

A Polarized Audience in South Korea and Its Impact on North Korea Policy

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Abstract

This article examines the implications of South Korea's 2022 presidential election on Seoul's policy toward North Korea. Specifically, this article seeks to explain how a deeply divided public will affect the credibility of the conservative Yoon administration as it seeks to implement a tougher stance toward Pyongyang. By incorporating recent findings on the relationship between polarization and audience costs, the article contends that audience costs will be more difficult to generate as supporters will excuse the administration's decision to back down as strategically correct or necessary decisions. On the one hand, this incentivizes North Korea to probe Seoul's level of resolve through military provocations or other aggressive behavior. On the other, this also grants the Yoon administration the freedom to experiment with various tactics intended to escape the current stalemate on the Korean peninsula. Combined, a polarized electorate adds to the strategic ambiguity already inherent in power transitions. As a result, the two Koreas are both likely to behave forcefully to demonstrate their level of resolve and gain the upper hand in inter-Korean relations. This article examines the strategic interactions between North and South Korea over the first few months of the Yoon administration to verify these claims.

South Korea's 2022 presidential election demonstrated just how divided the nation's society is. Conservative candidate Yoon Suk-yeol defeated his opponent Lee Jae-myung in the closest election in South Korea's history. Two aspects of the election process stood out. First, both candidates were relative outsiders who replaced the mainstream contenders in their respective parties. This reflected not only the desire for change among the public but also the internal struggles within the two major parties that persisted throughout the campaign. Second, the election process was extremely negative. As election day drew near,

both sides focused on attacking their opponent to discredit them as an unviable candidate. Both these aspects of the election meant that electability was key. Each side viewed it as essential to fiercely consolidate their respective supporters, which transformed the process into a nasty and brutish affair.¹ In this regard, the election results on 9 March were not only a symptom of South Korea's polarization but also a contributing factor.

Since the election, experts have been discussing the foreign and domestic implications of President Yoon's victory. The underlying message of the incoming Yoon administration is to correct the various mistakes of the previous Moon government. This is also true for foreign policy. Regarding inter-Korean relations, President Yoon is expected to adopt a hardline approach that seeks to reclaim the initiative he believes his predecessor relinquished to North Korea. The Yoon administration also hopes to revitalize South Korea's alliance with the United States and develop that relationship into a comprehensive strategic partnership. In terms of strategy, the Yoon administration has emphasized deterrence and reciprocity. The controversy surrounding the possibility of adopting a preemptive strike posture vis-à-vis North Korea demonstrates how sincere President Yoon is about his foreign policy principles.²

To a certain extent, these policy positions summarized above are consistent with those of former conservative South Korean governments. What has changed, however, is the increasingly polarized nature of the South Korean public. While presidential elections have been close in the past, most notably in 2009, polarization has undoubtedly become more extreme over the past couple of decades. How does this affect the Yoon administration's ability to effectively promote its foreign policy?

This article seeks to address this question by explaining how a deeply divided public will affect the credibility of the conservative Yoon administration as it seeks to implement a tougher stance toward Pyongyang. Specifically, this article incorporates insights and findings on the relationship between audience costs and polarization. Audience costs, defined as the "domestic political costs a leader may pay for escalating an international dispute, or for making implicit or explicit threats, and then backing down or not following through," are understood as a mechanism that contributes to the credibility of a threat issued by a state.³ The prospect of losing public support by failing to act on threats effectively ties the hands of the leader. This, in turn, makes a country's threats more credible. Recent studies, however, have shown that this mechanism fails to materialize when the domestic political environment is polarized. This is because, due to the nature of polarization, supporters will be more likely to excuse the government's decision to

back down from their threats instead of punishing them for backing down, thereby exempting leaders from political repercussions.

This article claims that audience costs will similarly become less relevant in South Korea due to increasing polarization. As a result, the work expects two main implications for the Yoon administration's foreign policy. First and foremost, the absence of audience costs will likely make South Korea's threats less credible in the eyes of North Korea. This creates a doubly dangerous environment on the Korean peninsula because it not only emboldens Pyongyang to defy or ignore South Korean threats but also because it incentivizes the regime of Kim Jong-un, North Korea's dictator, to probe the resolve and intentions of the Yoon administration through various actions. This suggests that military provocations or other aggressive behavior may continue, at least for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, the lack of audience costs generated by the South Korean society may enable the Yoon administration to be more flexible. This may appear somewhat counterintuitive. However, because President Yoon is expected to face fewer consequences if and when he decides to back down, alternative approaches may be attempted if pressuring North Korea through military and diplomatic means either fails or results in unacceptable levels of risk. Such freedom will also allow the Yoon administration to focus on other foreign policy issues, including how to strengthen the alliance with the United States or manage difficult relationships with Japan and China while intentionally ignoring North Korea in the process.

