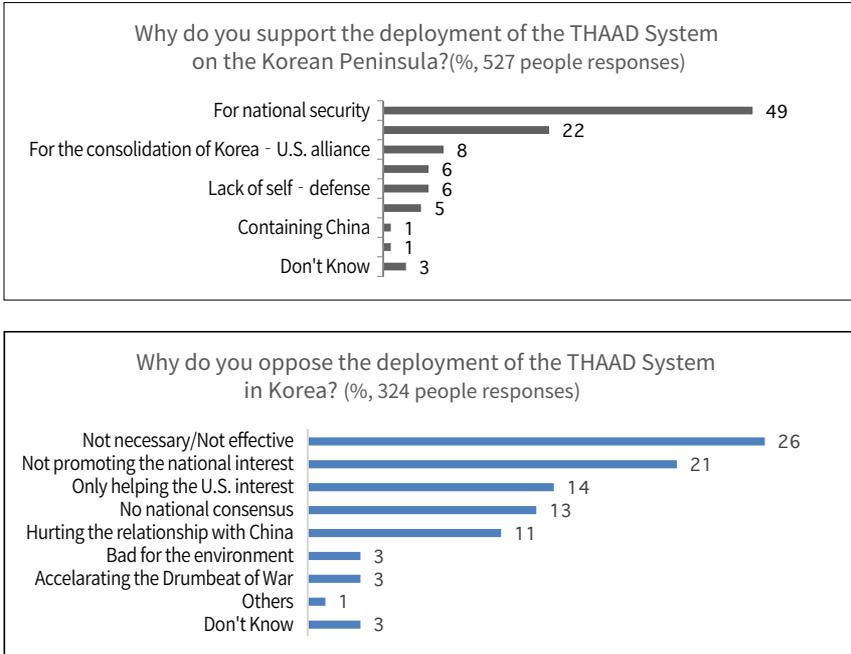
system. North Korea's nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) could allegedly hit the city of New York. In response, President Donald Trump of the United States during his UN speech called Kim a "Rocket Man on a suicide mission." Hinting at a military strike against North Korea, Trump's mention of war was ratcheted up in 2017, and included the expression, "fire and fury," "locked and loaded," "totally destroy North Korea," and "the calm before the storm." In China, President Xi Jinping continued economic retaliation against South Korea's corporations doing business in China as the Chinese government and the Chinese public was outraged and very concerned about the THAAD system deployment in South Korea. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from Japan was also busy courting Trump and was sometimes more unyielding than his counterparts from the United States and South Korea when it comes to talking to North Korea.

Then, to what extent has the so-called "Candlelight Spirit" affected foreign policy in South Korea? There is no doubt that the "Candlelight Protest" was critical for removing the former president. But, launching new foreign policy in the post-Candlelight Era turned out to be a completely different story. First of all, changes in security circumstances have little to do with protests in the streets. The candlelight protest was about the corruption and failures by President Park, not necessarily about foreign policy blunders. Second, free media in South Korea, uncontrolled by the Moon administration, is not necessarily cooperating with Blue House leadership and is often sending mixed signals regarding the effectiveness of the "driver-seat" argument laid out by the new administration over foreign policy-making. As President Moon claims that he would take a driver's seat in handling security concerns on the Korean Peninsula, the conservative media wasted no time criticizing him for being naïve and unrealistic.

Finally, the Korean public was highly divided over the question of how to respond to security threats from North Korea. In 2017, the Moon administration still had the public polarized over the issue of North Korea, ranging from nuclear weapons to human rights to aid decisions. Speaking of domestic polarization over foreign policy,

Figure 2 shows one good example of the public split over THAAD deployment in South Korea. Forty-nine percent of respondents who prefer to deploy THAAD believed that the missile defense system was necessary for national security. On the contrary, almost the same portion of respondents who viewed the deployment negatively claimed that the THAAD system was neither effective nor necessary for national security and interests. Eight percent of positive respondents endorsed the THAAD deployment as a part of efforts to consolidate the U.S.-South Korea alliance, whereas twenty-five percent of those opposing deployment discredited the promotion of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and underscored its relationship with China. Thirteen percent of those that disapproved of the THAAD system took issue with the decision-making processes and deplored no national consensus.

