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**Asia in 2025:
Great power rivalry, contested politics,
and global disorder**

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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KOREAN PENINSULA 2025: POLITICAL TRANSITION
AND STRATEGIC CONSOLIDATION*

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The year 2025 marked a phase of transition and strategic recalibration on the Korean peninsula, shaped by institutional crisis in the South, political consolidation in the North and shifting regional alignments. In South Korea, the confirmation of President Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment in April formally closed the constitutional crisis triggered by the declaration of martial law in December 2024. The subsequent presidential election in June brought Lee Jae-myung to power, inaugurating a new political cycle characterized by attempts to restore institutional stability, pursue judicial accountability and relaunch economic growth amid persistent polarization. In North Korea, 2025 was less a year of policy innovation than one of consolidation. The leadership focused on reinforcing elite discipline and advancing military modernization in preparation for the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party.

Inter-Korean relations reflected both continuity and recalibration. The first half of the year followed the established pattern of deterrence and missile activity, while after June Seoul attempted cautious de-escalatory measures and renewed proposals for phased denuclearization, which was met with limited reciprocity from Pyongyang. Internationally, North Korea deepened its strategic partnership with Russia while also trying to diversify its diplomatic efforts. South Korea sought to rebuild diplomatic credibility and manage alliance relations in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment, after Trump's election.

KEYWORDS – South Korea; North Korea; Lee Jae-myung; Yoon Suk-yeol; impeachment; martial law; Workers' Party of Korea; inter-Korean relations; North Korea missile tests; Russia-North Korea relations; China-North Korea relations; US-South Korea relations.

1. Introduction

The year 2025 marked a decisive moment of transition on the Korean peninsula, following the dramatic upheavals that had characterized the final

* This article is the outcome of a joint research effort of the two authors. More specifically, however, Marco Milani wrote sections 1; 2.1; 2.2; 2.3, 3.1 and 3.2, Antonio Fiori wrote sections 2.4; 4.1; 4.2; 4.3; 4.4 and 5.

weeks of 2024. If the previous year had culminated in the declaration of martial law by South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and his subsequent impeachment, 2025 unfolded as a year of institutional reckoning, electoral realignment and strategic recalibration. Rather than representing a complete rupture with the recent past, however, the developments of the year revealed the resilience of structural tensions that had been building over several years, both within South Korea and in the broader regional environment.

In South Korea, the first months of 2025 were dominated by the judicial and political consequences of the martial law. The arrest, indictment and confirmation of Yoon's impeachment by the Constitutional Court in April constituted one of the most severe stress tests for the country's democratic system since 1987. While institutions ultimately functioned within constitutional boundaries, the crisis exposed the depth of political polarization. The following presidential election held in June brought the progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung to power, opening a new political cycle. His victory did not signal the end of partisan confrontation, with the strong performance of the conservative candidate demonstrating the persistence of a deeply divided electorate. Instead, it initiated a phase of cautious normalization, in which efforts to restore administrative continuity, reinforce institutional legitimacy and stimulate economic growth coexisted with ongoing judicial proceedings related to the previous administration.

While South Korea underwent a turbulent political transition, North Korea experienced a year of internal consolidation. The leadership focused on reinforcing elite discipline and improving bureaucratic efficiency in preparation for the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party. Legislative sessions and party meetings emphasized implementation, accountability and modernization under conditions of prolonged sanctions and structural economic constraints. Technological setbacks, such as the highly publicized accident during the launch of a new naval destroyer, were reframed as failures of discipline rather than systemic weakness, reinforcing a governance model in which performance legitimacy and centralized authority remain tightly intertwined.

Inter-Korean relations reflected this broader pattern of continuity and recalibration. The first half of the year remained embedded in the confrontational dynamic consolidated since 2022, characterized by North Korean missile tests and the absence of meaningful dialogue. Following Lee's election, Seoul attempted to alter the tone of the relationship through de-escalatory gestures, such as the suspension of border propaganda measures and the articulation of several proposals to restart dialogue. Pyongyang, however, largely maintained its «two hostile states» posture introduced in 2023, limiting the impact of Seoul's openings.

Beyond the peninsula, 2025 was equally shaped by shifting international alignments. North Korea deepened its strategic partnership with Rus-

sia, transforming the comprehensive agreement signed in 2024 into tangible military cooperation and embedding itself more directly in Moscow's war strategy. At the same time, Pyongyang sought to balance this alignment by revitalizing ties with China and regional partners. South Korea, after months of diplomatic paralysis during the constitutional crisis, gradually reactivated its foreign policy under Lee, prioritizing alliance management with the United States, but also stabilizing relations with Japan and carefully recalibrating its approach toward China in an increasingly complex global environment

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *The aftermath of martial law and the confirmation of the impeachment*

The constitutional crisis in which South Korea plunged after the declaration of martial law by President Yoon Suk-yeol on 3 December 2024 continued to strongly influence the following months. While the immediate and more problematic consequences had been contained within a few hours, by the vote of National Assembly rejecting martial law, the political and judicial consequences of that decision continued to unfold in the first months of 2025. The sentiment of national unity and bipartisanship that had characterized the first protests quickly evaporated in the following weeks, with a return to the strong political polarization that had characterized the months before the 3 December declaration and that had been one of its root causes. In this context, between early January and the Constitutional Court's final ruling on Yoon's impeachment on 4 April, the country experienced one of the most severe stress tests of its democratic system since the transition of 1987, marked by a deepening polarization within society and a prolonged confrontation not only between different political factions, but also among state institutions, with the unprecedented arrest and indictment of a sitting president for insurrection.

At the beginning of 2025, South Korea found itself with a dangerous political vacuum at the centre of its institutional system: Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok became acting president, following first Yoon's impeachment and then that of Prime Minister and acting President Han Duck-soo voted by the National Assembly on 27 December [Milani and Fiori 2024]. This rapid succession of interim leaders underscored the institutional fragility produced by the martial law declaration and left the country without a clear and legitimate political leadership in a time of great tension and confusion, both domestically and internationally.

After the first failed attempt to take Yoon Suk-yeol into custody by police and investigators from the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO), due to the intervention of the presidential security service and of groups of supporters gathered near his residence, the authorities reorganized their

strategy and on 15 January Yoon was finally taken into custody without major clashes and brought to a detention facility for questioning [Yim and Park 2025, 15 January]. The standoff that lasted for several days between police authorities and the presidential security service was unprecedented in contemporary Korea and clearly epitomized the potential and dangerous tension existing between state institutions. In addition, rival demonstrations of protesters against and in favour of Yoon took place in Seoul for several days, while more than thirty lawmakers from the conservative People Power Party (PPP) denounced the CIO's actions as illegitimate [Lim 2025, 16 January]. The first weeks of the new year thus showed that the crisis was not over and that it continued to affect several different aspects and layers of the socio-political environment, ranging from people's support to state institutions and party-political dynamics.

After his arrest, Yoon refused to cooperate with the investigation, denouncing it as illegal and politically motivated. Two days later, the CIO sought a formal arrest warrant on charges of insurrection and abuse of power, citing the gravity of the alleged attempt to overturn constitutional order and the risk of recurrence [Heo 2025, 18 January]. At the hearing to confirm his arrest, Yoon continued to proclaim his innocence, while several thousand of his supporters demonstrated outside the courthouse. On 19 January, a court confirmed the arrest on insurrection charges, marking the first time in the country's democratic history that a sitting president was detained on such accusations. Violent incidents caused by some of his supporters outside the court, including attempts to storm the building, further demonstrated the dangerous and inflamed political climate [Shin 2025, 20 January].

The judicial process continued to evolve rapidly. On 26 January, prosecutors formally indicted Yoon for insurrection, after the CIO passed the case to the state prosecution, alongside former Minister of Defence Kim Yong-hyun and several senior military and police officials [Kim 2025, 26 January]. From the judicial perspective, the official indictment transformed the constitutional crisis into criminal proceedings with relevant political implications.

