

Introduction.

The South Korean elections, held on 3 June, returned the social democrats of the Democratic Party (DP) to power. Held two years earlier than usual, the elections were marked by uncertainty and an unprecedented social polarization. Lee Jae-Myung, the former governor of Gyeonggi Province (2018–2021)¹, won with 49.4% of the vote, defeating the conservative bloc, which had been severely weakened by the impeachment and arrest of its previous leader, Yoon Suk-Yeol.

Lee's victory marks not only a shift in the country's political orientation, but also a referendum on how the institutional crisis of recent months has been handled. The electorate responded ambivalently, punishing the outgoing government's authoritarian tendencies while placing their hopes in a leadership that, despite presenting itself as reformist, has been mired in scandal.

As the nation's 14th president, Lee is faced with tasks that are both urgent and delicate. At home, he will have to restore calm following the recent '*Martial Law Crisis*' and Yoon's arrest, all while confronting ongoing opposition from the state apparatus and the business community. The international situation is equally complex. South Korea lies at Northeast Asia's crossroads amid growing tensions between China and the United States. The new government's foreign policy will have to strive to maintain its economic and military ties with Washington intact while defending its own stand in such a dynamic and turbulent region.

Yoon Suk-Yeol: Promise, paralysis and crisis.

Since the end of military rule and the country's first democratic elections (1992), South Korea's political landscape has been divided in two opposing blocs: the conservative nationalists, represented by parties such as the Liberal Party² and the Grand National³,

¹ Located in South Korea's northwest corner, Gyeonggi surrounds and includes a part of Seoul's metropolitan area. It is home to over a quarter of the country's residents.

² Established in the early 1990s as a coalition of three conservative parties, led by Kim Young-Sam's Democratic Party for Reunification. In 1995, it changed its name to *New Korea*.

³ The result of the merger between the New Korea and the United Democratic Party (1997). In 2012, it was renamed

and the *liberals* of the Democratic Party (DP)⁴. Each bloc has had four presidents in office⁵, almost none of whom have emerged unscathed from the corruption scandals that often plague the country's upper echelons. The most prominent may be the one involving Park Geun-Hye⁶, who was impeached in 2017, and sentenced to 20 years in prison for abuse of power, bribery and disclosure of State secrets⁷.

The recent presidency of Yoon Suk-Yeol has been turbulent, to say the least. Having emerged as the victor in the March 2022 election, with 48.6% of the vote, he was expected to be the leader who would restore social moderation and political integrity. His candidacy was backed by his image as a champion in the fight against malpractice, cultivated over three decades as a prosecutor, during which he investigated prominent businesspeople and politicians alike.

His dedication earned him the support of the People Power Party (PPP), which emerged in 2020 as the leading center-right force following the collapse of the traditional conservative parties. The new formation wanted to present a fresh image, breaking with Park Geun-Hye's legacy, and appointed Yoon as its leader to that end. Throughout his career, he had led investigations into Samsung for accounting fraud and the National Statistics Center for allegedly falsifying results. In 2017, while heading the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office, he drafted the charges against Park and was promoted to state prosecutor general in 2019. However, he soon fell out of favor with the DP due to his insistence on investigating several key party members, including Justice Minister Cho Kuk⁸.

His victory in the presidential election was the narrowest in the country's history, beating his rival by just 250,000 votes. It was also hampered from the outset, since his rivals controlled more than half of the seats in the National Assembly. Unable to form alliances, or get laws and budgets approved, he was prevented from addressing the key points in

Saenuri (새누리) or *New World*, and in 2017, following the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, it was relaunched as the Liberty Korea Party. It was dissolved in 2020, when its most prominent figures joined the new *People Power Party*.

⁴ Direct successor to Kim Dae-Jung's original Democratic Party, founded in 2000. It has undergone numerous transformations through the addition of smaller centrist and reformist groups.

⁵ The conservatives with Kim Young-Sam (1992-1997), Lee Myung-Bak (2007-2012), Park Geun-Hye (2012-2017), and Yoon Suk-Yeol (2022-2024). The DP with Kim Dae-Jung (1997-2002), Roh Moo-Hyun (2002-2007), Moon Jae-In (2017-2022) and, since June, with Lee Jae-Myung (2025-present).

⁶ Daughter of General Park Chung-Hee, the dictator who ruled the country between 1961 and 1979.

⁷ She was released on health grounds in 2021.

