

Beyond the Pivot: Expanding South Korea's Global Role and G7 Cooperation in a New Era

by Tereza Novotná

South Korea's engagement with the G7 reflects a pragmatic response to a fragmented international environment. As the G7 has evolved into a forum for high-level political coordination, Seoul has emerged as a quasi-regular and consequential partner without pursuing formal membership. Under President Yoon, G7 outreach was framed as part of South Korea's emergence as a global pivotal state; under President Lee, this approach has been largely sustained, though recalibrated through pragmatic diplomacy. G7 participation complements, rather than substitutes for, South Korea's alliance with the US and its partnerships with NATO and the European Union, while offering a flexible venue for agenda-setting on global governance, technology and security. A less visible but politically significant benefit lies in the G7's contribution to sustaining Japan-Korea normalisation by lowering coordination costs. Stress-tested by US volatility and North Korea's growing alignment with Russia, the G7 provides South Korea with strategic leverage.

In an era marked by intensifying geopolitical rivalry, climate disruption, health emergencies and rapid technological change, the Group of Seven (G7) has emerged as a key platform for coordination. The return of geopolitics has elevated the G7's role in ways few would have anticipated even a decade ago. What began as a forum for managing economic turbulence among a handful of industrialised democracies¹ now functions as a global political steering group. Once primarily focused on macroeconomic governance,² the agenda has expanded, encompassing sanctions regimes, critical supply chains, digital governance and climate finance. In parallel, the G7 has intensified its outreach to Indo-Pacific partners, recognising that the centre of gravity of global politics and the world economy continues to shift eastwards. In this context, the Republic of Korea (ROK)/South Korea has become an increasingly regular presence in G7 processes, even if it remains formally outside the group.

Since its first invitation to a G7 summit in 2020, South Korea's participation in successive meetings has been anything but

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¹ Dobson, Hugo, *The Group of 7/8*, London/New York, Routledge, 2007.

² Ibid.



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incidental. Seoul brings a mixture of economic weight, technological capacity and diplomatic experience that aligns closely with the concerns of G7 members. As the world's thirteenth-largest economy,³ South Korea has weathered its own share of geopolitical pressure while consolidating a resilient democracy. As a central actor in Indo-Pacific security, the ROK has increasingly come to be seen as a "G7 Plus" partner capable of shaping, rather than merely adjusting to, evolving multilateral agendas. At the same time, the G7 offers Seoul something in return: a high-level forum in which it can articulate its strategic outlook not only to Washington, but also to key European partners and, crucially, to Japan.

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration (2022-2025) embraced this opportunity, framing G7 engagement as part of a broader effort to present South Korea as a "global pivotal state".⁴ Yoon's foreign policy – however polarising at home – did succeed in raising Seoul's profile across Western-led institutions from NATO to the G7 and in repairing relations with Tokyo.⁵ The election of President Lee Jae-myung in June 2025,⁶ inevitably raised questions about whether this outward-facing posture would endure.⁷ Rather than reversing course, however, the Lee government has signalled continuity with some adjustment: a more balanced and adaptive foreign policy anchored in what it terms "pragmatic" diplomacy⁸ – working with partners where interests converge, lowering the rhetorical temperature where they do not, and preserving room for manoeuvre.

This paper argues that G7-ROK cooperation should be understood precisely in this context. It remains an important avenue for expanding South Korea's global role, but it should neither be overstated nor treated as the primary vehicle for Seoul's international engagement. Instead, G7 participation constitutes one of several channels within a broader and diversified set of partnerships, pursued in parallel with NATO-ROK cooperation and the EU-ROK strategic partnership. Through this layered approach, South Korea seeks to advance its interests while contributing to democratic coordination at a time when both regional and global environments are in flux. The value

³ Gedeth, "South Korea Economic Overview", in *Gedeth Blog*, 10 June 2025, <https://gedeth.com/?p=28215>.