In early March, a Seoul court ordered Yoon's release from jail, citing procedural violations in the handling of his arrest. The prosecution declined to appeal and Yoon was released on 8 March, though the charges against him remained in place. His release was celebrated by his supporters and strongly criticized by his opponents, leading to a new wave of demonstrations with thousands of participants in mid-March [Kim 2025, 8 March].

In the meantime, political and judicial accountability were proceeding on parallel and partially independent tracks. While the criminal proceedings advanced, the Constitutional Court deliberated on the impeachment motion approved by the National Assembly in December. Hearings began in mid-January but were initially hampered by Yoon's absence, as he avoid-

ed appearing in person for fear of being arrested. Over the following weeks, the Court heard testimony from key officials, including Prime Minister Han Duck-soo on 20 February, who stated that members of government, including himself, had attempted to stop Yoon from declaring martial law [Lee 2025, 20 February]. This testimony contradicted the narrative advanced by some of Yoon's allies, that was aimed at sharing the responsibility among several members of the cabinet in order to have it considered as a collegial decision in line with constitutional procedures, and reinforced the perception that the decision had been taken by Yoon himself or within a narrow circle, but without broad institutional backing.

The composition of the Constitutional Court itself became a matter of political contention. The acting President Choi Sang-mok delayed the appointment of a ninth justice nominated by the National Assembly, prompting opposition parties to file impeachment motions against him as well [Son 2025, 21 March]. This standoff over the appointment reflected the opposition anxieties about the outcome of the impeachment process, which needed at least six votes in favour to be confirmed, but it also showed that the continued use or threat of use of the instrument of impeachment by the legislative power, seen as instrumental to political purposes, concurred in heightening institutional conflict and public distrust towards state institutions. On 24 March, the Court overturned Han Duck-soo's impeachment in a 7-1 decision, reinstating him as prime minister and acting president [Lee and Park 2025, 24 March]. This ruling temporarily stabilized the interim executive, but tension remained high.

On 4 April, after weeks of deliberation, and amid large but mostly peaceful demonstrations both for and against the president, the Constitutional Court unanimously upheld Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment and confirmed his removal from office. The ruling emphasized that the declaration of martial law had constituted a grave violation of constitutional principles and could not be justified by the circumstances cited by the president [Park 2025, 4 April]. Notably, the announcement did not trigger significant violence, despite fears of unrest and a massive deployment of police forces in Seoul. Yoon issued a brief message apologizing to the public but avoided direct acknowledgment of the Court's decision.

The months between January and early April 2025 confirmed once more the depth of South Korea's political polarization and the internal deficiencies of its institutional system, but also the resilience of its democracy. Institutional procedures, though contested and in some cases politicized, continued to function, even in extreme situations such as the arrest and indictment of a president for insurrection. At the same time, however, the crisis exacerbated pre-existing divisions. Supporters of Yoon framed the judicial proceedings as an attempt by «anti-state forces» to eliminate a conservative leader, echoing the rhetoric already presented in December 2024 by the former president. Progressives, conversely, portrayed the impeach-

ment as a necessary defence of constitutional democracy against the authoritarian attempt of an aspiring dictator.

The confirmation of the impeachment on 4 April did not put an end to the domestic political tension, but it marked the formal end of Yoon's presidency and of the political crisis that his declaration of martial law had triggered, setting in motion the process of electoral competition that would bring the country back to a situation of normality.

2.2. The presidential campaign and the June 2025 elections

The confirmation of Yoon Suk-yeol's impeachment by the Constitutional Court immediately shifted South Korea from a phase of emergency to one of electoral mobilization. On 8 April, the government called presidential elections for 3 June, triggering a compressed but highly consequential electoral campaign [Lee 2025, 8 April]. While the impeachment verdict formally closed the institutional crisis, it did not resolve the deep political cleavages that had preceded and accompanied it. In this context, the presidential race became the new arena for the different political camps to confront each other.

The Democratic Party (DP), strengthened by the Constitutional Court's unanimous ruling, moved quickly to consolidate its position. Lee Jae-myung resigned as party leader on 9 April to focus on his campaign and, despite the presence of other contenders in the primaries, won the nomination on 27 April with an overwhelming 89.77% of the vote [Goh 2025, 28 April]. The result underscored both the degree of internal cohesion in the progressive front and the unchallenged leadership position of Lee Jae-myung within it. The long months of confrontation with Yoon's administration and the impeachment had strengthened Lee's grip on the party, marginalizing internal critics and reinforcing the perception that he represented the only alternative to the conservatives. Considering the very poor state in which the martial law crisis had left the PPP, he immediately became the frontrunner.

Despite the fast consolidation as the main presidential contender, Lee had also to face some major obstacles related to his judicial problems. On 1 May, the Supreme Court overturned Lee Jae-myung's acquittal for electoral fraud, in a case related to the 2022 campaign, and ordered a retrial, raising questions about his eligibility and casting a shadow over his campaign [Kim 2025, 1 May]. In a decision widely interpreted as aimed at preventing judicial interference in the electoral process, the Seoul High Court postponed the first hearing for the new trial to 18 June, after the election [Bang and Kim 2025, 7 May]. While Lee denounced the timing of the ruling as politically sensitive, the postponement allowed his campaign to proceed without major disruption.

If the progressive camp entered the race with relative unity and strength, the conservative People Power Party (PPP) faced a far more turbulent process. Yoon's impeachment had left the party divided between those

who had supported his removal and those who continued to defend his actions. Several prominent figures entered the primary contest, including former Minister of Labour Kim Moon-soo, former party leader Han Dong-hoon, and two other relevant political figures: Ahn Cheol-soo – a moderate centrist who supported Yoon in 2022 – and Hong Joon-pyo – the very conservative mayor of Daegu and former presidential candidate in 2017 [Jung 2025, 22 April]. The multi-stage primary process gradually narrowed down the number of candidates to two and on 3 May Kim Moon-soo was selected as the official PPP candidate, with 56.5% of the vote against Han Dong-hoon's 43.5% [Shin 2025, 5 May].

However, the conclusion of the primary did not mean the end of the selection process for the conservatives. Between the end of April and early May, speculations grew about the possible candidacy of Han Duck-soo, who announced his own candidacy on 2 May, after resigning as prime minister and acting president the day before [Park 2025, 2 May]. This development represented a further blow to the stability of the country, since immediately after Han's decision the Vice Prime Minister Choi Sang-ok also resigned and the role of acting president was passed to the Minister of Education Lee Ju-ho [Lee 2025, 2 May].

With Han Duck-soo also in the race, negotiations to unify the conservative vote quickly followed, with intense discussions between Han and the officially nominated candidate Kim Moon-soo. The two politicians met several times in early May but were not able to agree on a merged candidacy or even on a road map towards unification. On 9 May, the PPP leadership, that in the previous days had shown very limited support for Kim Moon-soo, attempted to replace Kim with Han as the party's official nominee, leading to accusations of an internal «coup» and possible legal challenges. Ultimately, the following day, party members voted to confirm Kim Moon-soo as the candidate and Han Duck-soo withdrew from the race [Kim 2025, 11 May]. The episode clearly revealed the depth of factionalism within the conservative camp and the difficulties in rebuilding a coherent identity in the aftermath of Yoon's attempted coup.

