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The Transformation of South Korean Progressive Foreign Policy

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Executive Summary

The foreign policy orientation of the Democratic Party of Korea (DP)—South Korea's progressive party—is undergoing a recalibration to a more pragmatic, security-conscious orientation. No longer anchored primarily in ethnic nationalism or idealistic engagement frameworks: today's progressives are adapting to a strategic landscape defined by intensified U.S.-China competition, North Korea's nuclear maturity, China's economic coercion, and Japan's security normalization. Internally, generational shifts toward civic nationalism, growing concerns over economic inequality, and the rise of digital polarization are reshaping the domestic foundations of foreign policy preferences. This transformation has significant implications for alliance management, regional strategy, and trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan.

- The Democratic Party of Korea's foreign policy is shifting from engagement-centered idealism to strategic pragmatism amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry and North Korea's nuclear maturity.

- Generational change has decoupled national pride from ethnic homogeneity, eroding the ideological foundation of unconditional unification and reshaping foreign policy preferences.

- The progressive party, particularly under leader and current presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung, increasingly views the U.S.-ROK alliance as a platform for pragmatic cooperation rather than an ideological constraint, while ambivalence toward Japan remains tied to historical sensitivities.

- Domestic inequality and digital polarization are narrowing the consensus for traditional progressive foreign policy, favoring economic security and institutional pragmatism over ideological consistency.

- Policymakers should anticipate a more interest-based, less doctrinaire progressive foreign policy posture—even under leaders with roots in engagement-era traditions.

Introduction

Long-standing assumptions about the foreign policy priorities of South Korea's main progressive party[1]—known since 2015 as the Democratic Party of Korea (DP)—warrants reevaluation in light of structural pressures over the past decade. No longer anchored primarily in ethnic nationalism or engagement idealism, today's progressive leadership has been recalibrating foreign policy in response to a triad of constraints: (1) intensified U.S.-China rivalry and North Korea's nuclear maturity; (2) an erosion of the 386 Generation's ideological and institutional dominance; and (3) shifting public foundations—particularly generational shifts toward state-centered national identity, rising inequality, and digital polarization. This recalibration manifests in a strategic pragmatism that tempers engagement goals with heightened attention to alliance management, security imperatives, and institutional credibility

Through the 2000s, South Korean partisan politics hinged on sharply divergent foreignpolicy preferences toward North Korea, the United States, and Japan. Conservatives continue to favor deterrence, strong U.S.-ROK alliance solidarity, and recently, close coordination with Tokyo. Progressives traditionally prioritized economic engagement with Pyongyang, a desire for autonomy within—or from—the alliance, and a critique of Japan's historical grievances.[2] Progressives' engagement-first framework—codified in the Sunshine Policy of the 2000s—has at times positioned the United States as a potential impediment to inter-Korean reconciliation, with progressives expressing skepticism toward alliance mechanisms that might constrain Seoul's strategic flexibility in pursuing dialogue with Pyongyang.[3] Similarly, historical grievances with Japan have featured prominently in progressive foreign policy identity, often complicating trilateral security cooperation.[4]

That engagement-based consensus has come under mounting external pressure since the mid-2010s. Intensifying U.S.-China competition has forced Seoul to navigate a sharper great-power contest, while North Korea's advancing nuclear arsenal, and China's economic coercion have eroded confidence in Seoul's ability to handle China on its own. Simultaneously, Japan's gradual security normalization signals a regional realignment that limits independent Korean policy options.

Internal dynamics compound these constraints. Shifting generational attitudes toward national identity have undercut older attachments to unbounded engagement with Pyongyang. Rising digital polarization has fractured public discourse, making bipartisan consensus near-impossible to achieve. And widening economic inequality has refocused voter demands on domestic stability and security guarantees, reshaping what DP supporters expect from their leaders.

The June 2025 snap presidential election will crystallize these trends. This paper moves beyond personalities and rhetoric to analyze the structural drivers compelling a strategic recalibration: fusing enduring commitments to peaceful engagement, democratic solidarity, and regional autonomy with concrete security imperatives on a per-country basis. First, the paper traces the historical foundations of progressive identity, showing how engagement with North Korea, alliance ambivalence toward Washington, and historical tensions with Japan became hallmark positions. Second, the paper documents the external and internal structural shifts—especially since the late 2010s—that have narrowed the policy space for traditional approaches. Third, the paper demonstrates how these pressures are producing a new, pragmatic strand of progressive foreign policy, and it concludes with actionable insights for U.S. policymakers seeking to engage a transformed progressive party as a resilient partner in the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The Traditional Progressive Foreign Policy Framework

The term "progressive" (*jinbo*) in the South Korean context draws on both international and national traditions. In fact, from a comparative political science perspective, on the issues, the Korean mainstream progressive party can be defined as relatively centrist.[5]As in other cases around the globe, progressivism in Korea has engaged with global norms such as post-colonial sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, and critiques of hegemonic power. Yet it remains deeply rooted in Korea's political development, particularly the democratization movement of the 1980s. The mainline progressive establishment emerged from this struggle, creating a complex relationship with the United States that continues to shape foreign policy thinking.

