

# ISAS Brief

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## The Regional Impact of South Korea's Political Turmoil

*South Korea's President was forced to leave office by the constitutional court's upholding of Parliament's decision to impeach her over corruption charges involving her friend and big businesses. The constitutional court has ruled that protecting the laws of democracy and market economy is the call of a democratically elected leader. Furthermore, the successful unravelling of the political scandal marks a breakthrough in civil society activism in South Korea in exposing corrupt politicians and entrepreneurs who are seen to break the law. However, a possible political vacuum may mean that South Korea will face difficulties in dealing with the security and the politico-economic relations with its neighbouring countries like China, Russia, and Japan for a while at least.*

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South Korea is internally and externally in political unrest. South Korea's President Park Geun-hye has become the first leader to be forced to leave office. The eight judges at the constitutional court unanimously upheld Parliament's decision to impeach Ms Park on 10 March 2017 over her involvement in a corruption scandal in which her close friend Choi Soon-sil played a major role. The 92 day-long fight between Parliament and Cheong Wa Dae [Blue

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House, the presidential palace] was finally over. On that note, the nationwide candlelight march in support of the impeachment and a pro-Park Geun-hye counter-rally ended, too.

What does the political furore convey? The crux of the constitutional court's decision is that adherence to the principles of representative democracy and protection of the constitution are sacrosanct as the call of a democratically elected leader. In fact, the political scandal attracted greater attention than might have been the case because the names of some Korean big businesses like Samsung were associated with it. Political lobbying by big businesses through the perceived payment of bribes is not new to the country, but it has hardly led to a successful punishment of those involved. In this regard, the constitutional court's judgment is a breakthrough in establishing the cardinal principle that democratically elected leaders should promote the public interest and be rigorously punished when they seek to foster the particular interests of select individuals and enterprises.

For the final outcome in pursuing this scandal, civil society's participation was influential. One-third of the South Korean population is estimated to have attended candlelight rallies either at an individual level or through local political communities that supported the principle of rule of law in regard to the corrupt politicians and entrepreneurs who broke the norms of democracy and market economy. It was indeed delightful to see that civil society in South Korea has matured to the level of keeping a close eye on the government and market economy players and calling them to account for not defending the rules of democracy and the principles of free market. From an academic perspective, it is an interesting phenomenon that civil society has evolved as a key player in levelling and pursuing charges against the government and *chaeböl* [conglomerate] companies.

However, the political turmoil implies a lot more than a mere domestic transformation. This is especially true in South Korea's international relations with its neighbouring countries. It may also lead to a political vacuum until the next presidential election, scheduled for early May this year, in dealing with North Korea's ballistic missile tests and threats and the United States' 'Terminal High Altitude Area Defense' (THAAD) weaponry deployment. Not only many political leaders and citizens in South Korea but also neighbouring countries including China and Russia have criticised the South Korean Government's support for the THAAD deployment which was agreed to in 2016 under Ms Park's leadership. China has vehemently opposed the introduction of THAAD in the region, considering the deployment as the US'

attempt to hold China rather than North Korea in check. China has not only warned South Korea against the deployment and but also boycotted South Korean goods and K-pop. In fact, the boycott of South Korean products in China has been rapidly increasing, and many of the Chinese investors have withdrawn from the South Korean stock market as retaliatory measures. Russia also warned that it would take steps if Seoul were to go ahead and eventually deploy the THAAD system. The Russian Government thinks that Washington is creating a new regional segment of the US' global missile defence system in Northeast Asia, which is close to the Russian border. As such, both China and Russia think that the THAAD deployment will lead to an aggravation of the security and foreign policy situation in the region.

On the contrary, Japan's position differs over the issue of THAAD deployment. Regarding the latest North Korean missile launches, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said that Japan and the US confirmed that such activities of North Korea were a clear defiance of the relevant United Nations resolutions. After Ms Park was impeached by the constitutional court in South Korea, Japanese Defence Minister Tomomi Inada indicated that, with the Japanese security situation also being difficult, Tokyo would need to work with the US and South Korea. Further, the Japanese Government is concerned about whether the next President of South Korea would be cooperative with it over the security issue and other political agendas that Ms Park was supportive of.

In fact, India's experience of possessing a multi-layered ballistic missile defence system can provide a lesson to South Korea which is at a loss as to which way to go. India is the fourth country after Russia, Israel, and the US to successfully test a ballistic missile defence system. There will be merits and demerits of deploying such a system in South Korea. India faced a tougher security situation for a long time vis-a-vis both China and Pakistan until the late-1990s when it developed a two-tier ballistic missile system.<sup>2</sup> However, India's case is different from that of South Korea in the sense that India developed the defence shield on its own out of necessity. It took a long time for the Indian Government to deliberate and design the system with the help of domestic scientists, unlike in the case of South Korea which signed an agreement with a super power like the US, that too without the approval of Parliament in Seoul.

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<sup>2</sup> "India's Defence vis-à-vis Other Countries," *Rajya Sabha Debate* 4 August 1994. Accessed on 13 March 2017.

Further, India has failed to test interceptor missiles several times since the first test in 2006,<sup>3</sup> although it was proudly designed by indigenous scientists with advanced technology. It seems clear that India holds the balance of power in the region by possessing the defence shield system, but it has also spent an enormous budget on developing it.

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<sup>3</sup> “India’s Ballistic Missile Interceptor Fails Test,” *NDTV* 7 April 2015; “Interceptor Missile Mission a ‘Failure’,” *The Hindu* 23 May 2016; “India’s Ballistic Missile Defence System: All You Need to Know,” *Times of India* 12 February 2017. Accessed on 13 March 2017.