⁸ Accused of plagiarism, falsification of academic qualifications, tax evasion, and illicit enrichment.

his program, including inflation, the housing price crisis, and the increase of the defense budget. In the autumn of 2023, the National Assembly voted to dismiss Prime Minister Han Deok-Su. Yoon's presidential veto narrowly prevented this from happening⁹.

By the spring of 2024, the president's popularity had plummeted^{10 11}, with the legislative elections in April confirming the clinical death of his mandate. The DP claimed victory, winning 180 of the 300 seats in the Assembly. The PPP sank to 103, leaving the country in a state of gridlock due to ungovernability¹².

By the end of the year, Yoon accused the opposition of disloyalty and conspiring with Pyongyang to bring about his downfall¹³. Unable to get his general budget approved for the third time in his mandate, he declared martial law on December 3. This granted the armed forces broad powers, limiting civil rights in order to restrict the activities of rival formations. He defended the measure as imperative for governance and averting national paralysis. Nonetheless, the Assembly rejected its entry into force, with members of his own party voting against it.

On December 14, 204 of the 300 deputies voted to remove Yoon from office, paving the way for his impeachment. He was arrested on January 15, becoming the first president to be detained while in office.

With his disqualification confirmed by the Constitutional Court on April 4, the former president now faces the possibility of being tried for abuse of power and sedition. The first of these charges is supported by a ruling from the aforementioned court, which determined that the country was not in a genuine state of emergency that could justify the

⁹ AL JAZEERA. "South Korea lawmakers vote to sack prime minister". 21 SEPTEMBER 2023: Link: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/21/south-korea-lawmakers-vote-to-sack-prime-minister> Last access: 30 SEPTEMBER 2025.

¹⁰ STATISTA. "Approval rating of South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol from April 2022 to December 2024". Link: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1311511/south-korea-approval-rating-of-president-yoon-suk-yeol/> Last access: 8 OCTOBER 2025.

¹¹ His image undermined by the corruption scandals involving his wife, Kim Keon-Hee, who was arrested in August 2025 on charges of bribery and stock manipulation -> ICTJ – INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE. "South Korea's Former First Lady Arrested After Court Issues Warrant on Corruption Charges". 12 AUGUST 2025. Link: <https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/south-korea%E2%80%99s-former-first-lady-arrested-after-court-issues-warrant-corruption-charges> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

¹² CHA, Victor; PARK, Jinwan & LIM, Andy. "South Korea's 2024 General Election: Results and Implications". CSIS – CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES. 10 APRIL 2024. Link: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-koreas-2024-general-election-results-and-implications> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

¹³ GIORDANO, Elena & STARCEVIC, Seb. "South Korean president declares martial law in shock late-night address". POLITICO. 3 DECEMBER 2024. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/south-korea-yoon-suk-yeol-president-declares-martial-law-shock-address-north-korea/> Last access: 8 SEPTEMBER 2025.

invocation of martial law. The second charge, which could result in life imprisonment, stems from Yoon's repeated calls to his supporters to take to the streets and “*defend the nation*” in early 2025¹⁴. On September 26, he appeared in court on obstruction charges relating to his attempt to block his arrest. The trial has exacerbated the country's polarized climate, with demonstrations both for and against Yoon. Earlier this year, following his initial arrest, his supporters attempted to storm the Seoul Western District Court, resulting in 86 arrests and 51 police officers injured¹⁵.

2025 Presidential Election: candidacies and results.

In the event of a president's impeachment, the South Korean constitution stipulates that the National Assembly must set a deadline of no more than 60 days for new elections to be held. The date was set for June 3. The Democratic Party was naturally the favorite to regain power. The images of soldiers smashing the Assembly's windows with hammers were seen around the world, reviving fears of a return to the dictatorship's brief democratic interregnum¹⁶.

During the election campaign, the DP did not hesitate to draw parallels between General Chun Doo-Hwan and Yoon Suk-Yeol. The most staunchly democratic sectors presented voting for the People Power Party as a clear act of support for martial law, or as a vote against freedom. Regardless, in March, most polls showed the two parties were in a technical tie, with the conservatives still having chances of winning.

