



# South Korea's Foreign Policy After Regime Change: The Rise of Pragmatic Diplomacy

Eun Hee Woo





## Summary

This article examines the transformation of South Korea’s foreign policy following the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol and the rise of President Lee Jae-myung. It argues that South Korean foreign policy can be understood through four relational “mirrors”: North Korea, the United States, Japan, and China, each of which has historically shaped South Korean national identity and continues to influence political divisions. Under Yoon, foreign policy was framed as “values-based diplomacy,” aligning South Korea with the U.S.-led liberal order, strengthening trilateral security cooperation with Japan, and taking a firmer stance toward North Korea and China. His declaration of martial law, widely viewed as contradicting the democratic values he espoused, intensified domestic divisions and deepened the crisis within the conservative camp. In contrast, Lee has advanced pragmatic diplomacy prioritizing national interest and economic stability. While maintaining the U.S.–Japan–South Korea framework, his administration seeks to recalibrate relations with major powers and manage domestic anti-China sentiment. This shift not only reflects the growing strain within South Korea’s conservative camp but may intensify it. If Lee succeeds in stabilizing the economy and reinforcing South Korea’s standing as a middle power, segments of the moderate conservative electorate may gradually gravitate toward Lee’s Democratic Party, reshaping South Korea’s political landscape and its foreign policy trajectory.



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## Introduction: Korean Foreign Policy Captured by Political Polarisation

At around 10:30 p.m. on 3 December 2024, conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol (2022–2025) shocked the world by declaring martial law. He accused the opposition-dominated National Assembly of sabotaging his agenda, and engaging in “pro-North Korean” and “anti-state” behaviour that threatened the liberal-democratic system. The decision sparked overnight protests and led lawmakers to break into the barricaded Assembly building to pass a vote rejecting martial law. Within hours, Yoon rescinded the declaration. He was later impeached and imprisoned, leaving the country politically shaken.

These events deepened South Korean polarisation. Yoon’s supporters framed his actions as a necessary defence against perceived threats from the left. Opponents condemned them as a regression to authoritarian rule. Yoon had positioned South Korea as a defender of democratic values, aligning with US policy on China and the western stance on Russia. His resort to martial law was therefore deeply unsettling for both domestic audiences and international partners.<sup>1</sup>

In South Korea’s presidential system, foreign policy is profoundly shaped by the president’s ideological orientation and political base. It functions not only as external strategy, but also as an arena for

projecting identity and consolidating domestic legitimacy.

Amid intensifying US–China rivalry, South Korea faces growing pressure to choose a side. At the same time, the country’s complex relationships with North Korea and Japan continue to shape the nation’s collective identity. Within this configuration, conservatives have long mobilised *anti-communism* and *pro-US* alignment, whereas progressives have emphasised *inter-Korean dialogue* and *assertive diplomacy towards Japan*.

Against this backdrop, the impeachment of Yoon Suk-yeol and the rise of progressive President Lee Jae-myung raise pressing questions: How will South Korea’s foreign policy evolve under Lee’s leadership? Will Lee, as Yoon warned, make unconditional gestures of dialogue to North Korea? Will he attempt to pivot the country’s diplomatic axis from Washington to Beijing? Will he reverse the recent improvement in relations with Japan, returning once again to a state of friction?

## The Four Mirrors of Korean Foreign Policy

South Korea’s foreign policy orientation has been shaped by its turbulent modern history. After gaining independence from Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), the Korean Peninsula was soon divided following the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1953). During the Cold War, the United States

<sup>1</sup> Josh Smith et al., “South Korea’s Allies Cheered Yoon’s Foreign Policy, Ignored Domestic Discord,” Asia Pacific, Reuters, December 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south->

[korea-allies-cheered-yoons-foreign-policy-ignored-domestic-discord-2024-12-19/](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-allies-cheered-yoons-foreign-policy-ignored-domestic-discord-2024-12-19/).



viewed South Korea as a strategic outpost and a frontline state in its efforts to contain China and the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, South Korea was among the poorest countries in the world, but under the US security umbrella and with close economic relations with Japan, it achieved rapid industrialisation and economic growth under an authoritarian political system. The success of the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s brought an end to authoritarianism and ushered in a new democratic political order.