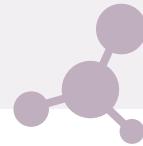
⁴ Yoon, Suk-yeol, "South Korea Needs to Step Up", in *Foreign Affairs*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1128401>.

⁵ Yeo, Andrew, "South Korea-Japan Rapprochement Creates New Opportunities in the Indo-Pacific", in *Brookings Commentaries*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/?p=1675581>.

⁶ Tan, Yvette and Woongbee Lee, "South Korean Opposition Wins Presidency after Months of Political Chaos", in *BBC News*, 3 June 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c861yyqxg4do>.

⁷ Derr, Arius, "Is Lee Jae-myung South Korea's Latest Liberal Firebrand or a Pragmatic Centrist?", in *East Asia Forum*, 8 June 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/?p=2344776>.

⁸ "Lee Jae-myung's Inaugural Address", in *The Korea Herald*, 4 June 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10502281>.



of the G7 lies less in formal institutional status than in its capacity to facilitate high-level political alignment and issue-based cooperation across trade, technology, security and global governance.

Following this introduction, this paper first examines the foundations of G7-ROK engagement and identifies areas where cooperation has already acquired strategic relevance. It then turns to the Japan-Korea relationship – an often overlooked but politically consequential dimension of South Korea's participation in G7 processes. Subsequent sections first draw lessons from NATO-ROK and EU-ROK cooperation before assessing how the G7 can help Seoul manage renewed US protectionism and alliance volatility as well as North Korea. The paper concludes by situating South Korea's G7 engagement within a wider architecture of pragmatic multilateralism that reflects Seoul's evolving role as a pragmatic and responsible global actor.

1 THE FOUNDATIONS OF G7-ROK ENGAGEMENT

South Korea's engagement with the G7 has evolved rapidly over the past few years

South Korea's engagement with the G7 has evolved rapidly over the past few years. Initially, Seoul's interactions with the group were infrequent, largely dependent on the host country's thematic or diplomatic preferences. Since 2020, however, successive presidencies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific have increasingly treated South Korea as a valuable interlocutor, extending invitations to South Korean presidents with notable regularity.⁹ This shift signals a move away from ad hoc participation towards a more structured cooperation. While it does not constitute a pathway to formal membership – nor should it be interpreted as such – it does indicate that G7 members increasingly view the ROK as a partner whose contributions carry both practical and political weight.

This pattern of invitations reflects a growing convergence between the G7's agenda and South Korea's own ambitions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Seoul's early reliance on large-scale testing, digital tracing tools and public communication demonstrated an ability to manage a major health crisis without resorting to draconian measures,¹⁰ offering a reference point for G7 debates on resilience and global health governance. As the focus shifted towards green and energy transition, South Korea's industrial and technological capabilities – from renewables and hydrogen to nuclear energy

⁹ President Lee Jae-myung attended the most recent G7 summit in Kananaskis, Canada in June 2025. Kim, Ellen, "South Korea's Diplomatic Comeback at the G7", in *The Peninsula*, 18 June 2025, <https://keia.org/?p=27222>.

¹⁰ Novotná, Tereza and Nam Kook Kim, "South Korea and the EU Battling COVID-19: Shared Contribution to Global Health Governance and Human Security", in *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 545-564, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-023-00684-8>.



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– became increasingly relevant to G7 discussions. Its position in global supply chains, particularly in semiconductors and advanced manufacturing, has become even more salient as democracies seek to reduce strategic dependencies. More recently, great-power competition and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have underscored the importance of partners able to contribute to sanctions implementation, defence-industrial capacity and supply-chain diversification – areas in which South Korea has assumed a prominent role. Moreover, the ROK's experience in dealing with North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes continues to resonate well beyond the Korean Peninsula.

