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'US fueling two Koreas' ideological battle'

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South Korea is gearing up for a fresh start by electing a new president following a year of political upheaval and scandals. According to the latest public opinion polls, Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party holds a comfortable lead which reflects public frustration with a decade of conservative rule. In this episode of The Debate, Press TV has asked political commentator, Jason Unruhe, and US foreign policy and national security analyst, Lawrence J. Korb, to provide their analyses of what lies ahead for South Korea, especially when it comes to foreign policy headaches such as tensions with the North.

Lawrence J. Korb maintains that the main problem with South Korea's foreign policy is that the country's conservative leaders always find themselves caught between China and the United States, and consequently, can never adopt an independent strategy towards their northern neighbor.

He speculated that a non-conservative president like Moon Jae-in has the capacity to break the chain and ease the tensions through a self-standing strategy.

"I think that when he [Moon Jae-in] gets in, he may basically say to the Chinese 'if you can lean off the North Koreans to tell them to stop their provocative behavior, then I may delay going for the THAAD system,' which the Chinese and the Russians see as theoretically undermining their nuclear capacity," the analyst said.

After all, Korb continued, if the international community really wants to achieve sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula, it should force both Seoul and Pyongyang to get back to the 'Sunshine Policy' which led to greater political contact between the two states during the 1990s.

“Let’s not forget you had the Sunshine Policy for ten years from 1998 to 2008 when you had open borders, industrial zone. They allowed people to go back and forth between the two countries and then the North Koreans ended up a South Korean naval boat and killed almost 90 people. A lot of people thought South Korea would take military action but they did not. So, there is a precedent to go back to and if Kim Jong-un would govern like his father Kim Jong-il, that is possible. It is really up to him to decide exactly which direction he wants to go and what type of policy he wants.”

He also noted that based on opinion polls, South Koreans’ first priority is economy and, thus, the next president must focus on job creation, welfare, education, and government accountability instead of tensions with its northern neighbor.

The image grab shows political commentator and analyst Jason Unruhe (L), and Lawrence J. Korb, a Washington-based foreign policy and national security analyst, on Press TV's 'The Debate' show on May 8, 2017.

However, the other panelist Jason Unruhe opined that the root cause of tensions between the two Koreas is “opposing ideologies” and as long as they cannot solve their ideological differences, no mutual business agreement can help them.

“As long as there is North and South with opposing ideologies, there is going to be some form of conflict.... There can be mutual agreements like the industrialized zones where they can both mutually benefit from, but in the end, the antagonist contradiction between the two sides remains and that is mostly fueled by the United States,” Unruhe concluded.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been rising under the new US president. The Trump administration has repeatedly threatened North Korea with military attack, asserting that Pyongyang’s nuclear and ballistic missiles pose a potential threat to the US’ existence. On the other hand, North Korea has vowed to destroy Japan and South Korea, Washington's main allies in the region, with its missile barrage in case of any aggression.

Meanwhile, the deployment of America’s anti-missile system, known as THAAD, in South Korea has put the country face to face with its main economic partner, China. Beijing sees the billion-dollar missile system as a security threat. So to fight back, the Chinese government has started restricting its business ties with South Korea