South Korea's development as a country is thus closely tied to its relations with its neighbours. It is useful to think of North Korea, the United States, Japan and China not merely as South Korea's diplomatic counterparts, but as four mirrors through which South Korean national identity is shaped. One's view of these countries largely depends on which side of South Korea's political divide you stand. In this sense, these four countries act as mirrors reflecting the political divide inside South Korea.

### **North Korea: A security threat or a blood-bound brother?**

For South Koreans, North Korea is both an entity that shares the same ethnic roots and a persistent security threat armed with a nuclear arsenal. The Korean War, initiated by North Korea's invasion and still technically unresolved, became the historical foundation on which successive authoritarian presidents constructed *anti-communism* as the state's core ideology and a central tool of political legitimacy. For conservatives who inherited this legacy, North Korea remains a major military threat.

A long history of deadly skirmishes between the two Koreas underpins the argument of conservatives that military deterrence is indispensable for maintaining peace. Moreover, the erosion of perceived ethnic bonds with North Korea has reinforced the tendency of younger South Koreans to view it primarily as a security threat.

Progressives, by contrast, view themselves as heirs to the democratisation movement and approach North Korea as a partner in dialogue and reconciliation. The past three progressive presidents have taken conciliatory approaches to the North aimed at building peace through engagement. Conservatives have criticised these policies as *idealistic appeasement* that endangers national security or, in their most extreme rhetoric, as acts that border on *treason*.

### **The United States: A symbol of freedom or dependency?**

The United States played a decisive role in ending Japan's colonial rule and defending South Korea during the Korean War, anchoring the country within the US-led capitalist bloc and supporting its postwar recovery. However, the alliance has never been fully symmetrical. In exchange for security guarantees and economic aid, South Korea contributed heavily to US-led Cold War efforts, including the deployment of approximately 320,000 troops during the Vietnam War (1964–1973). This asymmetry remains embedded in the alliance structure, most visibly in the continued US control over operational command of South Korean forces in wartime.



Within this framework, conservatives tend to view the United States as the ultimate guarantor of freedom and security, while progressives seek a more autonomous and equal partnership that reduces South Korea's strategic dependence on Washington.

### **Japan: A future partner or a perpetual aggressor?**

Japan is a vital partner in South Korea's security and economy, but also a lasting source of mistrust rooted in unresolved memories of colonial rule. Under US pressure, South Korea normalised diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, but the move was deeply unpopular domestically where many harboured resentment against their former rulers. The voices of colonial victims, which were excluded from the 1965 normalisation process, resurfaced after South Korea's democratisation when testimonies about forced labour and military sexual slavery under Japanese rule became widespread. While successive Japanese governments have issued apologies, historical revisionism among some right-wing politicians who seek to justify colonial rule continues to fuel anger in South Korea. Japan's increasing defence spending and expanding military role have also led to concerns about Japan's remilitarisation in neighbouring countries.

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<sup>2</sup> The Chosun Daily, "What China's Northeast Project Is All About," The Chosun Daily, 30 2009, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2008/05/30/NEGI5IWCD7LC66IVGCZL7V3ANI/>.

<sup>3</sup> Xie Ying, "Nationalism and Cultural Identity: Unravelling Disputes over Culture Ownership between China and South Korea," *Asia Review* 13, no. 3 (2023):

In this context, South Korean conservatives have sought to build a future-oriented relationship with Japan through swift resolution of historical disputes, whereas progressives have maintained that genuine reflection and heartfelt apology for past wrongs must precede reconciliation.