Against this backdrop, South Korea is increasingly described as a de-facto “G7 plus” partner.¹¹ The label is not merely rhetorical. Economically, Korea is firmly embedded among the world's leading industrial economies,¹² with combining a highly competitive export-oriented manufacturing base with a technological edge in sectors such as semiconductors, shipbuilding and advanced materials. Political context matters as well. As recent failed coup attempt demonstrated,¹³ South Korea remains a consolidated democracy with robust institutions and a record of peaceful alternation of power, even in moments of crisis. Strategically, it is deeply embedded in the Indo-Pacific's dense web of alliances, making it a regional security, economic security and technological hub. South Korea also occupies a relatively rare position as a close US ally that maintains developed institutional ties with the European Union and has recently stabilised relations with Japan – an asset for a grouping whose members do not always agree among themselves.

For Seoul, the appeal of the G7 lies in what distinguishes it from other platforms. Unlike NATO or the EU, the G7 is not a treaty-based organisation but an informal political forum centred on leaders' summits¹⁴ and a dense network of ministerial and senior-level meetings where South Korea can interact with its closest partners on a more equal footing which contributes to the group's attractiveness. Paradoxically, the absence of legally binding commitments is part of the G7's value: it enables agenda-setting, coalition-building and political signalling without imposing the institutional obligations associated with formal membership.

One of the often-overlooked advantages of South Korea's

¹¹ Edwards, Len, “The Case for South Korea's Inclusion in the G7”, in *CIGI Articles*, 13 June 2025, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/the-case-for-south-koreas-inclusion-in-the-g7>.

¹² OECD, *OECD Economic Surveys: Korea 2024*, Paris, OECD Publishing, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c243e16a-en>.

¹³ Lee, Chung Min, “Yoon's Failed Political Coup and South Korea's Mounting Crisis”, in *CarnegieArticles*, 5 December 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/12/yoons-failed-political-coup-and-south-koreas-mounting-crisis>.

¹⁴ Dobson, Hugo, *The Group of 7/8*, cit.



participation in G7 processes concerns its relationship with Japan. The bilateral relationship has long been susceptible to domestic pressures and unresolved historical grievances on both sides. While the recent improvement in Japan-ROK relations has been driven primarily by bilateral initiatives and trilateral cooperation with the United States, it remains fragile. Yet G7 summits, where Japan is the only permanent Asian member, offer an additional setting in which Seoul and Tokyo appear together as participants. This shared participation helps normalise coordination, decreases the costs of engagement for leaders in both countries, and creates space for cooperation that is less exposed to domestic sensitivities. The presence of European partners further lowers the temperature, enabling Seoul and Tokyo to articulate shared positions on issues such as export controls or maritime security that might otherwise be more vulnerable to political shifts.

From Seoul's perspective, therefore, the foundations of G7-ROK engagement are best understood not as a stepping stone towards formal membership, but as part of a diversified toolbox of partnerships. Alongside its alliance with the United States, its growing Indo-Pacific-based cooperation with NATO¹⁵ and its strategic partnership with the EU,¹⁶ participation in G7 processes allows South Korea to project influence simultaneously towards Europe, North America and the wider Indo-Pacific.

This political dynamic also helps explain why the Lee administration, despite its different ideological pedigree from the previous Yoon government, has shown no inclination to disengage from the G7. Lee's pragmatic foreign policy – centred on interest-driven diplomacy and an effort to maximise room for manoeuvre while maintaining alignment with democratic partners on core principles – does not imply retreat. Rather, it entails making strategic use of available platforms while avoiding unnecessary rigidity. The question, therefore, is not whether South Korea should seek G7 membership, but how Seoul can best use this forum to navigate an increasingly volatile international environment.

2 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR G7-ROK COOPERATION

If G7-ROK engagement is to become more effective, it needs to concentrate on a limited number of areas where South Korea's

¹⁵ NATO, *Relations with the Republic of Korea*, updated 9 July 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/partnerships-and-cooperation/relations-with-the-republic-of-korea>.

