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AND NOW THE HARD PART: LEE JAE-MYUNG AND SOUTH KOREA'S QUEST FOR BALANCE

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When Lee Jae-myung last ran for the South Korean presidency in 2022 he campaigned for balance in Seoul's foreign relations. At a time when the Biden administration pushed for not just closer bilateral, but trilateral cooperation with Japan on the security issues of the day, and Lee found himself in a tight contest with a conservative candidate happy to accede to Biden's wishes, this meant stressing an open hand to China and a willingness to say no to the United States. Three years later, Korea has just finished a snap election following an aborted martial law declaration and impeachment process. Lee, in his now-successful campaign to win the presidency again stressed balance. However, the circumstances around him, and around the Korean Peninsula, have starkly shifted, as has the meaning of "balance." Instead of a Biden administration eager to deepen cooperation with Seoul at all levels, Lee will have a counterpart in Washington that demands to see results in keeping with the US administration's goals.

And while the US administration clearly does have its eyes on the Indo-Pacific and seeks to contain China's ambitions there, US-Korea ties have not flourished during Seoul's leadership vacuum over the past several months, and supporters of the alliance have been holding their breath to see how Korea's next president will gel with President Trump on a personal level. Most recently, rumors of a US troop drawdown have set off fears of a decreased US commitment to South Korea, especially regarding the deterrence of North Korea.

It is in light of these developments that some of Lee's recent remarks, including his praise for President Trump's dealmaking skill and of the US Force Korea's role in ensuring regional stability, should be read. While such remarks may have surprised those who remember the foreign policy planks of Lee's last campaign for the presidency, they make sense under current conditions: North Korea remains a looming and unpredictable security threat, China—with its ambitions of regional hegemony—hovers over all, and not everyone in Washington is convinced of Seoul's indispensability.

Whatever else is true of Lee, he seemingly recognizes that balance will not be achieved if the US role diminishes and China's grows unabated.

Furthermore, Lee's previous stances on China, the US, Japan, and other foreign policy matters, when coupled with his domestic policy proposals—like supporting a universal basic income during the 2022 campaign—suggested that he would govern firmly from the left. Once Yoon Suk Yeol was removed over his ill-fated martial law declaration and Lee became the clear favorite, he has scaled back previous promises and even tried to rebrand himself as "centrist-conservative."

All of which is to say that, ultimately, Lee Jae-myung is a less a progressive ideologue than a politician—for both good and ill. Yes, his policy proposals have in the past earned comparisons to Bernie Sanders; they've also earned him the sobriquet of "Korea's Trump."

And now he has the presidency, a massive majority in the National Assembly, and a fragmented opposition. Assuming he establishes a rapport with President Trump, he would enjoy broad room to maneuver over the next five years, including in the security sphere. Here are some things to remember in the meantime:

- Does Lee and Democratic Party's return to power mean more inter-Korean talks? The odds are certainly better than under Yoon, but

not necessarily good. With Kim Jong Un officially swearing off unification with the South and enjoying ties with Russia, North Korea may be in no hurry to cozy up to Washington for sanctions relief. Even if he does, one lesson he appears to have learned from the Moon Jae-in years is that South Korea is irrelevant to his goals; Kim wants sanctions reduction and only the US is necessary for that. If North Korea bypasses South Korea entirely to achieve its diplomatic objectives over the next five years Seoul may actually have a weaker hand in dealing with Pyongyang and its regional partnerships may become even more important.

- "Balance" between China and the US may not be up to Lee—enjoying the security benefits that come with being a US ally and the economic boon of partnering with China would be a difficult posture under any circumstances. It will prove especially challenging if the rumors of US troop withdrawal prove true, leaving Lee to convince the US to increase its engagement in other ways, whether economically, in terms of intelligence-sharing, or in bolstering defense through weapons acquisition.

But Beijing presents other problems: China remains deeply unpopular in Korea, and not all governments who have shifted in the direction of the US since the COVID-19 pandemic did so voluntarily. Should Seoul's decisions in the security, trade, or tech spheres displease Beijing, the measures China takes in response may force South Korea down the path of Australia, India, and the Philippines, whose domestic discontent with Chinese actions pushed them into Washington's arms. If that happens popular sentiment could force Lee into a more hawkish position than he is comfortable with, and into a confrontation with his own party.

- No one expects Lee to be as friendly to Japan as his predecessor, who made unprecedented (and unpopular) gestures toward Tokyo in the name of trilateral security cooperation. But just because Lee is not another Yoon Suk Yeol does not mean he has to be another Moon Jae-in, who regularly inveighed against the "collaborators," abrogated the 2015 Comfort Women agreement with Japan to the delight of activists but not defense specialists, and threatened more serious steps like ending South Korea's involvement in the GSOMIA. Even if Lee declines to meet the Japanese prime minister for a summit, stable ties—marked by continued dialogues in the bilateral and trilateral formats—are in Korea's best interests. It's one thing for Lee to request sincere contrition from Japan regarding its imperial past; it's another thing entirely to throw away those ties to the benefit of China's hegemonic present. For a non-movement conservative to bolster bilateral Japan ties, even incrementally, will do wonders for the relationship over the long term.
- Lee has come under fire for saying that his reaction to a China-Taiwan contingency will be to say "xie xie" to both sides and otherwise steer clear. One can certainly decry such indifference; while Lee has sought to frame this as seeking good relations with both Taipei and Beijing, for an autocratic power to attempt the forcible absorption of a liberal democracy would have serious repercussions for all free societies, and for US security guarantees, across the Indo-Pacific. Neutrality is not good enough.

However, the ambiguity of Korea's response to a Taiwan contingency did not begin with Lee, and it is not up to him to solve alone. The United States must play a role in determining the parameters of Seoul's engagement, including by organizing discussions with Seoul at the track 2 level and above to help decide what Seoul's response to a Taiwan Strait emergency would be. A good first step would be for a US-ROK summit to include a statement opposing any effort to change the status quo by force; given recent Chinese diplomatic initiatives even that may count as a bold step from Seoul.

Again, the key word is "balance"—and not just in foreign affairs. In addition to the personal differences Lee will bring to the presidency compared to his predecessor, his party's base will have different demands. How he manages those expectations in the face of a rapidly changing security climate will determine his legacy, and maybe South Korea's future.

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