

# Recent Political and Geopolitical Developments in South Korea (2022–2025)

## Domestic Political Landscape and Leadership Changes

South Korea's domestic politics over the past 2–3 years have been turbulent, marked by closely fought elections, public protests, and an unprecedented impeachment crisis in late 2024. Key events include:

- **March 9, 2022 – Presidential Election:** Conservative candidate **Yoon Suk-yeol**, a former prosecutor-general, narrowly won the presidency with 48.6% of the vote against 47.8% for liberal rival **Lee Jae-myung**, in the most closely contested election in South Korea's modern history <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. Yoon's victory ended five years of progressive rule and he took office in May 2022, pledging national unity and a pro-business, tough-on-North Korea agenda <sup>3</sup> <sup>4</sup>.
- **October 29, 2022 – Itaewon Crowd Disaster:** A deadly crowd crush during Halloween festivities in Seoul's Itaewon district killed 156 people, mostly young adults <sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>. The tragedy sparked public outrage over inadequate safety measures and emergency response. Top officials, including the interior minister **Lee Sang-min**, issued public apologies <sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup>. In February 2023, the opposition-controlled National Assembly took the unprecedented step of **impeaching Interior Minister Lee** over the fiasco <sup>9</sup>. (He was reinstated in July 2023 when the Constitutional Court unanimously rejected the impeachment, ruling that while the response was flawed, it did not meet the threshold for removal <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup>.)
- **Mid-2023 – Public Discontent and Scandals:** Yoon's administration struggled with low approval ratings amid a **cost-of-living crisis** and political controversies <sup>12</sup>. Proposed labor reforms—such as a highly contentious plan to raise the cap on weekly working hours from 52 to 69—provoked backlash from younger workers and were shelved after protests in March 2023. Yoon's efforts to **improve relations with Japan** by resolving a wartime forced-labor compensation dispute (announced March 2023) were criticized by many South Koreans as too concessionary to Tokyo <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>. Elderly victims of Japan's forced labor marched in wheelchairs to protest Yoon's plan (which had South Korean firms compensate victims without new payments or apologies from Japan) as “humiliating,” insisting that Japan must directly apologize and pay damages <sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup>. Opposition lawmakers also lambasted the deal, reflecting how historical issues remain **domestically sensitive** despite the foreign policy rationale for rapprochement.
- **April 10, 2024 – Parliamentary Elections:** In a crucial midterm test, the liberal opposition **Democratic Party (DP)**, led by Lee Jae-myung, scored a decisive **landslide victory** in National Assembly elections <sup>17</sup>. The DP and a small allied party won roughly 187 seats combined, comfortably securing a majority in the 300-seat Assembly <sup>18</sup>. President Yoon's conservative **People Power Party (PPP)** won only 108 seats <sup>19</sup>, a stinging defeat that Yoon himself “humbly accepted.” Top aides, including Prime Minister **Han Duck-soo**, offered to resign after the loss <sup>20</sup>. The election was widely seen as a referendum on Yoon's government amid economic frustrations and scandal,

and it ushered in a period of **policy stalemate**: with the opposition controlling parliament, Yoon was largely blocked from passing major legislation <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> . This polarized political climate set the stage for even greater upheaval at year's end.

- **December 3–14, 2024 – Martial Law Crisis and Yoon's Impeachment:** In a shocking turn, President Yoon **declared emergency martial law** on December 3, 2024, in an attempt to break what he called “anti-state” obstruction by the opposition-controlled legislature <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> . This move—South Korea's first martial law decree since 1980—was met with immediate and unanimous resistance from lawmakers, including members of Yoon's own party <sup>25</sup> . Parliament formally **voted to overturn the martial law** within hours, forcing Yoon to rescind it almost immediately <sup>26</sup> <sup>25</sup> . The episode, with televised scenes of soldiers briefly surrounding the National Assembly, traumatized the public and drew international concern at the erosion of democratic norms <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> . Outraged opposition leaders called Yoon's act “treason” and demanded he resign <sup>24</sup> . On December 14, 2024, the National Assembly **impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol**, with 204 out of 300 members voting in favor of removal <sup>29</sup> <sup>30</sup> . (Notably, this exceeded the two-thirds threshold, indicating some PPP lawmakers or independents joined the impeachment motion.) Yoon's presidential powers were suspended, and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo became acting president <sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> . Yoon was accused of numerous constitutional violations, including the illegal martial law order and instructing security forces to block legislators' access to parliament <sup>33</sup> .

- **April 4, 2025 – Yoon Removed from Office:** South Korea's **Constitutional Court unanimously upheld Yoon's impeachment** on April 4, 2025, in an 8–0 decision <sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> . This permanently removed Yoon from office less than three years into his term <sup>36</sup> . The court condemned Yoon's actions during the martial law attempt as “serious violations of the Constitution” and a breach of the democratic order <sup>37</sup> . (Yoon's short-lived bid to use extraordinary powers had thus backfired catastrophically, making him the second South Korean president ever to be impeached and the first to be ousted for anti-democratic actions.)

- **June 3, 2025 – Snap Presidential Election:** Following Yoon's removal, a **special election** was held within 60 days as required by law <sup>38</sup> . **Lee Jae-myung**, the longtime opposition leader of the DP, won the presidency in a landslide on June 3, 2025, taking about 49.3% of the vote to 41.3% for conservative candidate **Kim Moon-soo** <sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> . Voter turnout (nearly 80%) was the highest in over two decades <sup>41</sup> , reflecting intense public mobilization in what Lee dubbed “judgment day” for the excesses of the previous regime <sup>42</sup> <sup>43</sup> . Lee's victory marks a profound political shift: he had narrowly lost to Yoon in 2022, but the martial law crisis “effectively handed the presidency to his main rival” amid a wave of public backlash <sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> . Lee Jae-myung was inaugurated immediately, becoming the new president of South Korea in early June 2025.