¹⁶ Lee, Moosung, "Strategic Partnership between the EU and Korea", in Nicola Casarini et al. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Europe-Korea Relations*, London/New York, Routledge, 2022, p. 233-242.



The first strategic priority concerns security coordination and regional stability

political voice and diplomatic experience can make a tangible difference, and where cooperation with G7 members generates clear added value. Much of the existing commentary on the G7-ROK relationship has gravitated towards supply chains, digital standards or AI governance.¹⁷ These issues are undeniably important, but an exclusive focus on them risks narrowing the conversation to technocratic domains. What is missing is a more explicitly political framing. Here, the Lee administration's emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy¹⁸ provides a useful point of departure: engagement that is issue-driven, results-oriented and flexible to adjust to shifting geopolitical conditions.

The first strategic priority concerns security coordination and regional stability. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has already drawn South Korea closer to European G7 members, not only through defence-industrial cooperation but also through shared concerns about deepening Russia-North Korea collaboration. Seoul is acutely aware of how developments involving the North Korea in Europe can reverberate in the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, tensions in the Indo-Pacific – around Taiwan, the South and East China Seas, and the Korean Peninsula itself – have moved higher on the G7 agenda.

In this context, G7 meetings serve several purposes. They provide South Korea with an opportunity to explain its security dilemmas to partners beyond Washington; to underline how North Korea's growing alignment with Russia – and, indirectly, with China – has implications for European and global security; and to build support for deterrence and defence measures that extend beyond the narrow US-ROK framework. G7 discussions on sanctions, denuclearisation and long-term support for Ukraine also offer Seoul a platform in which to articulate how developments in one theatre reverberate across another. For a pragmatic Lee government, this space can be used to foster shared ROK-G7 assessments of cross-regional linkages, highlighting how Russian-North Korean actions in Europe – together with Chinese assertiveness in Europe and Asia – mutually reinforce pressure on democratic states.

A second priority is managing the consequences of a more assertive China. The G7 has gradually become a venue where large economies seek to calibrate their responses to Chinese technological, economic and maritime coercion. South Korea's position is more complicated than that of Japan or Australia, but this complexity is precisely what

¹⁷ Orta, Kayla, "High-Tech Alliances: South Korea, the G7 and the Future of AI and Nuclear Innovation", in *IAI Papers*, No. 25|26 (October 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/20851>.

¹⁸ Lee, Shinae, "Lee Jae-myung's Pragmatic Diplomacy: Between Alliance and Autonomy", in *International Information Network Analysis*, 1 August 2025, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/lee_06.html.



A second priority is managing the consequences of a more assertive China

makes its perspective valuable. As a key actor in global value chains – particularly in semiconductors, batteries, shipbuilding and critical industrial inputs – South Korea is indispensable to any credible effort to “de-risk” from China without sliding into full-scale decoupling. Within G7 processes, Seoul can work with partners to shape approaches to export controls, investment screening and supply-chain diversification that protect national security while preserving an open, rules-based trading system. A pragmatic approach under Lee would emphasise South Korea’s role as a problem-solver: willing to shoulder responsibility in areas such as semiconductor resilience or green industrial value chains, while cautioning against binary framings and fragmented regimes that would disproportionately burden smaller and mid-sized economies.

A third area of strategic priority lies in multilateral governance, particularly the reform of international institutions. South Korea has long positioned itself as an interlocutor between developed and emerging economies, drawing on its own experience of rapid economic transformation. Its credibility with ASEAN countries, India, Mongolia and parts of the Global South – often described as “geopolitical swing states”¹⁹ – positions Seoul to contribute ideas on WTO reform, global taxation, climate finance and development assistance. What South Korea brings to the G7 is not institutional heft, but perspective: that of a country that has transitioned from one of the poorest to one of the richest countries in Asia and the world.²⁰ Participation to G7 summits therefore allows Seoul to shape reform debates while ensuring that middle-power perspectives, particularly from the Indo-Pacific, are not marginalised.

