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SOUTH KOREA'S NEW PRESIDENT HAS BIGGER CHALLENGES TO COUNTER

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Finally, on May 10, 2017, South Korea got its President from the Democratic Party, Mr. Moon Jae-in. Of course, his responsibilities as a President would not be easy. This is because he has become the President amid acute crisis in the Korean Peninsula. First, North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile tests are reasons for concern as also the Peninsula is almost on the brink of a nuclear war.

Second, he has taken over as the President just a few months after the deployment of the US missile defence system – the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system – commenced in South Korea. The system is believed to counter incoming missiles from adversaries. Third, the general public in South Korea does not want the THAAD to be deployed in the South Korean territory as it would lead to destabilisation and jeopardise relations with China. The business class in South Korea as also the music industry are already bearing the brunt

of the THAAD deployment decision. They have voted for Moon to resolve this issue and hence, standing up to their expectations also remains a huge challenge.

The THAAD deployment decision has annoyed the Chinese who have time and again opposed the deployment as they feel that the THAAD can undermine their nuclear deterrence. Not only this, the Chinese have already imposed undeclared sanctions on many South Korean goods as well as services. Any attempt to move closer to the Chinese will affect Seoul's relations with the United States as also the free trade agreement between the two countries especially as the United States complains of the trade deficit vis-à-vis South Korea. Thus Moon would need to be at his diplomatic best to resolve all the issues that would concern South Korea at the moment.

Moon was sworn in as President of South Korea post impeachment of President Park Geun-hye of the Liberty Korea Party (previously

Saenuri Party) who had concentrated on improving relations with the United States, paying less heed to China and North Korea. It is Park's regime which was enthusiastic about deploying the THAAD system in South Korea. After her impeachment, South Korea's Prime Minister and acting President, Hwang Kyo-ahn, agreed to commence the deployment process, calling it "vital defence measures".

Moon clarifies that the decision to deploy the THAAD was made in a hurry. But that can be understood. The United States knew very well that if Moon was elected as the President, it could be a difficult process to deploy the THAAD given Moon's inclination towards the Chinese. Prior to the elections, Moon has been of the view that befriending the Chinese is a priority for the South Koreans. An outright critique of Park's administration, he had blamed her and the decision to deploy the THAAD for the deteriorating relations between the Chinese and the South Koreans. In fact, as soon as he became the President, he stated that there would be debates and voting in the National Assembly to decide the THAAD deployment.

Probably, more than the South Koreans, the Chinese are happy to see Moon become the President of South Korea. The reason is well fathomed- China's concerns regarding the THAAD. As soon as Moon was elected President, China's Foreign Ministry immediately stated that it hoped that South Korea analysed China's

security concerns and dealt with the THAAD issue "appropriately"¹.

Moon has promising agendas to improve relations with China, continue the blossoming relations with the United States, as also resolve issues with North Korea through engagement and negotiations on one side, as well as pressure and sanctions on the other. Moon is expected to take a softer stance than his predecessors while engaging with North Korea.

As soon as he was sworn in as the President, he suggested the revival of the 'Sunshine Policy' with North Korea, a policy started in 2000s by South Korea to provide humanitarian and economic aid to North Korea, while in return seeking to prevent further proliferation of their nuclear and missile program. This softer approach towards the North Koreans is no big surprise considering that Moon's parents were refugees from Hungnam², a North Korean port that was evacuated right after the commencement of the Korean War.

The Sunshine policy failed then as North Korea felt alienated despite this policy, due to Seoul's closeness with the United States. Therefore, the responsibility now lies on Moon's shoulders to partner with North Korea ensuring peace and stability in the region. His statements make clear that he does not perceive North Korea as an enemy but as a state with whom engagement is necessary to bring about tranquillity and build trust. This positive stance

from Moon comes prior to North Korea's preparation for the sixth nuclear test. However, Moon's ways of dealing with North Korea contrasts Trump's hawkish ways (of dealing with North Korea). Moon, would thus, need to balance both North Korea and the United States efficiently. Though North likely is likely to welcome Moon as the President of South Korea, they are least likely to react unless he displays positive development to cement the differences between the two countries.

Conclusion

Moon comes with big challenges to deal with. While on the one hand he has to improve relations with North Korea as well as with China, on the other he has to take the biggest decision on the deployment of the THAAD system that is likely to make either of the parties- the United States or China – uneasy. Most important, the people who voted for him also hope for a THAAD-free South Korea. Can he stand up to these expectations and be at his diplomatic best?

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Ju-min Park and Jack Kim, "New South Korean president vows to address North Korea, broader tensions 'urgently'", *Reuters*, May 10, 2017.

² Moon Jae-in easily wins South Korea's presidential election", *The Economist*, May 13, 2017.