

Managing Instability Without Illusions: South Korea's Recalibrated Diplomacy Between China and Japan in a Shifting Global Order

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The resumption of summit-level dialogue between South Korea and China in early January 2026, the first in nine years, occurred at a moment when regional diplomacy could no longer be separated from global power realignments.¹ To interpret the meeting as the beginning of stabilization in Northeast Asia would therefore be misleading. What it revealed instead was a narrower and more pragmatic ambition: to prevent further destabilization in a Western Pacific security environment increasingly shaped by global shifts in power projection, alliance credibility, and great-power risk tolerance.

South Korea's re-engagement with China did not signal strategic realignment, nor did it represent a retreat from alliance commitments. Rather, it reflected a recalibration shaped by the cumulative pressures of global and regional change. As U.S. strategic behavior has grown more transactional and power-centric, and as rivalry among major powers has intensified across multiple theaters, the margins for regional diplomacy have narrowed. In this context, Seoul's choices are best understood not as autonomous regional initiatives, but as adaptations to a global order in flux.

This recalibration was already visible during the 2025 APEC summit in Gyeongju, where three bilateral trajectories intersected in ways that continue to define South Korea's strategic environment: a cautious improvement in South Korea–China relations, a rapid deterioration in China–Japan ties, and a parallel strengthening of Japan–South Korea cooperation. These were not isolated regional developments.² They reflected how Northeast Asian actors were repositioning themselves within a broader global power shift.

APEC Gyeongju and the Reordering of Regional Alignments

The 2025 APEC summit in Gyeongju took place at a time when economic cooperation and security competition were increasingly intertwined. While the official

¹ Jung Min-kyung, 2026, "Lee-Xi Summit a Measured Win after Years of Stagnation" *The Korea Herald*, January 06, 2026, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10650032>. Accessed on January 10, 2026.

² Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2025, "2026 APEC Leaders' Gyeongju Declaration" (November 01, 2025, <https://www.apec.org/meeting-papers/leaders-declarations/2025/2025-apec-leaders--gyeongju-declaration>). Accessed on January 10, 2026.

agenda focused on trade, technology, and growth, the summit functioned politically as a platform for recalibrating bilateral relationships under conditions of heightened global uncertainty. The erosion of multilateral norms, the return of coercive statecraft, and the growing willingness of major powers to bypass institutional constraints all shaped the context in which regional leaders interacted.

For South Korea and China, Gyeongju marked a turning point away from prolonged diplomatic inertia. Neither side attempted to resolve underlying disagreements, nor did they frame their engagement in the language of restored trust. Instead, both implicitly acknowledged that continued estrangement had become strategically costly in a world where great-power competition increasingly spills across regions. President Lee Jae-myung's state visit to Beijing in January 2026, following President Xi Jinping's visit to South Korea two months earlier, reflected this shared assessment. The objective was not convergence, but containment—containing miscalculation, containing escalation risks, and containing the spillover effects of U.S.–China rivalry into the bilateral relationship.

This cautious thaw contrasted sharply with developments between China and Japan. Although Beijing and Tokyo attempted to project stability during their APEC encounter, the months that followed saw a rapid deterioration in relations. Taiwan-related signaling, compounded by unresolved maritime and strategic disputes, pushed bilateral ties to their lowest point in years. This deterioration was not merely bilateral in its implications. It further destabilized the regional environment by reinforcing a broader global pattern in which great-power competition increasingly manifests through signaling contests rather than negotiated accommodation.

Japan–South Korea relations, by contrast, moved in the opposite direction. At Gyeongju, President Lee and Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi emphasized the necessity of closer cooperation in an increasingly severe security environment. Since then, both governments have sought to institutionalize this momentum through regular leader contact and what has been described as “shuttle diplomacy.” The summit between Lee and Takaichi in mid-January 2026 reflects this effort to consolidate gains rather than to announce a new strategic vision.³ Here again, regional alignment cannot be separated from global context: Tokyo's urgency is shaped not only by China's behavior, but by growing uncertainty over U.S. strategic reliability.