Across these three dimensions, a common thread is the preference for issue-based and flexible cooperation over a binary debate about Korean G7 membership. For the Lee administration, which must operate within a deeply polarised domestic environment, this approach has clear advantages. Participation in G7 processes offers a means of maintaining strategic continuity regardless of which political camp controls the presidency. In this sense, pragmatic diplomacy functions not only as an approach to foreign policy, but also as a stabilising mechanism. It enables South Korea to align closely with leading democracies where interests converge without provoking unnecessary friction with partners who may view G7 expansion as exclusionary.

¹⁹ Cohen, Jared, “The Rise of Geopolitical Swing States”, in *Goldman Sachs Insights*, 15 May 2023, <https://www.goldmansachs.com/insights/articles/the-rise-of-geopolitical-swing-states>.

²⁰ Bu, Jiashu, “How the ‘Miracle of the Han River’ Came into Being: From the Perspective of a Developmental State to Explore the Economic Transformation of South Korea”, in *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 23 (2023), p. 492-498, <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v23i.12950>.



3 JAPAN-KOREA NORMALISATION AND THE G7 AS A POLITICAL ANCHOR

Yet one of the most consequential, albeit underexplored dimensions of G7-ROK engagement, is its role in supporting and sustaining the fragile but strategically significant normalisation of relations between South Korea and Japan. Relations between South Korea and Japan have long been characterised more by fragility than by stability. Periods of cooperation have repeatedly given way to renewed tension, often triggered by domestic political change or by the re-emergence of unresolved legal and historical disputes. The rapprochement pursued under South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio marked an important departure from this pattern, creating a missing diplomatic space. Yet few observers would assume that this improvement is self-sustaining, particularly now that neither leader remains in office. Against this backdrop, the G7 offers something that Seoul and Tokyo often lack: an external anchor capable of cushioning inevitable fluctuations.

The added value of the G7 lies partly in its composition: Japan remains the only Asian member of the group. When South Korea participates in G7 outreach formats, the two countries are therefore placed alongside one another. While this may appear symbolic, repeated joint participation has a cumulative effect. Shared appearances incrementally standardise cooperation from an exceptional act into a routine practice. Over time, joint language in communiqués and parallel messaging become less performative and less exposed to domestic pressures. Importantly, such interaction does not require highly visible gestures. Moreover, trilateral moments with the United States lend political weight, while the presence of European leaders further lowers the temperature, making it easier for Korean and Japanese leaders to engage – sometimes informally – without the same domestic repercussions.

This matters because many of the issues on which Seoul and Tokyo increasingly converge remain politically sensitive. Sanctions enforcement against North Korea, technology export controls, Indo-Pacific maritime security, or even references to the Taiwan Strait can all provoke domestic backlash in both countries, as comments by PM Takaichi linking Taiwan's security with that of Japan demonstrated.²¹ Addressing such questions within a G7 framework diffuses attention

²¹ In November 2025, Japanese PM Sanae Takaichi stirred a diplomatic storm with China when she suggested that Japan's self-defence forces could be mobilised if a Chinese attack on Taiwan was carried out which would threaten Japan's survival. See e.g. Muzaffar, Maroosha, "How Sanae Takaichi's Taiwan Remark Stirred up a Diplomatic Storm between Japan and China", in *Independent*, 17 November 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/japan/japan-china-row-taiwan-sanae-takaichi-b2863454.html>.



and embeds them within a broader agenda shared with European and North American partners. As a result, cooperation between South Korea and Japan can unfold more naturally as one element of a broader conversation rather than as a test of bilateral resolve. In practice, this makes coordination more routine and less performative, allowing leaders to signal stability without overstating what has been achieved.

