



## THE PENINSULA

### **What Lee Jae Myung's Washington Debut Says About South Korea's Foreign Policy**

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On August 24–25, new South Korean President Lee Jae Myung made his first official visit to the United States, meeting U.S. President Donald Trump and visiting the Hanwha Philly Shipyard to highlight U.S.-South Korea cooperation in the shipbuilding industry. For Trump, this was (ironically) the second time welcoming a progressive South Korean president to the White House after the country experienced unprecedented political upheaval and the impeachment of a conservative president.

Bilateral tensions ran high ahead of Lee's visit. Both countries hoped to finalize discussions on a broad range of issues, including the trade and investment deal reached in July, as well as alliance modernization-related issues such as strategic flexibility for United States Forces Korea (USFK) and appropriate levels of defense spending. Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Hyun traveled to Washington, DC, ahead of Lee to try to smooth the runway, while three senior presidential advisors, including the chief of staff—who rarely travels with a president—accompanied the president for his visit. But the big surprise came hours before the summit, when Trump claimed there were “vicious raids on church by the new government,” including a U.S. military base in South Korea. Trump's post on [Truth Social](#) about a “Purge or Revolution” cast a chilling shadow for Lee to walk into.

But Lee's Oval Office meeting with Trump was successful. Much to the relief of the delegation, there was no “[Zelensky Moment](#).” Trump and Lee showed good chemistry and built a positive relationship. Lee was well-prepared for his meeting with Trump. His

initial remarks, which touched on Trump's interests and focus—starting with the redecoration of the Oval Office in gold, “Make America Great Again,” the “renaissance” in U.S. manufacturing industries, and Trump's peacemaking role around the world—strongly appealed to Trump and lightened the atmosphere in the room. Trump responded with a warm reception of Lee and explicitly noted that the United States and South Korea need each other.

### Key Takeaways

A key takeaway from the bilateral meeting is that Lee successfully elicited Trump's willingness and support for restarting dialogue with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. This is crucial for South Korea, especially when the United States has been reconfiguring its focus toward China, and the opportunity to engage North Korea narrows. Both Trump and Lee also affirmed their alignment on North Korea policy, with Trump explicitly endorsing Lee's approach toward North Korea.

Another takeaway was the affirmation by both leaders of U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation, which began under the first Trump administration but which Trump rarely spoke about, perhaps due to his preference for engaging countries bilaterally. However, his positive response to Lee's overture to Japan and recent meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba to improve the bilateral relationship sends a promising signal that trilateral cooperation could assume new momentum under Trump 2.0.

But despite a successful first meeting, Seoul cannot be complacent. First and foremost, the U.S. and South Korean governments have not released a joint statement or joint fact sheet as of this writing. This runs contrary to Japan, Italy, and other countries that released one soon after their leaders' meetings with Trump and suggests there is still daylight between the United States and South Korea on one or more issues. Hard negotiations will likely continue at the working level.

Trump stated that the two countries will honor the trade deal made in July; however, this deal has not been finalized in writing, and it is unclear whether the two leaders were able to hash out important details, including issues related to rice and beef. Lee also **announced** that South Korea will increase its defense spending, but the government has not released precise details.

Another key takeaway from the summit is that Lee's pragmatic diplomacy is yet to be tested. Although he broke with precedent and visited Japan before the United States—an attempt to flex his policy pragmatism and highlight the importance he places on U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation—China will be the real test for the new president's foreign policy.

Earlier this month, the United States **announced a ceasefire** in its latest trade war with China, and Trump has stated that the two countries have a good relationship. But the trajectory of U.S.-China competition is unlikely to change. There is a bipartisan view in Washington that China is a pacing threat to the United States, and the Department of Defense wants to shift the focus and role of USFK to help deter this threat. Trump's softened remarks on China are driven in part by his desire to cut a trade deal and secure a “win” he can sell domestically, but also by China's effective weaponization of critical minerals (rare earth magnets) that could paralyze key U.S. manufacturing industries, such as electric vehicles and smartphones.

In a [speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) after his Oval Office meeting, Lee stated that South Korea's reliance on the United States for security and China for the economy is no longer feasible amid intensifying U.S.-China competition, hinting at a departure from the strategic ambiguity embraced by his predecessors. He also added that South Korea cannot deviate from U.S. policy when supply chains are readjusted, while simultaneously highlighting the importance of managing South Korea's relations with China due to their geographical proximity. Whether Trump and Lee had a private conversation about South Korea's China policy is unclear. However, expectations are high in both Washington and Beijing that they can make traction with the new administration in Seoul. As a result, a dual-hedging strategy could become increasingly dangerous and may backfire as U.S.-China competition intensifies.

The third takeaway from the Trump-Lee summit is that the ball is now in North Korea's court, with Trump suggesting that he would like to meet Kim. It remains uncertain whether North Korea will take advantage of that opportunity, especially because of its ever-growing closeness with Russia. Additionally, North Korea has repeatedly emphasized that denuclearization is a non-starter. This means the Trump administration needs to offer something other than denuclearization to get Kim to the negotiation table.

In addition, Lee put Trump in the driving seat by expressing his willingness to play a role as "pacemaker" and help Trump become a "peacemaker" on the Korean Peninsula. It is not clear if this is the best position for South Korea, given the possibility that the Trump administration might strike a deal that jeopardizes the country's national interests. But Lee's remarks seem to reflect a reality that his government faces vis-à-vis North Korea, given its refusal to sit down with South Korea.

Overall, U.S.-South Korea relations under Trump and Lee are off to a good start. However, what is crucial for both countries moving forward is substantive discussions and agreements in writing. There will be both opportunities and challenges ahead for the two countries.

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*Photo from the [White House](#).*

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**Return to the Peninsula**