

[Special Contribution] South Korea's Future Lies in Creativity and Resilience

**The
Korea
Daily**

By The Korea Daily Digital Team

Sep 10, 2025 1:48 PM PDT

Last Updated: Sep 10, 2025 1:51 PM PDT

President Lee Jae Myung arrived at the White House recently for his first meeting with President Trump since taking office a few months ago. The auguries were not good. Mr. Trump had posted negative comments on social media about the upcoming meeting just hours before.

But Mr. Lee surprised everyone by his confident and skillful interaction with the notoriously unpredictable Trump. Issues at stake were trade, tariffs, cost-sharing of US troops stationed in South Korea, and investments in the US, including shipbuilding. President Lee praised President Trump's efforts to establish relations with Kim Jong Un of North Korea and assured him that he would welcome that initiative, a departure from his predecessors who bristled at the prospect of being excluded from such overtures.



U.S. President Donald Trump meets with South Korean President Lee Jae Myung at the Oval Office, at the White House, in Washington, D.C., U.S., August 25, 2025. [REUTERS]

Emerging from the Oval Office, a beaming Trump and a successful Lee spoke of the positive outcome and the possibility of the two traveling to China to meet with President Xi. However, many thorny questions remain, including the amount South Korea is willing to pay for the presence of U.S. troops and the role of deterrence against the North's formidable nuclear arsenal. While tariffs have been reduced to 15%, the details of trade and investment remain to be worked out.

As a longtime friend of Korea, I welcome a more mature relationship between the two countries I love.

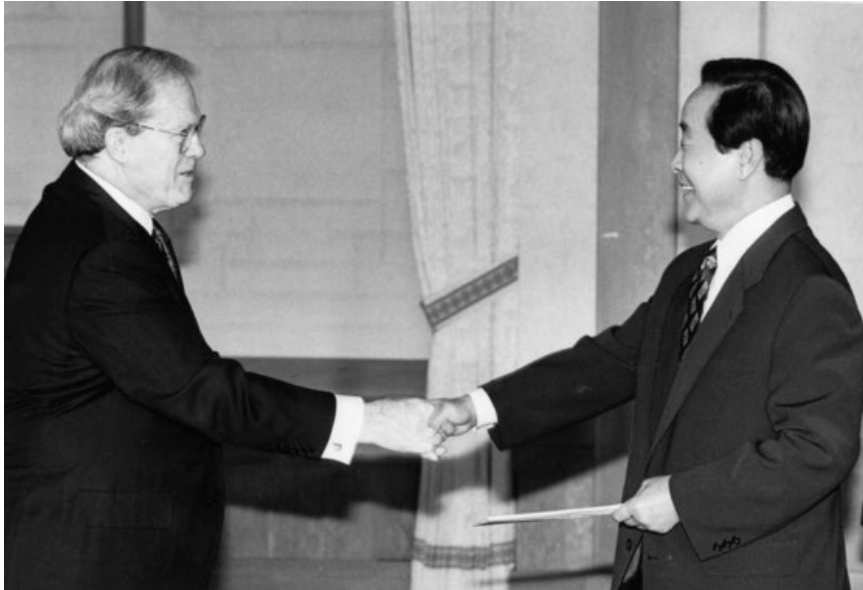
Along with many others, I am deeply troubled by the erratic, impulsive way in which decisions are made and carried out by Mr. Trump. The arrogation to himself of all important matters increasingly reduces democracy to a shell. Foreign policy is of course affected as indicated by the arbitrary imposition of tariffs and the demand for other nations to make concessions in trade and investment. International order is disrupted and economies are shaken. Inevitably international security is undermined even while several nations increase their nuclear stockpile.

