FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 05.06.2025 | Mason Richey

A period of Seoul-searching

South Korea has elected liberal Lee Jae-myung as president. While uncertainties loom, the shift in leadership could open new doors for Europe

After six months of political turmoil due to former President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law and his subsequent impeachment and removal from office, South Korea now has a new president: Lee Jae-myung.

Beyond the country's domestic political and socio-economic challenges, Lee is assuming the presidency at a critical, unstable time in international affairs. South Korea faces a challenging strategic outlook on defence, security and diplomacy, all of which have languished during the presidential interregnum. US-South Korea relations are overshadowed by President Trump's tariff and trade policies as well as the possible refocusing of US forces. Japan is a valuable partner, but historical frictions loom in the background. North Korea has advanced its military – especially nuclear and missile – capabilities while signalling growing hostility. China is a major trade partner, but also an enabler of North Korea and a revisionist threat to regional stability. And the international rules-based order, in which South Korea has thrived, is in disarray.

Bluntly stated, Seoul's allies are worried – both in the US and Europe – about the possible direction Lee might steer South Korea in international affairs. At various points, the new president has signalled an overly accommodating approach toward China and seemingly questioned whether a Taiwan Strait contingency – despite its major trade ramifications – should concern South Korea. There are also concerns about Lee's history of interest in rapprochement with North Korea, which might undermine international efforts to hold Pyongyang accountable for violating the WMD non-proliferation regime. On top of that, Lee also has a shaky record on the Russia-Ukraine war, having in part blamed Ukrainian President Zelenskyy for the war, and hinting that South Korea's interest in the conflict is primarily about reconstruction contracts in Ukraine and re-normalising trade relations with Russia.

To be fair, some of these positions are dated, and Lee's campaign rhetoric

evolved to pragmatically acknowledge a changed international order with a more openly convergent and threatening China-Russia-North Korea axis. Time will tell if his campaign rhetoric holds.

Implications for Europe

From a European perspective, an additional preoccupation is that Lee and his foreign policy team may neglect middle powers in general and Europe in particular. For numerous reasons – including a focus on inter-Korean affairs, where Europe has little influence – this is a longstanding issue for South Korea's progressive senior officials. Lee's Democratic Party is no exception, and if past practice holds, Europe may find itself downgraded in the graces of the Lee administration.

So, considering the foregoing, how should Europe evaluate and respond to Lee's approach to international affairs?

It would be a positive sign if Lee chose to send a personal confidant for a swing through Europe quickly.

An initial chance to gauge the bandwidth of Lee's foreign policy may be to consider whether he chooses to replicate a decision by his predecessors, presidents Yoon and Moon Jae-in: sending a post-election envoy to Europe. Yoon may have been disastrous domestically, but his foreign policy had positives, including an emphasis on relations with Europe. Discussions at meetings in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Paris covered both EU-South Korea and EU-NATO cooperation. Moon's team did something similar, sending a representative to Brussels and Berlin.

It would be a positive sign if Lee chose to send a personal confidant for a swing through Europe quickly. In addition to setting the tone and indicating Lee's intention to attend the late-June NATO summit in The Hague, agenda items could include reiterating commitment to the international rules-based order, free trade, non-proliferation, human rights, an acceptable peace for the Russia-Ukraine war and the various instruments of the EU-South Korea cooperation. Additionally, the two sides could discuss South Korea's plans for its final six months on the UN Security Council, coordinating to mitigate the downsides of the US-China great power rivalry and shared interests at the various multilateral summits scheduled for the second half of 2025. Ideally, mutual intentions for extending invitations for leader-level visits would be communicated.

Europe should hope to hear from Lee that the EU matters to him. It would also be encouraging to hear Lee's foreign and security policy team acknowledge the value of EU-South Korea cooperation mechanisms under the banner of the EU-South Korea strategic partnership: Framework Agreement, EU-Korea FTA, Crisis Management Agreement, Security and Defence Partnership, Digital Partnership, EU-Korea Strategic Dialogue, etc. Lee's appointment of the national security advisor, foreign minister and various senior officials will also provide information on how seriously he takes Europe. The EU should ascertain the influence of national security advisor Wi Sung-lac within the administration. The former South Korean ambassador to Russia has signalled that he values South Korea's relationship with Europe.

Europe should roll out the red carpet for Lee at the upcoming NATO summit.

A third barometer for Lee's interest in Europe is his handling of the upcoming summit 'season', featuring the G7 (mid-June), NATO leaders' summit (late-June), UN General Assembly (mid-September), APEC (hosted by South Korea at the end of October) and the G20 (late-November). Although South Korea is not a G7 member, it shares common interests. The European G7 states should monitor the Lee administration's outreach prior to the summit to get a sense of whether South Korea is in alignment regarding trade/tariffs, the Russia-Ukraine war and other issues. A crucial test will be whether Lee attends the NATO summit. As a NATO 'Global Partner' and member of the 'Indo-Pacific 4' (with Japan, Australia and New Zealand), South Korea has been represented at NATO summits at a leader level since 2022. Continuing to do so is low-hanging diplomatic fruit.

The UN General Assembly and G20 provide South Korea with opportunities to coordinate with European partners on global governance matters such as peace and security, the environment, trade and emerging technology. And as the host of the 2025 APEC summit, South Korea could also enhance its relations with the EU by inviting a European guest participant. France, with its extensive Pacific EEZ, would be an obvious choice, although someone from Germany or the UK, for example, would also be a valuable attendee. If Lee were to extend an invitation, it would indicate a global, Europe-friendly outlook on Indo-Pacific economic issues.

Beyond assessing the Lee administration, what else should Europe do? To start, if Lee does not send an envoy to Europe, the EU or a member state should consider sending an envoy instead. Second, the EU should vocalise the importance of the aforementioned EU-South Korea cooperation mechanisms, notably insisting on advancing the Security and Defence Partnership and the Strategic Dialogue. Third, Europe should roll out the red carpet for Lee at the upcoming NATO summit, including making time for meaningful bilateral meetings. Hinting that Lee's attendance might help potential South Korean weapons sales into the European market could be part of the equation also. Finally, in advance of the G20, the European members should coordinate with Seoul on issues susceptible to Trump's problematic influence, especially in the trade/economic portfolio.



Mason Richey
Seoul

Mason Richey is associate professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), editor-in-chief of the *Journal of East Asian Affairs* and president of the Korea International Studies Association.

-