

# [Column] Korea's Lee was right to skip the NATO summit

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**The leaders of Japan and Australia opted not to attend the summit, just like Lee, which should give the US something to ponder**



President Lee Jae-myung presides over a Cabinet meeting at the presidential office in Seoul's Yongsan District on June 19, 2025. (pool photo)



**By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University**

Korean President Lee Jae-myung's decision not to attend the 2025 NATO summit in The Hague on June 24-25 aroused considerable controversy.

Lawmakers from the main opposition People Power Party slammed the decision as a "diplomatic catastrophe" and accused Lee of bowing to North Korea's preferences in his foreign policy.

"The decision damaged trust in the alliance and weakened our position in foreign policy and

national security. It represents the abandonment of strategic solidarity,” protested lawmaker Na Kyung-won of the People Power Party.

Some conservative newspapers staked out critical editorial positions, voicing concerns that Lee’s no-show at the NATO summit might harm Korea’s national interest.

Korean Peninsula experts in Washington have also added their two cents.

Sydney Seiler, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, interpreted the decision as reflecting Korea’s weakening appetite for expanding defense cooperation with Europe.

A few conservative-minded figures have also voiced reservations that Korea, under Lee, is acting like a non-allied state and is defecting from the liberal democratic front.

Georgetown University professor Victor Cha offered the bizarre analysis that Lee’s visit may have been thwarted by diehard progressive forces in Korea at a time when NATO is stepping up efforts to counter China.

I don’t buy these arguments.

First of all, the NATO summit is an event at which the leaders of 32 countries charged with defending the North Atlantic gather together to deal with pressing issues. But let’s be clear: Korea does not have an alliance with NATO.

It’s true that the leaders of four countries in the Indo-Pacific — namely, Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand — were invited to the 2022 summit in Madrid. But that invitation was an emergency response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and those four countries were merely observers, with no influence on the NATO agenda.

I have my doubts about whether Korea’s leader really needs to play such a minor role at the yearly meeting. Given the new administration’s domestic agenda, the conflict in Iran, and the overall nature of the Hague summit, surely it was sufficient to dispatch Wi Sung-lac, who serves as the director of the National Security Office.

Second, Lee would have struggled to justify attendance on a policy level. Fundamentally speaking, NATO regards Russia as the biggest threat and treats China, North Korea and Iran as countries sympathetic to Russia. Furthermore, NATO has stepped up cooperation of various kinds with Korea and other countries in the Indo-Pacific as it seeks to encircle Russia and China with a liberal democratic coalition.

Under the banner of “values diplomacy,” former Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was an enthusiastic proponent of those efforts and attended the NATO summit for three years in a row, in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

But Lee’s Democratic Party questioned Yoon’s actions, claiming they risked weakening relations with China and Russia without providing any actual foreign policy benefits. Given the Democratic Party’s serious concerns about the alignment of Northeast Asia into blocs reminiscent of the Cold War, Lee’s no-show at the summit was entirely predictable.

Third, the Lee administration advocates a pragmatic foreign policy based on the national interest. Ideals are important, of course, but Lee would have attended the summit if there was something concrete to be gained. Instead, this was a summit where more was to be lost than gained.

Pundits listed ostensible benefits such as a stronger alliance with the US, potential support from NATO in the case of a war, defense industry cooperation, nuclear power and opportunities for summit diplomacy.

But all those benefits amount to hopeful speculation. In fact, Yoon had little, if anything, to show for his attendance at NATO summits over the past three years.

Furthermore, a chief item on the agenda of this summit was increasing defense spending by NATO member states. In the end, NATO members (except for Spain) promised US President Donald Trump that they would increase their defense spending to 5% of gross domestic product by 2035.

If Lee had been in attendance, he would likely have come under pressure to sign onto that commitment. He would also have been pressured to side with NATO on other points of the agenda, including support for Ukraine and condemnation of Iran — matters that may be out of step with Lee's vision of pragmatic foreign policy.

Finally, and despite these considerations of abstract purpose and concrete advantage, I believe Lee would have attended the summit as long as he had a definite opportunity for a tête-à-tête with Trump. But Trump was planning to only spend one day at the summit, on June 25, and then leave the Netherlands.

Given the doubtful prospects of a meeting, Lee had no convincing reason to jet off for The Hague, especially since he would have faced withering political attacks at home if he'd returned without a summit with Trump.

In short, Lee made the right call. It was an eminently reasonable choice based on common sense and cold logic.

Lee's decision not to attend despite diplomatic protocol and considerable pressure from his advisers is a testament to his diplomatic courage.

The leaders of Japan and Australia opted not to attend the summit, just like Lee, which I think will give the US something to ponder.

It looks like Korea has finally elected a president who does foreign policy right.

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