

South Korean presidential candidates line up behind US war drive

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South Korea is heading into the May 9 presidential election, triggered by the impeachment of conservative President Park Geun-hye, as the danger of military conflict in East Asia grows.

However, none of the candidates represents a progressive response to the crisis gripping the region, let alone an anti-war position. Their support for Washington's recent attack on Syria is a clear indication that they would not oppose a similar strike against North Korea.

The South Korean government backed the attack on Syria saying "that the use and proliferation of chemical weapons can never be condoned under any circumstances and to do that the international community should work together." None of the major candidates challenged this position.

Last Saturday, Moon Jae-in of the opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) did not deny the possibility of a similar attack on North Korea. Instead, he called for the United States to "be sure to have prior consultation with Korea on whichever measures it takes." The DPK, which postures as a progressive party, is not opposed to war with the North, but wants to be informed so Seoul can take an active role in the conflict.

The Democrats' campaign has also denounced North Korea in terms consistent with the line set by Washington. Spokesman Park Gwang-on said on April 5, "Candidate Moon has issued stern warnings on North Korea's provocative actions several times and has emphasized that if the Kim Jong-un government does not give up its nuclear and missile development, it does not have a future."

The US is deploying a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery to South Korea, which has drastically raised tensions with

China and is a symbol of the war-drive in the region. Moon has danced around the issue, saying the decision should be postponed until the next administration takes office.

Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, a breakaway from the Democrats, has more explicitly defended THAAD, despite previously claiming to oppose it. He stated last Sunday, "At a time the deployment is under way, it would not be a responsible attitude for a presidential aspirant to oppose it and promise to cancel it if elected." He called for a close alliance with the US as well, saying, "More fundamentally, when we are at odds with the United States over the issue of THAAD and the alliance is cracked, we could not resolve the critical issue of North Korea's nuclear problems."

Ahn's campaign stated last week that his presidency would work to develop similar, domestically-built weaponry, including the early completion of the "Kill Chain" and the Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD).

The Kill Chain is a system designed to carry out preemptive attacks on North Korean military positions, while the KAMD is similar to THAAD, supposedly capable of shooting down incoming ballistic missiles. A third strategy is also in place, announced late last year, known as the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation plan, under which all of Pyongyang would be destroyed under a barrage of missiles.

While Moon once held a comfortable lead in the polls, Ahn has gained ground. In a Gallup Korea survey last Friday, Moon led Ahn by only three percentage points, a jump of 16 points for the latter from the previous week. Ahn is a multi-millionaire and businessman who rose to prominence in 2011 by painting himself as a political outsider and making mild criticisms of the conservative government. He ran for

president against Moon and Park Geun-hye in 2012, but bowed out in Moon's favor.

In 2013, Ahn won a seat in the National Assembly and then formed the New Politics Alliance for Democracy with the Democrats the following year. However, Ahn left the alliance to form the People's Party in February 2016 following factional strife. He took with him a number of high-profile Democrats who represent the pro-business sentiments of the Democrats as a whole, uncomfortable even with a phony progressive façade.

Another candidate close to the DPK is Sim Sang-jeong from the Justice Party. Sim and her party regularly provide the Democrats with a left-sounding cover and have close ties to the labor unions, particularly the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). She also ran for president in 2012 before dropping out in favor of Moon. Trailing the other candidates with 3 percent in the polls, she claimed recently she would not drop out this time or form any alliances.

The candidates from the conservative Liberty Korea Party (LKP) and Bareun Party, Hong Jun-pyo and Yu Seung-min respectively, have failed to galvanize support, with their candidacies stuck in the single digits as well. The Bareun Party broke from the ruling LKP (formerly the Saenuri Party) in January, supporting President Park's impeachment and removal from office. Before the primaries, talk of a single, unified candidate of all the parties against Moon and the DPK was raised, but discussion of such an alliance has stalled.

Hong denounced the idea of forming any alliance with Ahn and demanding that Yu and the Bareun Party "come home" to the LKP. Yu's campaign has rejected this however, calling Hong an "unqualified candidate" in reference to an ongoing corruption scandal in which he is alleged to have received illegal funds. The case is now before the Supreme Court.

Hong has also become increasingly belligerent toward his political opponents and critics, with speculation that he is attempting to mimic Donald Trump and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in order to bolster his poor poll numbers.

While the Bareun Party is portraying itself as a clean and honest alternative to Hong and the LKP, one does not have to go far in South Korea to find a politician

who is corrupt. These scandals are used to obscure political differences while settling scores.

Moon is running on claims of eliminating corporate corruption. However, he is facing allegations that he used his political position to ensure a job for his son at a state-run company, as well as unanswered questions surrounding bribery allegations that led former President Noh Moo-hyun to commit suicide in 2009. Moon served as Noh's chief of staff.

President Park was not removed from office because she was corrupt. Her attempts to balance between Washington and Beijing caused a political rift within her party to deepen. Politicians like Yu and Kim Mu-seong, another conservative bigwig, criticized Park and her government for not taking a more pro-US line. Washington tacitly supported Park's removal, at no point making an attempt to defend her.

While nervous about the development of an anti-war movement, the entire political establishment in South Korea—conservative and "democratic" alike—are committed to the US alliance even as Trump threatens war against North Korea.



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