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How South Korea can balance its US commitments with global engagement

The key foreign policy challenges
for the Lee government

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Summary

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- Following the impeachment and ouster of South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol in April 2025, the election of the left-leaning Lee Jae-myung to the presidency comes at a precarious moment for South Korea. The country not only faces entrenched domestic political polarization, but it must also contend with increasingly severe security challenges from the East Asian region and beyond. Although the new government's political position is in stark contrast to that of its conservative predecessor, President Lee has sought to pursue what he has termed a 'pragmatic' foreign policy, seeking to emphasize greater continuity rather than radical change.
 - Despite the formation of a new government, South Korea's foreign policy is unlikely to change significantly in the short term, although the scope for change varies across foreign policy areas. At present, South Korea's foreign policy is driven by three interlinked factors: the transactional diplomacy of the second administration of President Donald Trump and its as-of-yet unclear policy towards the Korean Peninsula; an increasingly aggressive China coupled with heightened Sino-US competition; and exacerbating security threats from North Korea. The Lee administration will have limited room for manoeuvre with respect to its foreign policies towards the US and China, which will be constrained by the long-standing US–South Korea security alliance and Beijing's role as Seoul's largest trading partner. Yet, partisan domestic politics will likely exert greater influence on inter-Korean relations, as has been evident in Lee's early actions in pursuing a softer line towards North Korea compared to his predecessor. Nevertheless, Pyongyang's lack of interest in reciprocating the Lee administration's overtures raises the risk of North Korea exploiting South Korea's gestures to heighten provocations.
 - South Korea's foreign policy challenges will be magnified by the changing regional and global security environment. As this research paper argues, despite two recent meetings between presidents Lee and Trump, there remains uncertainty in Seoul over the degree and scope of US commitments to South Korea. At the same time, China's ongoing efforts to engage in coercive actions against South Korea, coupled with Beijing's assistance towards Pyongyang, continue to threaten Seoul's security. Moreover, North Korea's accelerated nuclear and missile programme has been accompanied both by a lack of interest in dialogue with South Korea and the US, and by ongoing security cooperation with Russia.

- Despite these challenges, South Korea continues to play a growing regional and global role. Its engagement with formal and informal institutions, such as NATO, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS (the Australia–UK–US defence and technology pact), as well as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum underscores how Seoul seeks to expand its influence beyond the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, these ambitions are likely to be constrained by great power politics and alliance commitments as well as, to a lesser degree, domestic political preferences.
- In response to the heightened security threats facing East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific, this research paper recommends that South Korea:
 - **Prioritizes national interest over political partisanship.** Irrespective of President Lee Jae-myung’s personal attitudes towards the US, Japan and the US–South Korea alliance, the increasing threats facing South Korea and the West’s allies in the East Asian region mean that to ensure credibility and stability, the Lee government must establish bipartisan strategies towards deterring the regional threats of North Korea and China. Such strategies must include effective sanctions enforcement, deterrence strategies and setting firm conditions for dialogue with North Korea.
 - **Strengthens military deterrence with the US.** For all the early tumult in the US–South Korea relationship following the inauguration of the second Trump administration, Seoul and Washington must focus on sustaining joint deterrence.
 - **De-risk interactions with China.** Although there is little appetite for decoupling from China within South Korea, Seoul must continue to diversify supply chains and clarify red lines on economic cooperation with Beijing, particularly with respect to sensitive technologies, including the possibility of decoupling.
 - **Strengthens trilateralism with the US and Japan.** The Lee government must not let extreme domestic political positions hinder its ability to sustain momentum from previous presidencies with respect to cooperation with Washington and Tokyo.
 - **Deepens and broadens ties with Western partners beyond the US.** By leveraging South Korea’s leading global role in maritime security, emerging technologies and cyber defence, South Korea must deepen and broaden its ties with Western partners beyond the US, whether that be Europe, NATO, or engaging with minilateral forums such as the Quad.

01

Introduction

The election of the progressive Lee Jae-myung as South Korean president, following the ouster of his predecessor, Yoon Suk Yeol, comes at a critical moment for South Korea, as the country faces increasing regional and global challenges.

The removal from power of South Korean president, Yoon Suk Yeol, on 4 April 2025, was one of the most turbulent junctures in democratic South Korea. Yoon's abortive invocation of martial law on 3 December 2024 marked the first time that martial law had been declared since South Korea transitioned to democratic rule in 1987. While martial law lasted for a mere six hours, having been quashed by members of the National Assembly, the incident further entrenched existing political polarization across the country, particularly between the left-leaning progressive Democratic Party and the conservative People Power Party led by then-president Yoon. Yet, although the collapse of Yoon's presidency highlighted the resilience of South Korea's democracy, it served as a precursor for a recalibration of South Korean leadership.

A snap presidential election on 3 June 2025 resulted in the left-leaning Democratic Party candidate, Lee Jae-myung, becoming South Korea's 14th president, and the ninth in democratic South Korea. Marking the end of three years of conservative rule, Lee's election was the second occasion whereby a progressive South Korean president had taken office following the impeachment of a conservative president, the first being the election of Moon Jae-in in 2017 after the removal of Park Geun-hye. Lee has repeatedly framed his foreign policy agenda around the idea of 'pragmatism', namely, balancing national interest while navigating a complex range of regional and global challenges.

Prior to his election, Lee attempted to rebrand his image from that of a left-wing populist to a 'centrist conservative'.¹ Yet, his election triggered concern both within and beyond South Korea, given his previous criticisms of the US and its Northeast

¹ In February 2025, Lee notably described the Democratic Party as a 'centrist-conservative party that values growth'. See: Kim, H.-J. (2025), '이재명 "민주당, 원래 '중도보수'...국힘 범죄정당 돼가' ['Lee Jae-myung: Lee Jae-myung: "The Democratic Party was originally *centre-right*... The People Power Party is becoming a *criminal party*"'], Maeil, 19 February 2025, <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/11244632>.

Asian alliances; calls for greater engagement with China at the expense of Seoul's ties with Washington; and desires for cooperation with North Korea.²

Drawing upon extensive interviews – including with former and current government officials – across the political divide, this research paper argues that despite the changes in leadership and rhetoric, South Korea's foreign policy will be marked by greater continuity than change, at least in the short term. Even though political partisanship may shape the initial tone of foreign policy, external structural changes are likely to constrain Seoul's room for manoeuvre. Such continuity will primarily be driven by three interlinked factors: first, the policies of President Donald Trump's administration and its transactional approach to alliances; second, the intensification of Sino-US competition; and third, the growing security threats from a nuclear North Korea. These dynamics are likely to limit Lee's ability to depart considerably from the foreign policy course pursued by his predecessor. Nevertheless, the one area in which Lee will seek to differentiate himself pertains to inter-Korean relations, even if Seoul's intended approach of reconciliation looks unlikely to catalyse substantive change in relations with Pyongyang.³

This research paper argues that despite the changes in leadership and rhetoric, South Korea's foreign policy will be marked by greater continuity than change, at least in the short term.

The arrival of the Lee administration comes at a precarious juncture for South Korea. Firstly, the US's foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula remains unclear, despite the recent trade negotiations between Washington and Seoul following the initial imposition of tariffs on South Korean imports to the US in April 2025. At the same time, the Trump administration's transactional approach towards its alliance with South Korea will pose a core challenge for Seoul. Secondly, South Korea will remain caught in the intensifying great power rivalry between the US and China, given Seoul's critical role in international supply chains and regional and global security arrangements. These factors would force any South Korean government – progressive or conservative – into an unavoidable quagmire. Thirdly, relations between North and South Korea have plummeted in recent years, with Pyongyang showing few serious intentions of reviving dialogue with Seoul or Washington, despite expanding North Korean cooperation with Moscow amid the ongoing Russia–Ukraine War. Irrespective of Lee's aim to meet Kim Jong Un,

² JoongAng Daily (2021), 'DP frontrunner Lee stirs pot with 'occupying' comment', 4 July 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/07/04/national/politics/history-controversy-Lee-Jaemyung/20210704182900371.html>; Kim, J. (2021), 'Lee Jae-myung vows to meet Kim Jong Un but rejects Trump's 'rosy' approach', NKNews, 25 November 2021, <https://www.nknews.org/2021/11/lee-jae-myung-vows-to-meet-kim-jong-un-but-rejects-trumps-rosy-approach>; Chosun Ilbo (2024), 'Opposition leader's remark 'what does Cross-Strait issue have to do with Korea?' sparks concerns', 25 March 2024, <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2024/03/25/RNXXXAND7FE7FE6OTUFEN26BLE>.