**Current Political Context:** President **Lee Jae-myung** now leads both the executive and (with his DP's majority) the legislature, giving him a strong mandate to pursue his agenda. However, he inherits a nation polarized and “deeply scarred” by the recent near-coup turmoil <sup>46</sup> . The tumultuous ouster of Yoon and the rapid power shift may be a sensitive topic – foreign delegates (such as Canadians) would be well-advised to **avoid any appearance of taking sides** in South Korea's internal political strife. Lee's government is likely focused on restoring democratic norms and addressing economic grievances that contributed to the crisis. Political observers note that Lee faces the dual challenge of **healing domestic divisions** and proving that his administration will govern transparently and lawfully after condemning Yoon's authoritarian lapse <sup>47</sup> .

<sup>48</sup> . All this forms the backdrop as South Korea engages in diplomatic initiatives like the upcoming bilateral AI summit.

## Foreign Policy Shifts and Major Diplomatic Engagements

Under President Yoon (2022–2024), South Korea's foreign policy took a markedly pro-alliance, globalist turn – branding South Korea a “**Global Pivotal State**” – with stronger alignment to the United States and renewed outreach to Japan, even as relations with China grew cooler. Now, with President Lee in office (mid-2025), some adjustments in tone and priorities are expected, though many strategic fundamentals (alliance commitments, etc.) will remain. Below are key developments in South Korea's external relations over the past few years:

### Alliance with the United States

The U.S.–South Korea alliance has deepened in response to regional threats and global challenges. Yoon Suk-yeol forged especially close ties with Washington, emphasizing a “values-based” alliance of democracies. In **April 2023**, Yoon made a state visit to Washington, D.C., marking the 70th anniversary of the alliance. There he and President Biden issued the “**Washington Declaration**,” which strengthened U.S. **extended deterrence** for South Korea in the face of North Korea's nuclear threats <sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> . The U.S. pledged, for the first time in decades, to deploy a nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarine to South Korean waters and involve Seoul in strategic planning via a new Nuclear Consultative Group <sup>49</sup> . Joint U.S.–ROK military exercises, which had been scaled down in previous years, were ramped back up under Yoon to signal resolve against Pyongyang's provocations.

Yoon also aligned with U.S. regional strategy by improving ties with Japan (facilitating **trilateral security cooperation** among Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo). A landmark **trilateral summit** at Camp David in August 2023 brought together Yoon, Biden, and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, resulting in commitments to annual trilateral military drills and coordinated regional strategies. South Korea furthermore joined U.S.-led initiatives like the **Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)** and increased its participation with NATO partners as a “Asia-Pacific partner,” reflecting Yoon's desire to raise South Korea's global security profile.

However, there have also been **frictions in the U.S.–ROK relationship** on the economic front. In 2022, the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) – which grants EV subsidies only to vehicles assembled in North America – **angered Seoul**, as it excluded South Korean-made electric cars from U.S. consumer tax credits <sup>51</sup> <sup>50</sup> . Yoon's government vocally protested this as unfair to Korean automakers (like Hyundai), and the two sides engaged in talks to mitigate the impact. Additionally, in a striking development in early 2025, the United States (under the new administration of President Donald Trump) imposed steep **tariffs on South Korean imports**, including a 25% tariff on cars, as part of a protectionist trade agenda <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> . This move – coming just as South Korea was in political transition – presented a serious economic challenge, given that automobiles are one of South Korea's top exports to the U.S. (27% of \$127.8 billion in U.S.-bound exports in 2024 were vehicles) <sup>52</sup> <sup>54</sup> . Seoul dispatched its trade minister to Washington to seek relief from these tariffs <sup>53</sup> . A Canadian delegate should be aware that **trade policies emanating from Washington (IRA subsidies, tariffs)** are a sensitive topic: South Korea sees them as threats to its export-driven economy and may quietly seek support from partners like Canada in advocating for fair treatment.

Under President Lee Jae-myung, core alliance ties with the U.S. will remain robust – Washington quickly affirmed respect for South Korea’s democratic process after Yoon’s ouster <sup>55</sup> . However, Lee is expected to be **less hawkish and more autonomy-seeking** in foreign policy. Lee has signaled he will “**seek peace through dialogue and strength**” with North Korea <sup>56</sup> , and will likely approach U.S. strategic requests (e.g. on China or global issues) with a bit more caution than Yoon. Still, U.S.–ROK cooperation on technology and AI is likely to continue (both countries prioritize AI innovation and ethical standards). The Canadian side can anticipate that while Seoul remains a close ally of Washington, Lee’s government might place added emphasis on **South Korea’s own national interests** in trade and technology discussions (for instance, being more outspoken if future U.S. policies harm Korean businesses). Any **perceived U.S. protectionism** or pressure on Seoul to take sides in U.S.–China rivalry could be points of quiet concern for the new administration <sup>46</sup> .

## Relations with China and ASEAN

South Korea’s relationship with **China** has been complex, balancing security alignment with the U.S. against economic interdependence with Beijing. Under Yoon, Seoul tilted more toward the U.S.-led camp, adopting a more openly critical stance on issues like the South China Sea and human rights. For example, Yoon’s government voiced support for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and, unlike his predecessor, Yoon showed willingness to **criticize China’s assertiveness** (albeit in measured tones). South Korea participated in U.S.-led forums that implicitly counterbalance China, and it kept in place the American **THAAD missile defense** system despite China’s past objections. Consequently, **Seoul-Beijing ties cooled**: high-level exchanges were limited, and China’s state media warned South Korea against “decoupling” from China. Chinese economic leverage remains a concern – Beijing had previously retaliated against Seoul’s THAAD deployment in 2017 with informal boycotts, a trauma still fresh in policy planners’ minds.