There is also a growing strategic rationale behind such multilateral anchoring. European G7 members and Japan increasingly view developments in Northeast Asia as closely connected to security dynamics in Europe. For them, stability in Northeast Asia is no longer a distant concern. The deepening relationship between Russia and North Korea, combined with China's support for Moscow and its increasingly assertive posture in the Indo-Pacific, has reinforced expectations of closer coordination between Seoul and Tokyo – especially on deterrence messaging, sanctions implementation and responses to North Korean provocations. Although these expectations are informal, they create tangible incentives. Within the G7, divergence is more visible and therefore more costly when played out in front of a group of close partners. Neither South Korea nor Japan has an interest in appearing as the weak link in this setting.

For the Lee Jae-myung administration, this external anchoring function carries political value. Lee inherits a relationship with Japan that has improved significantly but remains contested domestically.²² A purely bilateral approach would expose his progressive government to criticism from constituencies that remain sceptical of closer ties with Tokyo. Engagement through the G7 allows cooperation with Japan to be framed as part of a broader and pragmatic approach to global challenges rather than as a continuation of Yoon-era policy choices. Reconciliation is thus presented not as an end in itself, nor as a concession, but as a functional necessity. In this sense, the G7 helps depersonalise and de-ideologise the Japan-ROK relationship.

Even if leadership turnover hits Seoul or Tokyo, South Korea's continued participation in G7 can help insulate rapprochement with Japan from future political turbulence, even in the face of leadership turnover in either country. In an era of increasingly polarised and media-driven politics, neither Seoul nor Tokyo wishes to be seen as the spoiler. This does not mean that the G7 offers a panacea. It cannot replace bilateral diplomacy, nor can it eliminate the risk of renewed crises. Historical and legal disputes will continue to require direct consultations between the two governments. Nevertheless, the G7-Plus raises the political cost of disengagement, making backsliding

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²² Lebreton, Matthieu, "Sustaining the Japan-ROK Rapprochement", in *IISS Online Analyses*, 16 June 2023, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/06/sustaining-the-japan-rok-rapprochement>.



harder to justify not only domestically but also vis-à-vis international partners. For a government committed to pragmatic diplomacy, this may be one of the G7's most durable – if understated – contributions to South Korea's evolving global role.

4 LESSONS FROM NATO-ROK AND EU-ROK COOPERATION

South Korea's growing engagement with the G7 cannot be assessed in isolation from its parallel outreach to NATO and the European Union. Over the past several years, Seoul has invested heavily in strengthening ties with both organisations, resulting in a dense web of political, security and economic interactions with European and transatlantic partners. These relationships differ markedly in form, scope and ambition. Taken together, however, they reveal useful insights into how Seoul has approached its evolving global role: incrementally, cautiously and selectively. They also help clarify why G7-ROK cooperation occupies a distinct and complementary place, rather than functioning as a substitute for more institutionalised partnerships.

NATO-ROK ties have deepened most visibly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As one of the Alliance's four Indo-Pacific partners (IP4) – alongside Japan, Australia and New Zealand – South Korea has significantly increased its political engagement with NATO,²³ including regular participation at summits²⁴ and intensified consultations. This engagement reflects a shared understanding that security dynamics in Europe and the Indo-Pacific are increasingly interconnected. In the absence of a permanent NATO presence in Asia,²⁵ the Alliance has nevertheless provided a political forum in which Seoul can underscore the broader implications of deterrence failures in one region for security elsewhere.

At the same time, the limitations of NATO-ROK cooperation are evident. NATO remains, first and foremost, a collective defence organisation anchored in the Euro-Atlantic space. Despite recent progress in areas such as cyber defence and responses to hybrid threats, South Korea's engagement with the Alliance is driven as much by political signalling as by operational cooperation. It reinforces Seoul's alignment with democratic partners and situates South Korea within wider debates on security and resilience. Yet it cannot address several issues that loom large in Korea's strategic calculations,

²³ Reiterer, Michael, "NATO and the Republic of Korea: The AP4 in the Indo-Pacific", in *38 North*, 9 April 2024, <https://www.38north.org/?p=29987>.