³ Kim, J. (2025), 'Lee says he will pursue engagement with North Korea even if it doesn't respond', NKNews, 18 September 2025, <https://www.nknews.org/2025/09/lee-says-he-will-pursue-engagement-with-north-korea-even-if-it-doesnt-respond>.

as the South Korean president outlined during his first bilateral meeting with US President Donald Trump on 25 August 2025,⁴ Pyongyang's current lack of interest in reciprocating any goodwill gestures from Seoul looks to limit the longer-term success of any such initiatives.

As the Lee Jae-myung government has sought to adjust to changing geopolitical realities, South Korea's foreign relations have been preoccupied by trade negotiations with the US, which saw a preliminary agreement reached on 31 July 2025, and a final accord achieved on 29 October. At the same time, Lee has made clear his objective to pursue a 'pragmatic' foreign policy that features the broad goals of advancing the US–South Korea alliance, managing South Korea's ties with Russia and China, and resurrecting dialogue with North Korea. Not only are these objectives ambitious, but there remains a chasm between the rhetoric of the Lee government and its ability to implement its foreign policy vision in practice.

While South Korea's foreign policy dilemmas are primarily driven by the US, China and North Korea, South Korea must also contend with frosty relations with Japan, which have long been characterized by the legacies of historical grievances and resulting mistrust. Although recent summits between Lee Jae-myung and then-Japanese prime minister, Shigeru Ishiba, augured positively for reconciliation, Ishiba's subsequent resignation has exerted further pressure on South Korea to strengthen its trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US, which noticeably entered a new era of cooperation under previous administrations led by Joe Biden, Fumio Kishida and Yoon Suk Yeol. The positive first meeting between Lee and the newly elected Japanese prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, saw the two leaders recognize that despite differences on 'pending issues' – most likely referring to historical disputes – Seoul and Tokyo should strengthen diplomacy and 'develop the bilateral relationship in a future-oriented and stable manner'.⁵

In addition to navigating these challenges, South Korea aspires to increase its global status beyond that of a middle power and recipient of security guarantees from the US. As part of this goal, Seoul must diversify its geopolitical strategy by engaging with multilateral institutions such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), strengthening relations with European partners, and playing a proactive role in the fields of emerging and critical technologies, supply chain resilience, and regional and global security. Although the Lee administration has predictably abandoned the rhetoric of South Korea's role as a 'global pivotal state' pursued by his predecessor, South Korea's global ambitions look only to continue in the longer term.

Thus, as this paper argues, the effects of domestic political change on South Korean foreign policy are likely to be constrained by the dynamics of regional and global pressures. For all the Lee administration's desire to differentiate its foreign policy from that of its conservative predecessor, the importance of the

⁴ CNN News (2025), 'Transcript: Trump meets with South Korean President at White House', 25 August 2025, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/cnc/date/2025-08-25/segment/08>.

⁵ Johnson, J. (2025), 'Japanese and South Korean leaders agree to boost ties in first meeting', The Japan Times, 30 October 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/10/30/japan/politics/takaichi-lee-japan-south-korea-talks>.

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US–South Korea alliance, risks of entrapment in Sino-US rivalry, and the ongoing challenge of a nuclear North Korea together ensure that South Korean foreign policy looks to exhibit greater continuity than change, at least in the short term. Inter-Korean relations may form an exception to this trend, although the longer-term consequences remain uncertain. Understanding the factors driving and limiting South Korea’s foreign policy decision-making is crucial for examining both the trajectory of the country’s global influence, and the prospects for stability in Northeast Asia.

02

South Korea's 'pragmatic' foreign policy

Amid ongoing domestic political polarization and changing regional power dynamics, Lee Jae-myung has stressed that he will pursue a 'pragmatic' foreign policy, which balances South Korea's alliance with the US and Seoul's engagement with China, Russia and North Korea.

Following his election victory, Lee outlined a range of ambitious goals as part of his vision for South Korea's foreign policy. This vision would be based on what the South Korean president called 'pragmatism', a term regularly repeated in his election campaign.⁶ In this vein, South Korea's foreign policy under Lee would not only be grounded in its alliance with the US, together with 'prudent' management of ties with Moscow and Beijing, but Seoul would also likely attempt to reconcile South Korea's relations with North Korea at the same time as deterring threats from Pyongyang.⁷ The undefined nature of Lee's 'pragmatic' foreign policy raises questions for South Korea as it navigates an increasingly uncertain regional and global environment. Firstly, which foreign policy goals will the South Korean administration prioritize? Secondly, to what extent will Lee's determination to differentiate his own policy agenda from those of his conservative predecessor influence his decisions?

⁶ Korea Times (2025), 'Lee Jae-myung's inaugural speech', 4 June 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20250604/full-text-lee-jae-myungs-inaugural-speech>.

⁷ Kim, E.-J. (2025), 'Lee vows to unite nation, revitalize slowing economy', Yonhap, 4 June 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250604005352315>; Kim S.-Y. (2025), 'Lee's 'pragmatic diplomacy' vision put to test in U.S. alliance, regional power ties', Yonhap, 4 June 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250602009900315>.

South Korea has weathered a range of regional and global challenges both prior to and following its transition to democracy in 1987. Even after the birth of the Sixth Republic, the period of governance since the country's democratic transition, domestic political polarization – which had existed since the state's inception in 1948 – continued, not least between and within progressive and conservative parties. Such polarization has occurred 'in an environment in which institutions (including the media, political parties, the National Assembly and the legal system) have been perceived as functioning imperfectly'.⁸ All the while, domestic political divisions have become ever more entrenched amid the country's navigation of foreign policy challenges.

Fast-paced growth, coupled with the country's transition to democracy, has also catalysed the rapid diffusion of South Korean soft power.

South Korea's rapid industrialization and export-oriented economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s in no small part contributed to its present-day status as the fourth largest economy in East Asia and 13th largest in the world (by GDP).⁹ Such fast-paced growth, coupled with the country's transition to democracy, has also catalysed the rapid diffusion of South Korean soft power, as witnessed in the worldwide dissemination of South Korean, or 'Hallyu', culture, including the global popularity and success of K-pop, as well as Korean television and films.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the country's economic brawn has not prevented it from escaping the fact that it remains caught – not least geographically – between the larger powers of China, the US, Russia and Japan. As Table 1 shows, when compared to its regional neighbours (including the US), South Korea continues to lag behind its peers across a range of indicators despite its increasing cultural, diplomatic and economic influence beyond its immediate vicinity. Similarly, Seoul's contrasting regional and global status has created a dilemma for South Korean foreign policy strategists, thereby placing 'a premium on its ability to achieve the internal political unity necessary to maximize its influence in foreign policy'.¹¹

⁸ Nilsson-Wright, J. (2022), *Contested Politics in South Korea: Democratic evolution, national identity and political partisanship*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 20, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135300>.

⁹ Statista (2025), 'Countries with the largest gross domestic product (GDP) 2025', 2 October 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268173/countries-with-the-largest-gross-domestic-product-gdp>.

¹⁰ Lee, C. M. (2020), 'Can Soft Power Enable South Korea to Overcome Geopolitics?', in Lee, C. M. and Botto, K. (2020), *The Case for South Korean Soft Power*, New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/12/the-case-for-south-korean-soft-power?lang=en>.

¹¹ Snyder, S. A. (2018), 'Introduction', in Snyder, A., Lee, G., Kim, Y-H. and Kim, J. (2018), *Domestic Constraints on South Korean Foreign Policy*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations, p. 1, <https://www.cfr.org/report/domestic-constraints-south-korean-foreign-policy>.

Table 1. Rankings of states active in the Asia-Pacific according to different metrics (2024)

Rank	Economic capability	Military capability	Resilience	Future resources	Economic relationships	Defence networks	Diplomatic influence	Cultural influence
1	United States	United States	United States	United States	China	United States	China	United States
2	China	China	China	China	United States	Australia	Japan	China
3	Japan	Russia	Russia	India	Japan	Japan	United States	Japan
4	India	India	India	Russia	Singapore	South Korea	India	India
5	South Korea	South Korea	Australia	Pakistan	South Korea	Singapore	South Korea	Australia
6	Singapore	Japan	New Zealand	Indonesia	Australia	New Zealand	Indonesia	Malaysia
7	Taiwan	North Korea	Japan	Japan	Thailand	China	Australia	Thailand
8	Australia	Australia	South Korea	South Korea	Malaysia	Indonesia	Vietnam	South Korea
9	Russia	Singapore	North Korea	Australia	Indonesia	India	Singapore	Singapore
10	Indonesia	Pakistan	Malaysia	Vietnam	India	Philippines	Russia	Indonesia

Source: Patton, S., Sato, J. and Lemahieu, H. (2024), *Asia Power Index: 2024 Key Findings Report*, Sydney: Lowy Institute, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2024-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>.