At the same time, **South Korea cannot afford a rupture with China**, its largest trading partner. Exports to China (from semiconductors to chemicals) are vital, and South Korea is wary of being caught in a U.S.-China “tech war.” Notably, when the U.S. imposed sweeping export controls on semiconductor technology to China in 2022, Washington had to grant temporary waivers to Samsung and SK Hynix’s chip factories in China to shield them from immediate harm. South Korea has been **walking a tightrope**: it joined U.S.-led talks on a “Chip 4” semiconductor alliance (with the U.S., Japan, and Taiwan) but has tread carefully to avoid framing it as an anti-China bloc. In early 2023, the U.S. reportedly asked South Korea not to backfill any chip supply gaps in China caused by U.S. sanctions <sup>57</sup> – an indication of how Seoul is pressured to align with U.S. tech policy. South Korea’s response has been cautious compliance coupled with behind-the-scenes **diplomacy to reassure Beijing** that its aim is supply chain resilience, not containment of China.

Looking ahead, President **Lee Jae-myung** is expected to adopt a more **conciliatory approach toward China** <sup>58</sup> . Lee and his progressive camp prioritize a pragmatic stance: they acknowledge China’s importance to South Korea’s economy and likely will seek to **mend frayed ties**. We may see efforts to resume high-level dialogues with Beijing and perhaps more reluctance to explicitly join any initiative perceived as anti-China. That said, South Korea’s fundamental interests (freedom of navigation, peace in the Taiwan Strait, etc.) remain, and Lee is unlikely to shift back to a completely China-friendly posture at the expense of the U.S. alliance – rather, he will aim for a **nuanced balance**. A Canadian delegate should be aware that **China is a sensitive subject**: Seoul bristles at overt pressure either to confront Beijing or to accommodate it. Canada’s own nuanced stance (competing with China economically while challenging it on human rights <sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup> ) is something South Korea can relate to. It would be wise to frame any AI cooperation

proposals in a way that emphasizes **inclusive, rules-based norms** rather than explicitly targeting China, to ensure South Korean comfort.

South Korea's engagement with **ASEAN and the broader Indo-Pacific** has also evolved. The previous Moon Jae-in government championed a "New Southern Policy" to deepen ties with Southeast Asia and India. Yoon Suk-yeol, upon taking office, incorporated that into a wider **Indo-Pacific Strategy** unveiled in late 2022, aligning with U.S. and partner visions. Under Yoon, South Korea continued high-level diplomacy with ASEAN states: he attended ASEAN summits, pledged increased development assistance, and highlighted cooperation in infrastructure, climate, and digital innovation. Notably, South Korea and ASEAN share interest in **regional stability** – e.g., keeping sea lanes open and pursuing denuclearization of North Korea – and economic connectivity (ASEAN is South Korea's second-largest trading region). In November 2022 and 2023, Yoon met ASEAN leaders and emphasized South Korea's commitment to ASEAN centrality in regional affairs. For instance, Seoul has supported ASEAN's initiatives on Myanmar's crisis and contributed to regional pandemic recovery efforts.

Under President Lee, this **southward engagement is expected to persist**, as it has bipartisan support. Lee might place relatively more focus on inter-Korean matters than distant regions, but ASEAN will remain a key part of South Korea's diversification strategy. One area to watch is **technology and digital partnerships**: South Korea has been working with ASEAN on digital economy agreements and smart city projects, which could dovetail with AI cooperation themes at the summit. There may also be continuity in **defense diplomacy** – South Korea has been selling defense equipment to Southeast Asia (e.g., submarines to Indonesia, fighter jets to the Philippines) and conducting joint naval drills with ASEAN partners, reflecting a growing role in regional security that Canada, as a fellow Pacific nation, encourages. Overall, South Korea's message is that it seeks to be a **"global pivotal state" bridging advanced economies and developing nations**, and ASEAN is integral to that vision <sup>61</sup> <sup>50</sup> .

## Inter-Korean Relations (North Korea)

Relations with **North Korea** have deteriorated significantly since 2019, and the past 2–3 years have seen escalating tensions. Under Yoon, Seoul took a firm line: he declared that **any provocations by Pyongyang would be met with stern responses**, and he conditioned meaningful economic aid on North Korea taking denuclearization steps – a stance Pyongyang spurned. In response, North Korea dramatically ramped up its missile tests: since early 2022, it has launched scores of ballistic missiles, including **intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)** potentially capable of reaching North America. In 2022 and 2023, North Korea tested new long-range missiles (such as the solid-fueled Hwasong-18 ICBM) and shorter-range missiles simulating tactical nuclear strikes, all in violation of UN resolutions. It even sent small drones across the DMZ into South Korean airspace in December 2022, causing alarm in Seoul. Kim Jong-un has enshrined North Korea's nuclear status in law and rejected Yoon's offers of humanitarian aid, calling them "foolish." The Yoon administration responded by **strengthening military readiness**: resuming large-scale joint exercises with U.S. forces, boosting defense spending to record levels (over 2.7% of GDP), and even discussing the previously taboo idea of South Korea developing its own nuclear arsenal or requesting the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (though these ideas remained hypothetical debates). The **Washington Declaration** in April 2023 (noted above) was a direct result of North Korea's growing threat – it aimed to reassure South Koreans by giving them more say in nuclear contingency planning while **affirming that Washington's nuclear umbrella is firmly in place** <sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> .

Diplomatically, there have been almost no direct talks between Seoul and Pyongyang since 2019. The **inter-Korean communication hotlines** are frequently unresponsive (North Korea has cut them off periodically). Yoon took a decidedly different approach from former President Moon: no more appeasement or summitry without denuclearization. This hard line, unsurprisingly, yielded no breakthrough; instead, North Korea lashed out with insults (state media called Yoon a “confrontation maniac”) and **fully severed ties** with the last remaining inter-Korean cooperation projects.