Why Risk Management Has Replaced Strategic Ambition

The convergence of these bilateral trends explains why Seoul and Beijing have gravitated toward risk management as their organizing principle. Neither side has the incentive, nor the capacity, to pursue a strategic reset. The issues that divide them—Taiwan, alliance structures, missile defense, and the broader U.S.–China rivalry—are structural and driven by global dynamics well beyond the bilateral relationship.

³ Joyce Lee and Heejin Kim, 2026, “South Korea's Lee to Head for Japan Summit a Week after Meeting China's Xi” *Reuters* January 12, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/south-koreas-lee-head-japan-summit-week-after-meeting-chinas-xi-2026-01-12/> Accessed on January 25, 2026.

In this environment, risk management offers the only viable overlap. It allows both sides to restore communication channels, stabilize expectations, and compartmentalize cooperation without demanding agreement on core disputes. President Lee's public messaging ahead of the Beijing summit reflected this logic. By emphasizing national interest, mutual respect, and pragmatism—while avoiding language that would suggest either alignment with Beijing's positions or neutrality between major powers—Seoul signaled a deliberate effort to manage boundaries rather than redefine them.

Beijing's response suggested a parallel calculation. As relations with Tokyo deteriorated and global signaling became more confrontational, China had a clear interest in preventing its relationship with Seoul from becoming another axis of instability. The January summit was therefore characterized less by negotiation than by restraint: sensitive security issues were addressed obliquely, if at all, and public confrontation was avoided. This restraint reflects a broader global pattern in which major powers seek to limit risk on secondary fronts while contesting primary theaters.

South Korea's Narrowing Strategic Space in a Globalized Security Environment

South Korea's recalibration must be understood in comparative terms. Relative to the Yoon Suk-yeol government (2022-2025), the Lee government has adopted less confrontational public signaling, particularly on Taiwan-related issues. This shift reflects not a change in strategic alignment, but a reassessment of the costs of explicit normative positioning in a more militarized and globally interconnected security environment. Where the Yoon government was willing to absorb diplomatic friction as the price of values-based clarity, the Lee government has prioritized preemptive boundary management to reduce escalation risk.

At the same time, the Lee government's posture differs from that of the Moon Jae-in government (2017-2022). Whereas Moon's approach was often framed as seeking mediation space between Washington and Beijing, the current global environment offers little room for such claims. Alliance expectations are more explicit, military postures are more forward, and the penalties for misinterpretation are higher across multiple theaters. As a result, the Lee government has shifted from mediation as an aspiration to maneuverability as a method.

In this sense, pseudo-hedging under the Lee government is neither expansive nor ideological. It is tactical and defensive, designed to preserve limited flexibility within a structure increasingly shaped by U.S. alliance commitments and intensifying global competition.

Nevertheless, South Korea's current posture toward China and Japan is best described as positionally neutral but structurally asymmetrical. Diplomatically, Seoul seeks to avoid alignment with anti-China containment narratives. Militarily, however, it remains embedded in the US alliance system and is deepening operational cooperation with Japan.

This duality has become more visible following President Lee's state visits to both China and Japan. Seoul's diplomatic line emphasizes balanced engagement and regional stability. Yet defense cooperation with Tokyo is expanding under US alliance

frameworks. The symbolism matters. The meeting between South Korea's defense minister and Japan's defense chief at Yokosuka naval base—accompanied by a widely publicized friendly table tennis match—on the last day of January was more than optics. It signaled a normalization of defense-level familiarity and operational comfort that would have been politically difficult only a few years ago.

Such gestures function as alliance reassurance signals within the US-led security architecture, even as Seoul maintains diplomatic caution toward Beijing. This is not a contradiction but layered alignment: diplomatic neutrality at the narrative level, alliance consolidation at the military level.

The Return of American Power Projection and Its Regional Consequences

Overlaying these regional dynamics is a significant shift in U.S. strategic behavior under President Donald Trump. His administration's renewed emphasis on direct power projection and sphere-based influence—visible in coercive pressure against Venezuela's Maduro regime, open discussion of military options, the treatment of Greenland as a strategic acquisition, and persistent ambiguity over NATO's future—signals a departure from post-Cold War institutionalism or 'liberal international order' toward a more openly transactional use of power as well as regional (Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic) and dimensional (military, economic, and technological) security convergence.⁴

This shift matters profoundly for East Asia. China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Taiwan are all adjusting to the United States that appears less invested in institutional maintenance and more comfortable with ad hoc demonstrations of dominance. Beijing interprets this evolution as confirmation that global politics has entered a phase where rules are subordinate to capabilities. Tokyo, facing uncertainty about U.S. reliability in a crisis, has intensified debates over strategic autonomy and defense preparedness. Pyongyang views U.S. coercive behavior as validation of its nuclear deterrent strategy. Seoul, meanwhile, confronts an alliance environment in which U.S. power remains indispensable but less predictable. Taiwan is confused not to do anything while enforcing its 'silicon shield' of TSMC and its strong semiconductor ecosystem as leverage over every security dimension.