The influence of domestic politics on foreign policy

Historically, clear divisions have existed between South Korean conservatives and progressives with respect to Seoul’s foreign policy postures (see Table 2). While the former have tended to favour stronger ties with the US and more hawkish approaches to North Korea and China, the latter have pursued reconciliation with North Korea, stronger economic engagement with China and greater foreign policy autonomy, often to the detriment of relations with the US. Yet, in addition to the respective government in power, South Korea’s foreign policy postures towards the US, China and North Korea have also been a product of shifts within the East Asian regional security environment and broader international order. Of note, globalization has catalysed ‘the intensification of international and domestic (“intermestic”) linkages’ in South Korea’s foreign policy.¹²

¹² Kim, S. S. (2010), ‘North Korea’s Nuclear Strategy and the Interface Between International and Domestic Politics’, *Asian Perspective*, 31 (1), p. 53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704702>.

Table 2. Chronology of South Korea’s foreign policy postures

President	Term	Political party	US policy	China policy	North Korea policy
Roh Tae-woo	1988–93	Democratic Justice (Conservative)	Maintained a strong US–ROK alliance; supported US troop presence; removed US tactical nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula in 1991.	Opened formal diplomatic relations in 1992, two years after Russia–ROK ties were established.	<i>Nordpolitik</i> : reached out to North Korean allies (Russia and China); inter-Korean dialogues at prime ministerial level; Inter-Korean Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation signed in 1991.
Kim Young-sam	1993–98	Democratic/Liberal (Conservative)	Globalization policy (<i>segye-hwa</i>); emphasized US–ROK alliance in dealing with the first North Korean nuclear crisis; tensions between autonomy and sustaining the US–ROK alliance.	Developed economic and political cooperation; high-level exchanges; China–ROK ties seen as a means of resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis.	Harder stance and worsening inter-Korean relations following North Korean threat to withdraw from Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993. Critical of 1994 US–DPRK Agreed Framework negotiations.
Kim Dae-jung	1998–2003	Millennium Democratic (Progressive)	Supported Clinton administration’s North Korea policy; US–ROK relations declined under George W. Bush; Seoul’s push for US–DPRK normalization unsettled Washington.	Bolstered engagement with China in line with the Sunshine Policy; ¹³ perception of ROK tilting towards China.	Sunshine Policy centred on reconciliation with North Korea without a quid pro quo; muted criticism of North Korean human rights abuses. The first inter-Korean leader-to-leader summit with Kim Jong Il took place in 2000.
Roh Moo-hyun	2003–08	Uri Party (Progressive)	Maintained alliance but sought greater foreign policy autonomy; emphasized regional security. US–ROK relations declined following the death of two South Korean schoolgirls by a US army vehicle in November 2002.	Increased economic cooperation; pursued ‘balanced and pragmatic’ diplomacy; fissures in China–ROK ties pertaining to disputed territories and North Korean refugees.	Furthered the Sunshine Policy. Kaesong Industrial Complex opened in December 2004; hosted the second inter-Korean summit in 2007 despite North Korea’s first nuclear test on 9 October 2006.
Lee Myung-bak	2008–13	Grand National (Conservative)	Strengthened military and economic cooperation with the United States. US–ROK Free Trade Agreement signed in 2012.	Poor China–ROK relations. Relations with Beijing were largely economic. Summits between Lee Myung-bak and Hu Jintao took place in Seoul and Beijing in 2010 and 2012.	Hardline stance; ended Sunshine Policy; assistance to North Korea was conditional on denuclearization; no inter-Korean summitry.

¹³ The Sunshine Policy refers to South Korea’s policy of engagement with North Korea, initiated by the Kim Dae-jung government in 1998, and continued by the subsequent government under Roh Moo-hyun. The policy aimed to pursue ‘peaceful coexistence’ between the two Koreas, *inter alia*, while ‘coaxing the North to expand engagement with the outside world’. See Hong, S-Y. (1999), ‘Thawing Korea’s Cold War: The Path to Peace on the Korean Peninsula’, *Foreign Affairs*, 78(3), p. 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20049275>.

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President	Term	Political party	US policy	China policy	North Korea policy
Park Geun-hye	2013–17	Saenuri (Conservative)	Pro-US; approved the deployment of the US THAAD system in South Korea in July 2016.	Initially warm ties. Summits between Xi Jinping and Park Geun-hye in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016. Considerable worsening in Sino-ROK ties after THAAD deployment.	<i>Trustpolitik</i> : conditional engagement with DPRK, but tougher stance following North Korean provocations. Kaesong Industrial Complex, while re-opened in 2013, was closed by Park in 2016 after North Korean nuclear and missile tests.
Moon Jae-in	2017–22	Democratic (Progressive)	Sought to win US support for inter-Korean engagement; US–ROK ties deteriorated owing to Moon prioritizing relationship with North Korea; mediated between Trump and Kim Jong Un during US–DPRK summits in 2018 and 2019.	Pursued an ‘equidistant’ foreign policy between US and China. Pledged ‘three Nos’: no additional deployment of THAAD in South Korea; no participation in a US-led missile defence network; and no involvement in a trilateral military alliance with the US and Japan.	Prioritized engagement with North Korea, marked by three inter-Korean summits in 2018; peace-oriented diplomacy; suspension of some US–ROK military exercises. Comprehensive inter-Korean Agreement Pact signed in September 2018.
Yoon Suk Yeol	2022–25	People Power (Conservative)	Strengthened relations with the US and the US–ROK alliance (as outlined in the Washington Declaration of 2023); reinforced trilateral security with Japan through the Camp David summit.	Relations cooled; harder line on China, prioritizing security over economic concerns.	Hardline stance; resumed military drills; focus on deterrence; revoked South Korea’s participation in the Comprehensive inter-Korean Agreement Pact.

Sources: Nilsson-Wright (2022), *Contested Politics in South Korea*; Chung, J. H. (2006), *South Korea’s Strategic Thinking toward China: From Park Chung Hee to Roh Moo Hyun*, Brookings Institution, 18 October 2006, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/20061018.pdf>; Suh, J. J. (2009), *The Lee Myung-bak Government’s North Korea Policy: A Study on its Historical and Theoretical Foundation*, Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/1372/1/0001396359.pdf>; Snyder, S. A. (2018), *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Prior to his election, Lee Jae-myung made controversial remarks about South Korea’s ‘ironclad’ alliance with the US. In December 2021, he opposed the additional deployment of batteries for the US Terminal High-Altitude Aerial Defence (THAAD) missile system in South Korea, and criticized his conservative counterparts for being ‘too conscious’ of the US in terms of paying too much attention to Washington’s demands.¹⁴ Lee also derided the US Forces Korea – which has been stationed in Seoul since 1950 – as an ‘occupying force’,¹⁵ and dismissed trilateral defensive military exercises between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo as a ‘pro-Japanese act’.¹⁶

Yet, to the surprise of South Korean conservatives, Lee’s initial statements after his election signalled a possible departure from his earlier criticisms. Instead of repeating his comments, Lee called for Seoul to strengthen bilateral and

¹⁴ Ko, J-T. (2021), ‘Lee Jae-myung against Beijing Olympics boycott, opposes THAAD missiles’, *The Korea Herald*, 30 December 2021, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/2749478>.

¹⁵ JoongAng Daily (2021), ‘DP frontrunner Lee stirs pot with ‘occupying’ comment’, 4 July 2021, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2021/07/04/national/politics/history-controversy-Lee-Jaemyung/20210704182900371.html>.

