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THE TRUMP-LEE SUMMIT: MIXED SIGNALS FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Under the Trump 2.0 administration, the world is experiencing an era of unpredictability, ongoing regional conflicts, the intensification of the United States-China competition, and the phasing out of the rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific. In addition to this, the recent tariff onslaughts by the US on its decade-old allies and partners alike have further complicated the global dynamics. This has garnered the attention and necessitated a more calibrated approach for traditional allies, such as South Korea, to deal with the US. Such an opportunity culminated last month, with a face-to-face summit on August 25, 2025, between US President Trump and newly elected South Korean President Lee Jae-Myung.¹

With the shared objective of denuclearising North Korea, the summit emphasised strengthening the bilateral alliance and a coordinated strategy to re-engage with North Korea. His faltering diplomacy elsewhere in the ongoing global conflicts, Trump showed keen interest in engaging with North Korea, claiming that 'he shares a very good relationship' with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un and that he 'knows him better than anybody'.² However, Kim Yong-Jo, Deputy Department Director of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), and Kim Jong-Un's sister, who holds a significant position in North Korea, reiterated in July this year that the US should accept North Korea as a 'nuclear state' for any possibility of engagement between the two nations.

The summit took place in light of the prior trade deal, which was finalised on July

30, 2025, and reduced the US tariffs on South Korean exports from 25 per cent to 15 per cent.³ South Korea, in return, had already committed to reviving the decaying US shipbuilding industry with an investment of USD 150 billion in shipbuilding cooperation and USD 350 billion in investments from Korean companies to the US, including USD 100 billion in liquefied natural gas (LNG). With respect to defence spending, South Korea plans to allocate 2.32 per cent of its GDP for 2025 to modernise its warfare capabilities.⁴

The Trump 2.0 approach in the Indo-Pacific and towards regional commitments is no longer undergirded by multilateralism; rather, it is characterised by bilateral transactional relationships, often accompanied by tariff threats.

Trump's Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific

Despite the significant outcomes of the summit on a range of topics, it refrained from any explicit commitments for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' as well as any discussions on further engagement on previous mechanisms like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), formulated during the Biden administration. The Trump 2.0 approach in the Indo-Pacific and towards regional commitments is no longer undergirded by multilateralism; rather, it is characterised by bilateral transactional relationships, often accompanied by tariff threats. During his first tenure, Trump initially showed interest in a multilateral approach in the Indo-Pacific, specifically with the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in the backdrop of the emerging US-China strategic rivalry. The Biden administration subsequently maintained the relevance of the QUAD through the US-led 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'.⁵

In response to China's aggressive actions in the region, various administrations have undertaken concerted efforts to bring together partners and allies. However, US foreign policy under Trump has suddenly pushed a reset button, targeting its allies to increase their defence spending in case of conflict in Taiwan and the South China Sea. This has further cornered Trump's allies, such as South Korea, expecting them to assume a more proactive role in the case of a Taiwan contingency. This is also evident in the US taking a backseat from significant institutional initiatives like QUAD and AUKUS (a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States intended to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific), and has damaged its essential partners in Indo-Pacific like India and allies like Australia, respectively.

The respect for shared values and norms, as well as pursuing soft power and

maintaining a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific, are certainly not the means Trump sees as a means to counter China's presence in the region. Trump's foreign policy exhibits a lack of trust in diplomacy and the strategic importance of multilateralism in protecting

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its interests in the Indo-Pacific. In the present context, while dealing with traditional allies like South Korea and others in the region, the US foreign policy under the Trump administration is guided more by quantitative calculus based on punitive tariff reduction agreements with nations.⁶

Strategic Dilemmas in US-South Korea Relations

According to the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, the US assets on the Korean peninsula are deployed primarily to target the threats emanating from North Korea.⁷ However, the treaty provides for various contingencies. This signifies that in the case of a Chinese escalation towards Taiwan, it poses a higher risk of South Korea's active participation in the whole scenario. If South Korea fears its involvement in a Taiwan contingency or a potential conflict in the South China Sea, it becomes crucial that it rallies for a stable and rule-based Indo-Pacific order.

Amidst this, Trump's trade deals with allies and their intertwining with regional defence commitments invoke doubts and distrust in decade-old alliances. In South Korea's foreign policy history, the left-leaning administrations have been balanced out by maintaining an 'equidistant' policy of hedging between Washington and Beijing.⁸ However, President Lee's inclination towards a 'pragmatic diplomacy' approach reflects the complex dynamics evolving on the Korean peninsula and beyond.⁹

At present, South Korea's foreign policy faces two critical challenges: firstly, its reliance on trade with China and China's closeness with North Korea; secondly, the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Russia and North Korea last year.¹⁰ Against this backdrop, South Korean President Lee, with his calm diplomacy, sought to delicately balance relations with the US by not upsetting President Trump and emphasised the need to solidify the alliance further. With a pragmatic approach, he took the opportunity to

South Korean President Lee, with his calm diplomacy, sought to delicately balance relations with the US by not upsetting President Trump and emphasised the need to solidify the alliance further he took the opportunity to strengthen South Korea's defence commitments with the US.

strengthen South Korea's defence commitments with the US. Lee's prior travel to Japan, before Washington, also highlights the enduring significance of the trilateral cooperation between the US, Japan, and South Korea.

