

The August 2025 U.S.-South Korea Summit

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Introduction

On August 25, 2025, President Donald Trump hosted President Lee Jae Myung of South Korea (officially the Republic of Korea, or ROK) for a summit at the White House. It was their first meeting since Lee assumed the presidency in June 2025 to serve a single, five-year term. Lee's election followed the [impeachment](#) and removal from office of his predecessor, Yoon Suk Yeol.

During their summit, Trump and Lee had an [hour-long press availability](#) in the Oval Office, followed by a private luncheon. Afterwards, Lee delivered a [speech](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), attended a [roundtable](#) of U.S. and ROK business leaders, visited Arlington National Cemetery, and traveled to Philadelphia to visit a [shipyard](#) acquired in 2024 by the ROK-based firm Hanwha.

In their public interactions, Trump and Lee appeared [at ease](#), and amid Lee's [frequent praise](#) of Trump, they repeatedly touted the strength of the [U.S.-ROK relationship](#). Whether the summit produced concrete outcomes, however, is unclear. The two governments have not released any joint documents, [reportedly](#) due to their inability to finalize a July trade and investment deal.

The U.S.-ROK Trade and Investment Deal

In July 2025, the U.S. and ROK governments announced an [agreement to address certain U.S. tariff actions](#), but have yet to publish details. Some analysts note that this may be due to [continued negotiations](#). Reportedly, Trump confirmed to Lee that tariffs on U.S. imports from South Korea [remain at 15%](#) despite [ROK negotiators seeking lower auto tariffs](#). In practice, the 15% auto tariffs have not been implemented and remain at 25%. During the press availability, Trump said the two countries “[need each other](#),” adding the United States could meet ROK energy needs, and ROK shipbuilding companies could build ships for the United States and invest in U.S. shipyards, [a plan](#) the ROK government brands as “Make American Shipbuilding Great Again.” Trump also mentioned [a LNG pipeline project](#) in Alaska, for which he has [sought South Korean investment](#).

After the summit, U.S. and South Korean businesses signed [11 memoranda of understanding \(MOUs\)](#), including purchase commitments for aircraft and energy as well as commitments to cooperate on investment and manufacturing in shipbuilding, nuclear energy, and critical minerals. It is unclear whether

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these deals are included in South Korea's [\\$350 billion](#) investment commitment under the [July agreement](#), \$150 billion of which is earmarked for a shipbuilding cooperation fund and \$200 billion for investment in semiconductor, biotechnologies, critical minerals, and other industries related to economic security.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance

[Some observers](#) anticipated that Presidents Trump and Lee would discuss U.S.-ROK “alliance modernization” issues at the summit, including joint defense cost-sharing, the number of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, and the future role of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) writ large. Although the parties released no public statements on these issues, both leaders [expressed](#) strong [support](#) for the alliance. Previously, the Trump Administration had called on U.S. allies—including South Korea—to [increase their defense spending to 5% of gross domestic product \(GDP\)](#) and take on more responsibility for their own security. [Press reports](#) in the spring of 2025 indicated that the Administration was considering withdrawing 4,500 U.S. troops from South Korea, a claim the Pentagon [later denied](#) (the State Department reports that approximately [28,500 U.S. troops](#) are stationed in South Korea). In the press availability with Lee, Trump expressed interest in the United States [obtaining ownership of the land](#) used by USFK bases. It is unclear if the issue was discussed further.

In his CSIS speech, Lee said South Korea will increase its defense spending “[to transform the Korean military into a smart military](#)” that applies advanced technologies in warfare. As of 2025, South Korea spends [2.3% of its GDP on defense](#). Trump [stated](#) the two leaders would discuss ROK purchases of U.S. military equipment. In addition, Lee's national security advisor reportedly [said](#) both sides had reached “broad agreement on direction” regarding USFK expanding its activities to address perceived regional threats such as China—known as “strategic flexibility.” South Korea historically [has feared](#) becoming entrapped in a conflict off the Korean Peninsula, particularly involving Taiwan.

North Korea, China, and Japan

North Korea. During the [Oval Office meeting](#), Lee initiated a discussion about making efforts to reengage North Korea, which has refused contact with the United States and South Korea since [diplomacy between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un](#) collapsed [in 2019](#). Trump said he would welcome meeting with Kim, and Lee offered to play “[pacemaker](#)” to complement Trump's role as “peacemaker.” Trump said he supported Lee's approach to North Korea, though it was unclear whether this referred to Lee's apparent deference to Trump or to Lee's [three-phased plan](#) for North Korean denuclearization involving a freeze on nuclear weapons, then a reduction, followed by elimination. Lee later [said](#) the two presidents agreed to “achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula,” and that the two countries “will make efforts to have dialogue with North Korea while firmly responding to North Korean provocations.” He also reaffirmed South Korea's commitment not to develop nuclear weapons.

China. Before his 2025 candidacy, Lee had advocated a more accommodating stance toward China and a tougher approach to Japan than his predecessor; he has since moderated those stances. In his CSIS [speech](#), Lee said that although South Korea and China share “inevitable ties” due to their geographic proximity, South Korea “cannot act or make decisions that go against America's basic policy stance.” In an editorial, the Communist Party of China-affiliated [Global Times](#) said Lee's remarks revealed “strategic slackness” that “places South Korea's national interests in a subordinate position under the US' global strategy.”

Japan. Lee's Foreign Minister has said ROK-Japan and ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation, along with the ROK-U.S. alliance, comprise “[the core pillars](#)” of the Lee government's diplomacy. In an apparent first for a [ROK](#) president before a U.S.-ROK summit, on his way to Washington, DC, Lee visited Tokyo for a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba. In the United States, Lee said he would “

further strengthen trilateral cooperation,” especially through jointly responding to North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats.

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