



KOREA DIGEST

Korea Digest is a monthly publication of the Korea Centre, School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University, that compiles major political, security, economic and diplomatic developments in the Korean Peninsula. Korea Digest aims to track, highlight and provide brief analysis of important developments in the Korean Peninsula.

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Prepared by

Gourilakshmi S, Project Fellow, Korea Centre

1. Korean President Lee's New Year Speech Signals Reform

In his New Year address to the nation on January 1, President Lee Jae-myung outlined five priorities, including inclusive growth, sustainability, cultural competitiveness, and peace-based stability. [He pointed to export growth exceeding \\$700 billion, the KOSPI surpassing 4,000](#), and strengthened coordination with the United States as indicators of recovery, while reaffirming support for renewed inter-Korean engagement. On the same day, [North Korean state media in Pyongyang briefly reported](#) that Chinese President Xi Jinping had sent a New Year's greeting to leader Kim Jong-un, without disclosing details, a restrained acknowledgment that contrasted with Pyongyang's more expansive coverage of Russian communications, reflecting nuanced regional diplomatic signaling at the start of the year.



President Lee Jae Myung delivers his first New Year's address at the Blue House in central Seoul on Jan. 1. [BLUE HOUSE]

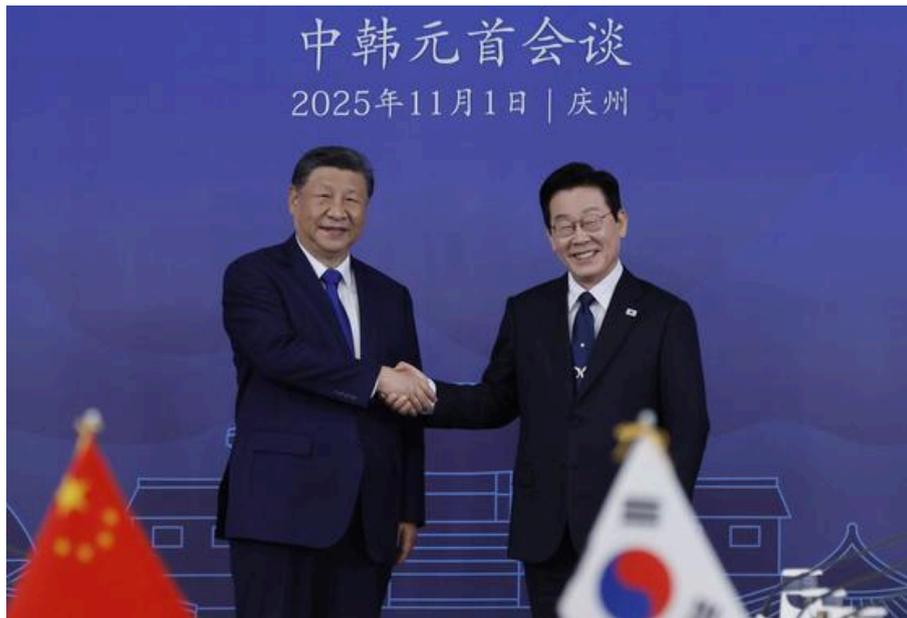
2. Lee's China State Visit Signals Reset in Bilateral Ties Amid Economic and Regional Focus

South Korea moved to stabilize relations with China in early January as [President Lee Jae Myung undertook a four-day state visit from Jan. 4 to Jan. 7](#), marking the first South Korean presidential visit to Beijing in nearly a decade and signaling a shift toward pragmatic engagement amid economic and regional pressures.

The visit followed [Seoul's public reaffirmation of the one-China policy](#) and growing emphasis on economic recovery and supply-chain stability. Talks in Beijing focused on restoring bilateral cooperation strained since the [2016 THAAD deployment](#), with both sides agreeing to pursue gradual normalization in trade, cultural exchange, and people-to-people ties, while maintaining dialogue on peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. [During a summit on Jan. 5, Lee and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to expand cooperation](#) in emerging industries, livelihoods-focused sectors, and environmental governance. The leaders also endorsed working-level engagement on sensitive issues, including maritime management in the Yellow Sea and the easing of informal restrictions on Korean cultural content in China, though no immediate breakthroughs were announced.

[Economic diplomacy formed the core of the visit.](#) At a Korea–China business forum, Lee called for a reorientation of bilateral economic ties toward new growth areas such as digital technologies, artificial intelligence and cultural industries, as traditional trade growth remains constrained. The participation of top leaders from South Korea's conglomerates underscored Seoul's focus on a private-sector-led recovery. [Lee's meetings with China's senior leadership on Jan. 6](#) reinforced a commitment to a more “balanced and mutually beneficial” relationship, alongside expanded cultural and historical exchanges. Parallel public-opinion data released in [China indicated improving sentiment toward South Korea](#), supporting Seoul's view that political recalibration could yield longer-term gains.

