

South Korea's President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol's Stance on the Energy

Transition

The March 9th election in South Korea saw political newcomer and right-wing candidate Yoon Suk-yeol claim victory by the narrowest of margins. Yoon earned 48.6% of the popular vote while his rival, Lee Jae-myung, conceded defeat with 47.8% of the vote.

One of the most hotly contested and [fierce election campaigns in South Korean memory](#) signals the changing of the guard from a liberal presidential office to the conservative politics of Yoon Suk-yeol.

Vowing to unite the country after an election that divided the country almost right down the middle, Yoon's politics bring an air of uncertainty to South Korean energy transition.

Yoon has made it clear that he sees reaching [100% renewable energy sources by 2050 as impossible](#).

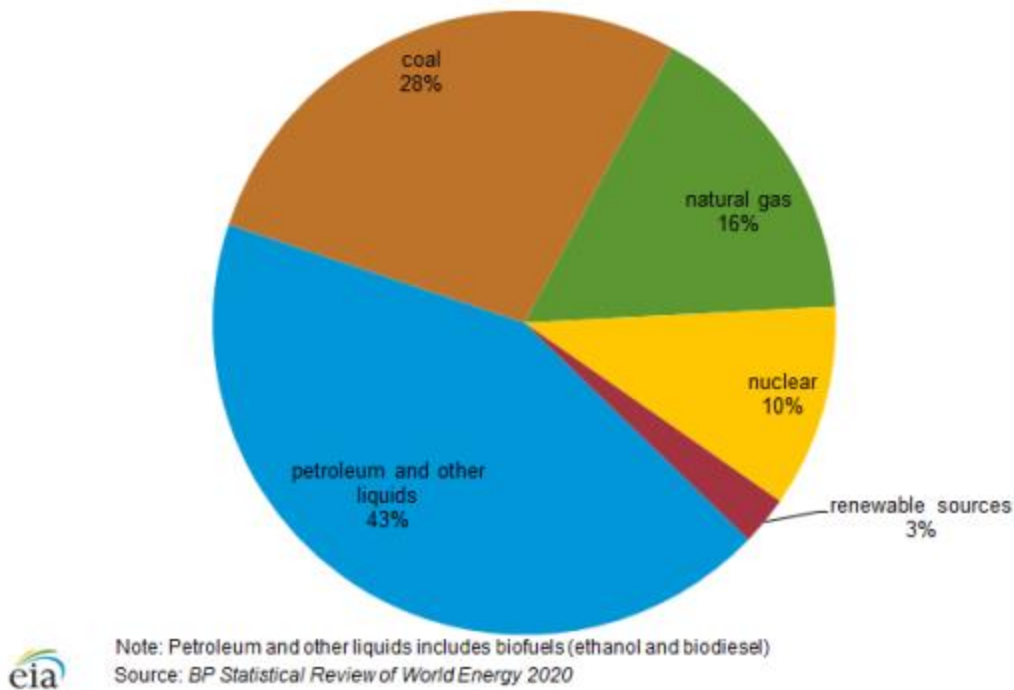
As Asia is in the midst of an energy transition, it remains to be seen exactly what direction South Korea and its new head of state will take things.

What Is South Korea's Current Stance on the Energy Transition?

The outgoing administration didn't have the cleanest track record for energy use, but they were beginning to take strides in the right direction.

South Korea's energy mix in 2019 consisted of [87% fossil fuels](#) (43% petroleum, 28% coal, and 16% natural gas). 10% of the remaining mix comes from nuclear power, and the remaining 3% was renewables.

Figure 1. South Korea's total primary energy consumption by fuel type, 2019



Source: [U.S. Energy Information Administration](#)

In [February 2021, that mix was slightly less reliant on fossil fuels](#) at 82.5%. The change saw substantial decreases in petroleum and coal, with a notable increase of natural gas to 23.7%. Renewable energy in the grid doubled but is still the lowest among OECD members.

The country [passed a bill in September 2021](#) that mandated climate neutrality by 2050. Part of the bill requires South Korea to cut GHG emissions by at least 35% from its 2018 levels by 2030.

However, climate analysts and critics have noted that to [step in line with the commitments made in the Paris Agreement](#), South Korea should be cutting its emissions by 59% by 2030.