This was owed to two main factors. Firstly, the PPP still had the momentum generated by fears surrounding the implementation of the pseudo-progressive policies adopted by the previous Democratic government of Moon Jae-In. Often labelled as ‘*woke*’, they were rejected by the majority of young men, as well as middle-aged and elderly citizens of both

¹⁴ POLITICO. “*South Korean court approves new arrest of former president*”. 7 JULY 2025. Link: <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/07/09/south-korean-court-approves-new-arrest-of-former-president-00445904> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

¹⁵ SON, Ji-Hyoung. “*Why didn't police hit back at violent protesters?*”. THE KOREA HERALD. 22 JANUARY 2025. Link: <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10404909> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

¹⁶ Following the assassination of General Park Chung-Hee, in October 1979, an interim government led by civilian Choi Kyu-Hah briefly took control of the country with the intention of undertaking a democratic transition. The project was interrupted when a group of conservative military officers, led by General Chun Du-Hwan, declared martial law and dissolved the National Assembly, executing a coup d'état that extended the dictatorship for twelve more years.

genders. Their lack of popularity was one of the main catalysts for Yoon's candidacy in 2022¹⁷.

On the other hand, the DP's decision to run with Lee Jae-Myung again raised numerous doubts. Not only had Lee been defeated previously by Yoon, he was also facing several legal causes, including charges of bribery and embezzlement. His role as opposition leader had also been controversial, suffering an assassination attempt in January 2024¹⁸. However, developments in the trials against Yoon throughout the spring were decisive in widening the gap. By mid-May, Gallup Korea showed that 51% of voters intended to vote for the DP, with only 31% backing the PPP¹⁹.

The polls also focused on the growth of Lee Jun-Seok's Reform Party; a new libertarian party created in 2024.

- Democratic Party (DP).

Lee Jae-Myung based his campaign on defending democracy and fighting inequality. Seeking to project the image of a broad-based candidate, he broke away from the radical positions of previous DP administrations. Recognizing the social divide created by the two previous governments, he promised his administration would usher in an era dedicated to equality, social harmony, and transparency. He avoided fueling gender confrontation by keeping Moon's Ministry of Equality and Family, a regular target of conservatives. He also turned his attention toward economic proposals aimed at fostering a technological resurgence, and to the implementation of new social policies. These included the debate of a universal basic income, the extension of health coverage, the intervention of the real estate market and the increase of social housing²⁰.

Despite his legal troubles, he obtained 17,287,513 votes (49.42%), beating his main rival by almost three million. The majority of his support came from the provinces of Gyeonggi, North and South Jeolla, and from the country's major urban areas. With control of two-

¹⁷ KIM, Hyung-A. "Moon's populist politics and its effects". EAST ASIA FORUM. 26 DECEMBER 2019. Link: <https://eastasiaforum.org/2019/12/26/moons-populist-politics-and-its-effects/> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

¹⁸ CHOE, Sang-Hun. "South Korean Opposition Leader Is Stabbed". THE NEW YORK TIMES. 3 JANUARY 2024. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/01/world/asia/south-korea-opposition-lee-jae-myung.html> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

¹⁹ REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S ELECTORAL COMMITTEE. "Results of Public Opinion Surveys and Registration Status View Details". 12-13 MAY 2025. Link: <https://www.nesdc.go.kr/portal/bbs/B0000005/view.do?nttlId=16141> Last access: 30 SEPTEMBER 2025.

²⁰ TIME MAGAZINE. "President Lee Jae-Myung's Plan to Reboot South Korea". 18 SEPTEMBER 2025. Link: <https://time.com/7317953/south-korea-president-lee-jae-myung-cover/> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

thirds of the National Assembly seats, he is assured at least three years of administrative calm.

- People Power Party (PPP).

The main challenge for the conservatives was to distance their party from Yoon Suk-Yeol's image. To achieve this, they selected Kim Moon-Su as their leader. Despite his age (73), his nomination was arguably the smartest move the PPP could make.

Like Lee, Kim is a Gyeongsang²¹ native, who also served as governor of Gyeonggi from 2006 to 2014. He was a member of the Korean Democratic Youth and an important activist against the military rule in his early years. Expelled from university, he was imprisoned several times between 1974 and 1988. Throughout the 1990s, he moved towards more conservative views in response to what he saw as a radicalization of the moderate left. In 1996, he won a seat in the National Assembly as part of the conservative bloc, a position he held until his election as governor. Critical of the Moon administration, he joined the PPP in 2020 following the dissolution of the Liberty Party. He served briefly as Minister of Employment and Labour during Yoon's government.

Kim largely endorsed Yoon's social and economic programme, but focused his campaign on the multiple lawsuits against his rival and on the need for transparency in public office.