¹⁶ Lee, M. (2022), ‘Opposition leader denounces trilateral naval drills as ‘pro-Japanese’’, *Yonhap*, 7 October 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221007006900315>.

trilateral relations with Washington and Tokyo while maintaining ties with Moscow and Beijing.¹⁷ This early approach, branded by the Lee government as ‘pragmatic’, indicates somewhat cautious continuity with the foreign policy of the Yoon administration, which stressed the need to strengthen US–South Korea and US–South Korea–Japan ties while reducing economic dependency on China. Recent separate summits between Lee and Shigeru Ishiba and Donald Trump, respectively, highlight how the Lee administration also seeks to maintain the status quo in South Korea’s relations with Japan, at least in the short term.

Lee’s outreach to global leaders has hitherto been successful. When Lee met Ishiba on 23 August 2025, the two leaders issued the first joint South Korea–Japan statement in 17 years, in which they pledged to work with the US ‘toward[s] the complete denuclearization of North Korea’ while bolstering bilateral economic cooperation in artificial intelligence, hydrogen and ammonia.¹⁸ Although unresolved historical disputes continue to afflict relations between Tokyo and Seoul, both leaders pledged to cooperate in resolving the ‘abductions issue’, referring to North Korea’s abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Following Ishiba’s resignation on 7 September, the election of Sanae Takaichi as Japan’s prime minister, on 21 October, raises questions as to the future cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo, given how Takaichi’s conservative politics stand in contrast to Lee’s ultimately progressive agenda, despite Lee’s embrace of ‘pragmatism’.

The first 100 days of Lee Jae-myung’s presidency have witnessed noticeable attempts to pursue an inter-Korean policy akin to those of Lee’s progressive predecessors.

On the Korean Peninsula, the first 100 days of Lee Jae-myung’s presidency have witnessed noticeable attempts to pursue an inter-Korean policy akin to those of Lee’s progressive predecessors. In his address on 15 August to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of Japanese rule over the peninsula, Lee stressed that Seoul had ‘no intention of engaging in hostile acts’ towards Pyongyang.¹⁹ These early indications suggest that the new government intends to take a softer stance towards North Korea compared to his conservative predecessor, Yoon Suk Yeol.²⁰

Although the presidency of Lee Jae-myung is in its early stages, the Lee administration will need to clarify its ‘pragmatic’ foreign policy, given the lack of bipartisan consensus within South Korea on the definition of the term. South Korean progressives tend to define ‘pragmatism’ as being in opposition to an ideological foreign policy, which they believe Yoon Suk Yeol and his government

¹⁷ With respect to Lee’s pledges for a ‘strategic cooperative partnership’ with China, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (2025), ‘Xi Jinping Has a Phone Call with President of the Republic of Korea Lee Jae-myung’, 10 June 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202506/t20250610_11644926.html.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2025), ‘Japan-ROK Summit Meeting’, 23 August 2025, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/pageite_000001_01221.html.

¹⁹ The Korea Herald (2025), ‘President Lee Jae Myung’s national address on Korea’s 80th Liberation Day’, 15 August 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10554719>.

²⁰ Ibid.

pursued through its consistent emphasis on South Korea's commitment to upholding values of freedom, peace and prosperity. For the Lee government, emphasizing this distinction serves as a key tool to appeal to Lee's voter base. In contrast, for some conservatives, pragmatism is seen as reflecting a strategy of equidistance between Washington and Beijing, an approach practised by the Moon Jae-in government (the last progressive administration to govern South Korea prior to Lee's election) that many believe failed to bear fruit.²¹ Indeed, the Lee government should look to learn from criticisms of Moon, not least that he was too focused on North Korea, as was demonstrated by three inter-Korean summits in 2018, which alienated the US and catalysed increasingly divergent perceptions of the North Korean threat between Washington and Seoul.²²

One of the many challenges that the new government will face, however, is the extent to which great power politics will dampen the Lee administration's instincts for more drastic foreign policy change, especially in relation to China and the US. As the next section of this research paper will detail, the unpredictable nature of the second Trump administration's policies towards its Northeast Asian allies, together with heightened Sino-US competition – and the resultant effects on global order – will limit Seoul's flexibility, not least in the short term.

²¹ Jo, E. A. (2020), 'Double Allegiance: Moon Jae-in's Strategy amid US-China Rivalry', The Asan Forum, 27 August 2020, <https://theasanforum.org/double-allegiance-moon-jae-ins-strategy-amid-us-china-rivalry>.
²² Kelly, R. E. (2019), 'Moon Jae-in's foreign policy reorientation', The Interpreter, 2 December 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/moon-jae-s-foreign-policy-reorientation>.

03

The main factors affecting South Korean foreign policy

South Korea's foreign policy will be influenced by three principal factors: the US's policies towards the Korean Peninsula; heightened competition between Washington and Beijing; and the ongoing security challenges posed by a nuclear North Korea.

As Table 2 makes clear, progressive and conservative administrations in Seoul have varied in their approaches to Washington, Beijing and Pyongyang. The Lee administration has taken power at a particularly unpredictable time. Yet, South Korea's foreign policy remains primarily motivated by three related factors: South Korea's relationship with the US in light of the second Trump administration's policies; intensified Sino-US economic and political competition; and escalating nuclear and military threats from North Korea coupled with Pyongyang's lack of interest in dialogue with Seoul and Washington.

The Trump factor

As one South Korean official succinctly noted to the author, Trump ‘is a reality that cannot be avoided’.²³ While the US president’s rhetorical disdain for what he perceives to be unequal alliances has disrupted South Korea’s confidence in its long-standing cooperation with Washington, the US continues to be the most important actor shaping South Korea’s foreign policy, a role which it has maintained since the end of the Korean War in 1953.²⁴ Washington’s policies towards South Korea have also been instrumental in shaping Seoul’s approach to Beijing and Pyongyang.

While the US president’s rhetorical disdain for what he perceives to be unequal alliances has disrupted South Korea’s confidence in its long-standing cooperation with Washington, the US continues to be the most important actor shaping South Korea’s foreign policy.

Although security threats in the East Asian region have increased in severity – a situation that has dampened calls from South Korean progressives for greater autonomy from the US – the first six months of the second Trump administration saw US–South Korea relations dominated by the imposition of US tariffs on imported goods. South Korea initially faced tariffs of 25 per cent (1 per cent higher than those imposed on Japan, a competitor), which threatened industrial products such as steel, cars and semiconductors.²⁵ In 2024, South Korean automotive exports to the US amounted to nearly \$35 billion, which accounted for 42 per cent of South Korea’s total exports to the US and contributed to a record \$55.6 billion trade surplus with Washington.²⁶ After months of negotiations, US–South Korea talks saw tariffs reduced to 15 per cent in October 2025, on par with those imposed on Japan and the EU, in exchange for South Korea investing \$200 billion in cash – over multiple years – together with an additional \$150 billion investment in the US shipbuilding industry.²⁷ Despite this agreement, Washington looks to continue pressuring Seoul to increase its own financial contributions for

²³ Author interview with South Korean official, July 2025.

²⁴ Kim, H. N. (1988), ‘The 1987 Political Crisis and its Implication for U.S.-Korean Relations’, in Kim, I. J. and Kihl, Y. W. (1988), *Political Change in South Korea*, New York: Paragon House, p. 221.

²⁵ The White House (2025), ‘Annex I: Country Reciprocal Tariff’, April 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Annex-I.pdf>.

²⁶ Jin, H. (2025), ‘South Korea says framework US trade deal possible by August, farm market access on table’, Reuters, 14 July 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/south-korea-trade-envoy-may-be-able-strike-framework-deal-with-us-by-aug-1-2025-07-14>; Jun, K. (2025), ‘Trump’s tariffs are hitting exports, early Korean data show’, The Korea Economic Daily, 23 April 2025, <https://www.kedglobal.com/economy/newsView/ked202504230001>.

²⁷ Choe, S-H. and Wakabayashi, D. (2025), ‘South Korea Says U.S. Agreed to Lower Tariffs and to Ease Investment Terms’, *New York Times*, 29 October 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/29/us/politics/tariff-trump-south-korea-trade.html>.

both the stationing of US troops in South Korea and the US commitment, under extended deterrence, to use its full military capacity, including nuclear weapons, to protect South Korea from attack.