### **China: An uneasy giant or a vital neighbour?**

Its immediate proximity means that China has always represented a diplomatic dilemma. Since diplomatic relations were established in 1992, trade and tourism have grown rapidly, creating deep economic interdependence. However, this has been accompanied by persistent security and political frictions rooted in China's alliance with North Korea and competing historical narratives. Tensions escalated sharply after the 2016 deployment of a US-South Korea missile defence system, leading China, citing security concerns, to impose informal economic sanctions that damaged South Korea's retail and tourism sectors. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in China, together with disputes over history<sup>2</sup> and cultural heritage,<sup>3</sup> have intensified anti-China sentiment in South Korea. Recent surveys show that more than 80 percent of South Koreans have an unfavourable view of China.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, South Korean conservatives have mobilised anti-China sentiment to rally

271–312, <https://doi.org/10.24987/SNUACAR.2023.12.13.3.271>.

<sup>4</sup> Seung-woo Kang, "Anti-China Sentiment Overshadows 30th Anniversary of Korea-China Ties," *Foreign Affairs*, The Korea Times, August 23, 2022, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20220823/anti-china-sentiment-overshadows-30th-anniversary-of-korea-china-ties>.



their base, whereas progressives view China as an indispensable source of South Korea's future growth and therefore seek stable bilateral relations.

## **From Yoon to Lee: A Shift from Ideology to Pragmatism**

### **The Contrasting Backgrounds of Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung**

The lives of Yoon Suk-yeol and Lee Jae-myung mirror South Korea's conservative–progressive divide. Raised in an affluent family, Yoon was trained as a career prosecutor and gained national attention by investigating corruption scandals involving former presidents. He entered politics as an outsider and rose rapidly to the presidency with an image as a tough, principled figure who refused to bow to those in power. Backed by the organisational machinery of the People Power Party, which was seeking a presidential candidate with broad popular appeal, he became the conservative bloc's natural standard-bearer.

By contrast, Lee Jae-myung rose from a deeply disadvantaged background, having worked in factories after school and suffered a permanent arm injury in an industrial accident that shaped his path to becoming a human rights lawyer. As Mayor of Seongnam and Governor of Gyeonggi Province, he built a strong popular base through welfare

expansion and fiscal discipline. After losing the 2022 presidential election to Yoon, Lee consolidated control over the Democratic Party, positioning himself for a return to power following Yoon's impeachment. These contrasting career trajectories seem to have shaped their distinct approaches to foreign policy.

### **Yoon Suk-yeol's Value-Based Diplomacy**

The Yoon administration placed "values-based diplomacy" at the core of its foreign policy. In viewing the US–China rivalry as the opening phase of a new Cold War, Yoon sought to redefine South Korea as a "global pivotal state" aligned with the US-led liberal order.<sup>5</sup> His government emphasised democracy, human rights and security cooperation with like-minded partners, while strengthening the US-Japan-South Korea security framework. This orientation was symbolically expressed through Yoon's participation in the 2022 NATO Summit, his address to the US Congress in 2023,<sup>6</sup> and Seoul's hosting of the Third Summit for Democracy in 2024.<sup>7</sup>

A key pillar of Yoon's values-based diplomacy was improvement in relations with Japan. He promoted what he called a "future-oriented" approach that prioritised strategic cooperation over unresolved historical issues and the voices of victim groups, even at the

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<sup>5</sup> Sook Jong Lee, "Strengthening South Korean Value Diplomacy for U.S.-South Korean Normative Alignment," Council on Foreign Relations, August 1, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/strengthening-south-korean-value-diplomacy-us-south-korean-normative-alignment>.

<sup>6</sup> Mi-na Kim, "S. Korean president hammers home alliance's basis in 'freedom' in speech to US Congress,"

Hankyoreh, April 28, 2023, [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/1089853.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1089853.html).

<sup>7</sup> Reuters, "Explainer: Why Is South Korea Hosting a 'Summit for Democracy'?", Reuters, March 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/why-is-south-korea-hosting-summit-democracy-2024-03-18/>.



cost of a domestic backlash.<sup>8</sup> For Yoon, restoring trust with Tokyo was essential to building a stronger trilateral security framework capable of responding to North Korea and broader regional challenges.<sup>9</sup>

Yoon translated this alignment into a more institutionalised deterrence posture through joint missile-defence exercises and a Camp David summit in 2023, where US President Joe Biden, Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida and Yoon pledged to formalise security coordination. This approach coincided with a sharp deterioration in inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang escalated military provocations<sup>10</sup> and cut communication channels, while Kim Jong-un formally abandoned North Korea's long-standing reunification policy by declaring that North and South Koreans were no longer "the same people",<sup>11</sup> marking a new phase of confrontation on the peninsula.