He obtained 14,395,639 votes (41.15%), which left him with no chance of governing.

- Reform Party (RP).

Founded in January 2024, the PR presented itself as a center-right party advocating liberal economic policies and moderate social positions. Its forerunner was Lee Jun-Seok, aged 40, a Harvard graduate widely regarded as one of the country's most brilliant minds. A computer engineer and entrepreneur, he was previously associated with the conservatives.

Throughout the campaign, the PR's programme focused on tackling corruption rooted in traditional bipartisanship, while also advocating for a more flexible labor market and the encouragement of domestic companies bringing back production to South Korea. He

²¹ Divided in two provinces (North Gyeongsang and South Gyeongsang), it is a traditionally conservative region, located in the southeast corner of the peninsula.

obtained significant support among young male voters²², as well as criticism from various groups who deemed him incendiary and opportunistic²³.

His candidacy obtained 2,917,523 votes (8,34%).

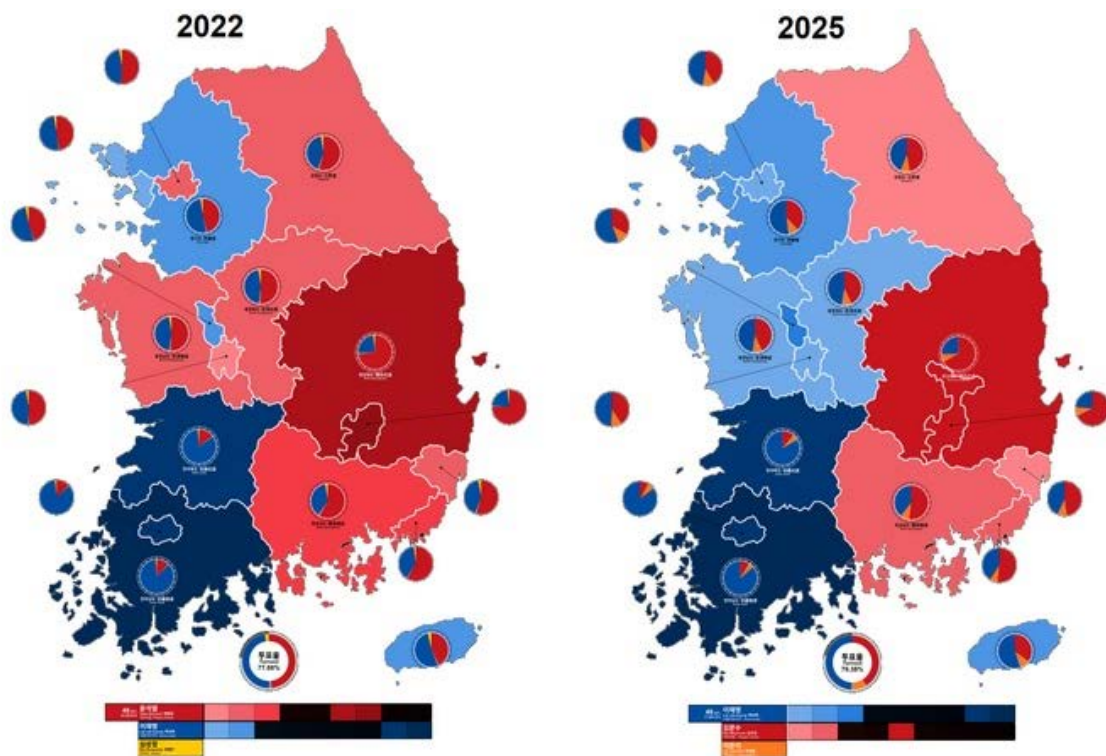


****Final results of the 3 June 2025 presidential election. Image courtesy of the South Korea National Election Committee****

The regional divide widened compared to previous elections. The Democratic Party consolidated its dominance in the south-west of the country (Gwangju, North Jeolla and South Jeolla), extending its lead in Gyeonggi Province. The conservatives maintained control of the east coast, home to their strongholds of Gangwon, North and South Gyeongsang, as well the municipalities of Busan and Ulsan. The most significant change occurred in the central provinces of North and South Chungcheong, which switched to the DP.

²² LEE, Soo-Jung. "Lee Jun-seok: How a Harvard engineer became the king of Korea's young men". KOREA JOONGANG DAILY. 12 MAY 2025. Link: <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-05-12/national/politics/Lee-Junseok-How-a-Harvard-engineer-became-the-king-of-Koreas-young-men/2305082> . Last access: 8 SEPTEMBER 2025.

