**Headline:** South Korea's President Lee Shouldn’t Attend NATO: Amidst Crises, Peace is Pragmatic

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**Source:** Globetrotter

**Tags:** Asia/South Korea, News, Politics, Opinion, War

**[Article Body:]**

In his inaugural speech, South Korea’s recently elected President Lee Jae-myung [declared](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/southkorea/politics/20250604/full-text-lee-jae-myungs-inaugural-speech#:~:text=No%20peace%20is%20too%20expensive%3B%20it%20is%20always%20better%20than%20war.) that ‘no peace is too expensive; it is always better than war’. The words capture an idealism packaged in Lee’s pragmatism. Indeed, at a time when the US Cold War against China is turning Asia into a tinderbox, when global temperatures have exceeded a 1.5°C increase, and South Korea’s economy and society are reeling from martial law, peace is the only pragmatic way forward. As such, Lee’s [hesitancy](https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10495003) in attending the June NATO Summit was a welcome contrast to former President Yoon Suk-yeol’s enthusiastic participation.

The opposite of pragmatism, Yoon was driven by a deep idealism to turn South Korea into a [‘global pivotal state’](https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/south-korea-pivots-conflict) for the US, regardless of the damage to inter-Korean stability or to South Korea’s relationship with China, a strategic trading partner. Amidst the backdrop of the chorus of editorial voices (including the conservative [*Chosun* newspaper](https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2025/06/13/USDAXQHJG5BDNLVIQSBIKN3RXY/)) from Korea’s leading media pressuring him to attend, Lee has stated that he will likely attend the NATO Summit. Yet, attending NATO exacerbates the crises facing South Korea, the region, and the world. Lee’s pragmatic foreign policy must disengage from the US-led NATO expansion into Asia that enables the US to escalate military tensions and destabilise the Indo-Pacific (the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula).

**An Atlantic Offensive in the Pacific**

Contrary to its [original mandate](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm), NATO has neither been about ‘collective defence’ nor about the ‘North Atlantic area’. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union (its ostensible justification for being), NATO has continued to exist, invading and waging war in Eastern Europe and West Asia to [maintain its](https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-nato-the-most-dangerous-organisation/) (especially that of the United States’) [dominance](https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-nato-the-most-dangerous-organisation/) under the rhetoric of ‘a rules-based order’. Then, starting in 2021, under the continuous [urging of the US](https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/11/22/natos-china-and-indo-pacific-conundrum/#:~:text=That%20statement%20paved%20the%20way%20for%20an%20increasingly%20substantial%20debate%20within%20NATO%2C%20with%20the%20US%20%E2%80%93%20supported%20primarily%20by%20the%20UK%20%E2%80%93%20consistently%20urging%20Allies%20to%20think%20more%20seriously%20about%20the%20strategic%20implications%20of%20China%E2%80%99s%20rise.), overriding concerns about hurting [‘political and economic cooperation with Beijing’](https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2023/11/22/natos-china-and-indo-pacific-conundrum/#:~:text=Since%20then%2C%20some,to%20eastern%20Europe.), NATO began framing China as presenting [‘systemic challenges to the rules-based international order’](https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-nato-the-most-dangerous-organisation/). Or to put it more directly, NATO feared that China challenged its [‘transatlantic values and interests’](https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-nato-the-most-dangerous-organisation/) around the world.

The heads of state of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea (collectively the Indo-Pacific 4) started attending the NATO summits in 2022. While NATO’s clause ten prevents non-European countries from joining its alliance, NATO’s expanded cooperation with these four US Indo-Pacific allies (on interoperability, joint war exercises, and [‘technological cooperation and pooling of R&D’](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf#page=56.99)) frees the US to intensify its Cold War against China. Furthermore, when NATO militaries [make port calls and carry out exercises](https://www.defstrat.com/magazine_articles/natos-strategic-pivot-to-the-indo-pacific-strengthening-alliances-and-expanding-deterrence-with-the-ap4/) in the Indo-Pacific, they expand the US military footprint in the region while practising future concerted responses to a military contingency. Given the importance of military posture during peace in determining the outcome of conflicts, the entry of Atlantic elements into the Pacific is, in itself, aggressive. Ultimately, even if NATO does not intervene in a regional conflict, it can still do everything else to contribute to the US Cold War and arms race against China.

**Rebalancing a Lopsided Foreign Policy**

As Lee enters office, he must extricate South Korea from former President Yoon Suk-yeol’s [headlong rush](https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/05/11/south-korea-pivots-to-conflict/) into the US’s Cold War Against China. Not only did the Yoon administration enthusiastically participate in the NATO Summits starting in 2022, but it also rushed headlong to support US efforts to maintain its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region in the Taiwan Strait, not least by entering into a [trilateral security cooperation](https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/12/01/trilateral-missile-defense-system-a-step-towards-asian-nato-2/) agreement with Japan and the United States.

It’s not yet clear how the Lee Administration will deal with Trump’s pressure to join its containment of China: after Lee won the election, the Trump administration acknowledged the elections as free and fair and then expressed [concerns](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/white-house-calls-south-korea-election-fair-expresses-concern-about-chinese-2025-06-04/) about Chinese influence, with little care to substantiate such claims. Within a Korean context, these claims are a nod to the far-right conspiracy theory that the 2020 National Assembly Elections involved Chinese interference, which Yoon used to justify calling martial law. The remarks were the diplomatic equivalent of warning shots from a gunboat against Lee’s intention to rebalance South Korea’s foreign policy by improving relations with China.

The Lee Administration faces many challenges. If Lee Jae-myung won with 49% of the vote, the pro-martial law conservative candidate nonetheless gained 41% of the vote. Thus, despite the great political mobilisations of the 2016 Candlelight Revolution and the 2024 Revolution of Lights, South Korea still struggles to break free from a Cold War framework that limits democracy to a contest between conservative parties.

South Korea’s inability to shake off this Cold War framework is partly due to the legacy of the Korean War (far-right conservative support is highest among those [past 60](https://biz.chosun.com/en/en-policy/2025/06/03/UNOUZLKHPZB4FO44Z6F5CEQXMU/#:~:text=In%20their%2060s%2C%20Kim,34.0%25%20of%20the%20votes.)), but it is also buttressed by the ongoing US military presence and Korea’s lack of wartime operational control of its own military. Established under US military occupation and developed under the US economic aegis, South Korea is constrained in its ability to chart an independent foreign policy based on its own national interests, such as achieving peace with North Korea. This constrains Lee’s ability to backtrack from many of Yoon’s commitments to the United States, such as the JAKUS trilateral security cooperation, intentionally designed to survive [changes in administration](https://www.counterpunch.org/2023/09/18/preparing-for-war-is-the-beginning-an-early-warning-for-northeast-asia/#:~:text=To%20shield%20the%20trilateral%20alliance%20from%20future%20democratic%20pressures%2C%20Biden%2C%20Yoon%2C%20and%20Kishida%20announced%20the%20%E2%80%9CSpirit%20of%20Camp%20David%E2%80%9D%20on%20August%2018%20at%20Camp%20David%2C%20which%20institutionalized%20annual%20trilateral%20summits%2C%20meetings%2C%20and%20consultations%20that%20could%20survive%20changes%20in%20administration.).

Given the increasing pressure to attend NATO’s meeting, it’s likely Lee will attend. Lee’s initial reasoning that now is the time to focus on the recovery of Korea’s economy rather than on attending the NATO summit is pragmatic for Koreans. As a way of stepping out of the US-led war drive in the region, when we should be diffusing rather than exacerbating the world’s crises, it is also pragmatic for the world.