The presidential campaign officially began on 12 May, with seven registered candidates, but in practice with three key figures: Lee Jae-myung for the Democratic Party, Kim Moon-soo for the PPP and Lee Jun-seok for the centrist Reform Party. From the beginning and throughout the campaign, opinion polls showed Lee Jae-myung with a significant margin over the other candidates [Kim 2025, 27 May]. His campaign emphasized «pragmatism», especially in foreign policy, a «normalization» of the country's situation with the return to economic growth and the strengthening of national unity after months of turmoil. His candidacy was presented as a clear break with Yoon Suk-yeol and his attempted coup and as a return to stability, institutional normalization and a clear political leadership for the country to navigate the complicated international situation. Lee also proposed a plan

for political reforms that could help reinforce the institutional system, such as two four-year terms for the president and the harmonization of the legislative and presidential electoral cycles [Maresca 2025, 28 May].

In the conservative front, Kim Moon-soo faced the difficult task of distancing himself from Yoon's controversial legacy without alienating the party's conservative base and the considerable number of supporters of the former president. His electoral approach combined criticism of the DP's excessive power in the National Assembly and the use of judicial activism for political purposes. In an attempt to broaden his appeal, Kim focused on economic issues, small business support and concerns over regulatory burdens. On 17 May, Yoon Suk-yeol formally left the party and declared his support for Kim, a move intended to reduce the symbolic weight of the former president on the campaign [Yang, Jang and Park 2025, 18 May]. Nevertheless, the shadow of martial law and impeachment remained a key issue in the public debate and the main liability for the conservative campaign. In order to improve his chances, Kim also tried unsuccessfully to convince the centrist candidate – and former leader of the PPP – Lee Jun-seok to merge the candidacies [Yi 2025, 20 May].

Despite expectations of a decisive progressive victory, the final weeks of the campaign suggested a more competitive race than early opinion polls had indicated. Even before the election day, early voting turnout reached the record level of 34.74% and this trend was confirmed with the final participation rate of 79.4%, the highest since 1997, reflecting the intensity of mobilization on both sides and the importance that the population attached to this election, after all the turmoil and instability caused by the martial law declaration [Lee 2025, 3 June]. The high level of voter turnout also signalled how the impeachment had not demobilized conservative voters but rather it had reinforced their sense of the importance of political participation.

The result on 3 June gave Lee Jae-myung a large victory, with 49.42% of the vote, Kim Moon-soo obtained 41.15%, while Lee Jun-seok 8.34% [NEC 2025]. Although Lee's victory was clear, the margin was narrower than what had been anticipated following the attempted coup and the impeachment process. The result thus confirmed that Yoon's vicissitudes had not fundamentally altered the underlying structure of partisan competition in the country, leaving the ideological cleavages and polarization largely intact, with the prospect of complicating the job of the newly elected president in his attempt of uniting the country.

2.3. Lee Jae-myung's first months in office and the road to normalization

Lee Jae-myung assumed the presidency on 4 June 2025 immediately after the certification of the election results, without the conventional transition period. His inaugural address was explicitly framed around the main points of his electoral campaign: pragmatism, economic recovery and national

unity, after months of institutional turmoil [Park 2025, 4 June]. The first months of Lee's presidency were inevitably defined by the political consequences of the martial law crisis, such as the need to restore a fully functioning government, the persistence of a deeply polarized system and the importance of reconstructing a clear foreign policy strategy.

From the outset, Lee's early moves reflected an awareness of institutional fragility and the need to mark discontinuity with his predecessor but also to keep the administrative process working. His campaign chief, Kim Min-seok, was nominated as prime minister, his close adviser Kang Hoon-sik as chief of staff, and the senior diplomat Wi Sung-lac as national security advisor, with the task of supervising foreign and security policies in the transition [Son 2025, 4 June]. Most of the ministers from the previous government were temporarily confirmed – with the exception of the justice minister because of his role in the martial law declaration – to ensure continuity in state affairs. This decision was aimed at reducing the risk of bureaucratic paralysis while also signalling that the new presidency would not move forward with indiscriminate purges of the state apparatus, in line with his ideas of pragmatism and national unity. In parallel, Lee established a policy planning committee that functioned as a sort of transition team in the first phase. The formation of the new government took place between the end of June and early July, with the nomination of all the ministers and the parliamentary confirmation of the appointed prime minister, with the abstentions of all the PPP members in the National Assembly [Chang 2025, 3 July].

Lee moved also to reassert his presidential authority over key institutional levers, with the decision to withdraw two Constitutional judges nominated by former acting President Han Duck-soo [Shin 2025, 6 June]. In addition, Lee reversed one of the most visible institutional decisions of Yoon's presidency: the relocation of the presidential residence, with the decision to move it back to the Blue House (*Cheong Wa Dae*) in late 2025 as a symbolic return to institutional normalcy [Kim 2025, 29 December].

The main focus of Lee's domestic politics in his first months in office centred on restoring trust and accountability towards the main institutions, after the martial law crisis, and on the normalization of the country's politics especially regarding the economy. Within days of his inauguration, the National Assembly approved a law to establish special prosecutors to investigate Yoon's attempt to subvert constitutional order, the corruption allegations involving the former first lady Kim Keon-hee and the controversy surrounding the death of a marine in 2023 and the alleged following cover-up [Park 2025, 9 June]. The appointment of independent special prosecutors was considered by progressives as a means to demonstrate that the crisis would be addressed through legal accountability, while for conservatives it was proof of political retaliation and weaponization of judicial institutions, with the result of further deepening polarization. Yoon refused to cooper-

ate with the special prosecutor, seen as politically motivated, leading to his re-arrest [Choe 2025, 9 July].

Beyond the judicial arena, Lee sought to define an economic and governance agenda under difficult conditions. The National Assembly approved an extra budget aimed at stimulating growth, while the conservative People Power Party boycotted the vote, another indicator that parliamentary behaviour remained shaped by total opposition with little room for compromise. At the same time, Lee's nominations in the government generated friction during confirmation hearings, with several nominees forced to withdraw amid controversies. The political situation thus remained tense, despite the efforts of Lee Jae-myung who tried to promote more bipartisan cooperation on key issues, such as economic growth.

The economic situation remained relatively fragile throughout 2025, especially in the second half of the year, due mostly to the external shock of US tariffs and to the reduction of domestic demand. The Bank of Korea revised growth prospects downward several times, from an estimate of 1.5% to 0.8%, reflecting weak domestic demand, a slowdown in export growth and difficulties in the construction sector [BOK 2025]. In response, the new administration relied mostly on expansionary fiscal measures, including the extra budget, aimed at stimulating growth and supporting households and small businesses. While some signs of recovery emerged toward the end of the year, leading to an actual growth rate of 1%, the overall economic performance confirmed the structural problems affecting South Korea's economy, with very strong sectors, like the export of semiconductors and high-tech items, but continuing difficulties in the domestic market, in particular regarding the construction sector [Borowiec 2026, 22 January].

The reshaping of party leadership also confirmed that polarization remained the central structural feature of South Korean politics. On the progressive side, the Democratic Party consolidated around Lee's figure and reorganized the parliamentary leadership accordingly, with the election of Jung Chung-rae on 2 August [Yoo 2025, 2 August]. On the conservative side, the PPP underwent a transition of leadership that favoured figures associated with Yoon and that opposed the impeachment, such as Jang Dong-hyeok who defeated Kim Moon-soo on 26 August and became the new party leader [Jang 2025, 27 August]; this development demonstrated that a confrontational stance toward the new administration was still prominent and that Yoon maintained a grip on the majority of the party.¹

The control of the National Assembly by the Democratic Party gave the president the possibility to promote legislation on several aspects that were considered crucial. In September, the parliament approved a law to dismantle the Korea Communication Commission and to create a new agency to supervise these matters [Kim 2025, 27 September], while in November Lee presented the annual budget with a speech at the National Assembly, boycotted by the opposition, in which he proposed an increase of

8% in spending for investments in strategic industries, such as defence, AI and cultural contents [Hwang 2025, 4 November]. By the end of 2025, the picture was one of partial stabilization of the situation but it was very limited in terms of national reconciliation. Confrontation between the two main political fronts remained unaltered, as demonstrated by the good result of the conservatives at the June vote; at the same time, the approval rating of the new president remained very high throughout his first months in office [Kim 2025, 5 December], signalling that a return towards a normal course of domestic politics was well received by the public opinion.