²³ JUNG, Min-Kyung. "Lee Jun-seok hints at presidential run". THE KOREA HERALD. 25 APRIL 2024. Link: <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/3379796> . Last access: 7 SEPTEMBER 2025.



****Comparative map with the results of the 2022 and 2025 presidential elections by province and municipality. Image courtesy of the South Korea National Electoral Committee****

Lee Jae-Myung: a new president for social peace, yet plagued by scandals.

With the country in shock by the second impeachment of a head of government in eight years, Lee has expressed his intention to usher in a period of reconciliation and economic recovery. Among his proposals is a constitutional reform that would limit presidential terms to two four-year periods²⁴. This measure has been endorsed by the State Affairs Planning Committee and would be accompanied by an expansion of the powers of local administrations. In theory, this would help to prevent presidential abuse of power and institutional deadlock. However, although control of the Assembly gives him ample room to maneuver in carrying out reforms, it will not be easy. His intention to increase the tax burden on large national conglomerates (*'chaebol'*) has led to direct confrontation with the country's main canters of economic power. Furthermore, he is taking office amid

²⁴ Instead of the current system with a single mandate of 5 years.

numerous scandals, some of which date back to his time as mayor of Seongnam (2010–2018).

Lee Jae-Myung was born in Andong into a humble family. He is a former lawyer specialized in labor law and human rights. He is the fifth of seven children. Due to a delay in registering his birth, its exact date is unknown, although it is officially listed as 22 December 1964. During his youth, he received a scholarship for disadvantaged students and completed his secondary education through a special training program. He then studied law at Chung Ang University, graduating in 1986. After serving as mayor for eight years, he was elected governor of Gyeonggi Province (2018–2021). He has been a member of the National Assembly since 2022, the year in which he also assumed leadership of the Democratic Party.

As the leader of the opposition, he became Yoon Suk-Yeol's nemesis, leading marches to the Assembly in December to block the imposition of martial law. He live-streamed the symbolic storming of the building and the protests of the deputies from his mobile phone, consolidating his image as an assertive politician with a strong connection to the people. During the first semester of 2025, he spearheaded the impeachment campaign of the outgoing president, while concurrently handling the legal cases against his persona. Of the five investigations still ongoing, one relates to the alleged irregular awarding of contracts for the Seongnam soccer team. This is the least serious of the charges, with the others including allegations of perjury, bribery and embezzlement of funds intended for North Korea.²⁵

He assumed office on 4 June, amidst a surge of protests against alleged Chinese and North Korean interference, which have persisted to date. Following his inauguration, all pending legal proceedings against him were suspended under Article 84 of the Constitution, which prevents the criminal prosecution of a sitting president except for insurrection or treason. Therefore, all indications point to him facing the first stage of his term with relative calm. Nonetheless, the suspension of the cases only means that they will be withheld until the end of his term, and various platforms of conservative jurists have already expressed their intention to prosecute him anyway. In such case, immediate

²⁵ Ji, Da-Gyum. "All of President Lee's criminal trials now suspended". THE KOREA HERALD. 22 JULY 2025. Link: <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10537143> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

arrest would not be possible, although the legitimacy of his government would be seriously compromised.

The strategic repercussions of the change in government.

There is mild concern that the return of the DP could alter the course of South Korea's foreign policy, especially in terms of how it balances its relations with the US, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and North Korea.

It is well-known that Washington, particularly during Republican administrations, has a preference for conservative leaders in Seoul. Conversely, Democratic governments have been accused of fostering mistrust due to their approach of adopting conciliatory policies towards the North Korean regime, as well as their ongoing rapprochement with China. For the time being, the new president has expressed his desire to balance pragmatism with the country's strategic interests²⁶²⁷, including the reactivation of inter-Korean dialogues. The announcement was not initially well-received by Washington, with whom South Korea also had tangible differences on trade issues since Donald Trump's return to the White House.

The relationship between Seoul and Washington is of paramount importance, given that the US is South Korea's security guarantor, with 25,000 troops stationed on its soil. However, the DP governments have advocated that Seoul maintain a position of relative equidistance between major powers, a policy which has clearly stirred controversy.