Moving forward, US–South Korea security relations will face three principal challenges, the first of which pertains to the US Forces Korea and whether it will primarily focus on deterring North Korea or adopt a broader, regional role with respect to combating China and possibly defending Taiwan in the event of any contingency. A reduced US presence in South Korea risks emboldening North Korea, especially at a time of heightened military cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang. Second, the US’s prioritization of deterring China risks marginalizing the regional threat posed by North Korea. As one former South Korean official stressed, this strategy could relegate North Korea to a ‘secondary concern’.²⁸ Third, South Korea continues to fear both entrapment – with respect to the country being dragged into a regional conflict – and abandonment by the US.²⁹ Although President Trump is yet to show any visible signs of disengaging from the East Asian region, Seoul remains aware of the possibility of a reduced US commitment to its alliance with South Korea. The recent agreement between the US and South Korea, allowing Seoul to develop nuclear-powered submarines in partnership with Washington, augurs positively for the continued US–South Korean alliance.³⁰ That said, questions about the possibility of South Korea developing an independent nuclear deterrent are unlikely to subside, despite President Lee’s opposition to this possibility.³¹

The China threat: Sino-US great power competition

In addition to the Trump administration’s lack of clarity in its policies towards the Korean Peninsula, a second challenge facing Seoul is the backdrop of escalating Sino-US competition. South Korea has long been caught between its key security ally, the US, and main economic partner, China. According to Park Jin, who served as South Korea’s foreign minister from 2022 to 2024, ‘the challenge for Korea is to find that subtle and working balance between the United States and China in a way that maximizes its geopolitical leverage.’³² Yet, the Lee government comes to power at a time of acute Sino-US rivalry, spanning the domains of technology, export controls, supply chain resilience, military modernization and regional strategy. The US’s imposition of sweeping tariffs on Chinese imports is an illustration of this intense competition, despite recent talks between Trump and Xi Jinping reducing the severity of these tariffs. Trump abandoned his threatened 100 per cent tariffs on Chinese imports, due to take place from 1 November 2025, and agreed to halve

²⁸ Author interview with former South Korean official, July 2025.

²⁹ Cha, V. D. (2000), ‘Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 44(2), pp. 261–291, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3013998>.

³⁰ Choe, S-H. (2025), ‘Trump Gives Legs to South Korea’s Dream for Nuclear-Powered Subs’, *New York Times*, 17 November 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/11/17/world/asia/trump-south-korea-nuclear-submarines.html>.

³¹ Seo, J-E. (2025), ‘Rival parties play blame game after U.S. places South Korea on nuclear ‘sensitive’ country list’, *JoongAng Daily*, 16 March 2025, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-03-16/national/diplomacy/Rival-parties-play-blame-game-after-US-places-South-Korea-on-nuclear-Sensitive-Country-List/2262941>.

³² Park, J. (2016), ‘Korea Between the United States and China: How Does Hedging Work?’, Korea Economic Institute, p. 62, https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/korea_between_the_united_states_and_china.pdf.

the 20 per cent tariff on goods pertaining to supplies of fentanyl from China.³³ Yet, the temporary truce in tariff talks is unlikely to lead to a thaw in Sino-US relations in the longer term.

Such heightened Sino-US competition poses clear challenges for Seoul. China notably is South Korea's largest economic partner, with South Korean exports to China exceeding those to the US and Japan combined.³⁴ Even prior to the arrival of the second Trump administration, the US had encouraged its allies and partners to diversify from China, leading to South Korea's respective exports to the US and Japan overtaking those to China in 2023, for the first time since 2006.³⁵ Nevertheless, in 2024, Beijing regained its position as Seoul's top export destination.³⁶

Although the Lee government has hitherto decided not to enact drastic changes in South Korea's foreign policy towards Beijing, a continuation of the status quo, for now, cannot ignore the regional and global threats posed by China. During the Biden administration, the US identified China as the main political and economic challenge to the Indo-Pacific region.³⁷ The second Trump administration has continued this approach by prioritizing the deterrence of China over North Korea. Yet, this latter approach has placed South Korea in a dilemma, particularly with respect to the possibility that any broader US Forces Korea role, beyond the Korean Peninsula, will likely drag South Korea into other regional tensions, not least involving Taiwan. President Lee has explicitly asserted his intention to avoid any such scenario.³⁸

While the Lee administration has underscored how South Korea should not have to 'choos[e] between' the US and China, escalating Sino-US competition will render it increasingly difficult for Seoul to avoid taking sides.³⁹ Both the Lee government and the president himself have outlined plans to repair South Korea–China relations from those under Yoon Suk Yeol, whom Lee deemed to have 'unnecessarily antagonized' Moscow and Beijing.⁴⁰ Such rhetoric will hardly go unnoticed in Beijing, which previously criticized the Yoon government's foreign policy postures, not least its alignment with Washington *vis-à-vis* Taiwan and semiconductors. From Beijing's perspective, the Yoon government's involvement in the 'Chip Four' semiconductor alliance (with the US, Japan and Taiwan) coupled with its strident support for Taiwan were responsible for worsening Sino-South Korean ties.⁴¹ For instance,

³³ The White House (2025), 'Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Strikes Deal on Economic and Trade Relations with China', 1 November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-strikes-deal-on-economic-and-trade-relations-with-china>.

³⁴ Yeo, H-K. (2024), 'South Korea's exports to the United States and Japan overtook exports to China in 2023', Peterson Institute for International Economics, 26 February 2024, <https://www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/2024/south-koreas-exports-united-states-and-japan-overtook-exports-china-2023>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Statista (2025), 'Main export partners for South Korea in 2024', 26 June 2025, https://www.statista.com/statistics/618514/south-korea-main-export-partners/?srsltid=AfmBOor0hRTZiQitwVZegUFT9_eJX-j2Dc6HuV3Hj09aFQEJsO8D1ENW.

³⁷ The White House (2022), 'Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States', February 2022, p. 5, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>; US Department of War (2025), 'Statement on the Development of the 2025 National Defense Strategy', 2 May 2025, <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/article/4172735/statement-on-the-development-of-the-2025-national-defense-strategy>.

³⁸ The Korea Herald (2025), 'Lee says Washington's demand on strategic flexibility of USFK difficult to agree', 25 August 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10560753>.

³⁹ Lee, D. (2025), 'Special envoy to China delivers President Lee's personal letter', Korea.net, 25 August 2025, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/policies/view?articleId=277683>.

⁴⁰ Seo, J-E. (2025), 'New Korean president vows to pursue 'pragmatic' foreign policy based on alliance with U.S.', JoongAng Daily, 4 June 2025, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-06-04/national/diplomacy/New-Korean-president-vows-to-pursue-pragmatic-foreign-policy-based-on-alliance-with-US/2321402>.

⁴¹ Reuters (2022), 'China says U.S.-led chip alliance should not harm global market', 21 July 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/china-says-us-led-chip-alliance-should-not-harm-global-market-2022-07-21>.

in April 2023, China's vice foreign minister, Sun Weidong, deemed Yoon's description of matters pertaining to Taiwan as a 'global issue', akin to that of North Korea, as 'totally unacceptable'.⁴² At the same time, any subsequent Sino-South Korean rapprochement will be constrained not only by Sino-US rivalry but the broader backdrop of deep economic interconnectedness between Washington and Beijing. For instance, on 25 August 2025, while Trump threatened to impose a 200 per cent tariff on wider Chinese exports to the US if Beijing did not guarantee Washington its supply of rare-earth magnets, subsequent Sino-US trade talks saw Beijing agree to pause export controls on rare earth minerals and magnets for one year.⁴³

Amid increasingly acute Sino-US competition, South Korea faces a dilemma typical of a middle power.

Thus, amid increasingly acute Sino-US competition, South Korea faces a dilemma typical of a middle power. On the one hand, being too close to Washington risks possible Chinese retaliation, as was most notably witnessed in Beijing's economic and cyber response, *inter alia*, following the deployment of the THAAD missile system in 2017.⁴⁴ On the other hand, leaning too closely to Beijing risks diminishing the US–South Korea alliance and losing access to cooperation in advanced technology. Nevertheless, for South Korea, maintaining stable relations between the US and China is easier said than done. Current pressures from Washington, particularly *vis-à-vis* limiting Chinese access to semiconductors and advanced computing chips, look to constrain any of Lee's ambitions to tilt closer to Beijing. The critical nature of these technologies in military applications means that these pressures are indeed warranted. Any transfer of advanced technology from South Korea to China raises the risk of enhancing Chinese military, cyber and surveillance technologies, which could be used to damage the US–South Korea alliance, as well as compromise South Korea's strategic advantage (particularly with respect to semiconductors), intellectual property and the security of Seoul and its allies.