While the search for greater autonomy within the alliance remains, the Korean left's foundational skepticism of U.S. security policy—rooted in its opposition to the Cold War–era military dictatorship once supported by Washington—has receded over the past twenty years and particularly the last decade, even in the face of renewed alliance anxieties that have resurfaced under U.S. President Donald Trump's unpredictability.[6] This historical legacy has at times posed challenges for U.S. policymakers, who have had to navigate the tensions between Cold War alliances and democratic ideals.[7]

Understanding the current DP foreign policy preferences therefore requires careful contextualization. It is not an expression of universal ideological claims transplanted from Europe or North America; it is a nationally specific political tradition, forged through the democratization struggle and adapted to Korea's strategic and historical realities. The central policy motivating South Korean progressives since democratization has been distinctive: a vision of inter-Korean engagement as the surest path to national reconciliation, regional stability, and autonomous foreign policymaking. While progressive actors have engaged with broader global norms, their foreign policy identity has remained substantially tethered to the imperative of reshaping peninsular relations.

Domestically, South Korea's mainline progressive party has traditionally relied on two pillars: a strong focus on inter-Korean relations and a well-organized network of supporters across politics, academia, and civil society. The ideological roots of this network lie in the democratization movements of the 1980s, which advanced a distinct vision for inter-Korean relations—one that linked peaceful engagement, rooted in economic cooperation and civil society exchange, to a broader strategy for transforming North Korea and recalibrating South Korea's place within the U.S.-ROK alliance.[8] Reconciliation was thus conceived not only as a national imperative but also as a geopolitical realignment project informed by postcolonial aspirations and a critique of Cold War clientelism. As articulated by the chief architect of the Sunshine Policy, Moon Chung-in, this engagement agenda also aimed to cultivate a peace regime that would enable Seoul to act as a more autonomous actor within a U.S.-led regional order.[9]

Institutionally, this ideological framework was operationalized through the enduring influence of the so-called 386 Generation—those in their thirties during the 1990s, who attended university in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s—who transitioned from grassroots mobilization into leadership roles within the administrations of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in.[10] This network was a cross-class coalition of activists, attorneys, scholars, journalists, unionists, and religious leaders who had come of age during the struggle against authoritarianism.[11] Far from being a monolithic bloc of former student radicals, this cohort formed a multi-sectoral ecosystem of progressive civil society, grounded in intellectual production, opposition media, and legal advocacy.[12]

Over time, many transitioned into policy roles, forming dense networks of trust and continuity that embedded democratic values into statecraft.[13] In a 2008 critical appraisal, historian Andrei Lankov wrote that the transition from activists to professional politician in the 1990s was not clear-cut:

> The 386ers had brought the ideas of their youth, albeit in diluted form, into mainstream politics. Few of them dreamed about a communist revolution any more [sic], and many (but not all) fantasies about North Korea died out. However, they still wanted a generous welfare state, usually without understanding that such a state is very expensive to taxpayers. They also wanted to distance their country from the US, assuming that Korea had nothing to be afraid of any more [sic].

Accordingly, the post-democratization framework that buttressed the early twenty-first century foreign policy priorities rested on three interconnected principles that distinguished it from conservative approaches: 1) prioritizing inter-Korean reconciliation through economic engagement rather than military pressure; 2) pursuing greater autonomy within the alliance while maintaining security ties; and 3) adopting a balanced regional approach that avoided excessive dependence on any single power.[14] These principles stemmed from a vision that economic integration and mutual prosperity could gradually transform North Korean society while enhancing South Korea's diplomatic flexibility.

The Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003) marked a pivotal shift through its Sunshine Policy, which prioritized reconciliation, cooperation, and gradual normalization over confrontation and deterrence. Rather than framing unification as an immediate goal, Kim pursued a phased process centered on peaceful coexistence and institution-building, including the landmark June 2000 inter-Korean summit and Joint Declaration.[15] More than a tactical initiative, the Sunshine Policy served as a strategic identity project, repositioning North Korea from a permanent threat to a potential partner, and recasting South Korea's role from a junior alliance actor to a regional norm entrepreneur.[16]

President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) extended this strategy through his Peace and Prosperity Policy,[17] emphasizing not only reconciliation with North Korea but also Seoul's aspirations to act as a regional balancer in Northeast Asia (*dongbuk-a gyunhyeong oegyo jeongchaek*).[18] This approach reflected growing aspirations for strategic autonomy within the alliance framework—a stance that created periodic friction with George W. Bush's administration in the United States while challenging traditional American assumptions about South Korea's diplomatic posture.[19]

After a decade of conservative rule under Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017) that prioritized a deterrence-first strategy toward North Korea, the Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022) signaled a renewed commitment to engagement. Yet rather than simply reviving strategies from the early 2000s, Moon's foreign policy reflected a generational and ideological evolution within Korea's progressive bloc—moving away from unconditional engagement toward a more multidimensional approach to regional order.[20] His administration pursued inter-Korean dialogue, including high-profile summits, but also adapted to new structural constraints posed by intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, North Korea's nuclear maturity, and South Korea's middle-power aspirations.[21]

Over nearly three decades, progressive foreign policy has demonstrated both remarkable continuity in its core principles and significant adaptation to changing strategic circumstances. The ideational framework developed during the democratization era—centered on engagement with North Korea, balanced regional diplomacy, and recalibration of the U.S. alliance—has remained influential even as its practical implementation has evolved in response to North Korea's nuclear advancement, China's rise, and changing domestic priorities. Yet as this paper will demonstrate, today's progressive policymakers face unprecedented constraints that are forcing more fundamental reconsideration of long-held assumptions. The combination of narrowing structural policy space and shifting domestic preferences is producing a more pragmatic, security-conscious approach that maintains progressive values while acknowledging transformed regional realities.

International Structural Transformations

The strategic landscape confronting South Korean policymakers across the political spectrum has fundamentally transformed since the early Sunshine Policy era. Multiple structural changes have dramatically narrowed the available policy space for all political actors—creating a far more constrained operating environment than the one progressive leaders previously navigated during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations.

U.S.-China Strategic Competition

The most consequential structural shift has been the emergence of explicit strategic competition between the United States and China. During the Kim and Roh administrations, China's rise created policy space for South Korea to pursue a balanced approach—maintaining security ties with the United States while developing economic relations with China.

Today's environment offers dramatically reduced flexibility. The strategic competition that began during Trump's first term has intensified under his second administration, with increasingly explicit pressure on allies to align their policies with American priorities across economic, technological, and security domains. The acceleration of economic and technological decoupling has severely constrained the strategic options available to South Korean policymakers regardless of partisan affiliation.

This narrowing of strategic options manifests in several concrete ways. In the semiconductor sector, South Korea faced U.S. pressure to join initiatives like the "Chip 4" alliance with Japan, Taiwan, and the United States, designed to counter China's technological advancement.[22] Such alignment risks economic retaliation from China, which remains South Korea's largest trading partner.[23] Similarly, U.S. pressure to restrict exports of advanced semiconductor technology to China puts Korean tech giants like Samsung and SK Hynix in a

precarious position, as they have significant manufacturing operations in China. These competing demands have forced South Korean leaders to make increasingly difficult tradeoffs between security alignment with the United States and economic engagement with China.[24]

The conventional Korean slogan of "security with the United States, economy with China" (*anmi kyeongjung*) has become untenable as the line between economic and security domains blurs in areas like critical technologies, supply chains, and infrastructure development.[25] These new structural constraints particularly challenge traditional progressive foreign policy frameworks that envisioned South Korea as a balancer or bridge between major powers. The aspirational concept of strategic autonomy that guided progressive administrations in the early 2000s has become increasingly difficult to maintain as the technological and security domains become inseparable from economic relationships.