Now, with **Lee Jae-myung** in power, a shift in North Korea policy is expected in style if not immediate substance. Lee has long advocated a **“peace economy”** approach and criticized Yoon’s lack of diplomatic engagement. In his victory remarks, President Lee vowed to **“seek peace with nuclear-armed North Korea through dialogue and strength”** <sup>62</sup>, implying a dual approach: reopening communication and offering incentives, while still maintaining deterrence. We can anticipate that Lee will **pursue humanitarian aid** or COVID-19 assistance to the North, push to reopen diplomatic channels (perhaps via intermediaries like China), and potentially revive elements of the Moon-era engagement policy (such as peace declarations or economic projects) if conditions allow. However, any overture faces a hostile counterpart – Pyongyang has given no indication it’s willing to talk, having rebuffed even the prior liberal government’s entreaties after 2019. Lee also inherits the reality of an evolved security environment: after North Korea’s repeated violations and its 2022 law declaring itself an “irreversible” nuclear power, South Korea’s establishment (even many liberals) recognize that **denuclearization is a distant goal**. Thus, Lee may focus first on tension-reduction measures – for example, seeking a moratorium on tests or a military hotline – and **coordination with the U.S.** on any diplomacy. Notably, Lee’s administration might **reintroduce a version of the “Sunshine Policy”** ethos, perhaps easing conditions for inter-Korean humanitarian exchanges or recalibrating sanctions enforcement (within the bounds of UN sanctions) to facilitate small-scale cooperation. Any such moves will require careful messaging to allies; Canada, for one, has consistently supported UN sanctions and **human rights advocacy regarding North Korea** <sup>63</sup> <sup>64</sup>. A Canadian delegate should be attuned to subtle changes: Seoul under Lee might urge partners to support dialogue or humanitarian exceptions, which could differ from Yoon’s ask for maximal pressure. Still, **North Korea’s human rights abuses** and nuclear threat remain areas of principled convergence – indeed, during Trudeau’s May 2023 visit, he and Yoon jointly condemned Pyongyang’s missile tests and human rights violations, pledging to raise international awareness on North Korean human rights <sup>63</sup> <sup>64</sup>. Such issues will continue to be highlighted, and Canada–South Korea cooperation here is strong and likely uncontroversial.

Importantly, **any discussion of North Korea at a bilateral AI summit** could intersect with security in terms of AI’s role in cyber defense or surveillance. North Korean hackers and cyber warfare (including crypto theft and espionage) are a growing threat; both Canada and South Korea are stakeholders in bolstering cyber defenses, where AI tools are critical. While not a traditional diplomatic topic, this is a nexus of technology and security to keep in mind.

## Japan and Regional Reconciliation

One of Yoon Suk-yeol’s signature foreign policy moves was to **mend the fraught relationship with Japan**, a U.S. ally that had been at odds with Seoul for years over historical disputes. In March 2023, Yoon’s government announced a breakthrough plan to resolve the long-running issue of compensation for **wartime forced laborers**: rather than insisting on payment from Japanese companies (as mandated by South Korean court rulings in 2018), Seoul set up a domestic fund (using contributions from South Korean firms) to compensate the victims <sup>13</sup> <sup>65</sup>. Japan, in turn, lifted certain export controls against South Korea

(on semiconductor materials) that it had imposed during the dispute, and both sides **restored each other to most-preferred trade partner status** by mid-2023 <sup>66</sup> <sup>67</sup> . This compromise enabled a thaw: Yoon traveled to Tokyo in March 2023 for the first bilateral leaders' summit in 12 years, and Japanese PM Kishida Fumio visited Seoul in May 2023. The two leaders declared a "new start" in cooperation, focusing on shared security concerns like North Korea and economic synergies (e.g. supply chain resilience). Notably, Kishida in May 2023 expressed "deep remorse" and sympathy for Korean victims of past colonial abuses – while not a new formal apology, it was a gesture welcomed by Yoon as a sign of goodwill <sup>68</sup> .

The rapprochement yielded tangible strategic benefits: Seoul and Tokyo revived their **General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA)**, enabling direct intelligence-sharing (particularly on North Korean missile launches). They also began three-way anti-submarine and missile-tracking exercises with the U.S. The improved Seoul-Tokyo ties are significant for Canada, as they strengthen the U.S.-led network in the Indo-Pacific and contribute to regional stability – a point Canada likely appreciates. However, this area is **politically sensitive within South Korea**. Yoon's concessions on historical issues were deeply unpopular with a majority of the Korean public <sup>69</sup> <sup>70</sup> and vehemently opposed by then-opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, who called the deal an "absolute win by Japan" and a sellout of victims' dignity <sup>69</sup> <sup>71</sup> . Throughout 2023, progressive lawmakers and civil society groups held rallies denouncing Yoon's Japan policy, and some surviving forced labor plaintiffs refused to accept the compensation money in protest <sup>72</sup> <sup>73</sup> .

Now that Lee is president, the question is how he will handle **South Korea-Japan relations**. There is some reassurance: despite his past criticism, **Lee has indicated he will not completely undo Yoon's rapprochement**. In fact, during the campaign he **pledged to continue the Yoon-era engagement with Japan** <sup>58</sup> – recognizing the importance of cooperation given North Korea's threat and the economic interdependence. We can expect Lee to maintain working-level and leadership dialogues with Tokyo, and the core agreements (such as the forced labor compensation fund and GSOMIA) will likely remain in place. However, Lee may seek **additional gestures from Japan** to placate domestic critics – for instance, pushing Japan to **offer a more explicit apology or contributions** to the compensation fund (which Japan's government has so far not done). He might also be more responsive to public sentiment on other historical issues; for example, if new disputes arise (like Japan's planned release of Fukushima wastewater, or textbook depictions of history), Lee could take a harder public line than Yoon would have.

