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How South Korea celebrated the 105th Anniversary of the March First Independence Movement



One year ago, after ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol radically changed his focus and outlined a policy shift embracing Japanese partnership during a speech commemorating the 104th anniversary of the March First Independence Movement against Japanese colonial rule, this author began waiting to see how this important anniversary would play out this year. His premonitions did not fail him!

The celebration itself went off without incident. As per tradition, **the main festive ceremony** was held at the Bosingak Pavilion in the center of the capital, where 7,500 independence fighters and their families received cash gifts from Seoul City Hall.

But we are interested in the president's keynote speech, which **was delivered on March 1 at the Yu Gwan-sun Memorial Hall in Seoul** and which consisted of several topical blocks. The first was on history and began with the historian's controversial claim that "Korea's declaration of independence was based on liberalism, the dominant trend in world history at the time." Yoon himself is indeed deeply immersed in Western liberal discourse, but to say such a thing about the worlds of the late 1910s–1920s seems incorrect.

In general, President Yoon has very specific ideas about how and by what means his country's independence was achieved. Below is a great quote worth parsing:

"Inheriting the spirit of the March Independence Movement, various types of independence movements followed at home and abroad. Independence fighters engaged fiercely in armed struggle at the risk of their lives. Visionaries with insight into changing global political landscape struggled for independence through diplomacy in countries around the world. Some independence activists initiated educational and cultural movements to empower Koreans with necessary skills on their own. Following the defeat of imperialism, we were able to gain independence thanks to all these pioneering endeavors."

However, neither the independence fighters who practiced terrorism, or at best attempted guerrilla warfare, nor those who practiced education and culture, much less those who tried to influence third countries through diplomacy, played a decisive role in liberating Korea. The Korean peninsula was liberated by the Soviet Army. But Yoon tried to obscure this point by saying that "with independence came the occupation of the northern half of our country by the forces of communist totalitarianism," and if one follows the text literally, it is possible to get the wrong impression that first the country gained independence and then the Soviet Army seized the northern half. But, to put it mildly, this is not the case.

On August 9, 1945, the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan and in six days defeated the Kwantung Army, including the Japanese forces in northern Korea. On August 11, the United States proposed the division of Korea into two occupation zones, which resulted in the Soviet Army occupying only the northern half of the peninsula and moving no further south. American troops did not show up in Korea until three weeks later. During this time, the Japanese handed over power to the left-wing nationalists (the right-wingers were afraid) and they even managed to proclaim the so-called People's Republic of Korea.

Yoon then makes another historical error by stating that "the blood and sweat of these independence activist enabled our country's independence and became the foundation of the Republic of Korea." This is also not true, although the ROK (in anglicized Korean, "Daehan Minguk") inherited the name adopted by the provisional government of the ROK in exile

founded in Shanghai in 1919, the leadership of that provisional government led by Kim Ku, as well as the leadership of the People's Republic of Korea (in anglicized Korean, "Joseon Inmin Gonghwaguk") were not recognized by the United States and did not participate in the creation of the 1948 incarnation of the Republic of Korea. Kim Ku was against both Kim Il Sung's communists and the Westerners led by Syngman Rhee, but was in favor of a unified country and was strongly opposed to Syngman Rhee's course of establishing a separate state on the southern half of the peninsula with himself at its head. Thus, the ROK-1948, created by Syngman Rhee, whom Yoon's entourage actively honors, is neither the successor of the ROK-1919 nor its ideological heir. Although Syngman Rhee was the first president of the ROK-1919, he was ousted in 1925 after proposing to make Korea a mandated territory of the United States.

But despite the number of historical errors, Yoon states that "no one is allowed to monopolize history." "I believe that the significance of all of these independence movements must be duly recognized and their history should be passed down correctly generation after generation." It looks like we are in for a new round of rewriting in the spirit of historical politics of the people in Yoon Suk-yeol's entourage. For when it came to "visionaries," it was a clear allusion to Syngman Rhee, who is controversial in the ROK because of his 12-year dictatorial rule as South Korea's first president and his hardline anti-communist views, **to say the least**. But Yoon's entourage has made efforts to highlight the former president's accomplishments, including supporting the construction of the Syngman Rhee Memorial.

Unfortunately, the author has to state that Yoon Suk-yeol has, in many ways, moved in the path of Lee Myung-bak. Not being an expert in history or foreign policy, he turned the development of relevant concepts over to members of the conservative camp, many of whom had been in the business just under President Lee.

That said, there is some degree of Russophobic sentiment in society. At the end of February, **The Korea Times published an article full of Russophobia and historical distortions, where they tried to equate the January 20, 1990 riots in Baku and their suppression by the Soviet army to the March First Movement**: "While historical circumstances and the degree to which victims differ, both events and their memorial celebrations share remarkable similarities, serving as powerful expressions of collective will to resist oppression and strive for national liberation." Interestingly, the author was not a representative of "white Europe" but one Choe Chong-dae, a guest columnist for The Korea Times and director of the Korean-Swedish Association. Yes, this newspaper is not so much

the voice of Yoon Suk-yeol as of Lee Jun-seok, but the appearance of such texts is an additional half a degree to the cooling of relations between Seoul and Moscow.

