

South Koreans Defy Biden's Man in Seoul

"The D.C. establishment backed Yoon because he was what they have wanted for decades"
Tim Shorrock Dec 4-Guest post © 2024 Drop Site News, Inc.

Veteran investigative journalist Tim Shorrock has covered the legacy of U.S. foreign policy in Asia for decades. He has been writing about the Korean Peninsula since the late 1970s and is well known for his groundbreaking reporting on the U.S. role in the 1980 coup in South Korea.

As this week's stunning events unfolded in South Korea, Drop Site News turned to Shorrock for a story about the Biden administration's close ties with the government of Yoon Suk Yeol and the popular revolt that thwarted his attempt to invoke martial law.

--Jeremy Scahill

Soldiers try to enter the National Assembly building in Seoul on December 4 2024, after South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law / Jung Yeon-Je / AFP via Getty Images

In a shocking turn of events, South Koreans went to bed Monday night to the news that their unpopular president, Yoon Suk Yeol, had declared martial law over the country, only to awake on Tuesday to discover that the National Assembly—backed by crowds of citizens gathering in protest—had overruled Yoon and restored their hard-won democratic system.

By Wednesday, an uneasy calm had settled over Seoul. Yoon, who has been praised as a diplomatic wonder and staunch ally by President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, appeared to be on his way out. All of Yoon's senior aides, including his chief of staff, have resigned their posts even though the president had accepted the parliamentary demands and lifted his martial law order. Opposition parties in South Korea led by the left-liberal Democratic Party (DP) are now seeking to impeach Yoon over his actions, with the first votes scheduled for Thursday.

Yet even as the coup unravelled in full public view, the close ties between the Pentagon and Yoon's military could present a dilemma for Biden and the next Trump administration. The United States stations 28,500 troops in South Korea and a U.S. general holds operational control over the Korean Army and the U.S.-South Korean Combined Forces Command during times of war. That has led to serious strains in the bilateral alliance over the years.

The brief, almost comical military takeover in Seoul brought back dark memories of South Korea's last experience with martial law in May 1980, when the renegade general Chun Doo-hwan seized power in a rolling coup and sent airborne special forces to the city of Gwangju to quell the last outburst of demonstrations. His paratroopers massacred hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators, sparking South Korea's first armed uprising since the Korean War and a six-day standoff between Gwangju's citizens and the U.S.-backed South Korean military.

"Everyone thought that such an event could never happen in South Korea again," Lee Jae-eui, who witnessed the Gwangju massacre and participated in the uprising, told Drop Site News just after learning of Yoon's action. "Now, exactly 44 years later, an unbelievable 'martial law declaration' was heard in a democratized South Korea," he said. "I thought, what kind of joke is this?" The shadow of Gwangju was also noted in South Korean press coverage of the public'

s anger at Yoon. “This feels like we are going through the May 18, 1980, Gwangju uprising again,” one woman at the scene in downtown Seoul told the JoongAng Daily. “You call this a country?”

Similar sentiments were heard throughout the country, from conservatives and progressives alike. Many recalled that former President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the former dictator, had attempted in 2017 to use the Defense Security Command to declare martial law to forestall her impeachment by the National Assembly (she was thrown out of office and later convicted of corruption). But the generals held back, and several were later prosecuted when the plot was discovered.

Yoon, too, was facing impeachment. He is a former prosecutor who was elected in 2022 by a narrow margin (of 0.8 percentage points) in a vote partly determined by young men furious with the gains made by women in Korea's patriarchal society. Once in power, he sought to reform and improve the country's export economy by cracking down on South Korea's powerful labor unions. He attacked opponents of his economic and national security policies as “communists” and pro-North Korean agents. For months, his popularity has dropped to historic lows of just over 10 percent.

Yoon's gambit began at 11:00 pm on Monday night, when Army Chief of Staff General Park An-su, a four-star general, issued a decree of martial law. It sounded much like the 18 years of authoritarian rule under Park Chung-hee, who took power in a military coup in 1961 and ruled with an iron hand until he was assassinated in 1979.

“All political activities, including those related to the National Assembly, regional assemblies, political parties, the forming of political organizations, rallies and protests are banned,” Park stated. “The act of denying free democracy or attempting a subversion is banned; fake news, manipulating public opinion and false instigation is banned.” He added: “Those who violate martial law can be arrested or raided without a warrant.”

Yoon followed with an address to the public. “At the moment, the Republic of Korea is like a candle before the wind—it could plausibly collapse at any time,” he said in a live broadcast. “I declare martial law to protect the [ROK] from the threats of North Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the shameless pro-North Korean anti-state forces that are plundering the freedom and happiness of our people, and to protect our free constitutional order.”

