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President Moon Jae-in's Dilemma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: South Korean President Moon Jae-in faces pressure from Pyongyang, Beijing, and Washington as well as from his own country about the North Korean crisis. He needs to find ways to balance the multilevel exterior pressure with the expectations of the South Korean voting public, which elected him in the hope of bringing about a more peaceful North Korean policy.

President Moon Jae-in assumed the office of the President of the Republic of Korea at the Blue House on May 10, 2017. He was elected after the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye by the National Assembly and the approval of the Constitutional Court of Korea. Prior to the official impeachment, millions of South Korean citizens filled the streets of Seoul for several weekends demanding Park's resignation and calling for a change in the Korean political system.

The election of Moon Jae-in, in that highly charged political and social atmosphere, was accompanied by expectations among the voters for a change in the country's security and foreign policy as well as improvements to the internal political arena.

While most new presidents get at least the first one hundred days to sort out their new government and new policies, in the case of President Moon, he was given no grace period in which to find his footing on foreign and security issues. Almost immediately after he got into the Blue House, on May 13, 2017, Pyongyang tested the Hwasong-12 (an intermediate-range ballistic missile).

If President Moon thought Pyongyang might change its modus operandi after his election to allow him to start negotiations between Seoul and Pyongyang, Kim Jong-un had other ideas. Kim immediately set about demonstrating North

Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities, despite calls from Seoul to change the policy of the previous South Korean administration towards North Korea.

Pyongyang did not address Seoul's calls for negotiation, continuing instead to respond to its main "rival," the US. North Korea continued to test its long-range and mid-range missiles, including the Hwasong-14 – an ICBM that can reach the US.

In addition to the missile launches, Pyongyang revealed a nuclear warhead that will allow it to deter the US with nuclear missiles. The final test, for now, was its sixth nuclear test, held on September 3, 2017. North Korea claims that test was of a hydrogen bomb.

The North Korean missiles and nuclear test challenge the policy of President Moon towards the DPRK. He faces a challenge on multiple levels. He was hoping to find policies that would ease tensions in the Korean Peninsula and permit a rebuilding of the cooperation that existed between Seoul and Pyongyang during the Kim Dae-jung and No Moo-hyeon presidencies, but the Kim regime in Pyongyang has shown no interest in easing tensions. Nor has US President Donald Trump, who has not been willing to ease the pressure on North Korea.

President Moon also faces a challenge from China. Beijing is not pleased with Pyongyang's brinkmanship policy, but neither is it content with Washington's policies towards the DPRK. The tension between Washington and Pyongyang and the disagreements between Washington and Beijing on how to handle the DPRK crisis carry a very high price tag that Seoul will pay.

The transitional government between President Park's impeachment and President Moon's election decided to deploy the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) despite objections from Beijing. China responded to the THAAD deployment by imposing unofficial sanctions on South Korea that have cost its economy billions of dollars.

President Moon has to juggle between conservative forces in Washington and South Korea that are calling for tough sanctions and an increase in the defense budget, and liberal forces that want to see a more moderate policy with which to build bridges of cooperation between South and North Korea. Moon is trying to find ways to ease tensions in the Korean Peninsula and rebuild cooperation between Seoul and Pyongyang – but at the same time, he is upgrading South Korea's deterrence capabilities with the US.

President Moon hopes he will be able to deter North Korea and at the same time convince Kim Jong-un to accept his offer to open negotiations. So far, this

balancing of policies has gotten nowhere: it has not met with acceptance from Pyongyang, and it has not convinced Beijing to ease its economic pressure on South Korea.

President Moon Jae-in has failed to convince Kim Jong-un to respond to his offers because Kim believes he is now playing in the big leagues. As long as Seoul remains unable to influence Washington, Pyongyang will prefer to deal with Washington directly and will ignore Seoul's peaceful initiatives.

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