Another complicating factor with respect to South Korea's attempts to position itself between China and the US pertains to Seoul's inter-Korean policy. Beijing will likely respond positively to the Lee government's aspirations to strengthen dialogue with Pyongyang. A thaw in inter-Korean relations not only aligns with China's desires to reduce instability along the Sino-North Korean border but provides China with greater leverage to call for a reduction in US influence over the peninsula, thereby weakening the US–South Korea alliance. Given China's role as North

⁴² Reuters (2023), 'China lodges complaint over South Korean president's 'erroneous' Taiwan remarks', 23 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-lodges-complaint-over-south-korean-presidents-erroneous-taiwan-remarks-2023-04-23>.

⁴³ Lawder, D. and Shalal, A. (2025), 'What did Trump, Xi agree to on tariffs, export controls and fentanyl', Reuters, 1 November 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/what-did-trump-xi-agree-tariffs-export-controls-fentanyl-2025-11-01>.

⁴⁴ Reuters (2017), 'South Korea considering complaint to China over THAAD retaliation', 12 January 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/south-korea-considering-complaint-to-china-over-thaad-retaliation-idUSKBN14W0NO>; Cheng, J. and Chin, J. (2017), 'China Hacked South Korea Over Missile Defense, U.S. Firm Says', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-secret-weapon-in-south-korea-missile-fight-hackers-1492766403>.

Korea's principal economic partner – and with Sino-North Korean trade now far exceeding levels prior to the COVID-19 pandemic – China will seek to exploit any reduction in inter-Korean tensions to strengthen its diplomatic and economic influence over North Korea.

At the same time, South Korea's recently unveiled '123 National Agenda', which outlines the five main objectives for the Lee government, supported by 23 strategic initiatives and 123 national tasks, made clear how South Korea seeks Chinese support in achieving North Korean denuclearization and facilitating improved inter-Korean relations.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the failure of past attempts by the US and South Korea to garner Chinese support for North Korea's denuclearization, coupled with China's continued assistance of North Korean sanctions evasion, casts doubt over Beijing's willingness to pressure Pyongyang in this vein.

The North Korea problem

In contrast to South Korea's relations with the US and China, the greatest effects of the change in South Korean government have hitherto been witnessed in Seoul's inter-Korean policy. Akin to previous progressive governments, the Lee administration has prioritized reconciliation, exchange and dialogue with North Korea. The government's five-year national strategy, outlined on 16 September 2025, seeks to revive not just inter-Korean dialogue but talks between the US and North Korea.⁴⁶

Given Lee's criticisms of his predecessor's policies towards North Korea, blaming the 'reality' of North Korea's 'cold attitude' towards the South on the Yoon administration's hawkish approach, it was hardly surprising that some of Lee's earliest foreign policy steps focused on North Korea.⁴⁷ Seoul halted loudspeaker broadcasts of K-pop and media along the inter-Korean border; dismantled loudspeakers; and suspended radio broadcasts into North Korea, the latter for the first time in over 50 years.⁴⁸ While these measures may reduce inter-Korean hostilities in the short term and at the interactions level, they have notably severed a fundamental lifeline for the North Korean population to access outside information. Previous suspensions undertaken by South Korean governments, such as by President Moon Jae-in in 2018, noticeably exerted little influence on North Korea's strategic behaviour.

Even though Lee's early approach towards North Korea reflects continuity with the postures taken by his progressive predecessors, any subsequent outreach from South Korea is occurring at a time of fundamental change in North Korea's policy

⁴⁵ Yoon, S-J. (2025), 'Presidential policy commission announces 123 national tasks', Korea.net, 14 August 2025, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/policies/view?articleId=277108>.

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (2025), 'Lee Jae Myung Government's Key Diplomatic Tasks', press release, 16 September 2025, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322968.

⁴⁷ Lee, J-M. via YouTube (2025), '회복을 위한 100일, 미래를 위한 성장' ['100 Days for Recovery, Growth for the Future'], video, 11 September 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oWT94XkT4KA>.

⁴⁸ Lee, M. (2025), 'Military suspends loudspeaker broadcasts against N. Korea in border area', Yonhap, 11 June 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250611007800315>; Lee, M. (2025), '(2nd LD) S. Korea begins dismantling anti-N. Korea loudspeakers along border', 4 August 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250804003152315>; Kim, M-S. and Park, S-H. (2025), 'Seoul ends its broadcasts to Pyongyang', The Chosun Daily, 22 July 2025, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2025/07/22/XKKQNFk6SBBN3CMWII4V225O5Q>.

towards its southern counterpart. In January 2024, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea would no longer pursue the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula under its own control, and would instead view South Korea as ‘the most hostile state’, and not part of the same – albeit divided – peninsula.⁴⁹ Reflecting this policy shift, the Kim regime dismissed Lee’s early attempts to improve inter-Korean relations as an ‘appeasement offensive’, wherein irrespective of the government in Seoul, South Korea would remain the ‘faithful dog of the U.S.’⁵⁰ Thus, despite both President Lee Jae-myung and President Donald Trump seeking to revive talks with the Kim Jong Un regime, North Korea’s explicit lack of interest in doing so makes any substantive progress unlikely. Even if any such dialogue is realized, Pyongyang’s lack of enthusiasm to reciprocate Seoul’s goodwill gestures will limit the prospects of success of the Lee government’s initiatives, not least given North Korea’s increasing unwillingness to denuclearize, coupled with its ongoing egregious violations of the human rights of its people.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Korea, via KCNAWatch (2024), ‘Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Policy Speech at 10th Session of 14th SPA’, 16 January 2024, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1705460896-963054484/respected-comrade-kim-jong-un-makes-policy-speech-at-10-th-session-of-14-th-spa>.

⁵⁰ Korean Central News Agency, via KCNAWatch (2025), ‘Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK, Censures Seoul Authorities for Deceptive Attempt at “Appeasement Offensive”’, 20 August 2025, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1755644872-696431448/kim-yo-jong-vice-department-director-of-c-c-wpk-censures-seoul-authorities-for-deceptive-attempt-at-appeasement-offensive>.

⁵¹ United Nations Human Rights Council (2025), ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights’, A/HRC/60/58, 4 September 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/a-hrc-60-58-advance-edited-version.pdf>.

04

South Korea: A global power in all but name

South Korea's expanding economic, technological and diplomatic reach underscores its evolution from a regional to a global power, as it seeks to leverage alliances, unilateralism and its so-called 'pragmatic' diplomacy to shape global agendas beyond its immediate region.

While South Korea continues to face challenges on the Korean Peninsula and within Northeast Asia, Seoul has notably demonstrated expanded ambitions and capabilities beyond its immediate region, not least during and after the Yoon Suk Yeol administration. The country's growing economic reach, technological leadership, security partnerships and soft power have allowed South Korea to project itself outside of the Korean Peninsula, thereby straddling the boundary between a middle and great power. At the same time, the country has leveraged its alliance with the US to develop and sustain ties with regional and unilateral forums in East Asia and beyond.

The Yoon administration notably promoted South Korea as a significant actor on the world stage by describing the country as a 'global pivotal state', a slogan that exemplified the government's vision of South Korea as upholding the core pillars of the postwar liberal international order.⁵² Although Lee Jae-myung has predictably eschewed phrases such as 'global pivotal state' – not least

⁵² Yoon, S-Y. (2022), 'South Korea Needs to Step Up', *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/south-korea/south-korea-needs-step-yoon-suk-yeol>.

to differentiate himself from his conservative predecessor to domestic audiences – South Korea’s economic, political and cultural rise is likely to continue in the future regardless of the political transition.

In its rhetoric, the Lee administration has made clear how a core component of South Korea’s foreign policy will be the prioritization of ‘national interests over values’.⁵³ For the Lee government, emphasizing the importance of national interests over values serves as a reminder both to domestic and global audiences of the government’s aim to differentiate its foreign policy from the values-based diplomacy of the Yoon administration, which many South Korean progressives saw as being overly ideological in nature. Nevertheless, in practice, South Korea’s current emphasis on national interests is unlikely to signal a retreat inward. Instead, Seoul is likely to maintain an outward-looking diplomatic approach, wherein despite the change in government, the country will continue to diversify and strengthen its partnerships outside of its alliance with the US and engage with multilateral institutions and actors beyond the East Asian region.

