The Rise and Fall of South Korea’s 586 Generation: Implications for the US Alliance

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To cite this article: Tae-Hyo Kim & Bernard Rowan (2022) The Rise and Fall of South Korea’s 586 Generation: Implications for the US Alliance, The Washington Quarterly, 45:2, 23-38, DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090759

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2090759

Published online: 14 Jul 2022.
Washington's biggest concern in its relationship with South Korea has been returning to a stance consistent with active engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. In response to June 2020 remarks by a senior South Korean official that his country had the right to choose between the US and China, the US State Department commented that South Korea had already chosen the US several decades ago when it abandoned authoritarianism and embraced democracy.1 In October 2021, although Washington officially welcomed the declaration of an end to the Korean War—a proposal that had been promoted for several years by the Moon Jae-in administration—the Biden administration expressed de facto opposition by insisting that it be linked to tangible North Korean denuclearization measures.2

With the March 2022 election of candidate Yoon Suk-yeol of the People Power Party, expectations are growing that the US-South Korea alliance will return to its previous role and regain its old strength. South Korea's new president believes that Seoul's reluctance under Moon to take a firm stand on issues challenging relations between Washington and Beijing, including policy toward
Taiwan and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, has created an impression of South Korea tilting toward China and away from its longtime ally. Yoon’s promise to participate in creating a free and open Indo-Pacific order by making the South Korea-US alliance the central axis of Seoul’s diplomacy is very encouraging from Washington’s point of view. From this rosy vantage point, the US-South Korea alliance will see a brighter road over the next five years. A global comprehensive strategic alliance between the two countries will enhance cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and in the region, as well as around the globe.

The United States should continue to develop positive synergy with the Yoon administration for the purposes of shoring up security in Northeast Asia. The US-South Korea alliance reached its peak during President Lee Myung-bak’s era (2008-2012), but only a few years later, when a left-leaning progressive government took over in 2017, the alliance regressed. There is no guarantee that this will not occur again. There is a wealth of research that focuses on the impact of changes in the international environment and US strategy on the US-ROK alliance, but much less attention is paid to how sharply Seoul’s attitude toward Washington is affected by South Korea’s domestic politics.

This paper makes three arguments. First, for the past 25 years, whenever the South Korean government has toggled between right and left, it has triggered cycles of instability in the US-South Korea alliance. Since 1998, right-wing and left-wing governments have each been in power three times, recently alternating, and the differences in the security policies of the two have gradually widened. While some have argued that a left-right or right-left ideological mismatch between US and Korean administrations explains alliance disjuncture, this paper posits that right-leaning governments in Seoul have successfully forged harmonious partnerships with both Republican and Democratic US administrations.

Second, the periodic discord that arises between Washington and Seoul is not an anomaly, but stems from an ideological confrontation that is structurally rooted in both Korea’s modern political history and generational conflicts. The left-wing members of what is termed the “586 generation” have been leading South Korea’s foreign policy under the Moon administration; when the political influence of this group increased, difficulties in the alliance were aggravated. Understanding the origins of the 586-generation members’ mindset, as well as their failure to adapt to changing circumstances, is key to rebalancing the US
alliance under the incoming Yoon administration. South Korea should capitalize on the activist and internationalist vision of the Biden administration in the present context.

Third, the political power of South Korean left-wing ideological forces, which reached their peak during the Moon Jae-in administration, is now on the decline. The direct cause is the policy failures and ethical missteps shown by this group over the past five years. More fundamentally, the political orientation of the next generation, young people in their twenties and thirties, is focused on practical concerns rather than ideology. Their support for the left-wing members of the 586 generation has begun to wane. The younger sectors of the domestic South Korean electorate are more concerned with other issues: economic conditions, gender equality (in particular a concern of younger women), political transparency, and generational (“boomer”) condescension. For all three of these interrelated reasons, the Biden administration should reassess the changing domestic political situation in South Korea before articulating its policy toward Seoul’s new administration. It should continue to expand its vision of the US-South Korea alliance to serve the national interests of both countries and contribute to stability and prosperity in East Asia. Given the election of Yoon and political attitudes that favor more than a typical alternation of political parties, the United States should revitalize and reinvest in its alliance with South Korea.