2.4. Stability before transition: North Korea's domestic recalibration in 2025

In 2025, North Korea's domestic politics was marked by a process of institutional consolidation and strengthened elite discipline in preparation for the 9th Congress of the Workers' Party. The main meetings of the state and the party did not introduce radical ideological shifts, but instead emphasized implementation, administrative control and political accountability. In a context of persistent economic constraints and accelerated military modernization, the leadership increasingly fused economic governance, national security and systemic stability, presenting efficiency and organizational loyalty as the foundations of regime legitimacy.

On 22-23 January 2025, Mansudae Assembly Hall in Pyongyang hosted the 12th session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA). Kim Jong Un did not participate or give a speech, despite the expectations of some watchers that he would comment on the return of Trump as US president. Delegates from the Workers' Party of Korea, the government, the armed forces and national institutions attended the session, which was held in conjunction with celebrations commemorating the 80th anniversaries of the party's founding and national liberation.

The assembly examined the cabinet performance in 2024 and delineated its duties for 2025, emphasizing the implementation of economic policies and development goals. Deputies adopted the state budget for 2025 and assessed how well the 2024 one was being implemented, paying special emphasis to investment goals meant to boost the economy and raise living standards [KCNA 2025, 24 January]. Organizational issues were also discussed, including committee allocations and SPA Standing Committee by-elections. Pak In Chol, chairman of the assembly, concluded by reiterating the deputies' dedication to the rebirth of the state under Kim Jong Un's direction and their position as the highest authority.

In advance of the Workers' Party of Korea's 9th Congress, the 13th session of the 14th SPA, which took place on 20-21 September 2025, signalled a change from affirmation to execution. The focus of the meeting was on improving governance capacity through legislation, administrative oversight and fixing implementation flaws. Deputies discussed sector-specific legislation and evaluated the enforcement of current rules, presenting

legal improvement as crucial for maintaining social order and managing the economy amid enduring limitations. The «20×10 Regional Development Policy», which intended to create industrial facilities in twenty counties annually over a ten-year period, was a major focus of domestic legislation [KCNA 2025a, 22 September]. The political significance of the meeting was increased by Kim Jong Un's arrival on the second day, when he gave a long speech. In addition to outlining policy priorities and providing a strategic assessment of conditions on and around the Korean Peninsula, he assessed recent social and economic changes. Kim emphasized the connection of economic management, political control and defence policy by connecting domestic governance to national security and external strategy. He also reaffirmed the fundamental concepts of independence, discipline and centralized leadership [KCNA 2025b, 22 September].

When combined, the 12th and 13th sessions showed how the regime's domestic governance objectives have changed over time, moving from institutional loyalty and symbolic affirmation to legislative consolidation and political signalling. Instead of adopting new policies, the later session strengthened continuity and regime stability by expanding the SPA's position as a forum for elite communication and policy enforcement.

One of the most remarkable events of the year took place on 21 May, when North Korea suffered a serious accident during the launch of a new large destroyer, with Kim Jong Un present at the ceremony [KCNA 2025, 22 May]. The stern of the ship entered the water before the bow, causing the hull to twist and partially capsize, because it had been launched sideways from a slipway, possibly because of the lack of a large enough floating dry dock. Images released soon after showed the vessel straddling the water and the slipway, indicating that a significant breakdown had occurred [Guinto 2025, 23 May]. The event brought attention to North Korea's naval modernization initiative. The DPRK started constructing two massive *Choe Hyon*-class surface combatants at Nampo and Chongjin in 2024. These vessels are believed to be the biggest warships the nation has ever attempted, weighing over 5,000 tons and measuring more than 140 metres. Although precise configurations are still unknown, the design is thought to incorporate vertical launch systems and a hefty missile loadout. Kim Jong Un was present when the lead ship, *Choe Hyon*, was launched at Nampo on 25 April 2025, following claims made by state media that construction had been finished in little over 400 days [KCNA 2025, 26 April].

In this context, the 21 May failure at Chongjin was particularly noteworthy as a politically sensitive and public defeat. North Korea swiftly launched a massive rescue effort with support ships. The damaged vessel, known as *Kang Kon*, was repaired and floating inside the harbour by the beginning of June. State media insisted that the hull plating was still intact while acknowledging water entry at the stern and scraping along the starboard side [KCNA 2025, 23 May]. The actual level of damage was unclear

because independent images did not show catastrophic hull rupture, but it did display apparent damage at the bow, including the sonar dome area and portions of the superstructure.

The political reaction came quickly. Kim Jong Un ordered repairs to be finished before an important meeting of the party's Central Committee in June, publicly framing the mishap as a breakdown in discipline and accountability rather than a technical malfunction. Simultaneously, the incident led to disciplinary actions. According to North Korean media, several officials, including the chief engineer, Ri Hyong Son, a vice department director in the party's Munitions Industry Department, and Hong Kil Ho, manager of Chongjin shipyard, were arrested in relation to the unsuccessful launch [KCNA 2025, 23 May; KCNA 2025, 26 May].

On 12 June, Kim Jong Un personally attended the vessel's renewed launch ceremony, marking the symbolic end to the episode [KCNA 2025, 13 June]. From an analytical standpoint, the sequence demonstrated how North Korea's military-industrial system recasts technological failure as an organizational and political problem. Under Kim Jong Un, the success of major projects is directly linked to the legitimacy of the regime, so failures are not a sign of technological limitations but rather of a lack of discipline or loyalty. A well-known authoritarian practice intended to maintain the power of the leadership centre is shown in the quick downward assignment of blame to shipyard managers, engineers and mid-level party officials. The staged recovery, with the second launch in the presence of the leader, and the public punishment of officials highlighted how elite control, discipline and performance-based legitimacy are linked to military modernization in the DPRK.

As North Korea was preparing for the expected strategic changes in 2026, the 12th plenary meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the party, which took place in June 2025, was a pivotal moment. The plenum was held at Mount Myohyang instead of Pyongyang, defying convention and highlighting increased worries about internal security as well as the leadership's need to examine state matters in a strictly regulated setting. Kim Jong Un oversaw a three-day evaluation of the first half of 2025's economic performance, with a special emphasis on the five-year plan that was introduced in 2021. In the face of sanctions and resource limitations, the leadership reiterated a push for the modernization of heavy industry, emphasizing technological advancement over straightforward output growth [KCNA 2025, 24 June]. The leadership presented a picture of controlled stability by the end of the meeting. The current five-year plan's last phase was characterized by an emphasis on modernization and self-reliance. The official announcement that the 9th Party Congress would take place in early 2026 was one of the session's main results. Apparently, this statement presented the plenum as a prelude to more extensive policy consolidation, such as establishing the nation's nuclear doctrine and institutionalizing the «two state» strategy on

the Korean peninsula. The Mount Myohyang plenum represented a significant turning point in North Korea's evolution from the survival-focused policies of the early 2020s to a more formalized and forceful governance model that is anticipated to take shape after 2026.

On 8 and 9 October, Kim Jong Un gave two significant addresses at a national gathering at the Party Founding Museum in honour of the Workers' Party of Korea's anniversary. He examined the Party's accomplishments since 1945 and evaluated his own performance from 2016 to 2025, paying close attention to the five-year defence and economic plans that were introduced following the 8th Party Congress in 2021. Kim acknowledged that living conditions and economic growth had fallen short of expectations while emphasizing advancements in nuclear, missile and conventional capabilities [KCNA 2025a, 10 October; KCNA 2025, 11 October].