His approach showed some similarities with his predecessor in terms of prioritising ties with Japan and strengthening the alliance with the US. However, his administration's proposition towards the Indo-Pacific is lacking. The chances that Indo-Pacific will deserve equivalent space in the current administration as Yoon's Indo-Pacific strategy remain bleak as of now. Perhaps this would be possible if the Trump administration shows renewed interest in values, a shared approach based on multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, and further offers a fair role for its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

Trump's Receding Approach with its Allies

Conversely, the current measures undertaken by the US have created a deficit of trust among allied nations, as the relationships have been shaken and reaffirming and rebuilding them has been hindered. Trump's staggering approach has caught allies off guard by making the relations transactional. During the presidency of Yoon, the previous South Korean President, the trilateral cooperation among the US, Japan, and South Korea was based on the security challenges in Northeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. This was solidified at the Camp David Summit, held between the three nations in Washington.¹¹ This trilateral mechanism thereby served as an 'institutional mechanism' to protect the US's interest in the region.¹² Against this backdrop, South Korea also released its Indo-Pacific policy under the conservative administration, while maintaining 'strategic autonomy', and sought a more extended role in the region alongside other nations, such as India and European countries, alongside the US. Their combined fears emerged from China's behaviour, which tried to 'reshape the international order for its own benefit at the expense of others.'¹³

Undertaking a 'diplomacy first' approach, the Biden administration in the past consolidated alliances with South Korea and Japan to expand partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁴ The Biden administration also focused on the minilateral groupings in the Indo-Pacific with respect to non-traditional security concerns.¹⁵ Such consistent diplomacy is absent in Trump's approach while dealing with his allies and partners. Under Trump, these alliances are no longer considered strategic to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific. The threat perception regarding China persists; however, the foreign policies of the US and South Korea are currently not in strategic alignment with respect to the Indo-Pacific, as evidenced by the lack of reference to it during the Trump-Lee summit.

To a certain extent, based on the summit's details, the emphasis on building a robust alliance may be a hidden signal of a commitment to a balanced order in the Indo-Pacific. As the commitment to concerted efforts is explicit, it reflects a renewed focus on the shipbuilding industry and bolstering maritime capabilities, ultimately countering China's naval presence in the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, during the summit, a lack of any consultative frameworks dedicated to the Indo-Pacific was not explicitly mentioned.

Downsides of the Summit

The summit ended with meaningful consultations and constructive dialogue but without issuing a joint statement, reflecting the limitations of the outcomes. Trump's unpredictable tariff behaviour towards its allies has made them vulnerable to remaining steadfast allies of the US in the first place. As of now, the alliance relationship between the US and South Korea remains intact; however, there is a lack of convergence with respect to the Indo-Pacific. There might be expected fallout with the remaining three years of Trump's presidency. On the other hand, South Korean President Lee's balanced engagement with Trump was seen as a welcome step at home in terms of managing alliances and upholding security ties.¹⁶

Trump's statements on Truth Social about a "purge and revolution going on in South Korea," just hours before the summit, made South Korean policymakers nervous.¹⁷ Although the outcomes of the summit were significant in terms of discussing details on the tariff agreement, alliance modernisation, as well as the presence of American troops on the Korean peninsula¹⁸. However, despite the best efforts of Lee's executive team, the objective of securing more tariff concessions from the US was not fulfilled. Other controversial topics with respect to alliance commitments, like 'strategic flexibility'¹⁹ in the context of a Taiwan contingency, details on defence cost-sharing,²⁰ transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to Seoul,²¹ and Trump's prior comments to take over the land ownership of military bases in Korea, were carefully evaded.

Conclusion

The summit was constructive, thanks to Lee's charm offensive approach, despite Trump's previous poor track record with his counterparts. Eluding Indo-Pacific terminology may have served the South Korean leader, Lee, best at the moment, in order not to antagonise China. However, the current geopolitical realities and the rapidly changing Indo-Pacific framework demand a robust multilateral mechanism that enables nations to coordinate within the liberal, rule-based order in the region. It is also time for middle powers like South Korea to realise the need to exit such rigid structural alliances

in the first place, as excessive dependence on traditional allies bears costs for autonomy in foreign policy decisions.

A crucial step could be to ensure a regional security deterrence architecture to denuclearise North Korea. This combined and coordinated approach among allies and partners will undoubtedly strengthen the larger rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific. With the increasing provocations in the region, the focus can be aligned on exploring combined strategic qualitative solutions. These developments necessitate an urgent course correction in US foreign policy to preserve the rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific before significant damage is done. For the US, this summit may have yielded economic gains, but the essence of strategic, long-term goals appears to be entirely off the table in the context of the Indo-Pacific for now.

Although the summit does not bear any direct consequences for India, the conduct of US foreign policy under the Trump administration, particularly in terms of relations with its partners, such as India and its allies, like South Korea, creates new pathways for these nations to work closely together to ensure a stable Indo-Pacific.

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