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South Korea Declares and Cancels Martial Law: What Are the Geopolitical Impacts?

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared emergency martial law in a move that caught everyone by surprise. The situation is particularly striking given that Yoon is a favourite in Washington and South Korea is considered part of the self-declared “West,” referring to Western-style liberal democracies.



What Happened in South Korea?

On December 3, 2024, South Korean ultra-right and isolated President Yoon Suk Yeol declared emergency martial law in a surprise nationally televised address, citing the need to protect the country from “North Korean communist forces” and “antistate forces.” He framed the move as a necessary step to “rebuild and protect” South Korea from “falling into ruin.” This is the first declaration of martial law in South Korea since 1980 when a military coup, backed by American President Jimmy Carter, led by Chun Doo-hwan followed the assassination of President Park Chung-hee.

South Korea faces pressure to fully commit to the U.S. strategy of decoupling from China

Shortly after the announcement, police vehicles barricaded the National Assembly, and armed soldiers entered the building, forcibly breaking a window to gain access. Martial Law Commander and Army Chief of Staff Park An-su issued Proclamation No. 1, prohibiting all political activities, including the operations of the National Assembly, local assemblies, and political parties. Protests, gatherings, and even media activities were restricted under the decree.

Despite these measures, by 1:00 a.m. (KST), the National Assembly passed a resolution demanding the lifting of martial law with 190 out of 300 members present voting unanimously in favor. Under Article 77 of the South Korean Constitution, this resolution obligates the president to comply. By 1:12 a.m., soldiers withdrew from the National Assembly, and approximately 2,000 citizens gathered outside, chanting, “Long live the Republic of Korea!”

How Does This Compare to Previous Martial Law Declarations?

South Korea has seen 16 instances of martial law since its founding in 1948, invoked during times of war or national emergencies. Article 77 of the Constitution allows for emergency and security martial law. Emergency martial law, as declared by Yoon, grants the president powers to restrict freedoms such as speech, assembly, and publication while altering judicial and governmental authority, such as outlined by the president’s declaration: Prohibition of all political activities, including protests and party operations; Media and publications placed under the control of the Martial Law Command; Prohibition of social disruption, including strikes; Medical personnel are required to return to their duties within 48 hours or face penalties; Citizens’ daily lives disrupted as little as possible, except for “antistate forces”; Violators face detention and punishment without a warrant.

The Motivations of President Yoon to Declare Martial Law

Tensions between Yoon’s government and the opposition Democratic Party have been escalating for months. The opposition holds a parliamentary majority and has repeatedly challenged Yoon’s administration, including 22 impeachment attempts since he took office in May 2022.

The immediate trigger appears to be the opposition’s recent budget cuts and impeachment proceedings against key government figures. In his address, Yoon accused the opposition of creating a “legislative dictatorship” that has undermined his governance, justifying martial law as a means to restore stability.

The Reaction of Opposition and Public

The opposition Democratic Party quickly mobilized lawmakers to the National Assembly. Party leader Lee Jae-Myung condemned Yoon's actions in a live YouTube broadcast, declaring him a traitor to democracy and stating that Yoon was no longer the legitimate president of South Korea.

Criticism also came from within Yoon's own People Power Party. Party leader Han Dong-hoon called the declaration "unlawful and unconstitutional," pledging to protect South Korea's democracy alongside its citizens. After the reactions and Parliament voted against the sudden martial law, the president cancelled his martial law.

International responses have been reduced so far. The Biden administration has called for a peaceful resolution while withholding direct criticism of Yoon's move. North Korea has not yet commented, but Pyongyang is likely to exploit the situation for propaganda purposes against Yoon's government.

While Yoon likely intended this move to demonstrate strength, domestically, with an approval rating of just 10 per cent, and the rapid legislative and public backlash against his martial law, there is no future for Yoon as president, as he will be impeached soon. The swift counteractions from lawmakers and citizens underscore the resilience of South Korea's democratic institutions and public will.

Geopolitical Impacts

The declaration and rapid reversal of martial law in South Korea under President Yoon Suk Yeol have significant geopolitical implications that reverberate far beyond the country's borders. While the immediate crisis underscores the resilience of South Korea's democratic institutions, it also exposes vulnerabilities in a nation navigating an increasingly complex international environment marked by neighbouring China's economic and military rise and North Korea's mutual defence pact with Russia.

Thanks to Yoon's Korea elevated position in the U.S. military strategy in Asia, the embattled president has become a favourite among think tanks and so-called Korean "experts" in Washington. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell even proposed that Yoon deserves a Nobel Peace Prize for overcoming Korea's historical disputes with Japan to strengthen the trilateral alliance.

Here is my analysis of the geopolitical developments resulting from this event:

Erosion of Democratic Credibility Amid Authoritarian Tendencies

South Korea has long been regarded as a model liberal democracy within the "West" due to its developed economy and political structure. Yoon's brief flirtation with authoritarian measures, however, raises concerns about the stability of democratic norms even in advanced

economies. This episode could embolden autocratic regimes to question the reliability of democratic systems in addressing domestic crises, weakening the collective influence of liberal democracies in global governance.

Deepened Strategic Dilemmas Between China and the U.S.

South Korea's geopolitical tightrope has become even more precarious. As China asserts its economic and military power, Seoul must balance its reliance on U.S. security guarantees with economic ties to Beijing. Yoon's actions risk exacerbating internal divisions between factions favouring closer U.S. alignment and those advocating a more neutral stance to avoid antagonizing China. This division complicates Korea's ability to present a unified front in the face of regional challenges, such as potential conflict over Taiwan or North Korea's increasing cooperation with Russia and China.

Impact on Regional Stability and Alliance Dynamics

The swift backlash to Yoon's martial law declaration highlights internal fragility, which could undermine South Korea's position in key alliances like the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific strategy. A destabilized South Korea risks weakening the broader Western alliance in Asia at a time when unity is critical to counter China's growing influence and assertiveness. Moreover, the incident emboldens North Korea and its partners, Moscow and Beijing, to exploit the perception of instability in Seoul for strategic gains.

Economic and Geoeconomic Ramifications

China's rise as a competitor in semiconductors, electronics, and automotive sectors directly threatens South Korea's economic foundation. Yoon's failed gambit detracts attention from addressing these critical challenges and heightens the urgency of navigating the transition from a globalized trade order to a more polarized economic environment. South Korea faces pressure to fully commit to the U.S. strategy of decoupling from China, risking retaliatory economic measures from Beijing.

Questions About U.S. Support Amid "America First" Uncertainty

Yoon's martial law declaration occurred amid broader concerns about the reliability of U.S. support under a potential second Trump administration. Trump's "America First" rhetoric raises fears that South Korea might be left vulnerable in the event of regional conflict, further complicating Seoul's strategic calculus. The perception of a fragile U.S. commitment could force South Korea to reconsider its security policies, possibly seeking a more independent or diversified defence posture.

Broader Lessons for the Global Order

Yoon's actions reflect the pressures facing developed economies in an era of rising geopolitical uncertainty. South Korea, a success story of globalization – built on globalization premisses and the support of the U.S. -, now confronts a rapidly changing “climate” where old certainties—be it U.S. support or the viability of a global trade network—are increasingly fragile.

The incident underscores how even nations deeply embedded in the Western democratic and economic order are grappling with unprecedented internal and external challenges. This should be a cautionary tale for other democracies on the importance of preserving institutional integrity and adapting to the transformative realities of a multipolar world.

Ricardo Martins, December 05, 2024

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