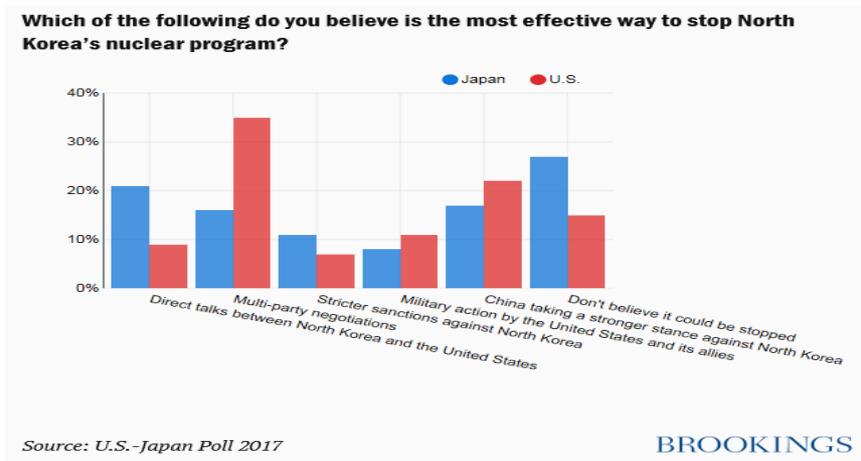
Figure 2. Political Divide over THAAD in South Korea, June 2017



Source: Gallup Korea.

When it comes to diverse views concerning North Korea’s nuclear program, people in both Japan and the United States gave yet another perspective. As shown in Figure 3, Japanese citizens tend to be more pessimistic than the American counterparts about preventing North Korea from developing the nuclear weapons. Also, people in Japan heavily prefer direct talks between North Korea and the United States for resolving the nuclear crisis, whereas multi-party negotiations including China and Japan are highly favored by the American public. Among positions shared by both the Japanese and American public are disapproving the strategy of a military strike against North Korea and emphasizing the role of China in pressuring the North Korean regime to denuclearize.

Figure 3. U.S.-Japan Poll Results concerning North Korea, 2017



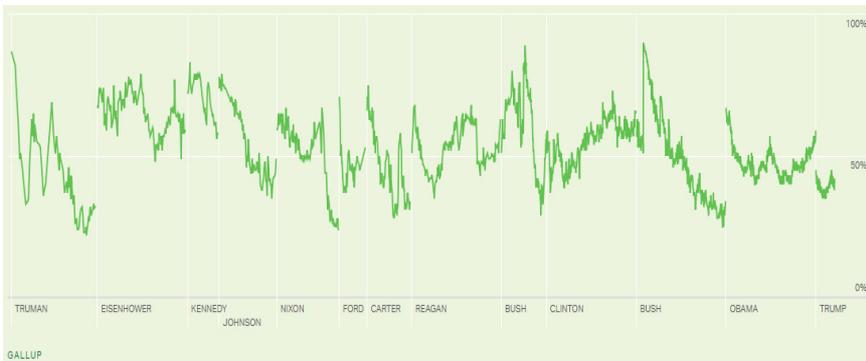
Source: Brookings Institution

IV. Presidential Politics and New Ownership of National Security in South Korea?

According to Neustadt, presidential power is the “power-to-

persuade.”¹¹ The American presidency is characterized as weak vis-à-vis U.S. Congress so that it is imperative for presidents to persuade members of Congress to believe that it is in their own interests to follow presidential leadership. During the periods of Richard E. Neustadt and other traditional scholars of the U.S. presidency, the House and Senate had an upper hand in the process of lawmaking. Thus, when the president pushes for his political agenda in the legislature, he tends to rely on the power to persuade, which comes from the inside-the-beltway reputation and public prestige. What is critical is how much support the sitting president enjoy as public support of the president is a key as to whether and how much members of Congress would embrace or embarrass the president.