**Left, Right, and Back Again: A Whiplash Alliance?**

South Korea’s left wing, which favors accommodation with North Korea and China, has not suddenly emerged. A minority of pro-North Korean forces has always existed in South Korea. However, since 1998, three of six South Korean Presidents have been left-leaning, and the influence of pro-North Korean leftists has gradually expanded. The two former progressive administrations often differed with the United States over security policies, as did the Moon administration over the last five years.

The Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2002) was the first left-leaning government to hold power after the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948. The Kim administration’s “Sunshine Policy,” which insisted that bold economic support could moderate North Korea, became the poster child for the leftist policy model vis-à-vis North Korea. At the time, the Clinton administration sought to fall in step with South Korea’s North Korea policy by initiating the “Perry Process,” which sought a diplomatic solution to the denuclearization of North Korea.

However, with the arrival of the George W. Bush administration in 2001, US-South Korea relations saw a dramatic shift. At a summit held 47 days after
President Bush took office, President Kim spent several hours trying to persuade the US President to embrace the North Korean regime. President Bush declared the talks “catastrophic,” announcing at a press conference shortly after the meeting that he harbored no illusions about diplomatic and economic initiatives having any effect on the regime. The following October, the second North Korean nuclear crisis broke out when it was revealed that Pyongyang had been secretly operating a new highly enriched uranium program in breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework, also known as the nuclear freeze agreement. As a result, the space for cooperation on North Korea policy narrowed still further.

The subsequent left-leaning administration, that of Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2007), again contended with the Bush administration throughout its five-year tenure, and tensions in US-South Korea relations continued. During six-party talks to negotiate North Korea’s denuclearization, South Korea’s stance was closer to that of China and Russia: it prioritized carrots (economic support) over sticks (economic sanctions). Meanwhile, security cooperation between South Korea, the United States and Japan was diminishing.

Roh’s notion of “independence diplomacy” implied that the US-South Korea alliance should not confront both China and North Korea simultaneously. President Roh framed South Korea’s role as that of a “balancer” promoting peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia and greater autonomy from Washington. He addressed the need to harmonize South Korea’s interests with Beijing and Pyongyang in his March 2005 speech at the graduation ceremony of the Third Military Academy. This Northeast Asian balancer theory—in which South Korea puts its ally, the United States, on par with China and conducts hedging diplomacy between Washington and Beijing—was a departure from Korea’s conventional policy. It reflected a widening difference between left- and right-wing leaders in South Korea, a gap that has persisted.

Some argue that South Korea-US relations deteriorate when South Korea’s progressive administrations must deal with a Republican president, who tends to be harder on North Korea, or when a South Korean conservative must work with a US Democrat. Conversely, this would mean that the alliance partnership improves when a South Korean progressive’s counterpart is a Democrat, whose party values diplomacy with North Korea, and that Korea-US relations likewise improve when a South Korean conservative administration partners with a Republican president. But in reality, the contours of the alliance have not been so clear cut.
It is true that the left-leaning Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations had a tough time dealing with George Bush, a Republican, between 2001 and 2007. However, the right-leaning Lee Myung-bak administration sought and forged a constructive relationship with both Bush, a Republican, and Obama, a Democrat.11 The Lee government’s “Global Korea” vision was well accepted by the Bush administration (2008-2009), while the Lee-Obama partnership (2009-2012) established a global strategic alliance, with accomplishments that included the Korea-US (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement (2010), improved deterrence against North Korea through revision of the US-Korea Missile Guidelines (2012), and South Korea’s dispatch of troops to Afghanistan and participation in that country’s reconstruction (2010-2012).12

This progress continued, as the right-wing Park Geun-hye administration (2013-2016) also managed to maintain close cooperation with the Obama administration. Washington and Seoul indefinitely delayed the transition of wartime operational control in 2014 to focus on strengthening the alliance’s deterrent capability against North Korea, and revised the US-Republic of Korea Agreement for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation in 2015. Additionally, the Park administration signed a military intelligence-sharing agreement (the General Security of Military Intelligence Agreement, GSOMIA) with Japan in 2016, allowing enhanced trilateral security coordination between the US, Japan, and South Korea. In sum, the Lee and Park administrations played a pivotal role in facilitating the Obama administration’s “rebalance” toward Asia.