Building on this analysis, Kim presented a new ten-year plan that would be codified in the upcoming 9th Party Congress. It called for the «comprehensive development of socialism» between 2026 and 2035 and described it as a «second era of nation-building». The plan seeks to make North Korea a powerful socialist state by 2035. It calls for quicker innovation and action while maintaining a strong foundation in popular mobilization and self-reliance under the sanctions regime. Economic self-sufficiency was reiterated as a fundamental principle. The «spirit of Kangwon Province» campaign, which portrayed Kangwon as an example of local development attained via party discipline, public mobilization and ideological commitment, was associated with this reinvigorated effort. In addition to supporting the «20×10 regional development policy», which was introduced in 2024, the campaign also strengthened Kim Jong Un's personal authority by directly linking regional achievement to his leadership.

These government initiatives, together with a noticeable expansion in trade and cooperation with Russia, led to an annual economic growth for North Korea of 3.7%, according to the estimates of South Korea's central bank, in 2024, the strongest increase in eight years [Sokolin and Kim 2025, 29 August]. In addition, North Korea's trade with China rebounded in 2025 to levels close to those seen before the pandemic, marking a 25% increase compared to the previous year [Sokolin 2026, 20 January].

During the plenary meeting on 9-11 December, the party discussed five topics on the agenda, most of which were related to domestic matters. The meeting evaluated the last year of the current five-year economic and defence plans and started preparations for the 9th Party Congress, including a new five-year economic plan for 2026-2030, after examining the execution of party and state policies for 2025. The official report stated that the strategy was «carried out», but it provided no information and made no mention of foreign policy [MacArthur Bosack 2025, 13 December]. Reiterating the concurrent growth of nuclear and conventional forces and depicting soldier deployments to the Russia-Ukraine war as a source of national

pride, the plenum praised advancements in economic building and military modernization. Prior to the Congress, Kim signalled harsher internal discipline by denouncing party officials for their ideological failings, carelessness and corruption. In addition, there were indications of limited reorganization within the Politburo, party departments, and the Central Military Commission, as well as the removal of one full and five alternate Central Committee members [The Pyongyang Times 2025, 13 December]. These actions were intended to address governance shortcomings and strengthen elite control prior to the 9th Congress.

3. *Inter-Korean relations*

3.1. *Persistent confrontation before the political transition*

The clear separation between the first and second part of the year, with the South Korean presidential elections in between, also strongly influenced relations between the two Koreas. The first half of 2025 did not bring any significant change to inter-Korean relations, which remained trapped in the confrontational dynamic consolidated during the previous years. The political crisis unfolding in South Korea after the declaration of martial law and the subsequent impeachment process prolonged this situation of stalemate for the lack of a clear political leadership in the South. The period between January and early June was characterized by continuity in military and rhetorical provocations and by the absence of meaningful diplomatic engagement.

The year opened with a familiar pattern. In early January, North Korea launched a medium-range ballistic missile, reportedly equipped with a hypersonic warhead, into the East Sea [Zwirko 2025, 7 January]. The test reaffirmed Pyongyang's determination to continue upgrading its missile capabilities, as part of a broader strategy of military technological advancement and pressure on the other regional actors.

Military provocations intensified again in March, when South Korea and the United States began the annual *Freedom Shield* joint exercises, strongly condemned by Pyongyang. North Korea responded by launching a series of short-range ballistic missiles into the Yellow Sea and issuing warnings about the risk of «nuclear war» on the peninsula [Han 2025, 24 March]. The exchange reproduced the well-established cycle of action and reaction, with large-scale exercises presented by Seoul and Washington as defensive, met with missile launches portrayed by Pyongyang as legitimate counter-measures.

At the same time, North Korea continued to emphasize qualitative improvements to its strategic capabilities. In early March, state media reported Kim Jong Un's inspection of a construction site for what was described as the regime's first nuclear-powered submarine [Choe 2025, 8 March]. While

independent verification remained limited, the announcement signalled the regime's ambition to enhance its second-strike capability and to diversify delivery platforms beyond land-based missiles.

In May, North Korea launched additional short-range missiles and a tactical ballistic missile under Kim Jong Un's supervision. A few weeks later, it carried out cruise missile tests in the East Sea [Park 2025, 22 May]. These actions were neither unprecedented nor technologically revolutionary, but confirmed the normalization of frequent missile activity as a tool of strategic pressure. Alongside missile launches, low-level border incidents and politically sensitive symbolic actions also contributed to maintaining a tense atmosphere. Activist groups in the South resumed the launch of propaganda leaflets toward the North in early May, prompting condemnation from both Pyongyang and, notably, from South Korean authorities concerned about possible escalation [Park 2025, 9 May].

In the months before the elections, inter-Korean relations were not at the centre of the political debate in South Korea. The absence of communication channels, due to the decision of North Korea of severing all the existing inter-Korean lines, reinforced a condition of stalemate. The presidential election on 3 June did not automatically alter the existing situation, but it introduced a new political variable in Seoul, connected to the different approach to inter-Korean relations of the newly elected president.

3.2. A cautious reopening: Lee Jae-myung's attempt to restart inter-Korean relations

Lee Jae-myung's election introduced a significant shift in tone and goals regarding inter-Korean relations. After three years marked by escalating military signalling and the gradual dismantling of confidence-building mechanisms under Yoon Suk-yeol, the new administration sought to reframe Seoul's approach toward Pyongyang, in line with the traditional priorities of South Korean progressives.

From the very beginning, Lee signalled that deterrence and dialogue should not be mutually exclusive. One of the first symbolic gestures came within days of his inauguration, when Lee ordered the suspension of propaganda loudspeaker broadcasts along the border; North Korea reciprocated by suspending its own broadcasts shortly thereafter [Kim 2025, 12 June]. The exchange did not represent a breakthrough, but it reintroduced a pattern of reciprocal de-escalation that had been totally absent in previous years. Shortly afterwards, South Korean military authorities proceeded to dismantle several loudspeakers installed along the demilitarized zone, reinforcing the signal that the new administration was willing to reduce tension with Pyongyang [Park 2025, 4 August].

Concurrently, Lee instructed the Ministry of Unification to take measures against the launch of propaganda leaflets by activist groups along the

border, through the deployment of police units and, later in the year, the approval of a law in the National Assembly granting authorities greater powers to intervene [Park 2025, 15 December]. These moves, although controversial domestically, served to eliminate possible sources of tension that could trigger North Korean retaliatory actions, but also to distance the new administration from the provocative stance of the previous one that allegedly used inter-Korean crises to escalate tension as a motivation for the declaration of martial law. The new administration also revived the humanitarian channel as a low-risk avenue for engagement. In late June, the Ministry of Unification authorized several civic organizations to seek contact with North Korean counterparts for humanitarian purposes [Lee 2025, 25 June]. These steps were designed to signal that Seoul's approach towards North Korea was now open for dialogue and cooperation.

Lee's broader strategic vision was articulated more clearly in mid-August, during his speech for Liberation Day. In contrast to the hard-line rhetoric of the previous administration, Lee reaffirmed that the South would not pursue unification by absorption and expressed willingness to restore elements of the 2018 military agreements aimed at reducing tensions along the border [The Korea Herald 2025, 15 August]. A few days later, in an interview, he outlined a phased approach to denuclearization, proposing an initial freeze of North Korea's nuclear activities followed by gradual reduction measures in exchange for political and economic normalization [Kim 2025, 21 August]. In September, during his address at the United Nations General Assembly, Lee presented a more structured strategy called «END» (Exchange, Normalization and Denuclearization), aimed at resuming inter-Korean dialogue and exchanges, normalizing relations between the two Koreas – including addressing the issue of international sanctions – and a step-by-step approach to denuclearization, starting with a freeze in nuclear development [Lee 2025, 23 September].