For a Canadian delegate, it's key to note that **Seoul-Tokyo ties, while improved, are still delicate**. Any praise of the Yoon-era deal or suggestion that Korea "move on" from historical issues, if phrased insensitively, could be poorly received by Korean counterparts (especially now with a new administration that includes many Japan-skeptic voices). At the same time, Canada can carefully encourage the continuation of **trilateral cooperation** among South Korea, Japan, and Western partners on shared challenges (North Korean missiles, supply chain security, etc.), as this is in everyone's interest. Given that Lee is a pragmatist in many ways, he likely sees the value in a stable partnership with Japan – but he must balance it with his base's expectations. A nuanced approach that **acknowledges Korea's historical pain** while supporting forward-looking collaboration (for example, joint AI research norms or student exchanges including Japan and Korea) would be wise.

## South Korea-Canada Relations

South Korea and Canada have significantly **upgraded their bilateral relationship** in recent years, laying a strong foundation for cooperation in areas directly relevant to an AI summit (technology, supply chains,

security). The year **2023 marked the 60th anniversary** of Canada–ROK diplomatic relations, and it was highlighted by high-level visits and agreements:

- In **September 2022**, President Yoon Suk-yeol visited Canada (in one of his first overseas trips) and met Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. They discussed supply chain resiliency for critical minerals and agreed to deepen science and technology cooperation, recognizing Canada's strength in AI and clean tech and South Korea's in advanced manufacturing. This set the stage for more concrete initiatives in 2023.
- **May 2023 – Trudeau's Visit to Seoul:** Canadian PM **Justin Trudeau paid a state visit to South Korea**, the first by a Canadian leader in 9 years <sup>74</sup>. During this trip, Trudeau addressed South Korea's National Assembly – becoming the first foreign leader to do so since 2017 – and held a summit with Yoon. The two countries issued a **Joint Leaders' Statement** affirming a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership** (CSP). A cornerstone of this CSP is **economic security cooperation**: notably, Trudeau and Yoon signed a memorandum of understanding on **critical mineral supply chains and clean energy transition** <sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup>. This deal is aimed at leveraging Canada's abundant resources (lithium, nickel, cobalt, etc.) to supply South Korea's booming battery and electric vehicle industries <sup>77</sup> <sup>78</sup>. By teaming up, both countries seek to reduce dependence on China for these crucial inputs – a priority as the U.S. IRA now incentivizes batteries sourced from free-trade partners like Canada <sup>51</sup> <sup>50</sup>.
- The two leaders also agreed to **expand cooperation in "future industries"** including **semiconductors, batteries, artificial intelligence, and small modular reactors (SMRs)** <sup>79</sup> <sup>80</sup>. South Korea sees Canada as a like-minded partner with complementary strengths: for instance, Canada's world-class AI research (Toronto, Montreal, etc.) and South Korea's prowess in electronics present opportunities for synergy in R&D and setting **ethical AI standards**. Indeed, they discussed working together on **standards for AI governance** and **digital trade**, building on both nations' commitment to a free, open, and secure internet. On energy, Canada's expertise in nuclear technology (CANDU reactors and emerging SMR designs) and South Korea's ambitious nuclear energy industry open avenues for collaboration in nuclear energy and safety <sup>81</sup>. Additionally, **natural gas and hydrogen** were highlighted: Canada, rich in LNG, and South Korea, a major LNG importer, are exploring how Canadian LNG (possibly via forthcoming terminals on the west coast) could bolster Korea's energy security and how both can cooperate on hydrogen development (South Korea aims to be a global hydrogen economy leader, and Canada has clean hydrogen potential) <sup>80</sup>.
- **Security and Values:** Trudeau and Yoon in 2023 also reaffirmed a shared strategic outlook. They **"strongly condemned" North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations** and pledged to work together to enforce UN sanctions and improve awareness of North Korean human rights abuses <sup>82</sup> <sup>63</sup>. Trudeau announced that **Canada would enhance its naval deployments** in Asia to help monitor illicit North Korean maritime activities (such as ship-to-ship smuggling) <sup>83</sup>. This complements South Korea's efforts and demonstrates Canada's commitment to regional security – an important signal to Seoul that Canada is a reliable Pacific partner. Both countries commit to the **rules-based international order**, be it in the context of freedom of navigation, opposing unilateral aggression (as in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where South Korea and Canada have both provided aid to Kyiv), or ensuring **peaceful resolution of disputes in the Indo-Pacific**. South Korea appreciated Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy (released in 2022) which identified South Korea as a key



partner; there is clear alignment in principles such as supporting ASEAN centrality, promoting human rights, and ensuring free trade.

Overall, **Canada-South Korea relations are at an all-time high** <sup>82</sup> <sup>84</sup> . There is strong political will on both sides to expand cooperation, and crucially, this relationship enjoys bipartisan support in Seoul. (The new President Lee Jae-myung is expected to maintain the positive trajectory; the partnership with Canada did not elicit partisan divisions, as it is seen as mutually beneficial and based on shared democratic values.) A Canadian delegate can therefore approach the summit confident that initiatives like AI cooperation or joint statements on ethical AI use will be warmly received. Potential **sensitive areas in bilateral talks are relatively few**, but one to note is trade: South Korea has a trade surplus with Canada (especially in autos and electronics), and while both are free-trading nations with an FTA (the 2015 CKFTA), any protectionist turn (like hypothetical EV incentives favoring North American content) could concern Seoul. Fortunately, Canada's inclusion of South Korea in its critical minerals strategy and both countries' commitment to **"friendshoring"** supply chains mitigate such tensions <sup>51</sup> <sup>50</sup> .