²⁴ Kim, Felix, "South Korea Emerging as Strategic Defense Partner as NATO Spending Surges", in *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*, 9 August 2025, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/?p=186919>.

²⁵ Novotná, Tereza et al., "NATO's New Mission: Keep America In, Russia Down, and China Out", in *The Diplomat*, 22 July 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/?p=270494>.



Viewed together, NATO, the EU and the G7 represent three distinct modalities of engagement for South Korea

including the immediate challenge posed by North Korea, as well as economic coercion, industrial policy, technology governance and supply-chain resilience – domains that largely fall outside NATO's remit. It is in these areas that the G7, and in a different way the EU, assume greater relevance.

EU-ROK relations, by contrast, are deeply institutionalised. The free trade agreement, framework agreement and strategic partnership agreement²⁶ have generated an extensive network of dialogues spanning trade, climate, digital policy and foreign affairs. For Seoul, the EU represents a predictable and normatively aligned partner with a strong commitment to rules-based governance.²⁷ Engagement with Brussels allows South Korea to anchor its policies in a more structured, long-term regulatory frameworks that are often less exposed to abrupt political shifts than those associated with the United States. At the same time, EU decision-making is inherently complex and frequently slow, while its external action is shaped by internal consensus-building among member states.²⁸ For a country such as South Korea, which operates in a volatile regional environment, the mechanisms of the EU's external action can limit Brussels' effectiveness as an effective partner in moments of crisis.

This is where the G7 fills this gap. Viewed together, NATO, the EU and the G7 represent three distinct modalities of engagement for South Korea. NATO provides a strategic lens on shared security challenges; the EU offers institutional depth and regulatory convergence; and the G7 functions as a flexible political forum where leaders can coordinate responses to emerging challenges. None of these channels is sufficient on its own. Used in combination, however, they enable Seoul to pursue a diversified foreign policy that maximises influence while preserving autonomy.

This layered approach fits well with the Lee Jae-myung administration's emphasis on pragmatic diplomacy. Rather than privileging one framework over others, Lee's government has signalled continuity with selective adjustment, maintaining engagement across multiple platforms while calibrating emphasis. For G7-ROK cooperation, the lesson is clear: its added value does not lie in replicating what functions well with NATO or the EU, but in reinforcing existing partnerships, filling coordination gaps, and providing Seoul with a venue in which pragmatic diplomacy can be exercised at the highest political level.

²⁶ Novotná, Tereza et al., "EU-Korea Relations at 60: Managing Cooperation in the Context of Great Power Rivalry", in *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (2023), p. 481-492, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-023-00686-6>.

²⁷ Cini, Michelle and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (eds), *European Union Politics*, 8th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025.

²⁸ Ibid.



The value of G7-ROK cooperation is best assessed not in moments of alignment, but under pressure

5 STRESS-TESTING G7-ROK COOPERATION: THE UNITED STATES AND NORTH KOREA

The value of G7-ROK cooperation is best assessed not in moments of alignment, but under pressure. Two such stress tests stand out: renewed volatility in US policy and the evolving external posture of North Korea. Neither challenge is new, and neither can be managed primarily through the G7. Yet both illuminate why Seoul engages with this format and where the limits of multilateral coordination lie.

Uncertainty surrounding US policy has become a structural feature rather than a temporary disruption. The return of protectionist instincts in Washington – most visibly associated with Donald Trump, though not confined to him – has reinforced long-standing Korean concerns about the durability of what has traditionally been described as an “ironclad” alliance. A more transactional approach, the recurrent use of tariffs and the instrumentalisation of trade for domestic political purposes have all had tangible effects on South Korea. The episode in September 2025 involving South Korean workers at Georgia’s Hyundai battery plant who were detained under harsh conditions²⁹ illustrated the extent to which even flagship Korean investments in the US are not immune to aggressive enforcement practices linked to a broader anti-immigration agenda.