Despite these openings, Pyongyang's reaction was generally negative and in line with the new «two states» position presented by the leader during the previous two years. The leader's powerful sister, Kim Yo Jong, issued several statements criticizing these initiatives and reiterating that Seoul was not considered as a partner for dialogue. She also added that a reopening of diplomacy with the United States, under the new Trump administration, would be possible only after a significant change in its hostile approach [Kim 2025, 29 July].

Military developments reinforced this stalemate, such as in the case of the *Freedom Edge* exercises that were partially postponed to September to reduce immediate tensions, but nevertheless were met by Pyongyang with strong condemnation [Park 2025, 15 September]. In a symbolic gesture to show that for North Korea the inter-Korean situation was not changed, a new set of loudspeakers was installed on the northern side of the border on 22 August [Kim 2025, 22 August].

In late October, North Korea resumed short-range missile tests for the first time in several months, followed by additional cruise missile launches. By December, further artillery drills and short-range ballistic launches confirmed that the North was not prepared to moderate its military posture in response to Seoul's openings. In addition, Kim Jong Un himself supervised the test of a new long-range surface-to-air missile on 24 December and the following day photos of him inspecting the completed hull of what was defined as a nuclear-powered submarine were released [Choe 2025, 25 December].

In this complicated situation, the new South Korean government continued to push for the establishment of channels of dialogue and confidence-building measures aimed at reducing military tension at the border, such as a clearer demarcation of the military demarcation line, through statements of the Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young, that, however, remained unanswered from the North Korean side.

An additional layer of tension emerged in January 2026 when Pyongyang accused South Korea of sending drones across the border and violating its airspace, in late 2025 and early 2026 [Kim 2026, 10 January]. While Seoul denied the involvement of the military or other government agencies and immediately opened an investigation, eventually identifying civilian actors behind the incidents, the episode highlighted the fragility of de-escalatory efforts in such a tense environment. Kim Yo Jong's statements on the issue oscillated between sharp condemnation and a cautious positive acknowledgement of Seoul's actions, pointing towards the possibility of a more malleable stance in the future [Jung 2026, 14 January].

The developments of the second half of the year demonstrated both the possibilities and the limits of policy recalibration. Lee Jae-myung's administration succeeded in altering the tone of inter-Korean relations, reducing potentially disrupting actions and reintroducing dialogue and cooperation in the inter-Korean vocabulary. However, North Korea's 2023 shift regarding relations with South Korea, with the launch of the «two hostile states» approach, continued to shape its posture on inter-Korean relations.

4. *International relations*

4.1. *War, reciprocity and strategic alignment: Pyongyang and Moscow in 2025*

In 2025, North Korea's foreign policy was dominated by the consolidation of its strategic alignment with Russia, transforming the comprehensive partnership agreement signed in June 2024 into a tangible military collaboration. What had initially appeared as diplomatic signalling and arms transfers evolved into direct operational involvement, with North Korean troops deployed alongside Russian forces. This shift marked a qualitative escalation in Pyongyang's external posture, embedding the regime more

deeply within Moscow's war strategy while simultaneously leveraging the conflict to advance its own military modernization, economic resilience and diplomatic positioning.

At the beginning of 2025, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy declared that two wounded North Korean soldiers were captured during fighting in the Russian Kursk border region, implicitly proving Pyongyang's direct involvement in the conflict [Vinograd 2025, 11 January]. The deployment of North Korean troops with Russian forces was first alluded to in late 2024 and then confirmed by many intelligence reports according to which North Korea had sent between 10,000 and 12,000 troops to support Russia's military effort [Kim 2024, 8 October; Ha 2024, 18 October; Garamone 2024, 4 November]. According to Ukrainian sources, these foreign forces were completely integrated under Russian command and occasionally even disguised themselves as Russian soldiers from ethnic minorities in order to evade discovery [Alpay 2025, 9 July]. Russian officials dismissed such allegations as «fake news» [TASS 2024, 10 October] while North Korea's leadership remained mute about the deployment. But the evidence grew over the course of the following few months. However, even after the capture of the two soldiers, Pyongyang stayed silent in public and the Kremlin declined to respond.

In mid-March, in the midst of negotiations for a truce in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui received a Russian team led by Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko [KCNA 2025a, 16 March]. The Russian politician also met separately with North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Jong Gyu and they agreed on concrete steps to improve bilateral cooperation in accordance with their comprehensive strategic partnership treaty, which was signed in June 2024 [KCNA 2025b, 16 March]. Rudenko's trip to Pyongyang seemed to be a follow-up to the pact signed the previous year, which stipulated that both parties must support one another in the event of an attack.

The confirmation of what many had long suspected arrived on 26 April, when Russia's top general Valery Gerasimov commended the «courage and heroism» of North Korean «soldiers and officers» fighting alongside Russian troops to liberate «border areas of the Kursk Region» [Reka 2025, 26 April]. By then, it was evident that the rumours concerning the active participation of North Korean soldiers in the conflict were true. The troop deployment was finally confirmed also by Pyongyang two days later, when the Central Military Commission publicly praised the «heroic» volunteers in Russia [KCNA 2025, 28 April]. Kim Jong Un himself reiterated the formula of North Korean heroes who «fought for justice», adding that a monument honouring their achievements in Kursk would be erected in Pyongyang and commented that the forces' deployment was a «sacred mission aimed at strengthening friendship and solidarity» between the two nations [KCNA 2025, 28 April]. According to North Korean media, Russian

President Vladimir Putin also expressed gratitude to the Korean troops, saying that «the Russian people will never forget the feat of the Korean special forces fighters» who «gave their lives for Russia, for our common freedom» [KCNA 2025, 29 April]. The Russian president's comment, following North Korea's recognition, demonstrated the coordination of Pyongyang and Moscow remarks.

North Korea's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine seemed to be motivated by a combination of military expediency and political strategy. The chance for North Korea to obtain firsthand expertise in modern, high-tech warfare was a major driving force. The Korean People's Army lacks operational expertise because it has not engaged in a significant fight in more than seventy years. North Korean commanders could thus witness firsthand the use of advanced artillery, drone warfare and combined operations by deploying forces to a contemporary battlefield. North Korean military technology and weaponry were also tested in the fight. Pyongyang could also evaluate the performance of its equipment in actual combat situations and use battlefield feedback to improve domestic arms manufacture by supplying Russia with rockets and artillery shells and fighting alongside Russian forces.

Both strategic and material returns were essential to this collaboration. According to intelligence reports, North Korea's military assistance is a component of a larger exchange with Moscow. Presumably, in return, Russia has given vital supplies like food and gasoline, paid deployed soldiers and helped develop critical assets like ballistic missiles, air defences and submarines [Sneider 2025, 30 July]. Closer ties to Moscow also had diplomatic benefits, in addition to immediate military and economic dividends. Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council may support North Korea's aspirations for satellite and space technology while protecting it from additional sanctions. In the end, despite the considerable risks involved, Kim Jong Un considered that involvement in the war would hasten military modernization and bolster regime security.

However, according to several sources, the North Koreans had suffered significant losses early in the conflict due to their lack of armoured vehicles, unfamiliarity with drone warfare, unpreparedness for modern warfare and a lack of coordination with Russian troops on the battlefield, particularly because of the language barrier, which led to several cases of «friendly fire» [Fenbert 2024, 14 December]. The estimation of casualties among North Korean military fighting for Russia has been varied. In January 2025, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) reported that over 2,700 North Korean soldiers had been injured and 300 had died in battle; Ukrainians reported that 4,000 had been killed or injured, while the United States put the number closer to 1,200 [Jo 2025, 13 January; Zadorozhnyy 2025, 9 January; VOA 2025, 12 January].

At the end of April, following months of preparatory work, North Korea and Russia began building a new bridge across the Tumen River.

Mikhail Mishustin, the prime minister of Russia, joined the groundbreaking event via video and referred to the bridge's construction as a «significant milestone» in relations between North Korea and Russia [Russian Government 2025, 30 April]. The new bridge would serve as a «grand symbol of the everlasting friendship and cooperation» between North Korea and Russia, according to North Korean Prime Minister Pak Thae Song, who also attended the event via video [KCNA 2025, 1 May].