### **Lee Jae-Myung's Pragmatic Diplomacy**

In contrast to Yoon Suk-yeol's values-based diplomacy, President Lee Jae-myung has pursued a pragmatic approach that

prioritises national interests and policy flexibility. From his first presidential campaign in 2022 through to the 2025 election, Lee framed inter-Korean economic cooperation not as a step towards unification, but as a tool for South Korea's own economic growth. He consistently emphasised that peace should be treated as a prerequisite for economic stability just as much as a moral ideal.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike previous progressive presidents, Lee has shown little attachment to the notion of unification. In his 2025 keynote speech at the UN General Assembly, he articulated what became known as the END Initiative, short for Exchange, Normalisation and Denuclearisation, often described as a "peaceful two-state" framework that accepts the two Koreas as separate political entities.<sup>13</sup> While conservatives criticised this approach as one that risks entrenching permanent division, it reflects a growing domestic and international recognition of the peninsula's political reality.

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<sup>8</sup> Ji-hyun Bae and Hyeong-cheol Shin, "Yoon reassures Japan that forced labor deal won't be reversed down the line," Hankyoreh, March 16, 2023, [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/1083932.html](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1083932.html).

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Ukraine, China Main Focus as South Korean President Visits White House," The Washington Post, April 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/24/south-korea-president-yoon-biden-summit/>.

<sup>10</sup> Josh Smith and Soo-Hyang Choi, "North Korea Fires 23 Missiles, One Landing off South Korean Coast for First Time," Asia Pacific, Reuters, November 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-fires-ballistic-missile-says-south-korean-military-2022-11-02/>.

<sup>11</sup> Justin McCurry, "Unification with South Korea No Longer Possible, Says Kim Jong-Un," World News, The Guardian, January 16, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/16/unification-with-south-korea-no-longer-possible-says-kim-jong-un>.

<sup>12</sup> Eun Hee Woo and Ulv Hanssen, "Lee Jae-Myung's Realist Approach to North Korea," The National Interest, June 27, 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/lee-jae-myungs-realist-approach-to-north-korea>.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, "President Lee Jae-Myung's Keynote Speech at the 80th United Nations General Assembly," September 24, 2025, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m\\_28650/view.do?seq=28](https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_28650/view.do?seq=28).



Japan initially reacted with caution when Lee took office in 2025,<sup>14</sup> fearing a return to historical disputes under a progressive government. Lee, however, signalled a more pragmatic line by pledging to manage historical and territorial issues in a principled manner while expanding forward-looking cooperation in other arenas.<sup>15</sup> He reinforced this message by visiting Japan before the United States and restoring shuttle diplomacy. Notably, this has continued even under the more nationalist leadership of Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. Although it is still early to judge, Lee currently has little political incentive to risk renewed confrontation with Japan.

### **The China Challenge**

For President Lee, the key challenge lies in managing strong anti-China sentiment at home while maintaining good economic and political relations with Beijing. Yoon was firmly aligned with the US-led anti-China bloc, making this tension far less acute, as his government joined the Chip 4 Alliance on supply chain cooperation and openly framed the Taiwan issue as a global security concern.<sup>16</sup>

Lee, by contrast, has sought to revive tourism and economic ties with China. His decision to

temporarily allow visa-free entry for Chinese tourist groups from September 2025 to June 2026 is intended to support South Korea's retail and tourism sectors, but has provoked a domestic backlash. Opposition politicians and conservative groups warn of crime, illegal immigration and public health risks, and there have been anti-China rallies in Seoul. Lee responded by warning that those demonstrations exceeded the limits of free expression.<sup>17</sup>

Lee's China policy thus reflects a dual logic: pragmatic economic engagement abroad and risk management of public opinion at home. It also signals a shift from rigid bloc politics to a more flexible diplomacy designed to preserve South Korea's strategic autonomy. Deep-seated public mistrust of China is unlikely to change any time soon, however, regardless of diplomatic adjustments. This limits the political room available for any South Korean administration seeking stable relations with China.