To examine the validity of these statements, this article explores inter-Korean relations over the past few months before and after the inauguration of the Yoon administration. While it is too early to tell, the evidence so far appears to suggest that the situation on the Korean peninsula may have become increasingly vulnerable to a general lack of credibility. To offer an initial assessment, the article examines recent tensions that have intensified due to reports that North Korea may be preparing for another nuclear test and how the South Korean government has responded to discuss implications.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The following section summarizes the literature on audience costs, focusing on how it impacts the ability of governments to credibly signal their intentions and how polarization impacts this mechanism. Next, the article discusses polarization in South Korea and how it is related to the country's foreign policy. Based on these descriptions, the subsequent section analyzes recent developments on the Korean peninsula to confirm whether polarization has reduced audience costs and weakened Seoul's ability to credibly signal and deter Pyongyang.

Audience Costs: An Overview

The concept of audience costs was first introduced by James Fearon, who claimed that audience costs are generated when a leader backs down from a threat that he or she had previously issued. Specifically, Fearon argued that “backing down after making a show of force is often most immediately costly for a leader because it gives domestic political opponents an opportunity to deplore the international loss of credibility, face, or honor.”⁴ The idea has since been popularized in the field of international relations. Subsequent studies have sought to empirically verify the existence of audience costs,⁵ identify the micro-foundations of the logic,⁶ examine whether it works similarly in both democratic and nondemocratic countries,⁷ and determine whether the public punishes the leader for displaying weakness or being inconsistent.⁸

Audience costs involve two audiences: domestic and international. Domestically, leaders are concerned about the consequences of issuing threats that they might later be compelled to withdraw. Whether it is due to the country’s loss of face, a display of incompetence, or inconsistent leadership, the public punishes the leader at the voting booth under such circumstances. Leaders can minimize audience costs and moderate the consequences. This is accomplished by justifying the decision to back down as the rational or right option, particularly when based on new information.⁹ Regardless of a leader’s ability to lessen the fallout, this nevertheless demonstrates the political salience of audience costs as a way domestic politics influence foreign policy decisions.

The domestic component is closely related to the international one. First, as noted above, the public’s disapproval of the leader stems from the perceived loss of credibility and reputation that the country suffers by backing down from threats. The international component of this logic is widely viewed as the main reason why states and leaders care about their reputations; maintaining a strong reputation is considered crucial for issuing credible threats in the future.¹⁰ As an example, President Barack Obama’s decision to declare a red-line against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad that the United States later failed to enforce when chemical weapons were used is criticized as one of his biggest foreign policy mistakes.¹¹ Some have suggested that the lack of firm US action in response to al-Assad’s indiscretions emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine in 2014.¹²

Second and more immediate, the prospect of being criticized and punished by the domestic audience is the reason threats are perceived to be credible by the international audience. The core logic is that foreign countries understand what will happen domestically to leaders who back down. As a result, foreign countries

consider threats to be more credible when leaders are likely to be held accountable. Skeptics have noted that this relies on the adversary's ability to know about the domestic politics within the country that has issued the threat.¹³ However, increased flows of information across borders strongly suggest that countries today have a good appreciation of domestic politics in other countries. Even without intricate knowledge of the political environment, the simple prospect of sowing internal divisions in rival countries also suffices as an incentive to defy issued threats.