Overall, the visit reflected South Korea's effort to recalibrate diplomacy through selective engagement with Beijing, balancing alliance priorities with the United States while seeking economic stability and reduced regional friction in 2026.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, right, shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during their bilateral summit at the Gyeongju National Museum in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang, on Nov. 1, 2025. [JOINT PRESS CORPS]

3. North Korea Missile Amidst President Lee’s China Visit

[North Korea fired multiple ballistic missiles into the East Sea on Jan. 4](#), marking its first missile launch of 2026 and coinciding with President Lee Jae Myung’s departure from Seoul for a four-day state visit to China, highlighting persistent security volatility on the Korean Peninsula. The launch, confirmed by South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, was Pyongyang’s first in nearly two months and came as North Korea’s denuclearization and regional stability were set to feature in Lee’s meetings with Chinese leaders in Beijing and Shanghai. The timing reinforced Pyongyang’s pattern of military signaling during periods of heightened diplomatic activity involving Seoul.

[During his visit, Lee urged China to play a constructive](#), mediating role in easing tensions with North Korea, while acknowledging limited communication channels with Pyongyang. In a Jan. 7 press briefing in Shanghai, Lee also said Seoul and Beijing agreed to work toward reducing negative public sentiment toward each other, while maintaining their respective positions on sensitive historical and political issues. Together, the missile launch and Lee’s remarks underscored the dual challenge facing Seoul at the start of 2026: managing renewed security risks from North Korea while seeking diplomatic cooperation with China to stabilize peninsula dynamics.

4. North Korea Blends Diplomacy and Deterrence, Criticizes U.S. Over Venezuela While Testing Missiles

North Korea intensified its military and diplomatic messaging in early January by linking regional security developments to broader geopolitical tensions following the U.S. military operation that captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. [On Jan. 5, North Korea's Foreign Ministry strongly condemned the U.S. action](#), describing it as a violation of sovereignty and accusing Washington of pursuing hegemonic policies. The criticism came alongside confirmation that Pyongyang had conducted a missile launch drill on Jan. 4, which state media described as part of efforts to strengthen its nuclear deterrent amid ["complicated international events."](#)

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un framed the test as necessary to maintain credible strategic deterrence, with analysts interpreting references to global instability as indirectly linked to the Venezuela crisis and broader U.S. military posture. South Korean and allied assessments indicated the launch involved short-range missiles with maneuvering capabilities designed to complicate missile defense interception. In response, [South Korean authorities convened an emergency interagency meeting on Jan. 5](#), concluding that both the Venezuela crisis and North Korea's missile activities were expected to have only limited economic and financial impact, while continuing to monitor regional security developments.



North Korea reported on Jan. 5 that it conducted a hypersonic missile launch drill on Jan. 4, supervised on North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. [NEWS1]

5. Korea–Japan Relations Advance Through Nara Summit and Shuttle Diplomacy

South Korea and Japan took concrete steps to deepen bilateral ties in January as [President Lee Jae Myung and Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi met on Jan. 13 during Lee’s two-day visit to Japan.](#) holding a summit in Nara amid heightened regional tensions involving China, North Korea and global economic uncertainty. and held a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi amid heightened regional tensions involving China and North Korea, as well as global economic uncertainty. The visit followed months of diplomatic coordination and marked a continuation of leader-level “[shuttle diplomacy](#)” aimed at sustaining momentum in Korea–Japan relations after the 60th anniversary of normalization in 2025.

During the summit, [the two leaders agreed to expand cooperation beyond traditional trade toward economic security, future industries such as AI,](#) intellectual property protection, and people-to-people exchanges, while reaffirming close coordination on North Korea, trilateral cooperation with the United States, and broader regional stability. President Lee also emphasized the importance of strengthening Korea–Japan–China communication, reflecting Seoul’s effort to balance ties amid growing Japan–China tensions over Taiwan and export controls. Lee additionally reiterated South Korea’s intention to pursue accession to the [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership \(CPTPP\)](#), though differences remain over Japan’s seafood import restrictions.

