

HANKYOREH

[Column] Lee still has his work cut out for him after summit with Trump

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Though his summit with Trump was, all in all, positive for Korea, working out the nitty-gritty details of sensitive issues will require a principled and shrewd approach



South Korean President Lee Jae Myung speaks to US President Donald Trump in the White House during their summit there on Aug. 25, 2025. (from the White House on Flickr)

By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University

Assessments of the recent Korea-US summit tend to depend on one's political affiliation. Korea's ruling party is praising President Lee Jae Myung for a highly successful meeting, while the opposition is decrying a "diplomatic disaster" that accomplished nothing.

Some members of the progressive camp have even bemoaned a "summit characterized by groveling and flattery," which I see as an uncharitable reading of the situation.

Given their social backgrounds, political preferences and negotiating styles, Lee Jae Myung and Donald Trump are like water and oil. That kindled fears that Lee might take the bait and spoil the summit just like Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.

But such concerns proved groundless. Lee and Trump came to an understanding in a summit that turned out to be, on balance, profitable for Korea.

The summit reinforced the Korea-US alliance and raised expectations that Trump will be proactive about pursuing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and establishing a peace regime. In light of Trump's heavy-handed bargaining style, we should be grateful that sensitive issues — such as tariffs, investment and the modernization of the ROK-US alliance — have been punted to working-level officials.

In a social media post just three hours before his summit with Lee, Trump expressed doubts about the political situation in Korea with hysterical language about a “purge or revolution.” But damage control before the summit by Lee's chief of staff Kang Hoon-sik and a lucid explanation provided by Lee during the summit itself assuaged Trump's worries. Lee's nimble evasion of the crisis ended up being the highlight of the day.

But with the summit over, Lee has his work cut out for him. As they say, the devil is in the details.

The US has pledged to reduce reciprocal tariffs on Korea from 25% to 15%, but Korean automobiles are still facing 25% tariffs. No details are forthcoming about threatened tariffs on semiconductors or pharmaceuticals, and it's unclear what Korea's investment package for the US will involve.

The US apparently envisions turning Korea's US\$350 billion investment package into a “national and economic security investment fund,” with Trump personally choosing where funds are invested and the US public receiving 90% of the return on investment. That plan, in its current form, is unacceptable to the Korean government, and working-level negotiators will likely struggle to bridge the divide.

On Thursday, Trump signed an executive order lowering tariffs on Japanese automobiles from 27.5% to 15%, which puts Korean automakers at a serious disadvantage.

Modernization of the Korea-US alliance is another sticking point. While that topic was not addressed in detail during the summit, Lee has said Korea is capable of taking the lead in its own defense and can raise defense spending from the current level of 2.6% of GDP to 3.5%.

Converting US Forces Korea (USFK) to a supplementary military force on the Korean Peninsula may also end up reducing the amount of Korea's financial contribution to the cost of stationing American troops on the peninsula.

Lee also made it clear that he doesn't support USFK adopting “strategic flexibility” or South Korean troops getting entangled in regional conflicts. That makes his stance qualitatively different from the “alliance modernization” desired by the US.

Another factor we shouldn't disregard is the political campaign by the American far right. The flap over Trump's “purge or revolution” social media post was just a taste of what's coming.

Newt Gingrich — the former US congressman considered a precursor of Trump’s MAGA movement — thundered in an Aug. 27 column in The Washington Times that the Lee administration’s “recent all-out assault on political and religious liberty has been breathtaking.”

Along the same lines, the Build Up Korea 2025 conference was held at the Kintex exhibition center in Ilsan on Friday and Saturday in a conscious effort to expand the presence of the far right in Korea. A sizable contingent of radical MAGA figures from the US appeared at the event, preaching the conservative gospel to young Koreans.

Conservative commentators such as Gordon Chang, Morse Tan, and Jeon Han-gil will be speaking in the Washington DC Truth Forum on Saturday.

The common denominator behind these events would appear to be conservative Christian fundamentalism. But in actuality, they are part of a transnational push to disseminate Trump-style MAGA ideology.

The pugilistic attitude of those who question and deny Korean democracy, the constitutional order, and Lee Jae Myung’s legitimacy as president may become a serious threat to the future of Korea-US relations.

Finally, while the ROK-US alliance and Korea’s trilateral cooperation with the US and Japan are undeniably important, we should also acknowledge their detrimental effects.

During his visit to the US, Lee said in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that the era of depending on the US for security and China for economic matters has ended and that Korea will now need to focus on the US both for its defense and its economy.

Lee’s remarks suggest a total reliance on the US, which is unlikely to please China. As it happens, the leaders of China, Russia and North Korea made a rare show of solidarity for China’s “Victory Day” last week. All these developments suggest that rather than avoiding another Cold War, we’re heading straight for it.

Lee’s summit with Trump was a good start. But going forward, hammering out the details is sure to be a challenge for Korea.

At times like this, it’s essential to take stock of our core values. We need to take full advantage of diplomatic pragmatism while remaining faithful to the basic premise of our foreign policy being grounded in popular sovereignty.

And more than ever, we need our leader to be principled, shrewd and resolute.

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