

# KOREA NEWSLETTER

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### South Korea-China Summit

In January 2026, the South Korean President Lee Jae Myung made a four-day (4~7 January) state [visit](#) to China and met with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping. This is his second summit with President Xi after they met on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit last November in Gyeongju, South Korea. The visit to China is part of the Lee administration's "pragmatic diplomacy" which seeks to [improve](#) relations with Beijing which got deteriorated due to the installation of the American-built Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea in 2017. China had imposed informal sanctions against South Korea, which affected the South Korean entertainment and tourism sector. President Lee's visit to China was accompanied with a big business delegation from South Korea. According to a report, the North Korean regime fired several missiles on the day President Lee reached China in an apparent move by Pyongyang to "[deter](#)" Beijing against developing closer ties with Seoul. Notably, this trip by President Lee Jae Myung also happened in the backdrop of the recent surge in diplomatic conflict between Japan and China on Taiwan. During his [meeting](#) at the Korea-China business forum, President Lee urged for the expansion of the trade ties between the two countries and deepen cooperation in artificial intelligence (AI), cosmetics and cultural industry. He called the summit with President Xi as [restoration](#) of South Korea-China relations.

### United States' Troops in South Korea

In January 2026, the South Korean media [reported](#) about the possible reduction in the American troops stationed in South Korea. According to the report, a U.S. Army squadron which was related to the reconnaissance mission in South Korea was apparently deactivated in December 2025, amidst concerns that there could be reduction in the American military support to Seoul. There have been speculations that the second Donald Trump administration in the United States could shift the American troops from South Korea to other locations to counter the military rise of China. Trump administration has also been urging South Korea to take more responsibility of its defence. Reportedly, the reduction of about 4,500 American troops in South Korea is part of Washington's strategy to contain China's rising hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. However, the South Korean defence ministry [refuted](#) the reports that speculated about the possible reduction in American troops in the country. According to the Defence Minister of South Korea Ahn Gyu-back, the recent development in the American military presence in South Korea is probably a part of the ongoing reformation "across the U.S. Army as a whole". On the other hand, a spokesperson of the Pentagon in the United States asserted that there has not been any [decision](#) about the fate of the U.S. Army squadron in South Korea which has reportedly been deactivated in the ongoing "military transformation initiative".

### South Korean President's Visit to Japan

In January 2026, the South Korean President Lee Jae Myung visited Japan for a summit with the Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi. This two-day summit (13~14 January) between South Korea and Japan was reported to further boost the “[shuttle diplomacy](#)” and build a “future-oriented” ties between the two countries. The meeting between the top-level leaders of Seoul and Tokyo happened in the backdrop of the recent diplomatic spat between Japan and China over Taiwan. Therefore, the South Korea-Japan summit was important from both geopolitical and economic perspectives as Seoul needs to maintain a strategic [balance](#) between Tokyo and Beijing. Reportedly, both China and Japan have been trying to bring South Korea closer to their side. In an interview to Japanese media, President Lee [expressed](#) that bilateral relations with Tokyo is equally important to that of Beijing for South Korea. During his meeting with the Prime Minister Takaichi, President Lee [called](#) for deepening the bilateral cooperation and he also referred to the controversial history between the two countries. Notably, the Korean Peninsula was colonised by the imperial Japan during 1910~1945, and in 1965 South Korea established diplomatic relations with Japan. The Japanese Prime Minister also urged for strengthening the strategic engagement between Japan and South Korea in order to maintain regional stability. Both Lee and Takaichi shared views on the importance of South Korea-Japan ties in the midst of changing geopolitical environment.

### North Korea and Crisis in Venezuela

The military attacks on Venezuela by the United States in January, and detention of the Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by the American authorities also apparently had an [impact](#) on the North Korean regime. The South Korean media reported that this would further solidify Pyongyang's policy for the development of the nuclear weapons and would make the task of the denuclearisation of North Korea more problematic. Reportedly, North Korea has shared diplomatic relations with Venezuela since 1974. The North Korean regime would try to avoid similar situation as it happened to that of Saddam Hussain, Muammar Gaddafi, and now Nicolas Maduro by the United States. Evidently, North Korea fired multiple missiles on January 4, in an apparent show of strength and an indication to the United States that Pyongyang should not be [mistaken](#) for Caracas. According to a South Korean political leader, the rationale that the Americans used to launch attacks on Venezuela and arrest President Maduro could also be [applied](#) to the North Korean case as Pyongyang is also accused of illegal drug trafficking and money laundering by the United States. On the other hand, the foreign ministry of North Korea [criticised](#) the military strikes by the United States on Venezuela, calling it a violation of the sovereignty of Caracas and that of the international laws enshrined in the United Nations Charter. Pyongyang also referred US as a “rogue state”.