Subsequently, the Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022), the third left-wing government since 1948, worked with both Republican and Democratic partners (the Trump and Biden administrations), but the relationship between South Korea and the United States reverted to one of less cohesion throughout. The Moon administration threatened US-South Korea security cooperation by arranging meetings (June 2018 in Singapore; February 2019 in Hanoi, Vietnam) between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who was not at all willing to give up nuclear weapons, and by persuading the US to lift sanctions on North Korea (at the time, now-president Biden called the meetings a “TV show”).13 Washington has long had a hard time understanding why South Korea, the most direct target of North Korea’s nuclear threat, seems indifferent to the need to deter the North’s nuclear capabilities, let alone to dismantling them, a puzzling fact showcased by the Moon administration’s actions.

Ever since the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) identified and reported on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program in May 1992, Pyongyang has insisted that it should have nuclear weapons to counter the “nuclear war rehearsal” military exercises conducted by the US and South Korea.14 Pyongyang has called the US-ROK drills “a conspiracy to invade by a foreign power [i.e., the
US]” and “South Korea’s foreign power-dependent disease.” Despite this absurd hyperbole, the US-ROK drills continued up until the summer of 2018, when the Moon administration requested cancellation of the regular Ulchi-Freedom Guardian (UFG) drill scheduled for August. Since then, all regular military exercises have been suspended or reduced. Subsequently, whenever Pyongyang called for suspension of US-South Korea drills, President Moon and his aides asked for flexibility to prevent military tension and conflict with North Korea.

The Biden administration (unofficially) requested that South Korea join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), an informal strategic collaboration between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. However, Seoul at the time affirmed its preference to avoid what might be perceived as anti-Chinese international gatherings. During its entire tenure, the Moon administration issued a total of fifteen statements protesting Japan’s treatment of history and related South Korean grievances. It never once complained about China and North Korea through a similar historical lens. It was also a highly unusual step for the Moon administration to treat China on an equal basis by “not taking sides.”

Left-wing administrations in South Korea have troubled relations with the United States, not because of the character of the US administration in power, but because of the ideology-led policy direction which tends to be pursued by South Korea’s left-leaning policymakers. In our view, they are consistently lenient toward China as well as North Korea, and overly critical of Japan. This is because their criterion for formulating security policies is not a pragmatic appraisal of strategic interests but a reflection of ideological attitudes arising from the left progressive elite of the 586 generation.

Furthermore, the gap between South Korean and US administrations was much greater during the Moon government even when compared to that of its two leftist predecessors (from 1998 to 2007), reflecting trends of increasing alliance polarization. The first reason for this increased tension was the Moon government’s insistence on promoting the idea that appeasement and economic assistance will change North Korea and China, even though the threat from China and North Korea has become much more serious. Second, this stance has relied on a mindset that deemphasizes the opinions of opposition party members concerned about regional security. This group of progressive or left-leaning elites has worked to maintain a specific policy line in Seoul, one of economic incentivization and appeasement of the electorate. Who has been leading...
these decisions in South Korea? The answer is the left-wing members of the 586 generation.