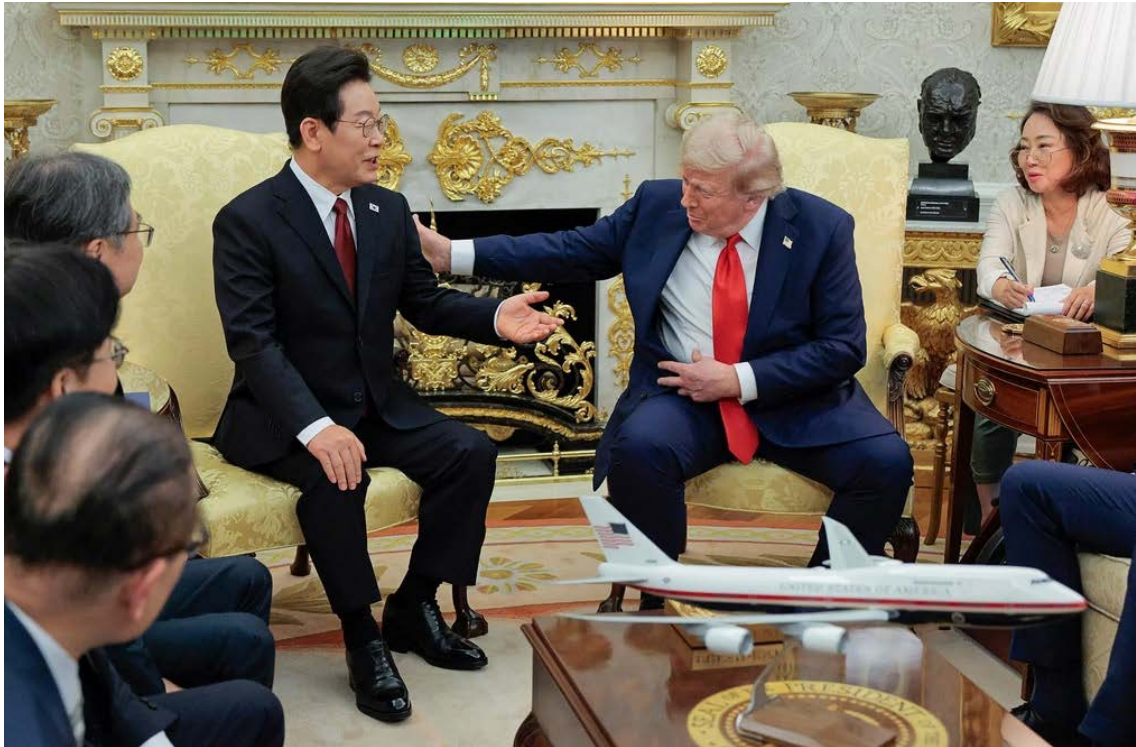
Since Kim Dae-Jung initiated his '*Sunshine Policy*'²⁸ in 2000, Washington has viewed the Democratic Party's policies of rapprochement with Pyongyang with a degree of caution. While DP leaders have consistently advocated for the establishment of diplomatic and commercial ties as the most effective means of achieving normalization in North-South relations, there is a prevailing skepticism among the Americans. It is evident that such

²⁶ MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA. "*Lee Jae Myung Government's Key Diplomatic Tasks*". 16 SEPTEMBER 2025. Link: https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322968 Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

²⁷ PERON-DOISE, Marianne. "*The Lee Jae-myung presidency: towards a recalibration of South Korea's middle power diplomacy?*". FOUNDATION POUR LA RECHERCHE STRATÉGIQUE. 23 JUNE 2025. Link: <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/programs/korea-security-and-diplomacy-program/lee-jae-myung-presidency-towards-recalibration-south-korea-s-middle-power-diplomacy-2025> Last access: 20 OCTOBER 2025.

²⁸ Consisting on promoting commercial and cultural exchanges between the two Koreas as a mean to reduce tensions and channel dialogue.

exchanges have not resulted in any tangible outcomes, including the establishment of a lasting peace or the mitigation of existing tensions.



**** Lee Jae-Myung in the Oval Office with Donald Trump during his visit to Washington on August 25th, 2025. Image by Chip Somodevilla****

The alliance between Washington and Seoul reached its lowest point during Trump's first term in office, which coincided with that of his South Korean counterpart, Moon Jae-in. Despite Moon's endeavors to foster consensus and initiate dialogue with Pyongyang, his tenure (2017-2022) was marked by the largest series of North Korean ballistic missile tests in history²⁹, along with a diplomatic and trade crisis with Japan, in which Trump aligned with the Japanese.