From bilateralism to minilateralism

Since the country’s establishment in 1948, South Korea’s foreign policy has been dominated by bilateralism, manifest predominantly through its alliance with the US. While prior to taking power, Lee warned that South Korea should not ‘put all [its] eggs in one basket’ – highlighting a willingness towards engaging with adversaries of the US, such as Russia, China and North Korea – he affirmed after his election that the US–South Korea alliance remains the ‘bedrock’ of Seoul’s foreign policy.⁵⁴ Thus, although South Korea should continue to strengthen its ties with the US, the limits to bilateralism have emerged as the security challenges faced by South Korea and the East Asian region have become increasingly interconnected, whether with respect to Sino-US competition, supply chain vulnerabilities or North Korea’s nuclear development.

Within a changing global geopolitical environment, South Korea has strengthened its engagement with minilateral frameworks, allowing the country to pursue issue-specific areas of cooperation with a smaller number of partners. In Northeast Asia, over the past five years South Korea has been increasingly active in attempts to strengthen trilateralism with the US and Japan, particularly in terms of military exercises and dialogues. For instance, the landmark Camp David summit of August 2023 and the proposal of the ‘Chip Four’ alliance in 2022 offer useful cases where South Korea has been able to mitigate overdependence on the US while sustaining the robust US–South Korea alliance, and widen its cooperation in valuable industries, such as semiconductors and critical technologies. Seoul’s minilateralism, however, has not been limited to Northeast Asia. South Korea has sought deeper engagement with forums such as the Quad and AUKUS (the Australia–UK–US

⁵³ Author interview with South Korean government official, July 2025.

⁵⁴ Yeo, A. (2025), ‘What South Korea’s presidential election means for the US-Korea alliance’, Brookings, 3 June 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-south-koreas-presidential-election-means-for-the-us-korea-alliance/>; Kim, E-J. (2025), ‘DP’s Lee vows pragmatic diplomacy with China’, Yonhap, 18 May 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250518002700315>; The Korea Herald (2025), ‘Lee says Washington’s demand on strategic flexibility of USFK difficult to agree’, 25 August 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10560753>.

trilateral security pact). Although South Korea is unlikely to become a formal member of these partnerships, not least as the future of AUKUS remains uncertain, Seoul's participation in these joint initiatives underscores how it recognizes the overlapping mutual security concerns faced by other Indo-Pacific partners and the need to strengthen collective responses.

Strengthened and longer-term engagement with NATO has epitomized South Korea's growing influence not just as a recipient of security guarantees from the US but as a provider of and contributor to security beyond its vicinity.

Despite having just had a change of government, South Korea was invited to the NATO summit in June 2025 for the fourth consecutive year since 2022, alongside the three other members of the 'Indo-Pacific Four' namely, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Of the invited government leaders from these countries, only the prime minister of New Zealand participated in this year's summit; Lee Jae-myung's national security advisor, Wi Sung-lac, attended in his place.⁵⁵ Such strengthened and longer-term engagement with NATO has epitomized South Korea's growing influence not just as a recipient of security guarantees from the US but as a provider of and contributor to security beyond its vicinity. At a time of increasing interconnectedness between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, as evidenced by the deployment of approximately 14,000 North Korean troops to assist Russia's war against Ukraine, South Korea serves as a useful bridge between these two theatres.⁵⁶ This growing South Korea–NATO engagement makes clear how not only are security threats – whether in terms of cyberthreats, supply chain disruption or falling victim to China's coercive behaviour – indivisible, but South Korea's vulnerability to Chinese political and economic coercion together with North Korean belligerence can also offer useful lessons for NATO with respect to balancing deterrence with engagement of adversaries, and maintaining robust alliances. From NATO's perspective, Seoul's influence is no longer confined to the Korean Peninsula.

One such manifestation of South Korea's international role is its hosting of global summits. The city of Gyeongju held the 2025 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum from 31 October to 1 November, which underscored South Korea's ongoing ambitions to become a global power. This was the second time that South Korea had hosted the forum – after the 2005 summit in Busan – and demonstrated Seoul's increasing international role and its institutional entrepreneurship in setting and shaping regional and global agendas. Prior to the 2025 APEC summit, the

⁵⁵ Kim, E.-J. (2025), 'Lee's top security aide to attend NATO summit in Netherlands: presidential office', Yonhap, 23 June 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250623009351315>.

⁵⁶ Mendelson, A. (2025), 'North Korea confirms it sent troops to fight for Russia', *Telegraph*, 28 April 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/04/28/north-korea-confirms-sent-troops-fight-russia>.

Lee government made clear how it intended to stress the importance of supply chain resilience and artificial intelligence within the Indo-Pacific, where Seoul has a comparative advantage.

Such global summits can serve as a useful litmus test of the Lee government's 'pragmatic' diplomacy. On the one hand, the participation of US president Donald Trump and Chinese president Xi Jinping at the APEC forum evinces Seoul's ability to engage both Washington and Beijing against a backdrop of intense competition, not least in relation to trade. Seoul has already demonstrated its willingness to engage with allies, partners and competitors, as underscored by the visit of South Korean foreign minister, Cho Hyun, to China on 17 September, to meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi.⁵⁷ On the other hand, many global forums involving great powers, such as APEC, rely upon consensus-based decision-making. For instance, if Washington or Beijing oppose Seoul's proposals with respect to supply chain alignment or trade concessions, Seoul will have limited influence and flexibility. Moreover, Seoul's ability to shape global agendas through these forums will also be constrained by the actions of an unpredictable second Trump administration. Prior to the APEC forum, the South Korean government refused to rule out a possible meeting between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un on the sidelines of the meeting.⁵⁸ Although no Trump–Kim meeting took place, the APEC summit demonstrated the ease at which great power politics could distract international attention from South Korea's own global ambitions. Seoul must ensure, therefore, that partisan political objectives do not usurp its national interests and longer-term global goals.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea (2025), 'Outcome of ROK-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting (September 17)', 17 September 2025, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=321186.

⁵⁸ Park, S. (2025), 'Washington-Pyongyang talks at APEC summit cannot be ruled out: official', Yonhap, 27 September 2025, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20250927001600320>.

05 Conclusion and recommendations

The Lee government looks to prioritize continuity over change, balancing alliance commitments, superpower rivalries and regional threats, while pursuing pragmatic diplomacy to strengthen deterrence, technological partnerships and its global role.

This research paper has argued that the first 100 days of the Lee Jae-myung government has signalled how, at least in the short term, South Korea's foreign policy looks to emphasize continuity over radical divergence from that of the previous government. Lee's rhetoric of pursuing 'pragmatism' has made clear that South Korea's foreign policy will be driven by three principal factors: Seoul's alliance with Washington, intensifying great power competition between the US and China, and the threat from North Korea. Even as the Lee government seems to prefer continuity over change – at least initially – these three interlinked factors will pose heightened challenges to South Korea's foreign policy decision-making. Questions over the US's commitment to its alliance with South Korea are being raised amid intensifying Sino-US economic and geopolitical competition, thereby placing Seoul in a difficult position as it seeks to navigate its ties with Washington and Beijing. At the same time, North Korea's increasingly belligerent behaviour and lack of interest in reviving dialogue with South Korea and the US make it clear that the Lee government's recent overtures to revive inter-Korean dialogue are unlikely to have a substantive impact in the longer term.

In the past, South Korea's electoral cycles have led to swings in foreign policy across changes in administration. Yet, the Lee government's current foreign policy portends a cautious approach that seeks to avoid confrontation with Washington, Beijing and Pyongyang. Nevertheless, while South Korea's foreign policy postures towards the US and China look to face the ever-increasing constraints of great power politics, the most visible changes will likely be witnessed in the realm

of inter-Korean relations. South Korea will thus continue to face the dilemmas of a middle power as it navigates regional challenges while seeking to bolster its engagement beyond its immediate region as a global economic and political actor.

Policy recommendations

Prioritize national interest over political partisanship

Despite South Korea's enduring domestic political division, such polarization should not dictate the country's foreign policy. The Lee government must not undermine stability and credibility by pushing for radical foreign policy change purely to satisfy domestic audiences. In this vein, South Korea should aim to establish bipartisan policies to address the most pressing concerns: the growing nuclear threat from North Korea; the challenges of cooperation with allies and partners; and Sino-US competition.

With respect to defending South Korea's national interests, the Lee administration must draw clear red lines to insulate – as best as possible – its inter-Korean policy from domestic partisan swings, to which it is particularly susceptible, especially given escalating regional and global security threats from China and North Korea. Such red lines should comprise robust support for the continuation of the US's extended deterrence over South Korea; the avoidance of granting North Korea unconditional concessions; and demonstrating clear resolve and a lack of tolerance for North Korean provocations.