I have been involved off and on in Korea for over three quarters of a century. I arrived in January 1947 as a nineteen year old in the Counter Intelligence Corps as part of the U.S. Occupation forces. I witnessed firsthand the depredations by Japan in Korea during its colonial control and World War II. At that time the 38th parallel was simply a dividing line between North and South. It was porous and refugees poured down from the North seeking sanctuary. The communists sought to undermine stability and foment insurgency in the South. Our job in the CIC was to counter those efforts and ensure sufficient domestic tranquility to lay the foundation for a free democratic election. That occurred in August 1948 with the Republic of Korea's first election.

Transplanting democracy anywhere is never easy and often impossible. People have to be informed (free speech , free press, freedom of assembly), be able to vote, and most difficult of all, learn to abide by the outcome. Korea was no exception. Syngman Rhee, ROK's first president, was an autocrat from the outset who made it impossible for anyone to challenge him. Elections were a formality. But he was a fierce anti-communist and that gave him immunity during the Korean War. When the war was over, young people began demanding greater freedom and fair elections, culminating in the student revolution in April 1960. The use of troops killing over a hundred students in downtown Seoul not only enraged the nation but meant Rhee's days were over.

Sadly the heady new freedom resulted in chaos, not democracy, leading to a military coup. General Pak Chung Hee seized control and made himself dictator, serving with a heavy hand for sixteen years until he was assassinated. Nevertheless the brutality of his rule should not blind us to the strides the country made towards a modern economy during those years.

I had returned to Korea in 1959 with my wife and children as Methodist missionaries to work at Yonsei University and with student groups around the country. We lived through five turbulent years there seeking to ground students for lives of service and the role of nation building. I had been deeply affected by my earlier experience in the Army, having grown close to a number of Korean colleagues. That led to my returning. This time I made lasting friends with several colleagues who remained close through the years and proved to be wise counselors later when I returned to Korea for the third time as U.S. ambassador.



U.S. Ambassador to South Korea James Laney (left) presents his credentials to President Kim Young-sam at the Blue House on November 2, 1993. Ambassador Laney, who arrived in October 1993 during President Kim's first year in office, served until February 1997. [JoongAng Photo]

The North has always cast a shadow over the political activities in the South. Its proximity to Seoul – 35 miles – and its entrenched fortifications along the DMZ, provided ready justification for autocratic rule in the South. Calls for freedom of speech and press were portrayed as tools of communism.

Even Kim Dae Jung, later president and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, was imprisoned and sentenced to death as a communist. He was saved only at the last minute by intervention by the United States. Many of the younger generation were not so fortunate. In the southern province of Gwangju, an uprising of young students led to the massacre of hundreds, precipitating fury across the country. The forces for freedom were building but it took another decade for the first non-military president, Kim Young Sam, to be elected in 1992.

That fear of communism served as a tool for domestic political opportunism should in no way imply that the North was not a serious threat. Through the years there had been despicable acts of terrorism by the North. In the early 1990's Pyongyang had begun attempts to build a nuclear reactor. Under intense international pressure they allowed international inspectors to oversee and monitor its construction. Then in 1993 the North threatened to expel the inspectors, precipitating a crisis.

I arrived as ambassador that Fall. Working closely with the Foreign Minister, we were able to persuade President Kim Young Sam to allow the U.S. to take the initiative in dealing with Kim Il Sung, dictator of the North. Former President Jimmy Carter was invited to visit Kim in Pyongyang, and they reached a tentative agreement to substitute peaceful reactors for the existing ones, again under outside supervision. This was later ratified in an "Agreed Framework" between the U.S. and North Korea.

In addition, the two Kims were to meet for the first time, foreshadowing a relaxation of tension. That never occurred as Kim Il Sung died suddenly and unexpectedly before it could take place. Nevertheless the freeze on the nuclear program held for eight years, until President George W. Bush abrogated it unilaterally after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Since then the North has built up a nuclear arsenal of serious proportions along with a formidable delivery system. Initially it provided deterrence against an attack by the United States. Through the years as serious incidents erupted along the DMZ, the North also needed a means of deterring an ever increasing threat by a richer and stronger South. But in today's world, while it serves as a source of pride and as a deterrent, it would be suicidal to use it for a first strike.