Figure 4. US Presidential Approval Ratings Changes



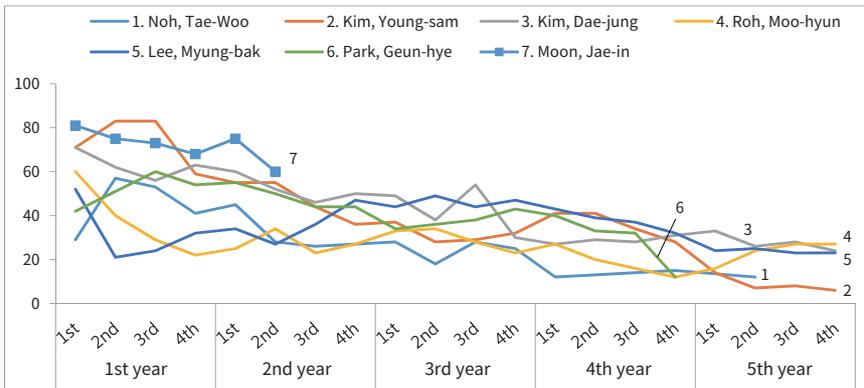
Source: Gallup.

Presidential job approval measured by polling is often considered in terms of public support of the president. Gallup defines “presidential job approval as a simple, yet powerful, measure of the public’s view of the U.S. president’s job performance at a particular point in time.” Indeed, public support of the president has its own characteristics. What is recurring as a strong pattern is the fact that presidential approval ratings tend to decrease over the course of

11. Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* (New York: Free Press, 1960).

individual presidencies. Figure 4 shows the tendencies and except for the U.S. Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, nearly all American presidents found public support dwindle the longer they held office. There are many different reasons for this. For example, American presidents cannot please everybody (James Polk). People only see their good points at first (Jimmy Carter). They are scapegoats for our problems (Martin Van Buren). The job is too much for one individual (Herbert Hoover). They make too many promises they cannot keep (Lyndon B. Johnson). Presidents often have to make unpopular decisions (Harry Truman). Presidents are not as powerful as people often think (Woodrow Wilson). And people do not always look at the overall record of a president (George Bush 41st). The case of Korean presidents is no exception. Figure 5 indicates the downward pattern of presidential job approval ratings in South Korea since democratization in 1987.

Figure 5. Korean Presidential Approval Ratings Changes

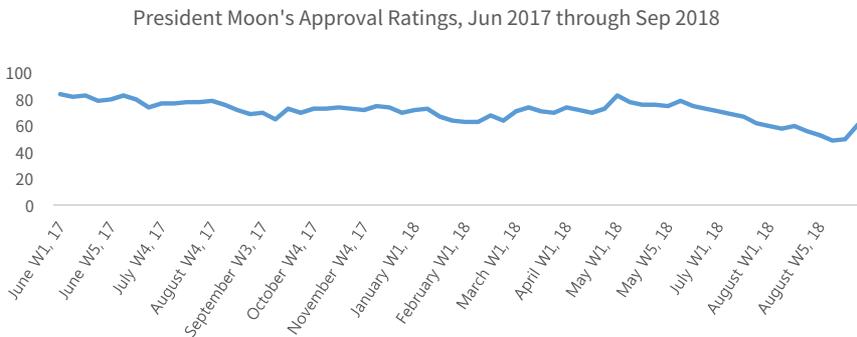


Source: Gallup Korea.