**The 586 Generation**

“The 586 generation” is little known outside South Korea. As developed here, the phrase is shorthand for the power brokers in the Moon Jae-in government and their supporters. The number 586 is used because these elites are in their 50s, attended college in the ‘80s—coming of age during the democratization of South Korea—and were born in the ’60s. The number of core 586-generation members holding elected office is currently in the hundreds. Though relatively small in number, their influence had been steadily expanding until recently. Only eighteen former student activists of this generation entered the National Assembly in the 2000 general election, but the number increased to 174 by 2020 as the 586 generation increasingly entered politics.20 Most belong to the Minjoo Party, forming the largest pillar of the 586 group in the Moon government. The 586 group led decisions on national affairs and took up key positions in the Blue House, the administration, the National Assembly, and the judiciary. Throughout President Moon’s tenure, he was surrounded by these like-minded 586 forces and fully endorsed their policy direction. They advocated progressive reforms to enhance the prospects of Korean young adults, reform Korea’s large-scale conglomerates (chaebol), accomplish gender equality, and encourage progressive economic outcomes.21

Opposed to past conservative administrations and made up of members of the Korean student democratic movement of the 1980s, the 586 generation appears to want to reform South Korean society both in the realms of domestic and foreign policy. Their domestic aims of greater equity and transparency carry on the legacy of their formative experience during the 1980s pro-democracy period in South Korea. Their foreign policy, meanwhile, centers on the goal of peaceful unification through negotiation with North Korea.

Twenty years ago, the 586 generation made its debut on the Korean political stage. It was then referred to as “the 386 generation.” The 386 group’s power base expanded when left-wing supporters took office from 1998-2007 (during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations). However, since the 386 group was young and inexperienced, top government posts were held by older like-minded representatives such as former director of National Intelligence Service and Unification Minister Lim Dong-won; former Culture and Tourism Minister Park Jie-won, who served as a special envoy to North Korea; former Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun; and former Deputy Chief of the National Security Council and Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok.
What Does the 586 Generation Want?

South Korea’s democratic movement peaked in the mid-1980s during the college years of the 586 generation. The death of President Park Chung-hee in 1979 was followed by another authoritarian regime (the Chun Doo-hwan government) that came to power in 1980 through a military coup, and citizen demands for direct presidential elections increased. At that time, the 386-generation came to the forefront as student protestors calling for democracy. As the Cold War was coming to an end, student activists criticized the authoritarian regimes for their anti-communist and pro-US policies, while launching pro-North Korea and anti-US ideological campaigns under the common goal of winning democracy in South Korea. These student activists believed that the United States was complicit in Japanese colonialism and soft on Korean authoritarianism in the aftermath of the Gwangju massacre. They also rejected America’s strident anti-communism and its support for Korea’s version of developmental capitalism as merely the serving of vested interests. In 1987, the direct presidential election system was introduced, and the appeal of student activism waned as the South Korean people began to choose their own president.

Pyongyang is aware of and has endeavored to play on the dynamics of a drifting South Korea under the influence of the sympathetic 586 generation. North Korea’s position in the region diminished when the Soviet Union, its strongest supporter, collapsed in 1991. Since then, Pyongyang has attempted to gain support in South Korea through different tactics. It has encouraged a version of Antonio Gramsci’s strategy known as the “war of position.” Gramsci argued in the *Prison Notebooks* that since the capitalist system enjoys cultural hegemony and supports the vested interests of capitalist power, Marxists should enter positions of power to develop influence in their fields in preparation for a long war. During the Moon administration, Pyongyang attempted to broaden this unification front against conservatives in South Korea and the United States.

Pyongyang faces two principal opponents: South Korea’s right wing intends to defeat the communist regime and achieve liberal democratic unification, while the US sympathizes with this goal as well as the idea of a non-nuclear Korean peninsula. The 586 group has continued the Korean political dynamic of voicing progressive opposition to conservatives who favor anti-communist, pro-capitalist, and risk-averse security policies, labelling these policies as serving corrupt vested interests. Through this lens, the United States is also seen as an...
“imperialist” force that has allied with South Korea and is hostile to North Korea.28