Since the North remains one of the most isolated countries in the world its nuclear arsenal serves as a military moat protecting its citizens from foreign contamination and knowledge of its backwardness and poverty. Recently it has earned cash by sending troops to fight for Russia in Ukraine. It continues to seek ways to circumvent the trade embargoes leveled against it. Even so, it cannot bear having its people learn that South Korea has an economy 100 times its size.

Ever since the Korean War ended in 1953, the U.S. has maintained a sizable military force in the South as a deterrent. As the North's nuclear program expanded the U.S. has assured Seoul that it is protected under its nuclear umbrella. Until Mr. Trump's first term the U.S. considered it to be in its own interest to have troops stationed in South Korea.

Once in office he demanded that Seoul should underwrite more of the costs of their presence. The introduction of such a blatant transactional approach stirred up latent uneasiness about how reliable the U.S. might be in a crisis. As a result there has been a rising chorus in favor of the South having its own nuclear deterrent. There is no doubt that the South has the capability to develop its own nuclear weapons. But that would be unwise. It would cost multiple billions of dollars and incur international disapprobation. Such an initiative would also pose a dire threat to the delicate status quo between the two Koreas.

In light of these considerations what might be the best strategy for Seoul? The first and most obvious thing would be to forgo aggressive propaganda along the DMZ. That unnerves the North and achieves nothing. Secondly since Trump avidly covets a Nobel Peace Prize, bringing the Korean War to a formal end with a Peace Treaty would be a signal accomplishment. President Lee's willingness to encourage a meeting between the North's Kim and Trump would be viewed as an act of true statesmanship and win Trump's favor.

Third, by forgoing the development of a nuclear program Seoul can save billions of dollars enabling it to assume more burden sharing associated with the presence of U.S. troops on the peninsula. This meets an insistent demand of Trump's. In return, Lee is then positioned to ask for a dual command structure, giving for the first time ROK authority over its own military. Seoul would not inevitably be tied to move in lock step with a decision it might oppose. Nevertheless the presence of U.S. forces would continue to provide a tripwire in the South against a first strike by the North.

Items remaining to be discussed include investments by the ROK in the United States. Korea has already spent billions to manufacture autos and batteries in the United States. Since Korea is second in the world to China in shipbuilding, Trump has indicated he would like to have Korea's assistance in reviving that industry in the United States. While the terms remain to be finalized, such requests do not appear unreasonable in principle.

President Lee has demonstrated innate political skill in his first months in office. He holds a strong hand in dealing with Trump but faces a daunting challenge in building a political consensus at home. That alone can give him the flexibility and political power to navigate troubled international waters, ensuring security and maintaining warm relations with the United States.

Looking back over three-quarters of a century, I cannot but be encouraged for Korea. When I first came in 1947, Korea was terribly impoverished from years of Japanese domination. Its populace was suffering from malnutrition and endemic disease. A civilian advisor told me at that time that with sufficient diet and adequate medical care the Korean people would become a force to be reckoned with. He has been proved right.

No other nation has come as far or as fast as South Korea. In economics, it has some of the most trusted brand names and is ahead of the U.S. in several fields of research. In culture K-Pop is the rage world-wide and a South Korean movie became the first non-English language film to win an Academy Award for best picture. Likewise kimchi and Korean food have become staples in stores everywhere. Politically Korea endured years of despotism because of the threat from the North. Now for over thirty years it has thrived under a democratic government, albeit partisan and fractious. But it has endured, no mean feat.

The hard fact is that for democracy to continue to survive parties must forge coalitions and learn to live with compromise. Otherwise we will all become the subjects of despots. We should remind ourselves that the difference today between despotism and freedom is mirrored precisely in the difference between North and South Korea.

My hope is that South Korea will continue to surprise the world with its ingenuity, its resilience and its creativity, none of which can flourish without the freedom that only a democracy ensures.



James T. Laney

The author is a former U.S. ambassador to South Korea (1993–1997).