Yet, for now, the likelihood of establishing bipartisan safeguards to prevent radical shifts in inter-Korean policy (such as with respect to opposing unconditional dialogue with North Korea), following any change in government, is slim. The stark differences in political leaning between the ruling Democratic Party – which commands a majority in the country's legislature, the National Assembly – and opposition parties will make it harder to achieve such a consensus. Nevertheless, the current government must learn from, and not merely dismiss, the foreign policy strategies of past governments.

Strengthen regional deterrence through partnerships with the US and Japan against the common threats of China and North Korea

The security environment in East Asia has worsened significantly from that during the first Trump administration, especially in light of intensifying belligerence from North Korea, Pyongyang's support for Russia in the Ukraine War and China's escalating regional coercion and belligerence. Despite recent trade negotiations between the US and South Korea, following the US's initial imposition of tariffs on South Korea, Seoul and Washington must work together to sustain the longevity of their alliance and strengthen military deterrence against mutual regional threats. South Korea must also bolster bilateral ties with Japan, even despite lingering bilateral disputes stemming from their shared history.

Although the election of the conservative Sanae Takaichi as Japan's prime minister on 21 October may have catalysed some initial unease among the ruling progressive party in Seoul, the first meeting between Takaichi and Lee Jae-myung highlighted the readiness of both countries to pursue mutual cooperation. Seoul cannot afford any backsliding on bilateral and trilateral economic and security cooperation with Tokyo and Washington. At a time when both China and North Korea continue to destabilize regional security, such cooperation is warranted, especially with respect to planning in relation to possible contingencies on the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan and wider East Asian region.

Continue to 'de-risk' interactions with China and prioritize US–South Korea–Japan trilateralism over China–South Korea–Japan trilateralism

South Korea remains unwilling to decouple from China given the extent of Seoul's economic ties with Beijing. Yet, the Lee government must prioritize US–South Korea–Japan trilateralism (centred around security cooperation) over that between China–South Korea–Japan (which remains largely economic), given China's ongoing track record of assisting North Korea in sanctions evasion. Seoul must continue to 'de-risk' from Beijing through the diversification of supply chains while protecting sensitive technologies from China's orbit. Given the risks of transferring sensitive technology from South Korea to China, including semiconductors, artificial intelligence and biotechnology, Seoul must not rule out decoupling from Beijing in this specific domain. While the Lee Jae-myung government has reiterated its desire not to antagonize China and Russia,⁵⁹ South Korea must not allow its fears of Chinese and Russian retaliation, such as in the economic and cyber domains, to limit its commitment to strengthening ties with the US. With respect to Sino-South Korean relations, the Lee Jae-myung government must not allow so-called economic pragmatism to evolve into economic dependency.

Ensure that South Korea does not lose focus on the North Korean threat

The Lee government has highlighted how it seeks to strengthen inter-Korean relations through dialogue with North Korea, which remains the most immediate threat facing South Korea. These ambitions have already been evidenced in Seoul's initial suspension of radio transmissions along the inter-Korean border, and restrictions on the broadcast of information to North Korea, the latter is a vital means for the North Korean people to access information about the outside world. While these actions – which have been tried in the past by both progressive and conservative administrations – might reduce inter-Korean friction in the short term, South Korea must not naively expect these actions to catalyse longer-term change in North Korean behaviour.

⁵⁹ JoongAng Ilbo (2025), 'President Lee's foreign policy outline emerges after Trump, Xi summits at APEC', 2 November 2025, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-11-02/national/diplomacy/President-Lees-foreign-policy-outline-emerges-after-Trump-Xi-summits-at-APEC/2434770>.

Given the strengthening of security and economic cooperation between North Korea and Russia, Pyongyang remains more emboldened than ever to violate nuclear and human rights norms. North Korea's past actions, such as offering minimal concessions during both the first Trump administration and the Six-Party Talks (the latter of which comprised multiple rounds of talks from 2003 to 2009 with the aim of instigating the peaceful denuclearization of North Korea), have evinced how offering unconditional benefits risks rewarding delinquent behaviour and effecting minimal change in Pyongyang's nuclear development.⁶⁰ Moreover, downplaying Pyongyang's violations of human rights and nuclear norms will only intensify North Korea's transgressions. As such, Seoul should stress its commitment to working with allies and partners in sharing information, bolstering deterrence and holding North Korea to account for its continued violations of global norms.

In line with its increasingly prominent global role, South Korea and like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific and the West must strengthen cooperation across sectors, without diluting the US–South Korea alliance

In addition to positioning itself as a leading actor in security, the global economy and technology, South Korea must strengthen its ties with the US in order to combat local, regional and international threats. At the same time, to avoid the risks of overdependence on the US, South Korea must cooperate with other Western allies and partners. To achieve this, and in line with the Lee government's aims of 'pragmatism', Seoul must demonstrate how its foreign policy is not simply reactive to changes in domestic politics and pressure from allies and competitors, but situated within a longer-term strategy with three main areas of focus: defending against an increasingly acute North Korean threat; prudent management of China's rise; and strengthening South Korea's role as a trusted partner in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Forming such a strategy in the long term, however, will be far from easy, especially given divergent viewpoints on addressing these challenges both within the ruling Democratic Party and across the bipartisan divide.

- At a regional level, South Korea must deepen its engagement with minilateral initiatives, such as the Quad and AUKUS, even as a non-member, not least through maritime, security and technological cooperation. Despite the uncertain future of AUKUS, South Korea should leverage the strength of its shipbuilding sector given recent US–South Korean trade negotiations, wherein Seoul committed to invest \$150 billion in the US shipbuilding industry. In this vein, South Korea should bolster cooperation with AUKUS members with respect to submarine design, maintenance and partnerships in research and development. The US's recent agreement to assist South Korea in building nuclear-powered submarines in order to deter regional threats of North Korea and China offers one useful starting point for strengthened cooperation.⁶¹ Seoul must also proactively join Quad working groups and participate in regional maritime security initiatives, such as joint exercises with Quad member

⁶⁰ Howell, E. (2023), *North Korea and the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶¹ Kwon, J. and Butler, G. (2025), 'The US will help South Korea build nuclear 'attack' submarines – here's what that means', BBC News, 15 November 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c620qppzlgwo>.

states as part of South Korea's growing commitment to regional stability. Furthermore, Seoul's role as a leading global producer of semiconductors offers an invaluable contribution to the Quad, not least given the South Korean government's prioritization of emerging technologies on its foreign policy agenda.

- Globally, South Korea must build upon its ties with NATO at a time when the alliance is seeking to strengthen engagement with the 'Indo-Pacific Four' (South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand). Given the increasingly interconnected nature of security between Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic theatres, South Korea should strengthen intelligence and information sharing with NATO and the Indo-Pacific Four. In the realms of cyber defence and emerging technologies, Seoul can build upon its Individually Tailored Partnership Programme with NATO, established in 2023, wherein it was able to participate in NATO cyber defence exercises and collaborate with NATO member states in interoperability, developing new technologies and combating hybrid threats.
- Seoul must also look to other Western democratic partners, such as in Europe, to strengthen its foreign policy engagement without weakening its ties with Washington. For instance, South Korea should leverage existing agreements with the EU and UK to deepen economic, technological and security ties. The EU–South Korea Digital Trade Agreement, concluded in March 2025, offers one such opportunity for South Korea to bolster its global role as a leader in digital infrastructure and the governance of digital trade norms.

Moreover, South Korea's extant collaboration with the UK in defence and security will prove useful in bolstering South Korea's ties with NATO. Possible South Korean collaboration with the UK Royal Navy with respect to freedom of navigation operations and joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific would be mutually beneficial to both countries. Doing so would both fulfil Seoul's interests in developing its naval capabilities and compel greater commitment on the part of the UK to the Indo-Pacific. Such commitment remains questionable given the Starmer government's lack of focus on the region, and reluctance to identify China as a systemic threat both to Britain and the West. The UK and South Korea's co-hosting of the AI Seoul Summit in 2024 offers a useful springboard for further partnerships in artificial intelligence – a key priority for the Lee Jae-myung administration – and connecting Seoul's advanced defence manufacturing sector with UK export channels.

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Cover image: Lee Jae-myung celebrates his selection as presidential candidate for the Democratic Party of Korea in Goyang, South Korea.

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