### **The Deepening Crisis of the Conservatives**

South Korea's conservatives, long associated with economic growth, national security and

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<sup>14</sup> The Asahi Shimbun, "Tokyo Hopes Lee Will Take Softer Stance and Value Ties with Japan," The Asahi Shimbun, June 4, 2025, <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15820207>.

<sup>15</sup> Eun-bin Kim, "Lee Jae-Myung Pledges to Restore Inter-Korean Hotline, Strengthen U.S. Alliance," Korea JoongAng Daily, May 26, 2025, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-05-26/national/politics/Lee-Jaemyung-pledges-to-restore-interKorean-hotline-strengthen-US-alliance/2315487>.

<sup>16</sup> Soyoung Kim et al., "Exclusive: South Korea's Yoon Opens Door for Possible Military Aid to Ukraine," Asia Pacific, Reuters, April 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-opens-door-possible-military-aid-ukraine-2023-04-19/>.

<sup>17</sup> Min-sö Kim, "Yi, panjung siwi-e 'pyohyön chayü nömötta' [Lee says anti-China protests have 'gone beyond freedom of expression.'],'" Ch'osönilbo [The Chosunilbo], August 13, 2025, [https://www.chosun.com/politics/north\\_korea/2025/08/13/S7YPL7WPKFEIDPQVXH6VS724WY/](https://www.chosun.com/politics/north_korea/2025/08/13/S7YPL7WPKFEIDPQVXH6VS724WY/).



alliance management, are suffering a profound identity crisis following the consecutive impeachments of two conservative presidents (Park Geun-hye and Yoon Suk-yeol). Once the country's political mainstream, the conservative camp is now increasingly marginalised, and its internal breakdown has begun to spill over into a broader crisis of democratic governance.

Segments of the conservative base have sought to justify Yoon's declaration of martial law as a necessary move to "educate" or "awaken" the left, portraying political opponents as ideologically misguided or illegitimate. They reject the results of recent elections lost by the conservative party as fraudulent and express their anger through acts of intimidation and violence directed at democratic institutions, notably the National Election Commission, the courts and the police.<sup>18</sup> At the parliamentary level, most lawmakers of the People Power Party boycotted votes to lift martial law and impeach the president, despite widespread criticism that they were evading their constitutional responsibilities. Ironically, these actions directly contradict the conservatives' long-standing self-image as "defenders of law and order".

Even after the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of democracy, South Korea's conservatives retained their anti-communist ideology originally constructed under authoritarian rule, repackaging it as the universal values of "liberal democracy" in order to delegitimise political rivals. Protests

against Yoon's impeachment, marked by the prominent display of US flags and appeals to Washington, revealed the persistence of this Cold War-era worldview, which has more recently been redirected towards China through xenophobic "anti-China" mobilisation framed as the defence of democracy and national security. Taken together, the defence of martial law and a reliance on externally oriented and exclusionary mobilisation are difficult to reconcile with the principles of liberal democracy and pluralism.

At the same time, a conservative identity centred on the US alliance is increasingly coming into tension with another core value: national security. During recent presidential primaries, several conservative candidates advocated for nuclear armament as a means of "autonomous defence". South Korea remains bound by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, however, and Washington has traditionally opposed any such move, although US President Donald J. Trump has been more ambiguous. This gap between alliance dependence and calls for strategic autonomy has further exposed the internal incoherence of the conservative camp.

