

South Korean presidential frontrunner stresses agreement with Trump

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South Korea's 19th presidential election, to be held tomorrow, will decide which candidate will replace Park Geun-hye, who was impeached then removed from office on March 10. Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) has maintained his large lead in the polls and appears to be on the verge of capturing the presidency.

In the final days of the election, the five major candidates sought to appeal to workers and young people while campaigning on the streets in the major cities. On Friday, Moon announced 10 election pledges, dealing with child care, protecting children and women from abuse, and youth unemployment. These pledges were gathered from suggestions made on social media, giving Moon the appearance of listening to the people.

Other candidates made similar pledges. Ahn Cheol-soo of the People's Party, Moon's biggest challenger, promised to increase the number of state-run child day-cares. He also promised a 100,000 won (\$88) monthly allowance for low-income families with children 11 or younger.

All the candidates addressed South Korea's notoriously long workweek, the second greatest after Mexico in the OECD group of developed economies. Both Moon and Hong Jun-pyo of the right-wing Liberty Korea Party (LKP) promised to reduce the total weekly hours from 68 to 52.

High levels of youth unemployment, rising costs of education and other economic concerns forced the candidates to address these issues, but, as in the past, all these pledges will be cast aside after the election.

Hong gained ground in recent weeks, relying on red-baiting tactics to paint Moon as an ally of North Korea. He claimed in a Facebook post that "May 9 is the day to judge pro-North Korean groups." He won support from those previously backing Yu Seung-min, another

conservative candidate who broke with the Saenuri Party, supported the impeachment of Park, and is promising a clean government.

A Gallop Korea poll last week showed Moon with 38 percent support, Ahn with 20 percent, Hong with 16 percent, Sim Sang-jeong of the pseudo-left Justice Party with 8 percent, and Yu with 6 percent. There is no second round in the election so Moon is highly likely to win unless other candidates withdraw and throw their support behind a rival. That now seems unlikely.

Given the low numbers for Sim and Yu, there was speculation they could drop out to back another candidate. Ahn, in particular, made a push to win both Sim and Yu to his campaign, promising to form a "coalition government" with them if he were elected. He promised Yu would be placed in charge of his economic policies, saying on Thursday the two had nearly identical programs.

None of the candidates has genuinely addressed the danger of war with China and North Korea, represented in South Korea most acutely by the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile battery that was placed in initial operational mode on May 1. Moon has postured as an opponent of THAAD, saying the next government should review the deployment, generating unease in Washington.

In recent weeks, however, Moon has attempted to assuage Washington's concerns. In an interview with the *Washington Post* published online May 2, Moon responded to a question about THAAD and possible US interference in the election, saying: "I don't believe the US has [that] intention, but I do have reservations."

Moon then made clear he is not opposed to THAAD but is looking for the best way to sell it to the people. "If South Korea can have more time to process this

matter democratically, the US would gain a higher level of trust from South Koreans and therefore the alliance between the two nations would become even stronger,” he said. In other words, Moon simply wants to cover approval for THAAD’s deployment with the fig leaf of nominal public discussion and debate.

In the interview, Moon stressed his agreement with US President Donald Trump on North Korea several times: “I think I am on the same page as President Trump. President Trump judged the Obama administration’s policy of strategic patience as a failure with regard to North Korea, so he has stressed the need for a change in North Korean policy.”

Moon stated later: “I share the same opinion as President Trump. Both the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations completely failed in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. I agree with President Trump’s method of applying sanctions and pressure to North Korea to bring them out to negotiate.”

It is important to note that the THAAD battery is being placed in Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province, a town 217 kilometers from Seoul. This places South Korea’s capital, home to more than 10 million people, and the most likely target of any North Korean missile strike, outside of THAAD’s 200-kilometer range. Rather than being meant to protect South Koreans, THAAD is meant to defend US military bases in cities like Pyeongtaek and Osan from retaliation. It is part of the US military build-up in Asia for war, particularly with China.

Ahn Cheol-soo has also backed THAAD’s deployment, despite limited criticisms of how it was rolled out. Sim Sang-jeong, posturing as a leftist, has opposed THAAD, but backs the US rationale for it—that North Korea is a threat and China should do more to rein in Pyongyang, shifting blame for the sharp rise in tensions away from Washington.

The US is taking nothing for granted. In a surprising move, US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Mike Pompeo arrived unannounced in Seoul on April 29 for talks on North Korea. He met with his counterpart, Lee Byeong-ho of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), and other government officials. However, he reportedly did not meet with any of the presidential candidates. Regardless, Pompeo’s appearance so shortly after US Vice President Mike

Pence’s own visit is an indication that Washington is working to ensure Seoul falls into line, no matter the outcome of the election.

After tacitly backing the removal of Park Geun-hye, who pursued closer relations with Beijing, the US is making clear there is no room for wavering with its allies. As the Trump administration ratchets up tensions with North Korea on a nearly daily basis, the plans for war being made in Washington and Seoul, which will be taken up by the next government, are being hidden from the population.



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