

South Korean presidential candidates move further to the right on North Korea

By Ben McGrath
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The South Korean presidential elections on May 9 are taking place amid mounting US threats of war against North Korea. All the candidates are vying to demonstrate their pro-US credentials. None offer a means for preventing war or a progressive solution to the political and economic crises gripping the country.

On Sunday evening, a third debate between the five major contenders dealt with foreign policy, national security and political reforms. Much of the focus was on front-runner Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) and his stance on North Korea.

Before the debate, the conservative candidates, Hong Jun-pyo of the Liberty Korea Party (LKP) and Yu Seung-min of the Bareun Party, engaged in red-baiting, accusing Moon of being a “leftist” and supporter of North Korea. Yu attacked the DPK candidate over claims that the Noh Moo-hyun administration, which Moon served as chief of staff, consulted with Pyongyang before abstaining on a 2007 UN human rights resolution on North Korea.

On Friday, Song Min-soon, who served as foreign minister under Noh, released a document he claimed backed up this assertion. Moon responded during Sunday’s debate that the government’s decision to abstain was made prior to consultations with Pyongyang.

In contrast to the conservative administration of impeached President Park Geun-Hye, Moon has stated he intends to return to the “Sunshine Policy” first implemented under Kim Dae-jung. This policy was designed to exploit the North Korean working class as a source of cheap labor for South Korean businesses.

During the 2012 election, Moon suggested that the now-shuttered Kaesong Complex in North Korea near the South Korean border should be expanded into a broader free trade zone and include parts of Incheon

and Haeju. However, it seems unlikely a Moon administration could carry out such plans given the threat of war hanging over the Korean Peninsula.

Moreover, Moon is quickly discarding previous attempts to tap into anti-war sentiment as he shifts to the right to fend off conservative criticism. He is promising to build up the military while appealing to Korean nationalism, and has sought to allay concerns in Washington by continually calling for a strong US-South Korea alliance.

“We must first closely coordinate with our ally, the United States,” Moon stressed during the second candidates’ debate last week. “We must also ensure that our point of view is conveyed sufficiently in the process.”

On Sunday, Moon said: “I will never allow any military provocations by North Korea. I will prevent war based on thorough crisis management and a strong Korea-US alliance. I will put a priority on securing military capabilities to curb the North’s nuclear and missile threats.”

These military plans include the early deployment of the “Kill Chain,” a system designed to launch pre-emptive attacks on North Korea, and the Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) shield, similar to the US’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery currently being deployed to South Korea amid widespread protests.

Moon has abandoned attempts to posture as an opponent of THAAD, describing it on April 11 as a card in dealing with Pyongyang. It was “just one idea for responding to the North Korean nuclear issue, and it’s a weapon for defensive purposes,” he said, adding: “If North Korea continues engaging in provocations like a sixth nuclear test and advancing its nuclear capabilities, the THAAD deployment may be

unavoidable.”

There is nothing defensive about THAAD. It is bound up with Washington’s war plans against China and Russia. Since 1988, the US has been working to develop and dispatch THAAD batteries to the region, including the X-band radar system. Beijing is concerned that the latter will be used to spy deep into its territory. In the event of a pre-emptive attack on China, US anti-missile systems would knock out any retaliation Beijing managed to launch.

The next closest candidate behind Moon is the other liberal, Ahn Cheol-soo of the People’s Party. Moon leads his challenger by approximately 10 percent in current polls. Ahn and his party broke from the DPK’s predecessor early last year and represent a more openly right-wing faction of the Democrats. Ahn has similarly called for the expansion of South Korean military forces.

All the candidates have stressed support for putting more pressure on China, lending support to US claims that Beijing is responsible for the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula. Yu Seung-min, who along with his Bareun Party has been deeply critical of Beijing, stated during the second debate: “China must pressure North Korea much more strongly, including the ban on imports of coal and cutting off oil supplies to Pyongyang.” Ahn Cheol-soo declared: “By taking a lukewarm stance, China enabled North Korea to go on with its aggression.”

Sim Sang-jeong of the minor Justice Party is running to try to convince workers and young people that a progressive alternative exists within the political establishment, based on nationalism and identity politics. Her role is to discredit Hong Jun-pyo, the only significant conservative challenger to Moon or Ahn. Sim played a similar role while running for president in 2012 before dropping out in Moon’s favor.

Sim has denounced Hong for involvement in a sexual assault when he was in university. Hong admitted in a 2005 essay that as a student he procured an “aphrodisiac powder” for a friend who mixed the substance into a woman’s beer.

“I cannot recognize a candidate as a rival who was an accomplice in a sex crime,” Sim stated during the debate. “It would be natural for Hong to resign in consideration of the shame felt by the people and national prestige.”

The Justice Party candidate is using the scandal to avoid challenging any of her opponents on more fundamental political issues, particularly Moon, whom Sim is politically assisting.

Amid rising fears and anxiety at the danger of conflict with North Korea, none of the anti-war sentiment widespread in South Korea finds expression in these candidates or in the media.

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