Back then, the US President opted to engage in direct negotiations with Kim Jong-Un, while maintaining a separate dialogue with his southern counterpart. Moon expressed regret that Trump seemed to disregard Seoul's prerogatives and viewed Korea's geopolitical statements as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with China.

²⁹ GARCÍA-GALÁN, Ignacio. "Misiles sobre las aguas del Este. Tokio y Seúl cierran heridas ante la amenaza norcoreana". IEEE – Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies. 9 JANUARY 2023. Págs.12-14. Link: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2023/DIEEE001_2023_IGNGAR_Misiles.pdf Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

Democratic governments have generally favored closer ties with Beijing in order to promote greater regional stability and stronger trade links. This has clear implications for the strategic agenda of the Indo-Pacific region and the Quad Alliance, spearheaded by the US and Japan, in which Washington hopes South Korea will play a key role. Moon Jae-In advocated a neutral approach and greater autonomy in foreign policy, leaving South Korea's contribution to the initiatives undecided.

Conversely, conservative administrations are known for their staunch support of US strategic alignments, backing Washington's stance on strategic matters at both regional and global levels. For them, the alliance between Seoul and Washington takes precedence over any other consideration, which leads to relations with Pyongyang and Beijing tending to be more tense during their administrations. In this regard, Yoon's presidency was marked by a firm stance against making any concessions to North Korea without first ensuring the dismantling of its nuclear arsenal. Yoon advocated for more stringent sanctions against the communist regime and adopted a hard-line stance that prioritized armed deterrence. As part of this strategy, he fully supported the expansion of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system³⁰, deployed in March 2017 during Park Geun-Hye's term in office. The installation of the system resulted in a diplomatic crisis with Beijing at the time, and was also criticized by Moon, who successfully appeased the People's Republic of China during his term by adopting the "Three NO's"³¹.

Lee was also among THAAD's detractors, although since his appointment as leader of the DP he has adapted his rhetoric, assuring the system is a strictly defensive tool focused on repelling a North Korean attack³². Furthermore, his administration has confirmed an 8.2% increase in the defense budget for 2026, with a focus on arms exports and cooperation with the US³³. As anticipated, this initiative has resulted in new tensions with

³⁰ An American anti-ballistic missile defense system designed to intercept and destroy, ballistic missiles in their terminal phase (descent or reentry).

³¹ NO to the expansion of the THAAD system on Korean soil, NO to participation or collaboration in the development of US missile systems, and NO to the creation of a defense triumvirate between South Korea, Japan, and the US.

³² CHOI, David. "South Korean presidential candidates spar again over THAAD missile defense system". STARS & STRIPES. 17 FEBRUARY 2022. Link: https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/2022-02-17/south-korea-presidential-race-thaad-missile-defense-debate-5051660.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2022.

³³ DSEI – DEFENCE & SECURITY EQUIPMENT INTERNATIONAL. "South Korea to raise defence spending, pursue greater self-reliance". 3 OCTOBER 2025. Link: <https://www.dsei.co.uk/news/south-korea-raise-defence-spending-pursue-greater-self-reliance> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

China, whose authorities imposed sanctions on several South Korean companies associated with the defense sector.

All indications suggest that the relationship with the PRC poses the greatest management challenge. Over the last decade, China has become the country's main trading partner, currently accounting for 19.7% of its exports³⁴. Even so, Yoon's government adopted a stance that bordered on outright hostility, often making clear overtures to Taiwan³⁵. It is anticipated that the repair of diplomatic relations will be challenging, particularly in light of recent disagreements between the new president and the Chinese authorities. During the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics (2022), Lee accused the Chinese of cultural appropriation when several dancers appeared wearing traditional Korean clothes³⁶. More recently, he stated that China is a "*strategic partner*", while emphasizing that the US is his country's "*only real ally*"³⁷.

Lee is aware that he cannot afford to upset the Americans in excess. If the Trump administration opts to resume negotiations with Pyongyang, it is imperative for South Korea to be included in the discussions. During his recent visit to the White House, Lee proposed the possibility of Donald Trump serving as a mediator in a round of inter-Korean contacts, a role that the American president expressed his willingness to undertake. He also committed to addressing the bilateral trade imbalance by allocating \$350 billion to support US industry and acquiring \$50 billion worth of Boeing aircraft for the national airline³⁸. This has earned him the respect of the US leader, as well as a reduction in tariffs on South Korean products from 25% to 15%.