He blamed the National Assembly and the opposition Democratic Party for placing South Korea “in a precarious position” by pressing for his impeachment over a series of scandals involving his own wife and opposing his hardline posture on labor unions and confronting North Korea. “Our National Assembly has become a den of criminals and is attempting to paralyze the nation's judicial administration system through legislative dictatorship and overthrow the liberal democracy system.”

But once again, the Korean people stood up to authoritarian rule. Over the course of Monday night, thousands of Korean citizens hearing the news about Yoon's declaration on social media poured into the streets of Seoul and the National Assembly itself, blocking the airborne troops trying to occupy the buildings. In Gwangju, people stood vigil at the old provincial government building where the 1980 uprising began. That helped convince the National Assembly that the people were solidly against martial law.

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“I think this reaction by so many people, myself included, was possible because they knew the Korean people would not accept military rule,” Benjamin A. Engel, a visiting professor at Dankook University in Seoul said on Bluesky. “Korea has seen how that works and rejected it.” In an interview, Engel added that, based on his experience, younger enlisted officers in the Korean Army “want nothing to do with the coup or using violence to prop up Yoon. Based on the announcements from the Martial Law Command, it seems Yoon has some senior military support. But that isn’t enough to sustain the coup or Yoon’s rule.”

In fact, Yoon's attacks on the opposition was too much even for his pro-military ruling People Power Party (PPP), whose leader Han Dong-hoo denounced the martial law declaration as “wrong” on Tuesday night. “We will stop it along with the people,” he declared. Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung joined Han in the National Assembly to say that “martial law is invalid.” Three hours after the crisis began, the assembly passed the motion to revoke Yoon's decree. All 190 lawmakers present voted in favor, including 18 conservative PPP members in the 300-seat parliament. The majority is held by the DP.

The DP's former leader, Moon Jae-in, was president just before Yoon, and ushered in a new era of diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. As many Koreans know, it was Moon who asked then-President Trump in 2018 to initiate talks about denuclearization with Kim. They lasted until 2019, when Trump refused an offer by Kim to close his largest nuclear weapons facility in exchange for a lifting of U.S. and UN economic sanctions (Trump was advised against the deal by John Bolton, his national security adviser, who is now a staunch opponent of the president-elect).

Since then, tensions on the peninsula have escalated substantially, as North Korea continues to test its powerful ballistic missiles and the United States and South Korea respond with the massive military exercises that were suspended during the Trump-Kim talks. The Biden administration and the Pentagon have also been deeply concerned that the 10,000 troops that North Korea has sent to aid Russia in its war with Ukraine could change the calculus of the battlefield and endanger the U.S. and NATO position in Europe.

But the U.S. media, which rarely reports accurately on North Korea's intentions or policies, has missed entirely the reason for Kim Jong Un's recent alliance with Vladimir Putin. Kim made his initial visit to Russia in September 2023, one month after Biden met with Yoon and then-Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to announce that Japan and South Korea had joined the United States in an unprecedented military alliance that reunited the southern half of Korea with its former colonizer in Tokyo. At that summit in Camp David, Biden, Yoon, and Kishida announced that their armed forces would henceforth hold trilateral military exercises to enhance their “coordinated capabilities and cooperation” in facing common enemies, namely North Korea and China.

Biden, for his part, reaffirmed that America’s commitments were “ironclad and backed by the full range of U.S. capabilities,” a reference to the nuclear-armed weapons, vessels, and war planes the Pentagon has stationed in the Northeast Asia region since the end of the Korean War. Since the formation of the alliance, Biden has boasted that he advanced U.S. security by

convincing Japan to rearm, a reference to its adoption of a counter-strike strategy that gave its Self Defense Forces the ability to strike enemy bases overseas for the first time since 1945.

The three-way exercises planned at Camp David have been going on now for over a year, often with U.S. B-52s flying in formation with Korean and Japanese war planes and U.S. aircraft carriers leading armadas of ships from the two nations. But it was only last June when Kim Jong Un visited Putin to sign his own pact with Russia pledging mutual defense if either country is attacked. It was that pact that apparently justified Kim's decision to send troops to the Kursk region of Russia near Ukraine.

As a result of Yoon's enhanced role in U.S. military strategy in Asia, the disgraced president has been the darling of the think tanks and Korea "experts" in the U.S. capital. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell has even suggested that Yoon should get a Nobel Peace Prize for putting aside Korean differences with Japan to make the trilateral alliance work.

"The D.C. establishment backed Yoon because he was what [they] have wanted for decades: A Korean leader who is pro-Japan and who will clearly take the side of the U.S.," said Dave Kang, a non-resident fellow at the non-partisan Quincy Institute who once advised Senator Bernie Sanders on Asia policy. "So they were willing to overlook many red flags in his decision-making and behavior in favor of—finally—getting trilateral cooperation between Korea, Japan, and the United States."