In June, Russia's Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu visited Pyongyang twice in less than two weeks, presumably aiming at securing additional troop deployment. He declared that North Korea would send 1,000 sappers and 5,000 military construction workers to Kursk [The Moscow Times 2025, 17 June]. In addition, during his meeting with Kim Jong Un, Shoigu again commended the performance of North Korean forces in Russia's Kursk region. KCNA reported talks between Kim Jong Un and Shoigu over «immediate cooperation and long-term plans» but did not provide specifics of the planned cooperation [KCNA 2025, 18 June]. Almost simultaneously, Russia and North Korea resumed direct train services between Pyongyang and Moscow – one of the longest passenger train journeys in the world, covering more than 10,000 kilometres – for the first time since the implementation of COVID-19 border restrictions [Sokolin 2025, 10 June].

At the beginning of July, Kim was seen placing his hands on six coffins covered in flags in pictures displayed during a banquet at the East Pyongyang Grand Theatre [Jung 2025, 1 July]. Senior officials wearing winter jackets, such as Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui and the leader's sister Kim Yo Jong, flanked him, suggesting the repatriation ceremony had taken place months before. State media broadcast footage of a tearful Kim sitting next to his daughter, Kim Ju Ae, and Russian Culture Minister Olga Lyubimova [Ji 2025, 30 June]. After both regimes acknowledged the troop presence and declared triumph in recapturing portions of Russia's Kursk area, Pyongyang began framing the fallen soldiers as part of a victory narrative. Similarly, towards the end of August, Kim placed flowers on a memorial wall that featured 101 pictures with the names of deceased troops, who presumably lost their lives while fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine, celebrating them as «great heroes» [KCNA 2025, 22 August]. Kim was also seen offering consolation to bereaved families by kneeling in gratitude and hugging children who were thought to be the sons and daughters of the deceased [Pohorilov 2025, 22 August].

In the same period, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov paid a three-day visit to the North Korean seaside city of Wonsan, signalling a strengthening of the two neighbours' strategic ties, with a meeting with Kim Jong Un aboard his yacht and opulent treatment at a recently opened resort [KCNA 2025, 13 July]. Alongside there were other signs of strengthening relations, such as the reopening of air connections – the first direct pas-

senger flight from Moscow to Pyongyang since the mid-1990s – and the enthusiastic arrival of Russian visitors to the resort [KCNA 2025, 29 July].

4.2. *Beyond the battlefield: Pyongyang's renewed diplomatic activism*

On 3 September 2025, Kim Jong Un arrived in Beijing on his special armoured train – accompanied by his daughter Kim Ju Ae, Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui and other senior officials – to participate in the parade marking the 80th anniversary of China's victory in World War II. It was not only Kim's first visit to Beijing since January 2019, immediately before the Hanoi summit with US President Donald Trump, but also the first time in over six decades that the leaders of China, Russia and North Korea gathered in the same place, since also Putin was in attendance. However, the way the visit was organized pointed to a last-minute decision, since KCNA announced the trip on 28 August, only five days before it took place [KCNA 2025, 28 August]. The military parade also saw the participation of officials from South Korea, led by Parliament speaker Woo Won-shik, who had declared he would discuss peace on the Korean peninsula on the sidelines of the parade; Woo was able to only exchange greetings with Kim, marking however the first direct contact between Seoul and Pyongyang in years [Jung 2025, 3 September]. At the end of the event, and after having joined a reception at the Great Hall of the People by Tiananmen Square, Kim and Putin travelled in the same car to the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, where a meeting was held, the first since the one Pyongyang in June 2024 when the «comprehensive strategic partnership» was signed. Putin expressed his gratitude to Kim for his «initiative» to dispatch forces and commended the valour and bravery of North Korean soldiers who, according to him, battled with Russian forces to thwart a Ukrainian advance into Kursk [President of Russia 2025, 3 September]. Kim responded that, since the strategic partnership agreement in June 2024, collaboration between Moscow and Pyongyang has «significantly strengthened» [KCNA 2025, 4 September]. On their walk to Kim's car, Putin encouraged him to visit Russia.

The parade offered Pyongyang a significant opportunity to boost diplomatic and economic coordination with Russia, but Kim's trip to China was also a chance to obtain Beijing's economic assistance and to avoid becoming overly dependent on Moscow.

The day after, Kim Jong Un was hosted by President Xi Jinping for tea and a banquet at his residence in Zhongnanhai: except for Putin, none of the other twenty-six foreign guests in the parade received this privilege. During the talks, Xi reassured Kim that Beijing attached «great importance to the traditional friendship» with North Korea and this position would not be modified «no matter how the international situation changes», implying the will to deepen mutual interactions and practical cooperation [KCNA 2025, 5 September]. Kim agreed with Xi about their unwavering friendship. The same position was expressed by North Korea's foreign minister,

Choe Son Hui, when she paid a follow-up visit to Beijing later in the month, meeting with the Chinese Premier Li Qiang and Foreign Minister Wang Yi [KCNA 2025, 30 September].

Only a few days later, Li Qiang embarked on a three-day visit to Pyongyang, to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party of Korea, marking a turning point in the two nations' alliance and emphasizing Beijing's plan to fortify regional ties in the face of growing hostilities with Western nations. Li, the most senior Chinese official to visit the country since 2019, declared that in order to contribute more to regional and global peace, China was prepared to work with North Korea to implement the agreements made by Kim and Xi during their talks in Beijing, as well as to improve strategic communications, sustain close exchanges and promote cordial cooperation [KCNA 2025b, 10 October]. The Chinese leader's visit to North Korea served as both a diplomatic demonstration and a calculated move, reminding the US that China still has considerable influence over North Korea.

The anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea also became a platform for revitalising relations with Southeast Asia. Alongside Laotian President Thongloun Sisoulith, Vietnam's top leader Tô Lâm attended the celebrations in Pyongyang, signalling a broader regional diplomatic re-engagement [Panda 2025, 15 October]. Both leaders met with Kim Jong Un, reaffirming their commitment to strengthening bilateral ties across political and economic domains. The Laotian position was subsequently reinforced by Foreign Minister Thongsavanh Phommvihane, who travelled to Pyongyang in mid-November for talks with Choe Son Hui [Visapra 2025, 14 November]. By reconnecting with ASEAN members such as Laos and Vietnam, North Korea sought to widen its diplomatic space beyond its deepening alignment with Moscow and its traditional reliance on Beijing, aiming to secure broader political support and reduce strategic isolation on the international stage.

4.3. South Korea's foreign policy in suspension: Institutional crisis and US pressure

The course of South Korea's foreign policy in 2025 was noticeably irregular and sequential, due to the constitutional crisis triggered by Yoon Suk-yeol's martial law declaration and the power vacuum following his impeachment. A near-total lack of diplomatic initiative characterized the first half of the year, while a swift but limited reactivation took place in the second half, driven more by the need to react to external pressures and reintegrate Seoul into an increasingly unstable international environment than by long-term strategic design.

South Korea's foreign policy was essentially relegated to a holding pattern during the first months of the year. Seoul did not take new stances, initiate projects or try to influence regional dynamics, despite the fact that

official diplomatic channels were still open. As a result, while tensions on the Korean Peninsula remained high and North Korea continued to strengthen its external alliances, South Korea seemed to be mostly absent from regional and international diplomatic discussions.

