

South Korean presidential candidates stoke anti-Chinese sentiment

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As the South Korean presidential election on March 9 approaches, the main candidates are lining up with the US-led war drive against China by stoking anti-Chinese sentiment. It serves to deflect mounting domestic tensions outwards, as none of the candidates has any progressive solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic or the social crisis facing the working class.

During the recently concluded Winter Olympics in Beijing, South Korean politicians seized upon two incidents in particular. The first took place during the Games' opening ceremony on February 4. During the raising of the Chinese flag, people dressed in a variety of traditional attire from the 56 ethnic groups in China participated, including a woman dressed in a Korean *hanbok*. The second incident involved the disqualification of two South Korean speedskaters in an event in which Chinese skaters went on to win gold and silver medals.

The leading presidential candidates—Lee Jae-myung from the ruling Democratic Party of Korea (DP) and Yoon Seok-youl from the right-wing main opposition People Power Party (PPP)—denounced China over both issues.

Lee, for example, wrote on Facebook shortly after the opening ceremony in response to the woman wearing the *hanbok*, “Do not covet the culture (of others). Oppose cultural appropriation.” His campaign has accused China of “stealing” Korean culture.

In response to this manufactured outrage, the Chinese Embassy in Seoul released a statement on February 8, saying, “It is their desire and right for representatives of each ethnic group in China to attend an international sports competition and the major national event of the Beijing Winter Olympics, wearing their traditional costumes.” Approximately two million ethnic Koreans live in China.

The same day, Christopher Del Corso, the US chargé d'affaires to South Korea sought to further stoke tensions, writing on Twitter, “What comes to mind when you think of Korea? Kimchi, K-Pop, K-dramas...and of course Hanbok,” using the hashtag #OriginalHanbokFromKorea. He posted pictures of himself wearing the clothing item.

There is more to this affair than simply the dress of one woman at the Olympics or lost medals. There are considerable monetary interests that come from the South Korean government's and entertainment industry's packaging of music, art, culture, and sport for public consumption abroad. Much of this is vapid, glorifies the wealthy elite, and does little to educate people about actual Korean life and culture.

However, in an indication of the deeper issues of Korean nationalism, the PPP's Yoon criticized China during an appearance on February 5, saying, “The kingdoms of Goguryeo and Balhae are our proud and glorious history.”

The Goguryeo kingdom, which developed approximately 2,000 years ago, and its successor Balhae, occupied the northern part of the Korean Peninsula and also parts of what is now party of China—southern Manchuria. The history of these two kingdoms is often obscured, altered, or outright falsified in Seoul in order to meet the contemporary political needs, a “tradition” that dates back to the activities of Japanese historians during the colonial period.

In referencing these two kingdoms, Yoon is essentially declaring parts of Manchuria to be Korean territory. This plays perfectly into the ongoing US war drive aimed at China that seeks to return the country to semi-colonial status while lopping off territories such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet. While

disagreement over Manchuria has not reached the levels of tension over these other regions, it is not out of the question that it could be exploited by the US along with its South Korean ally to stoke divisions inside China.

Yoon has waged an openly anti-China campaign, making clear that he would draw even closer to Washington. Speaking December 28 at an event hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce in South Korea, Yoon criticized Moon for being insufficiently anti-China. “The current government used policies skewed toward China, but most South Korean people, especially younger ones, do not like China.” The Moon administration, Yoon continued, “tried to act as a middleman between the US and China, but it ended up with bad relations.”

Yoon has pledged to install additional US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries in South Korea. The first battery was deployed in 2017 to Seongju, North Gyeongsang Province. Contrary to US and South Korean claims, the battery is not meant to protect the population from a supposed North Korean attack, but is part of the Pentagon’s anti-missile systems in the Indo-Pacific in preparation for a war with China. The Seongju battery’s range does not even cover the densely-populated Seoul Metropolitan Area.

After the 2017 deployment, China, which had expressed its concerns over the encroachment of the US anti-ballistic missile system, responded with economic restrictions on South Korean businesses, raising tensions between Beijing and Seoul. The deployment of any additional batteries will only intensify the strains between the two countries.

The Democrat’s Lee is attempting to posture as an opponent of this agenda, conscious of the broad anti-war sentiment in South Korea. Lee claimed in a February 23 article titled “A Practical Vision for South Korea” in *Foreign Affairs* that Seoul’s approach to China should include “a mixture of deterrence, diplomacy, and dialogue.”

Lee speaks for sections of the South Korean ruling class that have close economic ties to China and view tensions as a restraint on their profits. “South Korea must... maintain a partnership with China, which is the country’s largest trading partner, accounting for a quarter of South Korea's trade volume,” he wrote.

Lee also made clear that he backed Washington while

criticizing Beijing’s “increasingly assertive behavior.” He claimed, “The Biden administration’s ‘calibrated and practical’ approach to North Korea has emphasized this approach (towards diplomacy).” This comes at a time when Washington has dangerously brought Europe to the brink of World War III in its confrontation with Russia over the Ukraine.

In the denunciations of China, both candidates have made clear that they back South Korea’s alliance with the US and support the Biden’s administration’s reckless confrontation with China. In doing so, they are placing the South Korean population on the frontline of any conflict.



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