Regarding these audience cost mechanisms, scholars have recently begun to explore political polarization might affect the equation, particularly in the context of the presidency of Donald Trump. Daniel Drezner, for example, has claimed that audience costs may not exist in extremely polarized political environments. This is because supporters will either not perceive an empty threat as "empty" or because they will be inclined to interpret a decision made by a leader in the most favorable way possible. In other words, polarization causes audience costs to disappear even without the leader having to justify their decision to back down.¹⁴

Polarization, Audience Costs, and Foreign Policy in South Korea

Based on the theoretical descriptions above, this section explains the increasing polarization in South Korea and its impact on foreign policy. As evidenced by the recent presidential election results, polarization has increased in South Korea over the past several years. Kenneth Schultz identifies four distinct but closely related defining aspects of polarization. First, a sharper divide between the ideological positions of elites. Second, the "sorting" of the public into homogenous parties. Third, distrust and dislike of people from the other party, referred to as "affective" or "negative" polarization. And lastly, fragmentation of the media compounds the problem of polarization by enabling the public to conform to their existing beliefs.¹⁵

South Korea has witnessed each of these aspects.¹⁶ Studies have warned about increasing elite polarization between the two major parties. This has substantially shrunk the overlapping range of positions between the two sides and rendered moderate politicians an endangered species.¹⁷ Starkly divided views expressed by party leaders have also precipitated the polarization of the public and the consolidation of highly homogenous political parties.¹⁸ Furthermore, the South Korean public has tightly consolidated around the two major parties by following the cues of the elite. Party affiliation is no longer a matter of policy preference but increasingly a key part of an individual's identity.¹⁹ Studies have also suggested that affective rather than ideological polarization has been more acute among the South Korean public.²⁰ Lastly, the explosion of "new" media outlets on social

networking platforms such as YouTube and Facebook have exacerbated the media divide that already existed in South Korea.²¹ Such polarization has led some to believe that South Korea has followed, instead of bucked, global trends of “democratic depression.”²²

In addition, a unique feature of polarization in South Korea is that the public is divided over foreign policy, particularly on the North Korea question. Partisanship on foreign policy issues exists in other countries such as the United States, where preferences diverge on issues such as the use of force, unilateralism or multilateralism, and trade policy. Yet at the same time, politics tends to “stop at the water’s edge,” especially when national security is concerned.²³ At a minimum, differences remain ideological and thus less divisive. Relative bipartisanship on foreign policy can also partly be attributed to how the public is perceived to know and care less about international affairs.²⁴ While this has ebbed and flowed in recent years, the country’s relatively united front against a more assertive China both politically and economically demonstrates that this dynamic still exists.

Neither is true in South Korea. First, rather than foster bipartisanship, foreign policy exacerbates polarization. Two closely related issues lie at the heart of the divide: the country’s alliance with the United States and how to address the North Korea problem. A recent study revealed that the views held by opposing sides of the political spectrum have become more divergent on key statements such as “the ROK-U.S. alliance should be strengthened further” and “aid to North Korea should be increased.”²⁵ Other studies corroborate such a divide, identifying partisanship as a key determinant of an individual’s views of North Korea and unification.²⁶

Second and relatedly, the South Korean public is often required to pay close attention to foreign affairs as it directly impacts their safety and livelihoods. The threat of North Korea is a constant reality for the people of South Korea, not to mention how inter-Korean relations are a matter of culture and national heritage that invokes a more emotional reaction. South Korea’s tough geopolitical position contributes to the public’s heightened awareness. China’s economic retribution in response to South Korea’s decision to install Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries reminded the public just how closely tied the fate of the nation is to broader global trends. These two aspects cause the South Korean public to be more aware of foreign affairs than other nations in general.

These characteristics suggest that domestic politics and polarization in South Korea will deeply impact foreign policy. Regarding this particular relationship between domestic and foreign policy, scholars have discussed the potency of the so-called “south–south conflict” that has centered on competing views on North Korea policy and attitudes toward the United States. For example, the south–

south conflict may have made South Korea more vulnerable to manipulation by North Korea. Dong Sun Lee and Sung-Yoon Chung argue that polarization in foreign policy makes it easier for North Korea to try to alter South Korean policies that harm Pyongyang's own interests. This is because, on the one hand, the absence of audience costs makes it more convenient for South Korean governments to withdraw their initial threats. On the other hand, the polarized nature of the South Korean society makes it easier for North Korea to generate pressure on the government by instigating detractors.²⁷ Based on these mechanisms, Lee and Chung conclude that the south–south divide has caused North Korean provocations.

