

South Korean election candidates back US war preparations

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As South Korea's May 9 presidential election approaches, Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) candidate Moon Jae-in appears on the verge of victory. His support has largely come about as a result of the anger and frustration felt towards the conservatives, following former president Park Geun-hye's removal from office for corruption.

According to the most recent polls, Moon leads his closest challenger, Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, with 42.6 percent support compared to 20.9 percent. Hong Jun-pyo of the Liberty Korea Party is in third with 16.7 percent, followed by Sim Sang-jeong of the Justice Party and Yu Seung-min of the Bareun Party with 7.6 percent and 5.2 percent respectively.

Much of the campaign has been dominated by North Korea, as the Trump administration ramps up tensions on the Korean Peninsula on a daily basis. The current US deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery to South Korea has only exacerbated the fears and hostility to war.

All of the five major candidates have backed Washington's agenda, though Moon has postured as an opponent of the highly unpopular THAAD system. Without coming out against it, he has called for the decision on its deployment to be postponed until the next government takes power. At the same time, he has defended Washington's war plans in the region against China, stating that THAAD is for "defensive purposes" and that if North Korea continued its bellicose acts, the THAAD placement would be "unavoidable."

Last Wednesday, at night and with no announcement, the US began installing the THAAD system in Seongju, a city in North Gyeongsang Province. Trailers arrived carrying the missile launchers and the X-band radar, which China believes will be used to spy on its

territory. THAAD is designed to knock out an incoming ballistic missile and has a range of 200 kilometres. Despite claims that its purpose is to defend South Koreans from a North Korean attack, Seoul, a city of 10 million people, sits just outside of THAAD's range at its current location. Instead, the battery would be used to protect US bases in any confrontation with North Korea or China.

Despite the attempt to avoid protestors, hundreds gathered, carrying signs that read, "No THAAD, No War," and denouncing the US military. Clashes broke out with authorities. "Police let THAAD equipment pass through [protesters] by repressing them," said Gang Hyeon-uk, a religious figure involved in organizing the demonstrations. "The THAAD deployment is illegal and should be nullified."

Other demonstrations have taken place against THAAD, including in Seoul, but have been led by groups and labor unions, including the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), with ties to the DPK and the other political parties. They appeal to the presidential candidates, either explicitly or tacitly giving support to the Democrats, while whipping-up Korean nationalism, including by criticizing recent demands from Trump that South Korea foot the \$1 billion bill for THAAD.

At a protest on Saturday in Gwanghwamun, Seoul, approximately 50,000 people gathered to denounce THAAD and demand better social conditions. The first speaker was KCTU acting-chairman Choi Jong-jin who, referencing the candles protestors carried in rallies against Park Geun-hye, stated: "Our lives must be changed to have a real candlelight revolution and there must be a presidential election that changes our lives." In other words, the removal of Park for another capitalist politician, a Democrat who represents

“change,” amounts to a revolution for the KCTU.

Demonstrators expressed lukewarm support for Moon, however. “It is only workers who suffer,” said Lee Do-gyeong, a student studying to be a nurse. “The candidates in this election must create a country that genuinely protects workers’ basic rights. I did not want to support Moon Jae-in, but I think I must. I am nervous about the other candidates.”

More broadly, the election campaign has alienated voters. “I couldn’t learn how the candidates wanted to lead the nation if they were elected. All I learned was that all of them were substandard,” Cho Jin-hee, a housewife, said in the *Korea Times* after watching one of the televised debates. Park Seong-su, an office worker, similarly commented: “In future debates, I hope they will discuss policies and details, and how they might carry them out.”

The refusal of the candidates to discuss their policies is because they intend to keep their genuine agenda secret: the preparation for war and austerity. Following Pyongyang’s failed ballistic missile test on Saturday, all five denounced North Korea, including Sim Sang-jeong of the pseudo-left Justice Party, who stated: “North Korea should abandon its shallow scheme of promoting regime stability through a show of force and hurry to come forward to the dialogue table.” The implication is that the North Korean regime, not Washington, has been sabotaging talks, thereby justifying the Trump administration’s actions.

At the same time, there is no opposition to current US military exercises, aimed at intimidating North Korea and China, involving the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its strike group, with the South Korean navy. The two forces, along with the Japanese navy, have held missile warning informational link exercises (LINKEX) for the third time this year. The drills allow the three militaries to communicate and share intelligence on incoming ballistic missiles.

The election is by no means decided. There is still talk of an anti-Moon coalition between Ahn, Hong, and Yu, whose Bareun Party released a statement Friday calling for such an alliance. “We should not make the error of passing the future of South Korea to the liberal hegemony blinded by self-righteousness,” it stated.

The following day, in the hope of winning conservative support, Ahn announced he would form a coalition government if elected. He has also brought

Kim Jong-in, former interim chief of the DPK, onto this election team. Kim, a conservative who clashed with Moon’s faction, denounced the “hegemonic forces” in the DPK, language similar to that used by the Bareun Party.

Whatever backroom deals are made, and whatever the outcome of the election, workers, farmers, and young people must not place faith in any of the candidates. The war with North Korea and China that is being prepared behind the backs of the population can only be opposed by uniting with workers across Asia and internationally on a socialist perspective.



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