



## THE PENINSULA

### **New South Korean Government Takes Steps to Improve Relations with North Korea**

Published July 17, 2025

**Author:** [Robert King](#)

**Category:** [Inter-Korean](#)



With the election and inauguration of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung in early June, the new administration is beginning to ease the country's policy toward North Korea.

The new direction echoes the policy of former President Moon Jae-in to improve relations with North Korea. President Moon held two summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and played matchmaker in bringing together Kim and U.S. President Donald Trump for two summits—or three, if one counts the brief informal chat in Panmunjom when Trump delightfully stepped across the border into North Korea amidst handshakes and smiles. Despite these efforts, [North Korea's relations](#) with both the United States and South Korea remain strained, and conditions have improved little since the beginning of Moon's presidency in 2017.

Now, with the election of Lee to the presidential office and the ruling party's working majority in the National Assembly, a key question is what policies the new administration will pursue regarding relations with North Korea. Early indications show that President Lee seeks to continue the effort of the Moon administration in improving inter-Korean relations. At his first cabinet meeting on July 10, President Lee stated, "We must strive to restore disconnected inter-Korean ties" because "peace and coexistence between both Koreas are the most realistic and practical options for our security."

However, North Korea-related issues, including human rights, will likely continue to be awkward and controversial throughout Lee's five-year term. Voters are more diverse in their views on inter-Korean issues than ever before, North Korea has become more

recalcitrant, and South Korea has a prominent role in the United Nations and other international organizations. All of this complicates the Lee administration's desire to return to a friendlier, more extensive relationship with North Korea.

### **Backing Away from Unification**

The new administration has been in place for only a few weeks, but the recently named Minister of Unification, Chung Dong-young, said shortly after his nomination that the Ministry of Unification should be renamed. In remarks to the press, he questioned whether the word "unification" was an accurate description of the ministry's role. He noted that before East and West Germany reunited, the West German Ministry for "All-German Affairs" had been changed to the Ministry for "Inner-German Relations." Thus, Chung suggested in his confirmation hearing on July 14 that the ministry be renamed the "Ministry of the Korean Peninsula."

When an opposition lawmaker asked Chung whether North Korea was South Korea's "main enemy," which is how the previous Yoon Suk Yeol administration described the North in its 2022 *Defense White Paper*, Chung replied, "I don't agree." While he stated that North Korea is not South Korea's main enemy, he did call North Korea a "threat."

The unification minister nominee's comment is notable because in January 2024, Kim Jong Un made a dramatic declaration that reunification was no longer an objective for North Korea and began destroying infrastructure related to or inspired by unification, including the Reunification Arch in Pyongyang. The arch was two gigantic hanbok-clad female figures with arms outstretched and clasping hands across the main boulevard that leads into the North Korean capital from the south. Destruction of the arch may indicate that North Korea now rejects reunification of the two Koreas and acknowledges the existence of two separate countries.

### **Initial Steps to Improve Inter-Korean Relations**

Several gestures from Seoul during the first few weeks of the Lee administration signaled a more conciliatory approach to inter-Korean relations. In the first few days, parliamentary leaders pledged to adopt legislation—as soon as this month—prohibiting the sending of balloons with anti-North Korean leaflets across the border. President Lee stated human rights groups should be "severely punished" if they continue sending message-laden balloons into the North because they have angered the regime in the past.

The National Assembly passed similar legislation under President Moon in 2020, but South Korea's Constitutional Court struck it down as an excessive restriction on free speech three years later. The court ruled that modest limitations on sending information to the North would be acceptable, but only to assure the safety of South Korean citizens living in border areas. It is not yet clear how or whether the new legislation will avoid the same fate.

