



## TRILATERAL COOPERATION AND YOON SUK YEOL'S LEGACY IN SOUTH KOREA

BY ROB YORK

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Last week, former South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol (2022-25) [received](#) a life sentence for leading an insurrection in connection to his aborted martial law declaration in December 2024.

A few days later, it came to light that South Korea had [objected](#) to a proposed trilateral air exercise with the United States and Japan on Feb. 16 and 18, [citing](#) concerns of being dragged into the US-China rivalry, leaving the other two countries to carry out those exercises bilaterally.

These events are not unrelated.

Given his very narrow 2022 election and legislative minority, Yoon was always going to struggle at building a legacy in comparison to his conservative predecessors as South Korean president. Unlike Park Chung-hee (1961-79), he could not use his military command to shepherd the country through an era of rapid economic development. Unlike former Gen. Roh Tae-woo (1988-93), he could not use the presidency in the waning days of the Cold War to normalize relations with former Communist Bloc members and lead South Korea into the UN. Unlike Kim Young-sam (1993-98), he could not use the status of the first civilian leader following the military rule period to solidify the country's democratic transition, firmly asserting civilian control over the military and campaigning against the corruption of his predecessors.

One could say that Yoon—who faced an adversarial, even obstructionist, National Assembly throughout his term—seized the one chance he had at establishing a long-term legacy for the country: his 2022 decision to break the deadlock with Japan by traveling to Tokyo and meeting then-Prime Minister Kishida Fumio has faced much domestic derision since, with Yoon accused of everything from [submissiveness](#) to outright [betrayal](#) of the national interest. Had his interlocutor not been the mild-mannered

Kishida, but the far [more hated](#) Abe Shinzo, the backlash would have been even worse.

Still, previous conservative presidents [attempted](#) rapprochement with Japanese leaders and had their work [undone](#) once the progressive opposition came to power, making questionable the longevity of Yoon's quest.

Four years later, it appears that Yoon's gamble benefited Korea – if not Yoon himself. His successor, progressive President Lee Jae-myung has upheld bilateral cooperation, and even Japan's selection of the staunch nationalist (and protégé of Abe) Takaichi Sanae has not frayed [bilateral ties](#). This could have been Yoon's legacy.

It very well might have been, had Yoon finished his five-year term without acting rashly. That would have meant enduring, until May 2027, [consistent opposition](#) from the Democratic Party of Korea and its Assembly majority, as well as the legal scrutiny of his, [his wife's](#), and his associates' dealings in government. Based on the [fates](#) of his [predecessors](#), legal scrutiny would have followed him after leaving office.

Yet, instead of positioning himself as a tragic figure who made personal sacrifices for his country, Yoon instead chose to declare martial law and attempt an autogolpe on Dec. 3, 2024. His supporters have sought to justify this act – in addition to the [historical precedent](#) Park Chung-hee established in May 1961 (followed by Chun Doo-hwan in [December 1979](#)) by citing the obstructionist tendencies of his opponents in the legislature, and the [allegations](#) ([some of which](#) are [true](#)) of Beijing's mounting malign influence in the country.

However, as the Constitutional Court [noted](#) last year in its decision upholding Yoon's impeachment, there was no legal basis for his declaration. There was no imminent security rationale. Among the powers of the president of the Republic of Korea is the right to declare martial law, but Yoon's methods were not consistent with those outlined legally. Information we have learned about Yoon's plans for [opposition politicians](#) and [the press](#) have brought back deeply unpleasant memories for those who remember the democratic movements of the 1980s and earlier.

Yoon, who is not related to Park Chung-hee, who [prosecuted Park's daughter](#) for corruption, and who did not have Lee Myung-bak's [ties](#) to the country's *chaebol* conglomerate class, could have represented a clean break for a conservative movement in a democratic era. This movement needed fresh voices in support of fiscal conservatism, constitutionalism, and democratic coalition-building with Washington and Tokyo against Beijing and its partners.

Instead, pro-US voices on the Korean right are confronted with reports of how Yoon wanted DPK politicians dragged out of the National Assembly and press freedom stifled and have yet another reputational black mark to live down.

Lee Jae-myung has mostly reaffirmed the value of the alliance with the United States and cooperation maintenance with Japan since taking office last summer. But his apparent [default position](#) of pursuing harmony in Sino-Korean relations and promoting [independence](#) from US security guarantees revealed itself in the ROK's refusal to join the air exercise, citing an unwillingness to anger China. This will have ramifications if the United States seeks commitments to help deter a Taiwan contingency, call out Beijing's predatory behavior in the South China Sea, or build economic resilience through regional coordination. Indeed, unless the PRC reverts to the sort of behavior that drove so many of its neighbors into the arms of the United States between 2017 and 2022, or Washington suddenly becomes a lot more proactive in its use of soft power below the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, developments suggest an erosion of US influence in the ROK, to the PRC's benefit. Good bilateral relations with Japan seem certain to be tested once Lee's conciliatory approach to the PRC clashes with Takaichi's more outspoken stance.

The primary legacy of Yoon's martial law declaration is not his own life sentence—like most past South Korean presidents who have faced legal trouble, he will almost certainly be pardoned eventually.

The real tragedy may be in erosion in the US-ROK alliance—something that Yoon, with more patience and forbearance, could have avoided.

*The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to [rob@pacforum.org](mailto:rob@pacforum.org) for more information on how to contribute.*