This is likely to be the case for the Yoon administration also. Specifically, increased polarization in South Korea and the consequent absence of audience costs are likely to result in two main implications for the Yoon administration. First, threats that the Yoon administration chooses to issue may become less credible. This, in turn, may have two related consequences. First, North Korea may become increasingly emboldened to challenge threats issued by the Yoon administration. This is a direct function of the decreased credibility of threats due to a lack of audience costs. In comparison, a more indirect outcome might be that North Korea becomes incentivized to probe the Yoon administration's intentions through aggressive actions. This may particularly matter more in the earlier stages of the new administration as North Korea seeks to assess how the next five years of inter-Korean relations will unfold.

These mechanisms will likely exacerbate international tensions inherent when a country undergoes a power transition, creating a more contentious environment on the Korean peninsula. Theoretically speaking, newly elected leaders are incentivized to cultivate a strong reputation so that their future bargaining leverage increases. Opposing countries are similarly motivated to not only gain the upper hand but also assess the resolve of their new negotiation partner.²⁸

This has been empirically proven on the Korean peninsula. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has found that North Korea frequently times its military provocations to coincide with elections to maximize impact. In addition, the “provocation window,” or the time between elections and provocations, has narrowed over time. CSIS also finds that North Korea is indiscriminate toward conservative and progressive South Korean governments.²⁹ Such evidence implies that North Korea has become more strategic and is well aware of election processes in South Korea and the United States.³⁰

Second, it is worth also considering the domestic consequences in Seoul. The absence of audience costs suggests that the Yoon administration may enjoy greater flexibility to attempt a wider range of policy options. While President Yoon has

begun his term with stern threats directed at North Korea, the option to choose alternative strategies will remain available as this shift will not entail domestic political consequences. Furthermore, such relative freedom will enable the South Korean government to focus on other foreign policy priorities with neighboring countries such as the United States, China, and Japan. The key to this potential transition will be the success of initial pressure campaigns implemented by the Yoon administration.

Situation on the Korean Peninsula Since the Elections

Turning to an analysis of strategic interactions between the two Koreas over the past few months before and after the elections, one can assess whether the mechanisms described above have appeared on the Korean peninsula. Throughout the campaign, President Yoon proposed the denuclearization of North Korea as his top foreign policy priority to be pursued through a “principled and reciprocal” approach. At the same time, the Yoon campaign vowed to restore relations with the United States which, it argued, had been weakened by making too many concessions to North Korea.³¹ During the transition period, the president-elect followed up these promises through the transition team’s announcement of the 110 national key tasks on 3 May.³²

President Yoon’s claims about the prospect of preemptive strikes against North Korea are especially worth noting. The idea arose in response to North Korea’s missile test on 11 January. Speaking to reporters, then-candidate Yoon stated that “there is no other option to block a nuclear attack at the moment except through a preemptive strike with the Kill-Chain.”³³ Despite harsh criticism from his election opponent, Yoon doubled down on his statement a week later, claiming that “peace is the result of overwhelming force” and that “only a strong deterrent will protect the peace of South Korea.”³⁴ This view has been reiterated by key members of the administration since then, including former Defense Minister Suh Wook, who served under the Moon and Yoon administrations.³⁵

In contrast to the vagueness of North Korea policies proposed by both the campaign and the transition team, the prospect of preemptive strikes is much clearer and more direct. Moreover, it can be viewed as an initial threat targeting North Korea, particularly when considering how the notion was initially mentioned by Yoon in response to a missile test launch by North Korea. The immediate reaction reflected the polarized nature of the South Korean public. Conservatives welcomed the firm stance, while progressives criticized the statement as “irresponsible.”³⁶

At least on the surface, President Yoon’s threat appears to have had little impact on North Korea’s calculus, either before the election or since the inauguration.

From January 2022 until the elections in March, North Korea conducted nine separate provocations, all in the form of test launches of missiles with various ranges. North Korea's provocations have continued since the elections, with the Kim regime test-launching missiles on numerous occasions.³⁷

Aside from the relative frequency of these test launches, the escalation of tensions by North Korea provides further evidence that the initial threat might have been ineffective. In early May, reports started to appear that North Korea may be preparing for its seventh nuclear test, its first since the last nuclear test in 2017. Various experts and organizations, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and US military and intelligence agencies, have speculated that a nuclear test is imminent. Satellite images have revealed how North Korea has prepared the Punggye-ri nuclear test site and has resumed construction of a second nuclear reactor at the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.³⁸ The South Korean government also confirmed in late May that North Korea had been testing a nuclear triggering device.³⁹ While North Korea has not yet conducted its nuclear test, concerns remain as the Kim regime has maintained an aggressive tone.⁴⁰ There is also speculation that North Korea might be waiting for China's party congress expected to be held later this year.⁴¹

What is remarkable about the prospect of another nuclear test by the Kim regime is the fact that North Korea had previously declared the completion of its nuclear arsenal. In 2018, Kim Jong-un had declared that North Korea would no longer need further nuclear tests "under the proven condition of complete nuclear weapons."⁴² The relatively marginal need for additional testing of nuclear capabilities compared to the immense costs involved suggests that such posturing by North Korea is more the result of lack of credibility of South Korea's threats than the goal of advancing its nuclear capabilities.