Another point of sensitivity might be **South Korea's approach to China**: Canada's relations with China have been strained (e.g. the **"two Michaels"** incident, banning Huawei 5G gear, etc.), and Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy labels China a "disruptive" power. South Korea, as discussed, takes a slightly softer public tone. Canadian officials should be nuanced when raising topics like Chinese influence or Taiwan; South Korea prefers to couch such discussions in multilateral terms (e.g., support for international law) rather than direct criticism. Nonetheless, in private, Seoul shares many of the same concerns as Ottawa regarding cyber espionage, economic coercion, and disinformation – making this an area where discreet intelligence and AI-related cooperation (such as countering foreign information operations using AI tools) could flourish, without fanfare that might upset Beijing.

## Economic and Security Developments Shaping Policy Priorities

Several intersecting economic and security trends have been at the forefront of South Korean policy in recent years. These include **energy security challenges, the drive to lead in semiconductor and tech industries, evolving trade strategies amid global uncertainties, and efforts to bolster defense and regional security**. Each of these has political significance domestically and is relevant to international partners like Canada.

### Energy Security and Climate Policy

South Korea is heavily dependent on energy imports, which has made **energy security** a constant priority – heightened by the volatility in global markets due to the COVID-19 recovery and Russia's war in Ukraine. In 2022–2023, global fuel price spikes and supply disruptions put pressure on South Korea (which imports ~93% of its energy). The government took steps to diversify suppliers and energy sources. Notably, under Yoon, **nuclear power** was restored as a central pillar of energy strategy. Yoon **reversed the previous administration's nuclear phase-out policy**, resuming stalled reactor projects and committing to keep nuclear's share of the electricity mix around 30% or higher <sup>85</sup> <sup>86</sup> . In July 2022, Yoon's cabinet approved plans to extend the lifespan of existing reactors and build new ones, directly contrasting with Moon Jae-in's plan to retire reactors by 2050 <sup>87</sup> . This U-turn was justified both by climate goals (reducing reliance on coal) and energy security – nuclear offers steady, domestic electricity generation. South Korea also sees **nuclear technology exports** as a strategic industry: Yoon's administration inked a major deal with the UAE in January 2023 (during Yoon's visit to Abu Dhabi) for \$30 billion of investment cooperation, including

nuclear and defense, and has aggressively bid to build nuclear plants in other countries like Poland and Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, South Korea is investing in **renewable energy**, albeit not as rapidly as some peers. The country aims for carbon neutrality by 2050 and raised its 2030 greenhouse gas reduction target to 40% below 2018 levels. Offshore wind farms, solar PV expansion, and a nascent hydrogen economy are areas of growth. Yet progress has been moderate – renewables still account for only ~8% of power generation. Under Yoon, the government has been more cautious on phasing out coal (even considering some new coal plants already in pipeline), prioritizing a balanced approach. Energy security concerns were underscored in winter 2022/23 when LNG shortages and price spikes threatened heating fuel supplies. South Korea responded by signing long-term LNG contracts (including with Qatar and Australia) and exploring potential **Canadian LNG imports** once export facilities like LNG Canada come online. Indeed, energy ties with Canada are poised to deepen: as noted, the May 2023 agreements include cooperation on **natural gas and hydrogen** <sup>80</sup>. South Korea's plans to import clean hydrogen (for its fuel cell and industrial use ambitions) could involve Canadian green hydrogen in the future.

For a Canadian delegate, areas to highlight include **collaboration on clean energy technology** (smart grids, energy storage, carbon capture – all key to managing intermittent renewables) and the development of **SMRs**. Both countries are bullish on small modular reactors: South Korea's state entities are developing their own SMR designs, and Canada is planning to deploy SMRs domestically by the late 2020s. Working together on regulatory alignment or R&D could be mutually beneficial and would carry geostrategic weight (offering partners reliable alternatives to Russian reactors or Chinese coal power).

One sensitive aspect might be differing approaches to **climate action**. While both Canada and South Korea are committed to the Paris Agreement, Canada's government has been more outspoken about phasing out coal and reducing oil & gas reliance (even as Canada remains a major fossil fuel producer). South Korea, with its manufacturing-heavy economy, sometimes lags in cutting coal (it has several new coal plants that came online recently) and faces criticism for financing overseas coal in the past. If climate comes up, it should be framed cooperatively – e.g., discussing clean tech and emissions reductions in heavy industry (steel, cement) where South Korea seeks solutions.

## Semiconductor Strategy and Technology Drive

**Semiconductors** are often called the “rice of industry” in South Korea – essential to its economy and national pride. South Korea is home to two of the world's largest memory chip makers (Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix) and a growing fabless/design sector. The past two years have seen an intensifying **global semiconductor competition** or “chip war,” and South Korea has taken significant steps to stay ahead. The government under Yoon launched what media dubbed the “**K-Chips Act**,” a package of incentives for the chip industry. In January 2023 and again in 2024, Yoon's team pushed through legislation to **increase tax breaks for semiconductor and other strategic tech investments** – large firms can now get up to 15–25% tax credit on semiconductor facility investments (up from single digits), and smaller firms up to 35% <sup>88</sup> <sup>89</sup>. In March 2023, Yoon personally announced a vision for a colossal “**semiconductor mega-cluster**” near Yongin, just south of Seoul, to be constructed by 2030. This project, involving ~KRW 300 trillion (\$230 billion) mostly in private investment by Samsung, aims to create the world's largest high-tech chip hub, complete with fabs, material suppliers, and research centers <sup>90</sup> <sup>91</sup>. The government's role includes fast-tracking permits and building infrastructure – it even pledged to “cut red tape to half the normal time” for this cluster's development <sup>91</sup> <sup>92</sup>.