Historical and humanitarian issues were also addressed, [with both sides agreeing to strengthen cooperation on investigating the 1942 Chosei coal mine disaster in Japan,](#) where 136 Korean forced laborers died. The leaders discussed possible joint DNA testing and recovery of remains, a move welcomed by Japanese civic groups as a long-overdue step forward. While sensitive wartime issues were not discussed in depth, officials framed the agreement as an effort to manage historical grievances responsibly while keeping bilateral relations future-oriented. Both leaders expressed hope that the Nara summit would serve as a catalyst for the next phase of Korea–Japan relations, with plans for a reciprocal summit in South Korea later this year.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, right, poses for a photo with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi ahead of their pull-aside meeting held on the sidelines of the Group of 20 summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, on Nov. 23, 2025. [YONHAP]

6. Korea–Italy Summit Expands Cooperation from Advanced Industries to Cultural Exchange

South Korea and Italy moved to deepen bilateral cooperation in January as President Lee Jae Myung hosted [Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in Seoul for summit talks on Jan. 19](#), marking the first visit by an Italian leader to Korea in 19 years. The summit followed earlier meetings between the two leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in 2025 and came amid efforts to broaden Korea’s partnerships with European countries. During the talks, Lee and Meloni agreed to strengthen cooperation in trade, investment, artificial intelligence, aerospace, semiconductors and critical minerals, with both sides highlighting opportunities for collaboration in advanced and strategic industries. Italy is South Korea’s fourth-largest trading partner in the European Union, and the two governments emphasized the need to build on growing economic ties and people-to-people exchanges.

[Cultural cooperation also emerged as a key theme, with President Lee later revealing that Meloni proposed launching a joint Korea–Italy film project during her visit.](#) Speaking at a Cabinet meeting on Jan. 20, Lee instructed relevant ministries to support the proposal, underscoring the importance of the cultural and creative industries as a form of soft power. Lee warned that a weakening foundation in the arts sector would pose long-term risks, while noting the possibility of additional budget support to sustain cultural growth amid rising global interest in Korean content.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, right, shakes hands with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni before their talks at the United Nations headquarters in New York on Sept. 24, 2025, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

[JOINT PRESS CORPS]

7. North Korea Hardens Hostile Narrative and Steps Up Military Signaling

North Korea intensified its confrontational posture in January through a combination of ideological messaging, weapons testing and closer alignment with Russia, reinforcing Pyongyang’s framing of inter-Korean relations as those between “two hostile states.” State media released images from the Central Class Education House in Pyongyang, a key indoctrination facility, showing banners labeling [South Korea the “No. 1 hostile country” and its “unchanging archenemy.”](#) Displayed during events linked to the Socialist Patriotic Youth League, the messaging targeted young people and soldiers, underscoring the regime’s effort to institutionalize hostility toward Seoul. The exhibits echoed Kim Jong-un’s earlier directive to rewrite ideological education to portray South Korea as the North’s primary enemy, marking a clear departure from past reconciliation rhetoric.

This ideological hardening coincided with renewed military activity. [Kim oversaw the test-fire of an upgraded large-caliber multiple rocket launcher system,](#) with rockets striking targets hundreds of kilometers away in the East Sea. South Korean and U.S. intelligence assessed the test as likely involving the KN-25, a system capable of striking key South Korean facilities. Kim framed the launch as part of preparations for an upcoming ruling party congress, where plans to further strengthen the country’s nuclear and strategic deterrent are expected to be outlined. Alongside these moves, [Pyongyang emphasized its external alignment by pledging “permanent” and unconditional support for Russian President Vladimir Putin,](#) highlighting the

deepening strategic partnership between North Korea and Russia amid the war in Ukraine.

Together, these developments point to a deliberate strategy by Pyongyang to harden internal ideology, demonstrate military readiness and anchor itself more firmly within an anti-U.S. strategic bloc, even as regional tensions continue to rise.

8.India Highlights Democratic Values and Expanding Strategic Ties with Korea

[India used its Republic Day celebrations in Seoul to underscore shared democratic values and the growing depth of India–South Korea relations.](#) as New Delhi signaled sustained momentum in political, economic and security cooperation between the two countries.

Speaking at a reception hosted by the Indian Embassy, Ambassador Gourangalal Das emphasized India’s democratic legacy and economic confidence while pointing to a notable uptick in high-level engagement with Korea. He cited recent summit-level interactions, frequent exchanges between foreign ministers and visits by Indian ministers, lawmakers and state leaders as evidence of a renewed diplomatic rhythm. The ambassador highlighted expanding collaboration in the defense industry, rising Korean business activity in India and growing cooperation in priority sectors such as semiconductors and shipbuilding, areas closely aligned with India’s industrial and strategic policy goals. These developments, he suggested, reflect the steady evolution of the bilateral partnership beyond traditional trade ties toward more technology- and security-driven cooperation.