In other words, it is possible that recent provocations by North Korea intend to test the resolve of the new South Korean government to verify the extent and sincerity of the Yoon administration's hardline policies. The understanding that polarization has weakened the impact of audience costs in South Korea may have led North Korea to believe that enough pressure caused by a seventh nuclear test could compel the Yoon administration to soften its stance. If North Korea succeeds, it also acquires long-term benefits in the form of greater bargaining leverage.

If this is indeed the intended goal of the Kim regime, Pyongyang has certainly not achieved it so far. The Yoon administration has steadfastly maintained its firm position on North Korean provocations and has undertaken both military and diplomatic steps in response. For example, South Korea flew fighter jets in coordination with the United States in a show of force over the Yellow Sea on 7

June.⁴³ And during his recent visit to Madrid to attend the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit, President Yoon met with his counterparts from the United States and Japan and vowed to strengthen trilateral cooperation against North Korea in the region.⁴⁴

While still early, it is apparent that the two Koreas have been testing each other's resolve and intentions through various threats and initiatives. Neither side has yet to back down from their original positions, which is why tensions have persisted. The seventh nuclear test being prepared by the Kim regime, if and when it occurs, will likely set in motion a sequence of events that will allow the two sides to properly assess where each nation stands as they start the processes of competition and dialogue over the next five years.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the recent results of the South Korean presidential elections and explored its implications for the Yoon administration's policy toward North Korea. Based on existing studies, this article has shown polarization creates an environment in which leaders become free from the consequences of audience costs. This will subsequently lead to two outcomes. First, threats issued by states may become less credible which, in turn, increases the likelihood of threats being ignored by the target state. Second, the absence of political ramifications implies greater flexibility to attempt a wider range of policy options. This article has demonstrated that both of these mechanisms likely apply to South Korea, particularly given how the nature of polarization in the country makes it harder for South Korean society to generate audience costs. The analysis of recent tensions surrounding the Yoon administration's mention of preemptive strikes and North Korea's preparations for a nuclear test provides evidence that the Korean peninsula is currently susceptible to the absence of audience costs and credibility.

To conclude, two points are worth mentioning. First, future research is necessary to test the propositions claimed in this article. While recent developments certainly suggest that the mechanisms proposed in this article may exist, further investigation is required to empirically verify these claims—most notably because neither side has backed down yet. Future scenarios that involve, in particular, a decision by the Yoon administration to soften its position vis-à-vis North Korea will grant a better understanding of how audience costs are generated and function in today's polarized South Korean society.

Second, the descriptions suggested in this article apply in the short term. In other words, it anticipates that while audience costs will be hard to generate for the foreseeable future, they may return at later junctures. This can be attributed to the fact that polarization tends to peak during elections but also because the pub-

lic's expectations shift. It is to be expected that the Yoon administration will enjoy greater flexibility in the short term as its policies are compared to those of the previous administration and perceived to be firmer. However, the longer the Yoon administration maintains hardline approaches, the baseline will shift. This will make policy shifts more difficult in the future as conservatives may disapprove of the slightest of concessions, reintroducing audience costs into the mix.

There are signs that changes might be occurring on the Korean Peninsula. During his first Liberation Day speech on 15 August 2022, President Yoon outlined an "audacious" initiative that includes a wide range of assistance programs in exchange for "a comprehensive, phased, and step-by-step" denuclearization process.⁴⁵ But North Korea immediately rejected the offer, deeming it "foolish."⁴⁶ This indicates not only that the two sides are not yet ready to talk but also that they are not done competing for leverage. The period after power transitions involves the greatest amount of uncertainty both at home and abroad. How successfully the Yoon administration navigates these initial few months will determine how much progress is made toward peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.



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