In the relationship with the United States, this lack of initiative was most apparent. With Donald Trump back in the White House, Washington's strategy toward allies drastically changed, with a renewed focus on trade deficits, tariffs and transactional negotiating. The first significant external shock to Seoul occurred early in the year when the United States announced increased tariffs on South Korean goods [Kwon 2025, 3 April]. Seoul first reacted through technical and bureaucratic channels, sending economic delegations to Washington with the specific objective of minimizing immediate harm because it lacked the political ability to bargain at the leadership level [Song 2025, 21 May]. Seoul was inevitably more reactive than proactive at this stage, adjusting to US pressure rather than trying to set the agenda.

Only in early June, after Lee Jae-myung's inauguration, did there seem to be a noticeable change in South Korea's capacity for diplomatic action. Foreign policy then became a crucial tool for rebuilding international credibility.

4.4. Rebuilding credibility: South Korea's foreign policy under Lee Jae-myung

For the newly elected president, the United States was the first priority. Days after taking office, Lee spoke with President Trump directly for the first time over the phone, indicating that he intended to quickly reestablish high-level communication [Park 2025, 7 June]. The early stages of diplomatic re-engagement were dominated by the ensuing trade and tariff talks. A new trade agreement that lessened tariff pressure on important South Korean exports was the result of a series of interactions between Seoul and Washington in July [Mackenzie and Chia 2025, 31 July], which culminated in the bilateral meeting between Lee Jae-myung and Trump in late August. The summit emphasized the restored alliance management while also confirming the return of high-level political debate following months of institutional stasis. While Seoul focused on maintaining alliance stability and avoiding economic exposure, Washington prioritized defence cost-sharing, supply-chain security and trade imbalances as the main topics of discussion.

In order to limit economic harm and maintain geopolitical stability, South Korea took a very practical stance throughout these interactions, embracing the transactional logic enforced by the Trump administration and accepting disadvantageous conditions to ensure the stability of the alliance. This approach demonstrated the pragmatism that characterized Lee's first months in office in terms of foreign policy.

The second key target for the new president's foreign policy was Japan. After months of stasis, high-level discussions between Prime Minister Ishiba and Lee Jae-myung took place in August in Tokyo and the following

month in Busan, marking the return of active bilateral diplomacy [Shin 2025, 30 September]. However, this re-engagement was also mostly utilitarian in nature, in contrast to the previous initiatives of rapprochement put in place by Yoon Suk-yeol. While collaboration was framed around common security concerns and the management of threats associated with North Korea, controversial historical issues, that had been emphasized by Lee in the previous years, were mainly ignored, further demonstrating the pragmatic approach of the new president.

Just a few weeks following diplomatic reactivation, South Korea's attendance at the G7 summit in Canada marked a significant turning point in the return of the country to the international stage [Singh 2025, 21 June]. Seoul typically uses the G7 as a venue to reaffirm its position as a trustworthy and accountable actor within the community of advanced democracies, rather than exploiting the meeting to promote policy initiatives. Lee Jae-myung took a purposefully low-key approach, avoiding divisive stances on international disputes while highlighting collaboration, stability and economic resiliency. After months of diplomatic absence, the G7 served as a platform for re-legitimation.

South Korea started to refocus its foreign policy toward China by the middle of the summer. Seoul's attempt to normalize bilateral relations in the face of growing US-China competition was reflected in the phone conversation with Xi Jinping and the ensuing diplomatic engagement prior to the APEC summit, scheduled for late October in Gyeongju [Ji 2025, 10 June]. This outreach, which aimed to lessen diplomatic and economic vulnerability without jeopardizing alliance commitments, can be seen as a traditional hedging strategy rather than a sign of a strategic realignment [Fiori and Kim 2024]. While staying firmly rooted in the US-led security framework, South Korea aimed to maintain flexibility, especially in trade and supply chains.

A period of concentrated diplomatic activity began in the fall. South Korea was able to project an image of regained normalcy and diplomatic competence by taking part in and hosting important global events [Pacheco Pardo 2025, 16 November]. Seoul's goal to reclaim its position as a middle power capable of bridging regional and global agendas was demonstrated by its engagement with partners in Asia, Europe and the Global South. Hosting the APEC summit reinforced this ambition, providing South Korea with a platform to convene major powers and shape discussions on economic resilience and regional stability. On the sidelines of the summit, Lee held bilateral meetings with President Trump, the newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi and President Xi Jinping, signalling Seoul's intention to maintain active and balanced diplomacy among competing centres of power. These encounters underscored South Korea's effort to combine alliance management with strategic flexibility in an increasingly polarized international environment.

South Korea's foreign policy in 2025 had a very uneven development. Seoul was mainly absent from the international stage during the first half of the year, due to the lack of political stability. Starting from June, with the election of a new president, foreign policy initiatives restarted, including handling the problematic relations with the US administration, reestablishing functional cooperation with Japan, carefully stabilizing relations with China and reiterating alliance-based security while re-examining issues of operational autonomy.

The early course of Lee Jae-myung's foreign policy must also be interpreted in light of South Korea's ongoing internal divisions and of structural limitations. Even after the reestablishment of a fully functioning government, the room for manoeuvring was severely constrained by the resurgence of transactional demands from Washington and the escalation of the US-China competition. Because of this, Lee's foreign policy seemed to be more influenced by the need of stabilization and pragmatism than by activism. In this perspective, 2025 proposed a measured realignment within existing strategic boundaries, where pragmatism served as a response to alliance constraints and geopolitical instability.

5. Conclusions

In 2025, the developments on the Korean peninsula did not signal a dramatic change, but rather a period of adjustment shaped by various political and structural pressures. Both South and North Korea experienced significant internal shifts, that however did not change the overall balance of power in the region. In South Korea, challenges to democracy have been met with the capability to adapt and recover by the political system. Meanwhile, in North Korea, the government continued to tighten its grip on power and prioritize military strength.

In South Korea, the constitutional crisis and impeachment process were a critical stress test for democratic institutions. The confirmation of the impeachment and the following presidential election showed that constitutional solutions were still able to handle political conflict. At the same time, the crisis revealed how deep polarization was still present and shaped the political landscape, with the new administration taking office in an atmosphere of partisan clash. Consequently, the new presidency's first phase has been marked more by pragmatism and institutional stabilization than by ambitious reform, prioritizing restoring credibility and ensuring governability.

In North Korea, 2025 was a year of consolidation ahead of the upcoming Party Congress. The leadership has stressed discipline, control and performance through most sectors of military and strategic importance. Even events that could be interpreted as failures, like the accident with the naval launch, were re-formed into issues of personal responsibility instead

of systemic weakness. This approach is part of a bigger pattern in Kim Jong Un's style of governance that emphasizes signs of modernization as evidence of strength, while setbacks are presented as individual mistakes to be corrected by the leadership.

This situation has brought little progress in inter-Korean relations. While the South took a more cautious and de-escalatory line over the course of the second half of the year, after the election of Lee Jae-myung, such as through attempts to lower tensions on land borders and reintroduce dialogue incrementally, none of these initiatives fundamentally altered Pyongyang's strategic calculations. The doctrine of «two hostile states» remains at the core of its view of inter-Korean relations as a fundamentally adversarial relationship. So, even as the South has softened its rhetorical stance, actual conditions for mediation remained weak and did not bring any significant result.

At the same time, the broader international context has further constrained the room for manoeuvre on the peninsula. North Korea's deepening cooperation with Russia has provided Pyongyang with additional strategic space and practical benefits, particularly in the military domain. This alignment illustrates how the regime uses external conflicts to strengthen its own position. For South Korea, domestic political instability temporarily reduced diplomatic visibility, but the subsequent effort to reinforce alliance coordination showed awareness of the need for stability in an increasingly competitive international environment.

In conclusion, 2025 can be interpreted as a year of stabilization after crisis in the South and consolidation before strategic repositioning in the North. Democratic institutions in Seoul have proven resilient, but polarization persists. Pyongyang has strengthened internal discipline and external alignment, but this has not translated into greater openness toward the South. The peninsula therefore remains characterized by managed tension rather than reconciliation.

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