The event, which featured traditional Indian cultural performances, also served as a soft-power showcase, reinforcing people-to-people links alongside strategic engagement. Together, the messaging reflected New Delhi’s intent to position Korea as a key partner in its broader Indo-Pacific outlook, anchored in shared democratic principles and converging economic interests.



Dancers perform traditional Indian dances during the Republic Day reception hosted by the Indian Embassy in Seoul at Sebitseom on Jan 26. [SEO JI-EUN]

9. Seoul Navigates Alliance Pressures Amid U.S. Strategic Shift

South Korea faced growing strategic calculations this month as changes in U.S. defense policy under President Donald Trump intersected with broader alliance expectations, from deterrence on the Korean Peninsula to participation in Washington-led global initiatives. President Lee Jae Myung emphasized the need for self-reliant national defense, calling it [“the most basic of basics,”](#) after the United States released a new National Defense Strategy that places greater responsibility on Seoul for deterring North Korea’s conventional military threats. The strategy reflects the Trump administration’s “America First” approach, urging allies to shoulder a larger share of their own defense while the U.S. focuses on extended deterrence, particularly nuclear protection. [Lee argued that South Korea, with defense spending exceeding North Korea’s GDP and one of the world’s largest militaries, must be fully capable of defending itself,](#) linking stronger defense capacity to long-term economic stability and peace.

The policy shift aligns with Seoul’s long-standing goal of assuming wartime operational control of its forces, but it has also raised concerns among analysts about potential gaps in alliance coordination, especially as the new U.S. strategy avoids explicitly prioritizing North Korean denuclearization. Critics warn that adjusting the role of U.S. Forces Korea while redefining alliance responsibilities could embolden Pyongyang if not carefully managed. At the same time, [Seoul is cautiously weighing an invitation from Washington to join the U.S.-led “Board of Peace,”](#) a proposed international body aimed at postwar reconstruction and governance in

conflict-affected areas, including Gaza. While the government has welcomed the initiative in principle, officials remain wary of unclear mandates, high potential costs and questions over whether the body could encroach on roles traditionally handled by the United Nations. Internally, sentiment appears divided between concerns over financial and legal obligations and the strategic value of aligning closely with Washington at a time of mounting trade and security pressures. Taken together, the developments highlight the complex balancing act facing Seoul: strengthening self-reliant defense capabilities, maintaining alliance credibility under a more transactional U.S. framework, and navigating global diplomatic initiatives that increasingly function as informal tests of alliance solidarity.

10. Russia Signals Openness to Reset with Seoul, but Constraints Remain

[Moscow has signaled interest in restoring relations with South Korea](#), hinting at a possible diplomatic recalibration as Russia seeks greater flexibility amid its prolonged confrontation with the West. Russian President Vladimir Putin publicly expressed a desire to revive ties during a recent diplomatic ceremony, marking a noticeably softer tone after years of strained relations following the Ukraine war. The remarks align, at least rhetorically, with President Lee Jae Myung's emphasis on "pragmatic diplomacy," which prioritizes national interests over ideological alignment. South Korea's foreign ministry has maintained that communication channels with Russia remain open, and Seoul has indicated it would encourage Moscow to play a constructive role on issues related to the Korean Peninsula, particularly as U.S.-led efforts toward ending the Ukraine conflict gather momentum. Observers note, however, that Moscow's message appears largely symbolic. No concrete steps, such as sanctions relief, eased export controls or the restoration of direct flights have followed. Russia continues to classify South Korea as an "unfriendly country," citing Seoul's participation in Western sanctions as the primary obstacle to normalization.

At the same time, limited signs of pragmatism are emerging in the economic sphere. Seoul is exploring cooperation on Arctic shipping routes, while major Korean firms have quietly taken steps to preserve trademarks and legal footholds in Russia, reflecting defensive positioning rather than renewed commercial engagement. The most significant constraint remains Russia's deepening military alignment with North Korea. Moscow's strategic partnership with Pyongyang, including North Korean support for Russia's war effort, severely limits how far it can move toward Seoul without undercutting its own leverage. For South Korea, any rapid diplomatic upgrade risks appearing to tolerate cooperation that directly undermines its security interests, while also complicating coordination with the United States and Europe. Analysts suggest that for now, both sides are testing the waters rather than pursuing normalization. The immediate goal appears to be lowering tensions and restoring

limited working-level dialogue, with the trajectory of Russia–Ukraine peace talks likely to shape whether Moscow’s outreach evolves into something more substantive.