Moreover, in May 2024, the government unveiled a **26 trillion won (~\$19 billion) support package** for the semiconductor sector <sup>93</sup>. This includes around 17 trillion in low-interest loans via the state-run bank to spur chipmakers' capital spending, and funds to support **chip equipment makers and fabless chip design startups** <sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup>. Officials explicitly framed this as a response to "all-out national warfare" in semiconductors globally <sup>96</sup> – an acknowledgment of U.S., China, EU, and Japan pouring subsidies into their own industries. South Korea, for instance, wants to boost its relatively small **fabless** segment (currently only ~1% of global fabless revenue) to at least 10% of the world market <sup>97</sup> <sup>98</sup>, to lessen reliance on foreign chip IP and diversify beyond memory chips.

This semiconductor push intersects with geopolitics. The U.S. CHIPS Act offers subsidies but also bars recipients from significant expansion in China – Samsung and SK Hynix are navigating these restrictions carefully. South Korea is coordinating with the U.S. to ensure its companies aren't caught in the crossfire; at the same time, Seoul is mindful of not alienating China, which still accounts for 30%+ of Korean chip exports (either as China or Hong Kong). So far, South Korean firms have secured one-year waivers (repeatedly, most recently extended into 2024) to continue operating and upgrading their China fabs. **Tech alliance diplomacy** is dynamic: South Korea engages in the "Fab 4 (Chip 4)" dialogues and signed a semiconductor partnership MOU with the U.S., but it avoided public fanfare, reflecting its balancing act.

For Canada, South Korea's chip strategy offers opportunities. While Canada doesn't have a big semiconductor manufacturing base, it has strength in areas like chip design (for AI, telecommunications) and certain **critical materials** (for example, gallium and nickel used in chips). During Trudeau's visit, semiconductors were explicitly mentioned as a cooperation area <sup>81</sup>. This could mean Korean chip firms investing in R&D centers in Canada or joint research in next-gen AI chips, quantum computing components, etc. Given the summit's AI focus, it's worth noting South Korea's ambition in **AI semiconductors**: the government has a plan to nurture domestic AI chip designs (NPUs) to reduce reliance on U.S. GPU chips <sup>99</sup>. Collaboration in this field might be fruitful – e.g., Korean firms working with Canadian AI researchers to optimize hardware for AI algorithms.

A sensitive aspect here is **export control and IP security**. Canada and South Korea are allies but also have to manage intellectual property carefully, especially if U.S.-origin tech is involved. Ensuring that any joint tech development does not run afoul of third-country export controls (like if U.S. tech is in Korean chips, it can't be transferred to certain countries) will be an important consideration.

## Trade Policy and Supply Chain Resilience

South Korea's trade policy in the last couple of years has adapted to a world of supply chain shocks and new trade blocs. Traditionally a champion of free trade (with 17 FTAs including ones with the U.S., EU, China, and of course Canada), South Korea has been pursuing **new trade agreements** to diversify markets. It joined the **Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, which took effect in early 2022, binding it closer economically with ASEAN, China, Japan, and others under a mega regional pact (albeit one with relatively modest trade liberalization). South Korea has also shown interest in the **Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)** – the Yoon administration indicated plans to apply, especially after resolving some disputes with Japan (a CPTPP member that could veto new entrants) <sup>100</sup> <sup>101</sup>. However, domestic agricultural lobby concerns and the recent political turmoil may have delayed formal application. Still, joining CPTPP remains on Seoul's strategic radar to hedge against protectionism and secure access to more markets.

A major focus has been **“supply chain security”**, which links trade with national security. South Korea, like many countries, was rattled by the 2020–21 semiconductor shortages and the pandemic disruptions. Under Yoon, a Presidential Supply Chain Committee was set up, and Seoul worked with partners (U.S., EU) on early warning systems for supply crunches. The critical minerals MOU with Canada <sup>75</sup> <sup>76</sup> is a prime example of this strategy – ensuring access to lithium, graphite, etc., outside of Chinese control. Similarly, South Korea engaged Australia and others for minerals, and invested in recycling capabilities at home.

Another facet is **trade in high-tech sectors under new rules**. For instance, the U.S. IRA and CHIPS Act essentially create a North America-centric ecosystem for EVs and semiconductors. South Korea’s response has been to negotiate *exemptions or adaptations* – e.g., lobbying the U.S. to treat leasing of Korean EVs differently (a partial workaround was achieved so leased EVs can still get U.S. credits). With Europe, South Korea struck a deal in 2023 to prevent Korea from being seen as a “developed country” under the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment (which could impose fees on steel/aluminum exports) – Korea argued its own climate efforts should count. These technical trade issues show South Korea’s proactive diplomacy to shield its exporters.

One potentially **contentious area in trade** that a Canadian delegate should tread lightly on is the **agriculture market**. South Korea’s public is sensitive about food security, and resistance to opening agriculture further (rice in particular) remains high. Canada, as an agri-exporter, might push for better access (e.g., for beef, pork beyond FTA terms), but timing is delicate given Korea’s political focus elsewhere and upcoming 2026 FTA upgrade talks. It would be prudent to keep the summit’s emphasis on tech and AI, where interests align, rather than side-track into thorny agricultural disputes.

Finally, **South Korea’s economy** lately has faced headwinds: growth slowed to around 1% in early 2023, flirting with a technical recession <sup>102</sup>. High global interest rates hurt Korea’s housing market and curbed consumer spending. Exports – the lifeblood – were down year-on-year for several months through 2023 due to weak demand in China and a global semiconductor down-cycle. This economic strain has political implications: it was a factor in Yoon’s unpopularity and the opposition’s election win <sup>103</sup> <sup>12</sup>. President Lee has inherited an economy in need of a boost. His policies will likely focus on social spending (to address inequality) and stimulus for innovation. In trade, Lee might be a bit more protectionist in rhetoric (progressives often emphasize protecting farmers, small businesses), but broadly he is expected to uphold Korea’s trade commitments. For international partners, continuity should prevail – any shifts will be in tone (e.g., more talk of “fair trade” or labor rights in FTAs to satisfy his base).