The Unification Front campaign of North Korea and its Workers Party stresses three words: Jaju (independence), Minjok (nationality), and Pyonghwa (peace). These nationalist values of autonomy and peace for a united Korean people motivate Pyongyang’s policy both historically and into the present.29 Liberal members of the 586 generation and the Moon government also share these ideas from a South Korean perspective.30 This common frame of reference implicitly criticizes interference from the United States (independence) and proposes that discussion of and decisions about the future of the Korean Peninsula are a matter for North and South Koreans (nationality).31 If an end-of-war declaration is made and a peace treaty is signed between the US and North Korea without North Korea’s denuclearization, as Pyongyang hopes and the Moon Jae-in administration sought, then there would no longer be a rationale for a US troop presence in the South. Furthermore, if the US-South Korean alliance loses its vitality, North Korea would be able to achieve “peaceful” unification by isolating South Korea. So far, there have been four official inter-Korean Summit statements: the June 2000 statement between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il; the October 2007 statement between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il; and the April and September 2018 statements between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un.32 North Korea succeeded in inserting the expressions “Jaju” and “Minjok” into all four documents, while avoiding the issue of dismantling its nuclear program.

From Ideology to Practicality
The kind of nationalism inherent in the ranks of the 586 forces considers US forces in South Korea to be hostile to South Korea’s mode of peaceful and independent nationalism. Rather than telling the United States to leave directly, this group wants US policymakers to align with their goals of a peace regime on the peninsula and in the region.33 At the request of the Moon administration, US-ROK joint drills have not been conducted as planned since 2018. In addition, the Moon administration consistently declined to co-sponsor UN resolutions on North Korean human rights violations.34

586-generation leaders believe the biggest obstacle to progress in inter-Korean relations is a hostile US policy toward Pyongyang. This leads to demands that the Korean Peninsula issue be discussed more closely with China, the sponsor of North Korea. China and North Korea have a mutual aid and cooperation treaty, the only defense treaty either country has with another nation.35 China’s consistent strategy has also been to encourage South Korea’s distance
from trilateral security cooperation with the United States and Japan, as can be seen in commentary on recent talks between Seoul and Japan.36

Leading up the March 2022 elections, there were signs that the Moon government was out of step with the bulk of the South Korean public. According to the July 2021 edition of the Korea Research Institute’s regular survey of 1,000 people aged eighteen and over, South Koreans show the highest level of friendship toward the United States (55.9 out of 100 degrees), followed by Russia (38.8 degrees), North Korea (32.2 degrees), China (24.8 degrees) and Japan (24.6 degrees).37 The South Korean perception of China is the lowest among survey results over the past five years, and the favorability of Japan has been on a steady upward trend since July 2019. When it comes to security policies, the Moon government’s pro-Chinese and North Korean policies ignored majority opinion and pursued its own outdated ideological stance.38

The outcome of the 2022 Korean presidential election suggests that the South Korean electorate believes that the left-wing’s hedging strategy between the United States and China should end. Vis-à-vis South Korea-China relations, the two countries must find a space for cooperation while respecting each other’s core interests. If a robust US-South Korea alliance continues across the military, economic, and high-tech fields based on common values, it will serve as an effective lever for South Korea to bring China into the arena of constructive cooperation.

**America’s Double-Edged Diplomacy**

Reflecting this desire of the Korean people to change their leadership and policy direction, former Prosecutor General Yoon Suk-yeol of the opposition bloc won the March 2022 South Korean presidential election. Yoon has pledged to pursue a comprehensive strategic alliance with the US and improve relations with Japan, so a rapid restoration of US-Japan-Korea triangular security cooperation is expected.39 South Korea’s policy coordination with the US on the issues of China and North Korea, which had been idle during the previous administration, also will be restored. As expected by the Biden administration, there will be a greater possibility that South Korea more closely cooperates with the major networks of the free democratic camps such as the Quad and the Five Eyes intelligence sharing arrangement.
Despite a situation that might appear to prefigure a challenge for US-ROK relations, with a conservative leader in Seoul and a Democrat in the White House, prospects for improved relations are high. For South Koreans, the question of whether their country will stand with the United States is properly related to the more fundamental question of protecting the shared values and sustained development gains that have given their nation freedom and prosperity. This state of affairs indicates that past tendencies to forecast mismatched expectations between conservative Korean and centrist/liberal American administrations do not reflect reality. More fundamental is the area of agreement between Seoul and Washington on the need to face up to a hardening of Pyongyang’s military strategy and the lack of balancing from a surging Chinese regime. Further strengthening the US-ROK alliance has quickly become a priority for both Presidents Yoon and Biden.