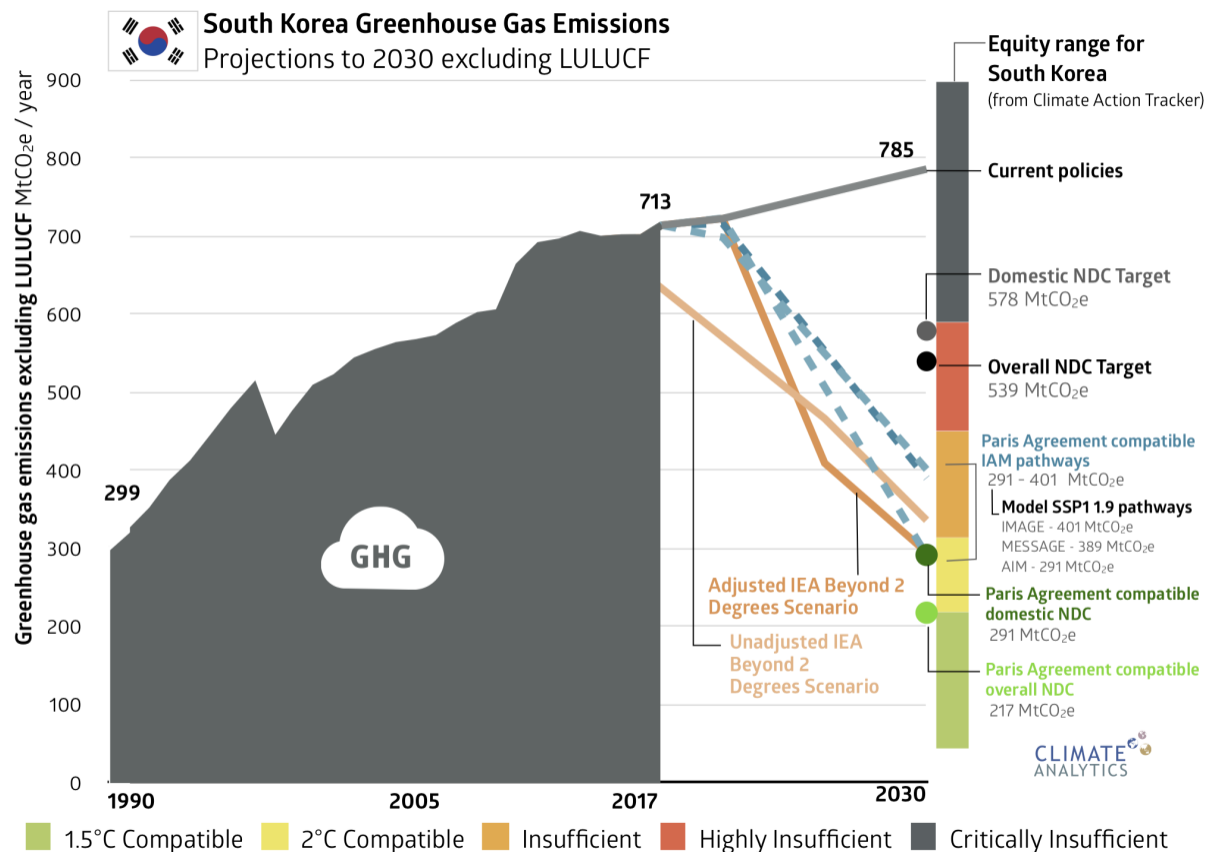
While by no means a golden climate child, South Korea was beginning to find its way towards carbon neutrality under the old administration.

What are President-elect Yoon's Climate Philosophies?

As mentioned earlier, Yoon has already stated his disagreement with the notion of reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. He adds [that traditional energy sources must be maintained](#) while working toward sustainable growth.

Yoon, holding office for the first time in his career, is a strong proponent of nuclear energy and has [announced plans to increase nuclear production](#). He also vows to resume the construction of nuclear power plants that were halted due to the current administration's stance on phasing them out.

Yoon agrees on the importance of increasing the share of renewable energy in the domestic energy mix and that South Korea should increase its climate target to cut 40% of emissions by 2030.



Source: [Climate Analytics](#)

While not entirely against the idea of renewable energy, Yoon seems likely to slow the country's transition to clean energy sources when climate agencies are sounding the alarm over the Earth's current trajectory.

The Uncertainty of Yoon's Allegiance to Big Business

Incoming president Yoon Suk-yeol finds himself in a peculiar place when it comes to big business in South Korea. The former prosecutor general has had [major run-ins with the bigwigs of South Korean business](#) but is vowing now to develop amicable relations with Korea's largest companies.

Yoon indicted the Vice Chairman of Samsung, Lee Jae-yong, in 2017 on bribery charges. Lee was found guilty and given two and a half years in prison for his crimes.



Source: [International Finance Magazine](#)

Honorary Chairman of Hyundai, Chung Mong-koo, was put behind bars for embezzlement in 2007 when Yoon was working at the prosecutor's office.

Yoon also indicted the S.K. Group Chairman Chey Tae-won, in 2012 on embezzlement charges for which he was handed a sentence of four years in prison.

Yoon has a tricky relationship with South Korean business but has promised to be helpful to their causes. This likely signals he is willing to provide them leniency regarding climate regulations.

Samsung, arguably the economic engine of South Korea, has been [less than stellar on its transition to green energy](#). With Yoon at the helm, it appears unlikely that they will be pressed to clean up their act.

Can Joe Biden Influence Yoon to Be More Climate Friendly?

Although it looks bleak for an accelerated energy transition in South Korea, perhaps there is one saving grace. Yoon Suk-yeol has repeatedly stated the importance of having a good relationship with the United States.

While the U.S. is by no means the shining example of a clean energy economy, they are taking the need to transition seriously. President Joe Biden has had conversations with Yoon and [voiced the importance of the climate issue](#) with his South Korean colleague.

Perhaps the importance of a good relationship with the U.S. will influence South Korea's incoming administration to ensure that the country cleans up its energy grid.

South Korea's Energy Transition Is At a Fork in the Road

It remains to be seen whether South Korea will be a leader or a hindrance in Asia's energy transition. Early signs point to the president-elect being very lenient with Korean polluters and pushing for increased nuclear production. While better than fossil fuels, nuclear energy will only prolong the transition to renewable sources.

If his campaign promises are anything to go by, we should expect South Korea to be lagging in the Asian energy transition. We'll have to wait and see what Yoon brings to the table, though. What a politician says to get elected is hardly representative of their actual work while in office.