## Defense and Regional Security Posture

South Korea’s security posture has been evolving in response to nuclear North Korea and a more uncertain regional environment. A few key developments intersecting with politics:

- **Defense Buildup:** South Korea has been steadily increasing its defense budget, which in 2024 reached a record high of over 59 trillion won (~USD \$45 billion). Investments are going into improving missile defense (to counter the North’s missiles), developing indigenous capabilities like a next-generation fighter (KF-21) and a light aircraft carrier, and augmenting ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) including military satellites and drones. Under Yoon, the government pushed for even stronger deterrence – floating ideas such as acquiring nuclear-powered submarines and increasing the presence of U.S. strategic assets. There’s also been active development of conventionally-armed **Hyunmoo ballistic and cruise missiles** that can reach all of North Korea, as

part of South Korea's own "three-axis" defense system (preemptive strike, missile defense, and retaliatory punishment). These efforts enjoy broad political support as they are directly tied to the North Korea threat. President Lee is unlikely to reverse investments in defense; if anything, his call for "strength" alongside dialogue suggests he will maintain robust conventional deterrence while seeking tension-reduction.

- **Arms Exports Boom:** A noteworthy economic-security development is South Korea's emergence as a major **arms exporter**. In 2022, South Korea signed huge contracts with Poland (estimated ~\$15 billion) to supply K2 battle tanks, K9 self-propelled howitzers, K239 rocket launchers, and FA-50 fighter jets – partly to help Poland backfill equipment sent to Ukraine, and to modernize NATO allies with reliable non-Russian gear. This was one of the largest arms deals globally that year. South Korea also saw increased weapons sales to other countries (Australia ordered K9 howitzers, Saudi Arabia and UAE show interest in Korean missile systems, etc.). This arms export drive is backed by the government as a growth industry and as a way to strengthen defense ties. However, it intersected with sensitive issues: the Ukraine war. Seoul has a policy of not exporting lethal weapons to active conflict zones (reflecting caution over provoking Russia), but by selling to Poland, which then aids Ukraine, Seoul found a workaround. In 2023, there were reports (though officially denied) that South Korea provided hundreds of thousands of artillery shells to the U.S. to help replenish stocks for Ukraine <sup>104</sup> <sup>105</sup>. A Canadian delegate might see if there is room to gently encourage South Korea to more directly support Ukraine – since Canada is very supportive of Ukraine – but should recognize South Korea's balancing act. With Lee in charge, the stance might remain cautious; his party has historically been more dovish and might fear retaliation (e.g., Russia curtailing gas exports or cooperation on North Korea) if Seoul openly arms Ukraine. This is a **quiet point of divergence** between Canada and South Korea: their end goals align (deterring aggression, upholding international law) but methods differ due to geography and risk calculus. Any discussion on this should be handled in a respectful, understanding manner.

- **Regional Flashpoints:** South Korea under Yoon took modest steps to increase involvement in regional security beyond Korea. For instance, the South Korean Navy joined multinational patrols to enforce UN sanctions on North Korea's smuggling, and showed its flag in exercises in the South China Sea. Yoon's administration also expressed interest in **joining the Quad** (currently U.S., Japan, Australia, India) working groups as an observer or in specific projects, although it stopped short of seeking full membership so as not to alarm China. Under Lee, expect a more restrained approach to such initiatives – he will likely prioritize Korean peninsula issues. Still, South Korea will continue participating in **UN peacekeeping**, anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (where its Cheonghae Unit has been active), and possibly expanded cooperation with NATO (Yoon attended NATO summits in 2022 and 2023; the new government might maintain partnership status but with less fanfare). These contributions show South Korea's role as a security provider, which Canada, as a NATO member and Pacific nation, values.

One regional security topic to watch is **Taiwan**. Yoon's government, in line with the U.S. and G7 (which includes Canada), emphasized peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait in joint statements – a shift from Moon's silence on the issue. If cross-strait tensions flare, there may be interest in coordinating on sanctions or contingencies. However, Seoul's appetite for direct involvement is limited. This remains a sensitive issue; South Korea would hope Canada understands its constraints given the proximity and economic stakes.

**In summary, South Korea enters the bilateral AI summit in Seoul with a new leadership and a recalibrated outlook.** Domestically, the dramatic impeachment of Yoon Suk-yeol and the rise of Lee Jae-myung will influence South Korea's stance: expect a greater emphasis on democratic values, outreach to North Korea, and perhaps a cautious tone on U.S.–China competition – all while maintaining strong partnerships and an innovative economy. The **foreign policy agenda** is dominated by strengthening alliances (with the U.S. and partners like Canada), managing China relations, deterring North Korea, and leveraging improved Japan ties for regional stability. On the **economic and security front**, issues like semiconductor supply chains, energy independence, and advanced technology governance (including AI) are at the forefront and offer fertile ground for Canada–Korea collaboration.

For the Canadian delegate, being aware of **sensitive topics** will be important. These include South Korea's **historical issues with Japan**, which, although improving, should be approached with empathy; its delicate **China balance**, meaning discussions on China-related strategy should be framed in terms of shared principles rather than pressure; and the recent **domestic turmoil**, which should be acknowledged only insofar as to praise Korea's democratic resilience, avoiding any implication of interference. Areas like **North Korean human rights, critical minerals cooperation, AI ethics**, and **supply chain security** are “green light” topics where values and interests align strongly <sup>64</sup> <sup>82</sup>. By focusing on these and demonstrating understanding of South Korea's recent challenges, the Canadian delegation can expect a productive summit that reinforces the **strategic partnership** and advances mutual goals in the AI domain and beyond.

**Sources:** Recent Reuters, Al Jazeera and other reports have been used to ensure up-to-date and credible information on these developments <sup>106</sup> <sup>42</sup> <sup>84</sup> <sup>48</sup>, among others, as cited throughout.

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