Amid this fragmentation, on the international stage, President Lee Jae-myung has interestingly come to embody the very virtues traditionally claimed by conservatives. By successfully hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit and strengthening South Korea's

<sup>18</sup> In-sŏn Chŏng, "Sŏbujibŏp nandong 49 myŏng modu yujŏe: 'Chŏhanggwŏn-do pyohyŏn-ŭi chayu-do anin pŏngnyŏk.'" [All 49 defendants in the West District Court riot found guilty: 'Not the right to resist or

freedom of expression, but violence.']," Hankyŏre [The Hankyoreh], August 3, 2025, [https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/1211338.html](https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/1211338.html).



defence cooperation within the US-South Korea-Japan security framework, Lee has projected steady and credible leadership. His agreement with Trump on the construction of nuclear-powered submarines has further reinforced this image, linking enhanced defence cooperation with alliance-based economic bargaining.<sup>19</sup> The submarine negotiations unfolded alongside a widely discussed US-South Korea trade and investment agreement involving large South Korean investments in US industries. Although massive in scale, totalling approximately \$350 billion, these pledges were viewed in Seoul as comparatively modest relative to Japan's less generous terms and therefore received a relatively favourable domestic response.<sup>20</sup> As a result, disillusioned moderate conservatives, fatigued by the People Power Party's reflexive opposition, have begun to see Lee as following a more credible conservative path, while perceiving their own party as increasingly radical and disconnected.

As protectionism resurfaces globally, however, scepticism about the US-South Korea alliance is spreading within South Korea. A symbolic turning point occurred in September 2025, when more than 300 South Korean employees at an electric-vehicle battery plant in Georgia were detained by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency as if they were slaves in chains. Although they were released after a week, the incident left many South Koreans feeling

humiliated and highlighted an uncomfortable reality: the US will disregard South Korea's dignity when US interests are at stake. While Seoul will not abandon the alliance with Washington, public debate over its meaning and limits has intensified during Trump's second term, narrowing the political space traditionally occupied by conservatives reliant on pro-US rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Within this environment of shifting loyalties and global realignment, President Lee Jae-myung's pragmatic diplomacy has emerged as a reflection of South Korea's search for greater autonomy. His approach signals an attempt to recalibrate foreign relations according to national interest while balancing between the competing pressures of ideals and realities, liberalism and protectionism, and Washington and Beijing. Pragmatism thus represents not only a diplomatic strategy, but a broader effort to reposition South Korea within an evolving international order.

The sustainability of this effort, however, is far from guaranteed. Political polarisation remains severe and conservative forces could rapidly mobilise against Lee in the event of economic slowdown, real estate instability or widening inequality.<sup>21</sup> The defeat of the Moon Jae-in administration in 2022, despite its achievements on pandemic management and inter-Korean engagement, offers a

<sup>19</sup> Jake Kwon and Gavin Butler, "The US Will Help South Korea Build Nuclear 'attack' Submarines - Here's What That Means," BBC, November 16, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c620qppzlgwo>.

<sup>20</sup> Sang-Hun Choe and Daisuke Wakabayashi, "South Korea Says the United States Agreed to 15% Tariffs," The New York Times, October 29, 2025,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/29/us/politics/tariff-trump-south-korea-trade.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Eun Hee Woo, "South Korea Is Not a Liberal Country Yet," Democracy, East Asia Forum, June 3, 2020, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2020/06/03/south-korea-is-not-a-liberal-country-yet/>.



cautionary reminder of how quickly political tides can shift. Ultimately, the survival of Lee's foreign policy pragmatism will depend as much on domestic economic performance as on diplomatic success.

For European partners, a number of policy implications flow from these developments. South Korea's pragmatic diplomacy should not be misread as a departure from the democratic-capitalist camp; rather, its scope will remain within predictable limits. At the same time, Europe must recognise domestic polarisation in South Korea as a growing source of foreign policy volatility and incorporate South Korean political dynamics

into strategic risk assessments. Given the likelihood of sharp policy swings across electoral cycles, European governments would benefit from maintaining close engagement with both ruling and opposition actors to preserve continuity in bilateral cooperation. Finally, supporting South Korea's role as a stabilising middle power could serve European interests, particularly in areas such as supply chain coordination in strategic sectors (e.g., electric vehicle batteries and semiconductors), North Korea risk management, regional security dialogue and multilateral norm-setting.



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