But the trilateral partnership—and Yoon's role in crafting it—has enraged many Koreans who cannot forget Japan's cruel use of sex slaves and forced labor during the war and the Japanese ruling Liberal Democratic Party's historic refusal to acknowledge or apologize for the country's actions (under Yoon's deal, Japan offered no apology and all the costs for victim reparations are borne by South Korea). Even though South Korea's opposition and Kim Jong Un agree on little else, their mutual dislike of Yoon's alliance with Japan is one of the reasons Yoon has falsely labeled the Democratic Party as pro-North, an epithet that carries dangerous weight in South Korea.

Yet even as the United States backs Yoon's stance on North Korea, the enhanced ties between the Pentagon and the South Korean Army, coupled with memories of what happened in Gwangju 44 years ago, is an explosive combination. Many Koreans remember that after Chun's coup and the slaughter in Gwangju, President Jimmy Carter directed the Pentagon to help the Korean martial law command crush the uprising by sending an aircraft carrier and advanced reconnaissance aircraft to monitor the actions of the Korean troops dispatched to the city from the Combined Forces Command. After assisting Chun to reassert military control over the country, South Korea suffered seven more years of authoritarian rule.

Carter's military backing for Chun in that moment of crisis was only revealed in 1996, when I obtained documents under the Freedom of Information Act showing that his administration had told the general 10 days before Gwangju that the United States would not oppose the use of Korean army troops under U.S.-Korean command to put down massive student demonstrations that rocked the country that spring. Last spring, the full set of over 4,000 FOIA documents was published in Korea, giving citizens their first detailed look at the evidence of complicity between the U.S. government and the Korean military. The Hankyoreh headline told the story: "Records show how America stood back and watched as Gwangju was martyred for Korean democracy."

Few Americans know this history. But the CIA and Korea specialists inside the U.S. government certainly do. That may account for the White House National Security Council statement issued just after Yoon declared martial law. “The U.S. was not notified in advance of this announcement,” it stated. “We are seriously concerned by the developments we are seeing on the ground in the R.O.K.”

Later, at a Pentagon press briefing, Air Force General Pat Ryder ducked questions from reporters about U.S. military commanders’ communications with their Korean counterparts during the coup, referring them to the U.S. Command in Korea. After he spoke, a Department of Defense specialist on “Indo-Pacific” issues assured Drop Site News that U.S. Forces Korea had “no advance notice of anything to do with martial law.” That, of course, is exactly what the Pentagon and the State Department falsely said about the U.S. role in Gwangju.

The 1980 coup and the violence in Gwangju will stir Korean memories again next week. On December 10, the Swedish Academy will award the Nobel Prize in Literature to the South Korean novelist Han Kang, who first garnered international attention with her novel *Human Acts* that deals with the horrors of the massacre in Gwangju. It was based in part on Lee Jae-eui’s famous book *Gwangju Diary* about the uprising, which was banned for many years by the Korean government. “The bereaved families of Gwangju victims, as well as the entire nation, feel a great sense of pride and honor at the news of Han Kang’s Nobel Prize win,” Lee said.

John Eperjesi, a professor at Kyunghee University in Seoul, said that Kang’s book and Yoon’s attempted coup could hold lessons for the United States. *Human Acts*, he said, “is about the fight against martial law in the past, but is obviously relevant to both the South Korean and U.S. present.” With Donald Trump talking about using the U.S. military to quell domestic disturbances, “the chances that he will try the same as Yoon at some point are pretty high I would imagine. These are dark times, and mutual aid is going to be really important in helping us all survive.”

In fact, the possibility of continued strife seems certain. As the attempted coup unfolded, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, the country’s largest and most militant labor federation, said it would immediately “commence an indefinite general strike until the Yoon Suk Yeol regime steps down.” Also on Wednesday, a broad coalition of media workers, including the Korea Journalists Association, demanded that Yoon resign and called his government “a dictatorial regime that has deviated from the normal course” of democracy.

Meanwhile, the U.S. embassy in Seoul issued a statement that “the situation remains fluid” and warned U.S. citizens to “anticipate potential disruptions” over the coming days. Yoon’s weak position was signalled in an equally anemic statement from Blinken, who welcomed Yoon’s statement rescinding the emergency martial law order yet failed to acknowledge that he had attempted an overthrow.

“We continue to expect political disagreements to be resolved peacefully and in accordance to the rule of law,” Blinken lectured. “We reaffirm our support for the people and the U.S.-ROK alliance based on shared principles of democracy.” That remains to be seen, for both countries.