The second block was again devoted to Korea-Japan friendship. “The 1919 Proclamation of Korean Independence made it clear to Japan that our independence would be a path to prosperity for both countries.”

Yoon went on to note that Korea and Japan are once again working together to overcome a painful past, “Sharing the values of freedom, human rights and the rule of law, our two countries have become partners in the pursuit of common interests for global peace and prosperity... The security cooperation between the two countries against North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats has been strengthened further... I hope that the 60th anniversary of Korea and Japan normalizing diplomatic relations next year will serve as an opportunity to take our bilateral relationship to a higher level, one that is more productive and constructive.” Thus, the president essentially reiterated the thesis that cooperation in the present is more important than disputes of the past, and if Seoul and Tokyo work together to solve difficult problems, they can open “a bright new future for bilateral relations.”

In terms of specifics, Yoon pointed to security cooperation to combat DPRK nuclear and missile threats, tourism flow between the countries totaling 9.28 million people in 2023, and mutual assistance in rescuing citizens during conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Problematic topics were not addressed at all this time. It is no coincidence that media outlets like The Korea Times, in opposition to Yoon, immediately noted that “his speech **didn’t reveal much about the lessons the nation should learn from its traumatic past**” and “Yoon was cautious about mentioning Japan directly as the state responsible for South Korea’s tragic past.”

However, the same article pointed out that “South Korea would have nothing to gain, should its ties with Japan turn sour again at this critical juncture. It could pay a price on the security front because of the grave geopolitical circumstances. Tensions are escalating in East Asia, which some pundits have likened to a new Cold War-like standoff between two blocs, each consisting of three nations — one is a coalition of democratic countries, namely the United States, South Korea and Japan, and the other is the autocratic partnership forged among China, Russia and North Korea. If Seoul-Tokyo ties are held back again due to disputes over historical issues, that will do a disservice to their trilateral partnership with the US.”

But the most significant part of the speech for this author was the third block – the conclusion of the speech, very tangentially related to the March First Movement, but pointing to a new course on the inter-Korean track. Yoon said “The March First Independence Movement will

be made complete only upon a unification that brings freedom and abundance to everyone. Now, we must move toward a free, unified Korean Peninsula where the people are its rightful owners.”

This was followed by trite statements about “tyranny and human rights abuses of the North Korean regime,” which “deny the universal values of humanity.” While criticizing the North for calling the South the main enemy, President Yoon failed to mention that the South started calling the North its “enemy” or “main enemy” as early as 2023, specifically in the Defense White Paper.

But that is not all. According to Yoon, “unification” is necessary to spread the universal values of “freedom” and “human rights,” and South Korean efforts must once again “become a source of hope and a beacon of light” for the people of North Korea. The most important quote, according to the author, begins thus:

“Unification is a challenging task that we cannot accomplish alone. The international community must pool its strength in a responsible manner. A free, unified Republic of Korea will contribute to peace and prosperity not only in Northeast Asia but also in the Indo-Pacific region and the rest of the world. As President of the Republic of Korea, I will do all I can to fulfill this duty that history and the Constitution have given to me.”

Such remarks coincide with news that the South Korean administration will work to formulate a new vision for the unification (or rather reunification) of Korea. This would include the value of liberalism, noting that the current **unification plan drafted in 1994, which has served as the basis for South Korea’s unification policy for the past 30 years, does not contain such a concept**. As one of the first steps, Yoon declared July 14 as North Korean Defectors Day and called on citizens to show them “warm compassion and understanding.”

What does this mean? Yoon Suk-yeol linked the March First Movement to the idea of unification, saying it should culminate in unification so that everyone can enjoy freedom and abundance. And for that, it is necessary to strive for a free and united Korean Peninsula. The elimination of the DPRK is positioned as a global task that the ROK must fulfill together with the entire free world for the triumph of universal values. This author does not remember such revanchism since the days of Syngman Rhee, who also openly called for a march on the North by the international community. The ROK President, in fact, explicitly calls for the elimination of DPRK sovereignty, while honestly pointing out that this task cannot be accomplished solely by the South.

But while the ROK National Security Act considers the North an anti-state organization that has alienated the northern half of the country, North Korea is not an unrecognized or partially recognized state in terms of international law, being a member of the UN and having diplomatic relations with some 140 other states.

The ROK president's open declaration of a course to destroy the DPRK with the help of the international community is not only strikingly different from the changes in the DPRK's inter-Korean policy, but is a far more destabilizing factor than any missile launches by Pyongyang.

It is true that during Lee Myung-bak's reign, this author encountered revanchists among the "young colonels" who claimed that "if the politicians did not interfere with them, they would take over the North in a couple of days." But then they were young colonels. After certain provocations, the matter ended with the shelling of the South Korean Island of Yeonpyeongdo, after which revanchist sentiments subsided. Over the past nearly 15 years, North Korea has significantly increased its military potential, becoming a full-fledged nuclear power with an ever-improving delivery capability.

Even with the help of the "international community," the elimination of the DPRK would bring incalculable disasters because, according to North Korean regulations on the use of nuclear weapons, threatening the existence of the state is a reason to press the red button. That Yoon Suk-yeol does not see these consequences of such a conflict is extremely sad.

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