

The  
Presidency in  
Korea 2013  
No. 1

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**Moderator**

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**Discussants**

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of Presidency in Korea 2013 roundtable

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## Statecraft: A Presidential Qualification

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Globalization, the advancement of democracy, and the growth of social media are all increasing the need for new governance. In addressing the challenges of this era, the East Asia Institute has been seeking new institutional recommendations for the desirable role, power, and responsibility of the president in South Korea. These efforts have been undertaken through the projects *The Presidency in Korea* in 2002 and *Presidential Transitions in Korea* in 2007. In particular, these projects have shown ways in which to secure leadership through stable statecraft or “the quality of governance.” In recent years, statecraft has become an important yet undervalued task in South Korean politics.

With a new president due to be inaugurated in January 2013, the EAI launched *The Presidency in Korea 2013* in order to look into the methods of statecraft and look back at the outcomes from previous presidential administrations in South Korea. Through this analysis, it hopes to understand the formation of governability and qualities needed to perform as a successful president in the context of this new political environment.

For this project, the EAI invited a wide range of speakers who have served in the presidential administrations of the post-democratization period in South Korea for roundtable discussions with scholars and experts. On February 22, 2012, Yeojoon Yoon, Chairman of the Korea Research Institute for Local Administration, was invited to speak at

the first roundtable on the importance of statecraft for the South Korea presidency. The following is a summary of the main contents of the meeting.

### The Lack of Statecraft in South Korea

Since democratization in 1987, successive South Korean presidents have received mostly negative evaluations of their performance in office. This has been mainly due to the fact that presidential candidates tend to focus solely on winning the election and rarely prepare themselves for what comes next. More often than not, they have overlooked the importance of statecraft or the ability to govern, which can determine the success or failure of a president as well as the performance of a nation.

The core elements which constitute statecraft is the ability to propose a suitable vision by recognizing the most urgent tasks and then to realize that vision as policies. Efforts in this regard include: creating or modifying policies; appointing the right personnel; and managing divisions within society. In order to achieve such efforts, it is important for a president to possess workable knowledge through comprehensive studies and experiences. Until now, the lack of effective statecraft among former presidents in South Korea has made it difficult for them to be successful.

## **The Importance of Publicness**

A president's lack of knowledge on publicness, which is the basis of the nation's authority to exercise executive powers, results in a privatization of presidential power. This sense of private ownership of power by a president spreads to those who serve closely with him and to his family which usually results in cases of corruption. The failure of past presidents in South Korea was largely caused by this sense of private ownership of power. There is a misconception that state power won through an election is akin to a war trophy. This kind of thinking has led to harmful consequences where state power is treated as if it is the president's own family fortune or so-called patrimonialism. Furthermore, a negative impact upon publicness can come from failed policies which bring economic and security instability and then generates mistrust from the people to believe that the state is unable to protect citizens and their property. This was very much the case for President Lee Myung-bak who had a negative impact upon publicness through similar policies.

It is important then that one of the main tasks for the next president is to rebuild publicness and a practical starting point would be in the selection of administration officials. This process should seek to avoid personal preferences which have often created distrust among the public. Rather administration officials should be selected carefully and based on a person with the right talent for the right position according to the official standard. If a talented person who does not have a personal relationship with the president is selected for the right position, it will earn the trust from all sectors of society.

## **Rethink Democracy**

Next is a president's understanding of the workings of democracy. It has been twenty-five years since the democratization of South Korea and yet even among the leaders who struggled for democracy during the authoritarian period such as former Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, democracy has not been properly exercised.

It is ironic that those who devoted their lives for democracy against the military regime of the past have exercised a kind of authoritarian statecraft. This is because they did not fully understand how to operate a government in a democracy. In this case they focused only on procedural democracy rather than statesmanship. This led to a lack of understanding related to parliamentary politics, relations with opposition parties, and the media. It has also resulted in these presidents having become heavily involved in parliamentary elections in order to favor the ruling party. This lack of consensus in the decision-making process by exercising power arbitrarily goes against the principles of democracy.

In this vein, it is difficult to categorize Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung as leaders who operated through democratic institutions. Alongside them, President Lee Myung-bak has had problems in the way he has communicated with society because he disrupted the political party system which is supposed to serve as the indirect communication channel in a democracy.

## **Economic Democratization leads to Political Democratization**

As part of the foundation for political democratization, economic democratization is also

an important agenda which requires effective presidential statecraft. Although the Park Chung Hee era was authoritative, checks and balances on the *chaebols* or business conglomerates were possible. However, after democratization, the rapid expansion of the *chaebols* and the sharp decline of the state's ability to control them are considered as roadblocks toward the development of democratization in South Korea. In this context, former President Roh Moo-hyun once remarked that "power had crossed to the market." Furthermore, the lack of presidential statecraft has led to a dependency among policy makers on the *chaebol*-affiliated economic research institutes for policy ideas. As a result, the nation's policy has more or less become a tool that serves the interests of the business community.

The people's discontent has grown as they see the *chaebols* failing to invest in new jobs despite earning large profits under the Lee administration's pro-business policies. As the polarization of South Korean society grows wider, economic democratization will be the main agenda for the next president. In the case of the four presidents since democratization, we have seen that without electing a president, who possesses the right sense of statecraft, it becomes an immensely difficult task to run the country. The future of South Korea will depend upon effective presidential statecraft. The hope is that the future president will set publicness as a core value and utilize effectively statecraft based upon good knowledge and awareness of democracy. ■

## About the Speaker

### Yeojoon Yoon

Yeojoon Yoon was a reporter at *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Kyunghyang Shinmun*. Since 1977, he has devoted himself as a Public Information Officer and has served as the Special Assistant to the Director for Public Affairs and the President's Senior Communication Secretary. In 1997, he served as the Minister of Environment and in 2000, was elected as an assemblyman for the 16th National Assembly. He served two terms as the head of the Youido Institute and currently is the Chairman of the Board for the Korea Local Development Institute. He has recently published the book *Statecraft* (2011).

### Moderator

Sook-Jong Lee, President of the East Asia Institute

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