What about the case of President Moon? Since his inauguration in May in 2017, the progressive president has enjoyed relatively high approval ratings. Starting with approval ratings of about 80 percent, the Moon administration successfully filled the “communication gap” failure that the previous presidents were accused of. President Moon

launched a charm offensive and his un-going public strategy gained public support in South Korea.¹² The candlelight protest followed by the election of a new president has created a fresh opportunity for progressive parties in South Korea, whereas conservative coalitions have failed to do “soul searching.” In the aftermath of President Park’s impeachment, conservative leaders could not revamp the age-old conservative slogan of economic growth and national security. The disastrous election results of the local elections of June 2018 were a devastating blow for conservative parties and politicians. In spite of a recent setback caused by economic slowdown, President Moon is still popular among the Korean public, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. President Moon’s Approval Rating Changes



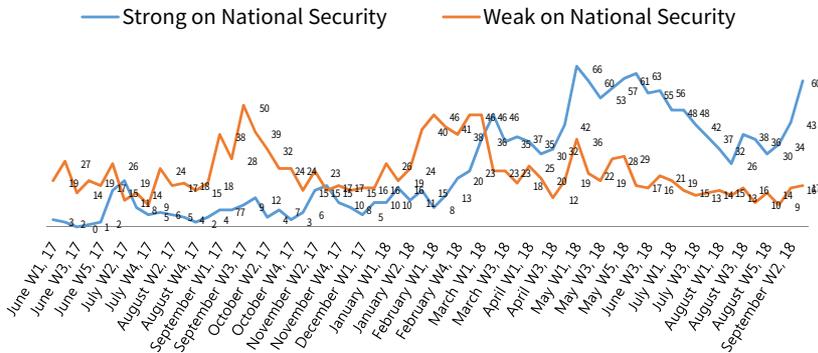
Source: Gallup Korea.

Do President Moon’s high approval ratings lead to the new ownership of a national security issue in South Korea? Figure 7 shows some switching and striking results when it comes to the evaluation of presidential leadership over national security. Until the month of March in 2018, the long-lasting pattern of progressive presidents being perceived as “weak on national security” persisted. The year 2017 was the peak of the nuclear crisis by North Korea, fanned by President

12. Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1997).

Trump’s unpredictability and bellicosity.¹³ The public in South Korea was seriously concerned about the possibility of military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula.

Figure 7. Public Opinion over President Moon and National Security, 2017-2018



Source: Gallup Korea.

Things have suddenly turned around in early 2018, when Kim Jung Un made a speech of rapprochement and announced his intentions for denuclearization. The PyeongChang Winter Olympics proceeded peacefully and the summit meeting between President Moon and Chairman Kim took place in April of 2018. With respect to the handling of North Korea, South Koreans focused on “diplomacy” and “talk” for positive evaluation of the Moon administration. The same keywords also applied to the naysayers against President Moon. In other words, those negative about the Moon administration gave low approval ratings because President Moon only underscored “diplomacy” and “dialogue.” And yet, those who disapproved of President Moon’s handling of North Korea’s denuclearization were not in the majority.

Obviously, it is too early to tell whether this shift of security issue

13. Taesuh Cha and Jungkun Seo, “Trump by Nixon: Maverick Presidents in the Years of U.S. Relative Decline,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2018), p. 79-96.

ownership in favor of a progressive president is significant and sustainable. The Kim Dae-jung government also briefly secured public support and then failed to maintain the momentum when the first-ever summit meeting between the two Koreas in 2000 ultimately changed little regarding the clash between North Korea and the Bush administration. And, the progress made towards North Korea's denuclearization this time could be lost at any time if North Korea and the United States repeat the past failures of no trust-building with each other.¹⁴ There is, however, no doubt that the biggest premise of "denuclearization through dialogue," offers major advantages to the Moon administration when it comes to the dimension of public relations in South Korea. Especially, when the conservative opposition has no alternative strategy to offer in dealing with nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, President Moon's leadership over national security could enjoy public support for a while to come.¹⁵

V. Conclusion: Perceptions, Performance, and Party

The security crises concerning the denuclearization of North Korea pose new challenges to traditional ideas and political institutions in South Korea. Among others, unconventional U.S. foreign policy pushed ahead by Trump has made conservative voters and parties in South Korea scratch their heads over the solidarity of the U.S.-ROK alliance. The U.S. president's cancelling of the joint military exercise overnight and praising the North Korean dictator as talented were actions thought of as unthinkable since the armistice of the Korean War in 1953. This was truly shocking particularly because the conservative elites and parties have long employed the ROK-U.S. military partnership as the backbone for their political identities. Indeed, the playbook of "Red Scare" by conservative presidents and

14. Jungkun Seo, "Agreements without Commitments? The US Congress and the US North Korea Agreed Framework, 1994-2002," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2015), p. 107-122.