The G7 offers no mechanism to constrain US unilateral behaviour. What it does provide, however, is a political setting in which South Korea can compare its concerns within a wider group of advanced economies facing similar exposure to US policy volatility. This helps avoid framing tensions with Washington as uniquely Korean and reinforces the sense that these challenges are part of a broader pattern affecting US partners. In this respect, the G7 does not function as a shield, nor does it replace bilateral alliance management. Rather, it serves as a forum that signals continuity in South Korea’s broader strategic orientation even when bilateral channels become strained.

North Korea presents a different, but equally revealing, stress test. Pyongyang’s accelerating nuclear and missile programmes, combined with its deepening relationship with Russia – including the provision of missiles and soldiers in support of Moscow’s war effort – have further tightened the linkage between European and East Asian security. At a time when decision-making in the UN Security Council is effectively paralysed by Russia’s veto, the political relevance of the G7 has increased, despite its limited direct leverage over North Korea. For Seoul, coordinated messaging and joint sanctions discussions within the G7 carry political weight. In addition, G7 deliberations help frame North Korea not simply as a bilateral or regional spoiler,

²⁹ “South Koreans Face Shock and Confusion after Worker Detentions at Georgia Hyundai Plant”, in PBS News, 8 September 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/?p=531239>.



Seoul has approached the G7 as a practical instrument for political coordination

but as part of a wider challenge to the international order.

Taken together, these two stress tests highlight both the limits and the relevance of G7-ROK engagement. The G7 cannot substitute for the alliance with the United States, nor can it contain North Korea's strategic ambitions. Its contribution is more modest, but still consequential: sustaining political coordination among key partners at moments when established frameworks are under strain. For a middle power like South Korea,³⁰ operating in an environment defined by persistent uncertainty and constrained choices, this function – however understated – remains strategically valuable.

6 CONCLUSION – PRAGMATIC MULTILATERALISM BEYOND THE PIVOT

South Korea's participation to G7 summits as an invited country reflects a broader recalibration in how Seoul navigates an increasingly fragmented and less predictable international environment. Rather than treating the G7 as a status symbol or as a stepping stone towards formal membership, Seoul has approached it as a practical instrument for political coordination – one that complements, rather than replaces, its alliance with the US, its partnership with NATO and its institutionalised ties with the EU. In this sense, G7-ROK cooperation is best understood not as an end in itself, but as part of the Lee administration's wider strategy of pragmatic multilateralism.

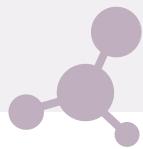
As this paper has shown, the added value of the G7 lies less in formal outcomes than in its political function. The G7 offers Seoul with a venue for agenda-setting, coordination and signalling when established institutions are constrained. Used alongside NATO-ROK and EU-ROK cooperation rather than duplicating them, the G7 is also where South Korea can situate North Korea within wider debates about global security and the erosion of international norms. Perhaps most importantly, G7 offers a multilateral setting in which sensitive relationships – most notably with Japan – can be stabilised and normalised over time.

This does not imply that the G7 can resolve core strategic challenges facing South Korea, from alliance volatility to North Korea's challenge. Yet for a middle power operating under persistent uncertainty, if used pragmatically, G7's contribution is still consequential. Looking ahead, the challenge for Seoul is not to expand the scope of G7 cooperation indiscriminately, but to use it selectively and credibly. For a government committed to pragmatic diplomacy, this means resisting overstretch while continuing to engage where the G7 adds

³⁰ Pacheco Pardo, Ramon, *South Korea's Grand Strategy. Making Its Own Destiny*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2023.



clear political value. Going “beyond the pivot” does not require doing more for its own sake, requires doing enough – consistently, strategically and with a clear sense of limits. In an international environment defined more by constraints than by opportunities, this may be the most realistic, and ultimately the most effective, course available to South Korea.



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