South Korean human rights activists, including North Korean defectors now living in South Korea, have long sent balloons into the North carrying leaflets criticizing the regime's human rights record, and many have also included humanitarian items such as food, medicine, and even USB drives with South Korean movies and music. Since the Constitutional Court's ruling in 2023, balloons have again been sent north in large numbers, but that practice has recently provoked a dramatic North Korean response. North Korea has retaliated by sending thousands of nuisance balloons into South Korea

carrying garbage, cigarette butts, plastic water bottles, used paper, old shoes, and “what looked like compost,” clearly responding to the resumption of message balloons arriving from South Korea.

### **Repatriation of Six North Korean Sailors**

Another indicator of the future direction of the South Korean government's policies toward North Korea was the repatriation on July 9 of six North Koreans whose boats drifted into South Korean territorial waters in March and May this year. The general procedure to make such a return of personnel possible has been with messages from the United Nations Command in South Korea to the North Korean military. Although the North did not respond to the messages about these fishermen, two North Korean ships arrived to receive the six compatriots, who crossed back into North Korean waters aboard one of the wooden boats that had first drifted south.

Human rights activists in South Korea called for an independent third party to confirm that the North Korean seamen wanted to be returned. South Korean officials announced the desire of the sailors to return to North Korea and publicized the actions well before the repatriation took place. This was in contrast to the return of two North Korean sailors in 2019 during Moon's presidency, when the sailors requested to remain in South Korea but were forcibly returned. This latest return of sailors was handled in a more transparent and less controversial way than the incident in 2019.

### **The Lee Administration on North Korean Human Rights**

Many discussions of North Korean human rights issues have played out in the United Nations over the last two decades, and North Korea has been particularly harsh in objecting to the criticism it has received. The most recent UN action on the issue was a high-level session of the General Assembly in May 2025. Lee was not yet in office, thus South Korean diplomats, acting under the previous administration, actively participated in the session.

A number of similar discussions on North Korean human rights occurred in 2024. The Human Rights Council devoted a related session in April that year, while the Security Council held a discussion on North Korea's human rights abuses as a threat to international peace and security in June. Later in the fall, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee held a discussion of the topic and adopted a resolution critical of North Korea.

Multiple UN bodies will continue to confront North Korean human rights abuses, which could be awkward for Seoul and its efforts to improve relations with Pyongyang. South Korea is a leading member of the United Nations. Few other states have had one of their citizens serve as UN Secretary General, as Ban Ki-moon did from 2007 to 2016. South Korea has another six months left in its third two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and has also served several rotating terms on the UN Human Rights Council.

Meanwhile, North Korea is more formidable in 2025 than it was the last time a pro-engagement South Korean administration was in power three years ago. North Korean troops are fighting alongside Russian troops in Ukraine, and Pyongyang is supplying much-needed ammunition and military equipment to Moscow. This gives North Korea greater

influence with Russia. At the same time, the Trump administration's deteriorating relationship with China over trade and tariff squabbles has likely led to a more cordial relationship between China and North Korea.

Washington's bull-in-the-china-shop approach to international relations with friend and foe alike compounds the difficulty for Seoul. Statements from President Lee have emphasized the importance of South Korea's relationships with the United States and Japan. At his first press conference after assuming the presidency, Lee spelled out his perspective in seeking progress with North Korea: "Based on the basic foundation of our alliance with the U.S. and our trilateral cooperation with the U.S. and Japan, we will pursue dialogue, communication and cooperation based on strong capacity for national defense."

### **Conclusion**

Early moves by the Lee administration indicate a deliberate effort to improve relations with Pyongyang. South Korea's new approach builds upon the legacy of earlier engagement efforts but unfolds in a markedly different environment, one in which North Korea is more assertive abroad, less receptive to dialogue, and views the South as a separate state. It remains to be seen whether this shift will lead to meaningful progress in inter-Korean relations, but the new administration in Seoul appears committed to testing the waters.

*Robert King is a Non-Resident Distinguished Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America. The views expressed here are the author's alone.*

*Photo from the Republic of Korea [via Flickr](#).*

*KEI is registered under the FARA as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the government of the Republic of Korea. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.*

---

**Return to the Peninsula**

[Tweet](#)

[Share](#)

[Share](#)

[Email](#)