15. John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

parties have, until recently and effectively, put progressive parties on the defensive. Then, all of a sudden, just as the election of Trump in 2016 has thrown American politics into turmoil, the about-face of the American president since 2017 has astonished conservative politics in South Korea. In addition, as I have analyzed in this paper, the public in South Korea now overwhelmingly supports the basic direction of the Moon administration over the handling of North Korea. Simply put, the perception and reputation concerning the ownership of security issues by conservatives seems to change, at least for now.

When South Koreans endorse a peaceful approach to the nuclear crisis, I suggest that conservative coalitions no longer be out of touch with public sentiment. The political reality is that the notion of “war-as-no-option” is firmly planted in the mindset of Korean voters, whereas many people believe that the complete denuclearization of North Korea is required. Scare tactics long employed by the conservative media and the traditional elites would neither alarm nor attract the South Korean public any longer. With Trump being spontaneous each and every day, conservative coalitions could no longer rely on the U.S.-ROK alliance as their political panacea.

As of now, the only direction conservative politics in South Korea could take appears to be by adopting the position of “peace-through-strength,” which would get Korean conservatives back on track as security hawks. In other words, the Reagan style of rhetoric and reputation is needed for conservative coalitions in South Korea, as progressives continue to emphasize negotiations and compromises with North Korea. Among others, if conservatives aim to reshape their security issue ownership, they could, for example, call for the complete inspection of North Korea’s nuclear facilities and the return of wartime operational control (OPCON) to the South Korean military. Only when conservative coalitions in South Korea are consistently tough on American policymakers as well as the North Korean regime, they could present new party identities to the younger generations in South Korea.

What about the candlelight protest and political institutions in South Korea? Although the Candlelight Protest in 2016 has

dramatically presented a new possibility for civic participation for political reform in South Korea, the impact to date has been arguably limited to the overthrow and takeover of the presidency in the Blue House. For sure, the drive for “draining the swamp” has swept the political scene since the inauguration of President Moon. And yet correcting past wrongdoings does not always create the new political institutions, by which political reform could systematically and comprehensively persist.

For example, the so-called “imperial presidency” was considered to be the main culprit for the failure of previous presidents in South Korea.¹⁶ The Moon administration, however, has not taken any critical measures to tackle this institutional problem of unchecked presidency. Rather, the need for handling the security situation and economic reforms has allegedly caused President Moon to delegate more powers than before to his Blue House advisors, who are not electorally accountable. I posit that the new security crises would provide an unprecedented opportunity to the progressive coalition only when President Moon and his party could take charge of the political reform of the presidency in South Korea. The personal charm of President Moon would be good for his own political career during his term in office but would be far short of building his party’s reputation in terms of national security after his retirement in 2022.

Finally, another missed opportunity in the aftermath of the Candlelight protest is the reform of the legislative branch in South Korea. As the Candlelight movement signifies the democratic principle of “checks and balances,” the National Assembly should function as a key player in the area of foreign policy-making. The Armed Services Committee should host hearings regularly to ask and assess the administration’s positions and strategies over the question of North Korea’s denuclearization. Legislative heavyweights should step up to the plate and lead public debate for national consensus-building over how to resolve the security crisis. Only when the National Assembly in South Korea helps the public hold the Moon administration

16. Andrew Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

accounting, can President Moon and his advisors care for democratic and consensual solutions to the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

■ Article Received: 10/28 ■ Reviewed: 11/23 ■ Accepted: 11/23

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