Despite its status as superpower and leader of the alliance for freedom and democracy, the United States now depends more than ever on allied nations. The Biden government should not repeat the Trump administration’s mistake of approaching the alliance in terms of bilateral bargaining and trading, thereby causing Koreans to doubt the strength of their partnership with the United States. Realism dictates that roles should develop with respect for the growing power and abilities of all nations in the alliance.

Robert Putnam’s “Two Level Game” argues that domestic politics of related countries play a significant role in revising and finalizing international agreements between governments. How will this impact US foreign policy and US-ROK relations? The Biden administration should conduct public diplomacy to help South Koreans understand and support US positions on its foreign policy toward North Korea and China, as well as its Indo-Pacific Strategy. Crafting messaging to create a constructive consensus among the Korean people will continue to be important. For example, South Koreans should hear about what the previous administration in Seoul was reluctant to talk about, such as the monstrous human rights violations in North Korea, China’s denial of democracy in Hong Kong, repression in Xinjiang, and China’s work to make free navigation in the South China Sea conditional on acceptance of its sovereignty in the area.

Helpfully, after a months-long review of North Korean policy, Biden’s security team has settled on a new “practical approach” that explores diplomacy while maintaining economic sanctions. As White House press secretary Jen Psaki put it on April 30, 2021, US policy “will not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor will it rely on strategic patience.” This approach seems focused on creating
a middle ground between Trump’s eagerness to talk without seeking concrete results and Obama’s waiting game that wasted time.

It is also worth emphasizing that a resumption of step-by-step diplomacy that rewards Pyongyang’s piecemeal actions toward denuclearization with economic incentives will not work. The history is clear. Every possible reciprocal deal—small and large—that has been struck with North Korea (the 1994 Agreed Framework, the 2005 Joint Statement of the six-party talks, and the 2012 Leap Day Agreement) has ended in failure because the Kim family never intends to forgo its nuclear weapons.

Pyongyang’s goal is to get the Biden administration to ease economic sanctions. In his address at the Eighth Workers Party Congress in January 2022, Kim Jong-un admitted that the North Korean economy is in trouble due to international sanctions. North Korea’s penchant for rejecting dialogue reflects a strategy to frustrate the US demand for reciprocity in negotiations. While maintaining the principle of welcoming unconditional dialogue with North Korea, the Biden administration should work closely with the Yoon Suk-yeol government on the principles and detailed implementation plans of its North Korea policy.

Washington should commit itself to following an allied posture of determined and evident deterrence against North Korea’s nuclear missile and conventional threats. It should assure the South Korean people that the extended US deterrent provided to South Korea will be continuously monitored and reinforced. Seoul and Washington can achieve this by regularly holding tabletop exercises, which were conducted only twice during the Moon administration, and by establishing a more concrete agenda for the Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group established in 2016.

Economic cooperation with South Korea is equally critical. By encouraging and supporting global Korean companies such as Samsung, LG, and SK to engage more actively with the US market, the Korean private sector will contribute to realigning manufacturing value chains to the economic benefit of all. America’s strategic partnership with South Korea encompassing areas such as semiconductors, next-generation batteries, cyber-tools, green technologies, and pharmaceuticals can merge with the broader vision of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Framework. The depth and horizon of the US-ROK alliance will expand as economic interdependence between the two countries deepens.

The United States must be ready for a sustained challenge from China given the dynamics of great power competition, and the Korean Peninsula is a zone where American and Chinese vital strategic interests conflict. The question of who wins the systemic competition between the two Koreas is central to the US national interest, economically and in security terms, and to the outcomes of this bipolar competition. The United States should invigorate a solid and comprehensive alliance with South Korea’s government and people so that the
alliance does not drift again. It now has the opportunity to do so with the Yoon Suk-yeol administration.

Notes


