

- **Politics & Security**

Seoul's Diplomatic Tightrope: Between Tokyo, Trump, and North Korea



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|| Former presidential advisor deciphers South Korea's high-stakes diplomacy between Tokyo, Washington, and the looming shadow of North Korea.



President Lee Jae-myung and the First Lady board their flight to the G7 Summit on June 18. (©Lee Jae-myung/FB)

South Korean President Lee Jae-myung's first diplomatic stop in Tokyo, not Washington, surprised many observers last month. For a leader whose core base still seethes over historical grievances with Japan, it signaled a measured turn toward pragmatism.

Days later, Lee was in the Oval Office, facing the familiar brew of tariffs, alliance angst, and the challenges of Trumpian caprice. Defying apprehensions at home and in Washington, however, Lee kept a steady hand, reaffirming and promising to expand the traditional alliance with the US.

Meanwhile, North Korea remains the perennial shadow. Though the new South Korean president seeks to reopen channels with Pyongyang, the regional calculus has been complicated by the regime's deepening ties with Moscow.

JAPAN Forward recently spoke with [Moon Chung-in](#), professor emeritus at Yonsei University and former special adviser to President Moon Jae-in, to unpack these evolving geopolitical dynamics.

What is your assessment of the Ishiba-Lee summit on August 23?

As many Japanese media outlets called it, the meeting was a "pleasant surprise." It is unprecedented for a South Korean president to visit Tokyo ahead of Washington, especially given the number of pending issues between the two East Asian countries.



PM Ishiba welcomes South Korean President Lee to Tokyo. (Courtesy of the Cabinet Secretariat)

Perhaps more noteworthy were the things left unsaid. At the summit, Lee made no mention of historical grievances, a highly unusual move. Instead, he focused on the future, emphasizing the importance of normalizing relations with Japan in a constructive manner.

Though old grievances could flare again, for the moment, it was, in my view, a successful opening for both leaders.

Where do you see the relationship heading from here?

The two leaders agreed to resume shuttle diplomacy, which had been suspended for months following former President Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment and ouster. Once this regular exchange of visits is restored, consultations will become more routine, helping both sides manage differences more smoothly.

Lee met with Trump on August 25. Many in Seoul were apprehensive at first. Did South Korea manage to hold its ground?

The summit reinforced the South Korea-South Korea alliance and created some optimism for renewed American involvement in denuclearization and peace-building on the Korean Peninsula. Given President Trump's hard-nosed negotiating style, it was fortunate that more sensitive issues such as tariffs, investment, and alliance modernization were essentially deferred to working-level talks.

That said, there are considerable challenges ahead. The devil is in the details, as we say. Washington pledged to cut reciprocal tariffs on South Korea from 25% to 15%,

but duties on Korean automobiles remain at 25%, and tariffs on semiconductors and pharmaceuticals are unresolved.



US President Donald Trump (right) meets with South Korean President Lee Jae-myung at the White House in Washington on Aug. 25. (©Lee Jae-myung FB)

Trump's recent executive order reducing tariffs on Japanese automobiles to 15%, a move widely seen as disadvantaging our auto industry, has also stirred trepidation at home.

The investment aspect is equally thorny. Washington has announced a \$350 billion USD "economic security fund," with President Trump personally overseeing the investment decisions and redistributing 90% of the profits to Americans. Officials in Seoul find these terms unacceptable. Bridging this divide will be very difficult.

How do you read the discord surrounding Seoul's pledged investment package within the broader trade deal?

The US anticipates that South Korea will come up with a total of \$350 billion in the form of an up-front investment fund and that President Trump himself will allocate the fund in accordance with his own preference. But the South Korean government seems to have a different way of thinking.

Of \$350 billion, \$150 billion would go to the shipbuilding sector and the remainder to semiconductor, nuclear power, battery, bio, and critical mineral sectors. And Seoul thinks that it would come up with only 5% of such investment in the form of equity participation, but 95% will be in the form of loans and loan guarantees by its banking and financial institutions. Thus, there is a huge gap between Seoul and Washington.

South Korean law and political reality will make it very difficult for the Lee government to accommodate President Trump's demands. Any use of taxpayer money would, of course, require parliamentary approval.

How did Lee handle US demands to modernize the alliance?

There were no detailed discussions, but President Lee did signal that South Korea could increase defense spending from the current 2.6% of the domestic GDP to assume greater responsibility for its own defense. This implies that US Forces Korea would serve more as a supporting role, potentially reducing South Korea's defense cost-sharing obligations.



Japan's Chief of Staff Gen. Yoshihide Yoshida (right), South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Kim Myung-soo (center), and US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Daniel Caine pose for a photo during the trilateral defense chiefs' meeting at JCS headquarters in Seoul, on July 11.

At the same time, Lee made clear that South Korea does not agree to Washington's demands for "strategic flexibility" of its own forces, meaning an arbitrary in-and-out of American forces there. Lee also does not concede to the idea of obligatory involvement of South Korean troops in regional conflicts such as the contingencies in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

North Korea was also on the agenda. What direction do you expect North Korea policy to take under Lee and Trump?

Inter-Korean relations have been frozen for the past several years. Pyongyang has declared the South an enemy state and cut off all contact. Against this backdrop, President Lee appealed to Trump, who maintains a certain level of personal rapport with Kim Jong Un, to take the initiative.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un attend an official welcoming ceremony at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang on June 19, 2024. (©Sputnik/Gavriil Grigorov/Pool via Reuters)

By calling Trump a "peacemaker," Lee was urging Washington to help de-escalate military tensions on the peninsula and move from an armistice toward a peace regime.

Trump expressed willingness to meet Kim this year, but whether Pyongyang will respond positively is unclear. It would likely require dramatic proposals, such as easing sanctions or normalizing relations between the US and North Korea. Without progress there, inter-Korea dialogue will remain stalled as well.

There are growing concerns about burgeoning ties between Russia and North Korea. How serious is this?

It's indeed worrying. Last year, Moscow and Pyongyang signed a new treaty that essentially makes them mutual defense allies: if either is attacked, the other is obligated to intervene.

As for the transfer of advanced military technologies — ICBM reentry, multiple-warhead systems, hyper supersonic missiles, intelligence satellites, or nuclear submarines — I have yet to see concrete evidence that Russia has provided them.

North Korea will certainly seek to obtain these technologies. That is why South Korea and Japan need to work together to dissuade Russia. At the same time, lowering tensions on the peninsula is critical, so that Pyongyang has less incentive to pursue them.