Concurrently with Lee's visit, a special delegation led by former National Assembly Speaker Park Byung-Seok travelled to Beijing to meet with PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi. During the course of the meeting, Park delivered a personal letter from Lee to Wang, addressed to Xi Jinping, expressing his interest in moving towards a strategic partnership,

³⁴ SANTANDER TRADE MARKETS. "*South Korean foreign trade in figures*". OCTOBER 2025. Link: <https://santandertrade.com/en/portal/analyse-markets/south-korea/foreign-trade-in-figures> Last access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

³⁵ KING, Sean. "*Yoon Suk-yeol Dips a Toe in the Taiwan Strait*". GLOBAL TAIWAN INSTITUTE. 31 MAY 2023. Link: <https://globaltaiwan.org/2023/05/yoon-suk-yeol-dips-a-toe-in-the-taiwan-strait/> Last Access: 18 OCTOBER 2025.

³⁶ Koreans are recognized as one of the People's Republic of China's ethnic minorities.

³⁷ FOREMAN, Hanna & YEO, Andrew. "*The art of the alliance: 3 takeaways from the Trump-Lee summit*". BROOKINGS. 28 AUGUST 2025. Link: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-art-of-the-alliance-3-takeaways-from-the-trump-lee-summit/> Last access: 17 OCTOBER 2025.

³⁸ Ibid.

opening a permanent channel of communication on security matters, and greater cultural exchanges³⁹. This gesture is indicative of an intention to maintain a balance between economic cooperation and strategic loyalty; particularly in a context of internal protests and demonstrations that call Chinese influence into question.

Finally, relations with Japan pose a different challenge. While conservative governments tend to prioritize bilateral cooperation on security and trade, Democrats have historically adopted a more critical stance, with historical revisions fueling tensions. During his campaign, Lee deviated from the established pattern. Indeed, he went so far as to defend his commitment to collaboration with Japan as a fundamental element of enhancing regional security and overall well-being. This was corroborated during his meeting on 30 September in Seoul with former Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba. In the course of the meeting, the commitment was made by both leaders to the restoration and strengthening of GSOMIA⁴⁰, the promotion of joint supply chains, and the management of differences with caution and restraint⁴¹.

Conclusions.

The return of the Democratic Party to power marks a turning point in South Korea's recent history. The newly elected president is faced with a challenging scenario, characterized by the need to address critical issues such as institutional stability, social cohesion, and the redefining of the country's role on the international stage.

The implications of the election results require careful consideration. The campaign has highlighted the social and territorial divide that runs through the country. Young urbanites, concerned about unemployment and housing prices, have demonstrated a different voting pattern than older generations, who are more sensitive to security and order

³⁹ MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA. "Wang Yi Meets with Special Envoy of ROK President Park Byeong-seug". 25 AUGUST 2025. Link: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202508/t20250825_11695640.html Last access: 17 OCTOBER 2025.

⁴⁰ The "General Security of Military Information Agreement" is a security and intelligence cooperation treaty, signed in 2016 by Japan and South Korea, and sponsored by the US.

⁴¹ MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF JAPAN. "Japan-ROK Summit Meeting". 30 SEPTEMBER 2025. Link: https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kr/pageite_000001_01311.html Last access: 17 OCTOBER 2025.

issues. These fractures will be one of the most significant challenges of Lee's term, as they will determine the legitimacy and effectiveness of any reform project.

The new president is a figure that encapsulates the complexity of contemporary South Korean politics. He is a leader with a significant popular support, a reformist vision, and strong parliamentary control, yet he is also constrained by social polarization and the threat of legal action. The nation's democracy will once again be put to the test during his presidency. If he succeeds in overcoming the judicial challenges, implementing his reforms, and reducing confrontation, he could usher in a new era of stability. Alas, should the situation deteriorate, his term will be nothing but another chapter in the Asian nation's long history of political instability.

In addition to these challenges, there are the difficulties in navigating foreign relations in one of the most sensitive geopolitical scenarios on the planet. Lee will seek to consolidate South Korea's autonomy as a key player in the Indo-Pacific.

For the time being, his approach seems to be way more intelligent than that of his predecessors, continuing on the path of cooperation with Japan, making efforts to ameliorate differences with Beijing, and leaving the thawing of inter-Korean relations in Trump's hands.

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