In this context, South Korea's emphasis on risk management over strategic transformation is not merely a regional preference. It is a rational adaptation to a global order increasingly defined by great-power force projection rather than institutional constraint.

⁴ Wooyeal Paik, 2022, "Expansion of Economic Security Concept: A First Cut for 2020s' Security Context." [경제안보개념의 확장: 2020년대 안보 맥락에서] *Korean Journal of International Studies* [국제정치논총] 62(4): 325-364; Wooyeal Paik, 2024, "The Korean Defense Industry Enters the European Security Theater: An Analysis of Korea-Poland Arms Deals" *IRSEM (Ecole Militaire) Research Paper* 140: https://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/nr-irsem-140-paik.pdf. (February 02, 2026)

Managing, Not Solving, the Security Agenda

The January 2026 South Korea–China summit illustrated the limits of what can be addressed under current conditions. Issues such as missile defense, nuclear-powered submarines, and broader U.S. military activities were managed without public dispute, reflecting an implicit recognition of global and alliance constraints on both sides.

The January 2026 South Korea–Japan summit also represented the friendlier all-dimensional bilateral relation, which is unforgivingly squeezed under the instability of the security regime in the Western Pacific. They know they need to collaborate, rather than conflict, to navigate through this difficult time by not being divided and ruled in most circumstances.⁵

North Korea, meanwhile, occupied a more muted position in these two summits. General statements about peace and stability substituted for concrete initiatives, not because the issue has diminished in importance, but because it has become increasingly resistant to external leverage in a global environment saturated with crises. In this sense, the relative deprioritization of the peninsula reflects a broader shift in global attention rather than a deliberate downgrading of Korean security concerns. Even though North Korea, a *de facto* nuclear weapons state, is and will be one of the top security faultlines in this region, these three countries might decide to step aside for a while.

An Incomplete Search for Equilibrium in a Fragmenting Order

Taken together, these developments suggest that South Korea is not pursuing stabilization in any robust or structural sense. What is emerging instead is an effort to prevent further destabilization within a global order that no longer offers clear mechanisms for conflict resolution.

This approach amounts to an incomplete search for equilibrium. It is incomplete because it accepts the persistence of unresolved tensions and structural rivalry. It is an equilibrium because it seeks a balance in which those tensions are managed, compartmentalized, and prevented from escalating uncontrollably.

For South Korea, this equilibrium rests not on grand strategy but on process: sustained dialogue, careful sequencing, disciplined public messaging, and selective cooperation. It also rests on an explicit recognition of limits. The U.S.–South Korea alliance continues to define the outer boundary of Seoul’s strategic options, even as the global credibility of alliance systems becomes more conditional.

This equilibrium should not be understood as permanent, either. It is provisional and contingent, shaped by a phase of global power restructuring rather than by any settled regional order. Its value lies not in durability, but in its capacity to reduce risk and preserve maneuvering space while larger forces reshape the international system. In the Western Pacific marked by rising tension and declining trust, South Korea’s current diplomacy reflects neither optimism nor resignation. It reflects adaptation and

⁵ Kim Dong-ha, 2026, “Defense Ministers Engage in Ping-Pong Diplomacy” *The Chosun Daily* January 31, 2026, <https://www.chosun.com/english/national-en/2026/01/30/ZZFVLTOCXBAJRNWRD6DY2FH2SQ/> Accessed on February 2, 2026.

evolution. And in a world where regional dynamics are increasingly embedded in global power shifts, such adaptation may be the most realistic objective available. Rather than marking the start of genuine stabilization, the two summits point to a more modest objective: preventing further destabilization with smiling faces.