North Korea's Nuclear Maturity

North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities have advanced dramatically since the early Sunshine Policy era, fundamentally altering the calculus for engagement. When Kim Dae-jung initiated his engagement policy in 1998, North Korea had not yet conducted a nuclear test and its missile program remained in developmental stages. Today, North Korea possesses dozens of nuclear warheads, long-range missiles that can reach the U.S. mainland, and is building the ability to launch missiles from submarines.[26]

This transformed threat environment creates multiple challenges for policy implementation. Economic engagement has become more difficult to justify politically, as resources provided to North Korea could potentially strengthen its nuclear program. The leverage of deterrence advocates has increased, as they argue that only a robust military posture backed by American extended deterrence can ensure South Korean security. Meanwhile, international sanctions regimes legally restrict many forms of economic cooperation that were central to earlier engagement strategies.[27]

North Korea's unilateral dismantling of Sunshine-era projects has further complicated progressive policy approaches. The closure of the Mount Kumgang tourism project in 2008,[28] and the suspension of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in 2016,[29] eliminated key channels for economic cooperation that had been centerpieces of progressive engagement strategy.[30] Most significantly, North Korea's 2024 constitutional revision to remove references to peaceful unification and to designate South Korea as a "hostile state" rather than a potential partner has shattered the foundational assumption of ethnic solidarity that underpinned the Sunshine Policy approach. These developments offer a stark signal to even the most idealistic progressives that traditional engagement frameworks require fundamental reconsideration.

The Moon administration's experience highlighted these contradictions. Moon attempted to broker improved U.S.–North Korea relations through summit diplomacy while simultaneously strengthening South Korea's indigenous defense capabilities—recognizing that the nuclear reality required adaptation of traditional approaches.[31] The collapse of the Hanoi Summit in 2019 and subsequent breakdown in negotiations demonstrated the limits of engagement when confronting a nuclear-armed North Korea. Contemporary policymakers must now grapple with a North Korean threat profile that makes early 2000s engagement strategies increasingly difficult to implement without substantial modification.

For progressives, these structural changes create a fundamental challenge to traditional engagement paradigms. Progressive policymakers must now reconcile their historical emphasis on engagement with the strategic necessity of countering an advanced nuclear threat uninterested in inter-Korean engagement, forcing a recalibration of progressive foreign policy's foundational approach to inter-Korean relations.

Chinese Economic Coercion and the THAAD Watershed

Perhaps second only to North Korea's nuclear advancement, one of the most consequential external shifts constraining South Korean foreign policy has been the rise of China's economic coercion and strategic assertiveness. During the early 2000s, progressives sought to deepen economic cooperation with China while maintaining security ties to the United States.[32] President Roh Moo-hyun's regional balancing diplomacy similarly reflected ambitions to recalibrate South Korea's role as an autonomous actor navigating between competing great powers in Northeast Asia.

During the 2000s, South Korean views on China exhibited clear partisan differences. Progressives were often perceived as favoring closer ties with Beijing, questioning aspects of U.S. policy, and expressing optimism about China's economic rise.[33] Conservatives, by contrast, approached China's growing influence with greater skepticism, emphasizing security concerns and the risks of strategic dependency. Yet even amid these ideological divides, a broad recognition of China's economic importance was shared across the political spectrum.

The 2016–2017 controversy about the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system was a watershed moment in South Korean elite and popular attitudes toward China. Prior to Seoul's decision, Beijing issued stark diplomatic warnings about bilateral relations and Chinese state media compared the situation to the Cuban Missile Crisis.[34] When South Korea agreed to host the American system under the conservative Park Geun-hye administration, China responded with punishing economic sanctions. Korean celebrities disappeared from Chinese TV, concerts were suddenly canceled, and Chinese travel agencies were instructed to decrease the number of travelers going to South Korea. Beijing's retaliation severely impacted the business of South Korean companies like Lotte, which had provided land for the missile system, while Korean automakers and other industries faced boycotts and regulatory harassment.[35]

Since the THAAD episode, the space for balancing between Washington and Beijing has sharply narrowed. As China has increasingly weaponized its economic leverage, preferences for maintaining equal distance between Washington and Beijing have slowly faded. While conservatives generally favor clearer strategic alignment with the United States, progressives have also moved away from earlier visions of balancing or equidistance. The distinction between partisan approaches today reflects differences of degree rather than fundamental orientation among elites: progressive policymakers increasingly seek greater strategic flexibility within the alliance framework, but also acknowledge the primacy of the U.S.-ROK alliance in safeguarding national security amid intensifying great power competition. Among the broader progressive electorate, the latest research suggests alliance ambivalence remains more salient, even as attitudes toward North Korea appear disengaged or indifferent.[36]

Japan's Security Evolution

Japan's transformation into a normalized security actor represents a fundamental structural shift affecting South Korean foreign policy calculations. Under former prime minister Shinzo Abe (2012–2020) and his successors, Japan evolved toward a more proactive security posture—including constitutional reinterpretation to allow limited collective self-defense and institutional reforms such as establishing a National Security Council—while maintaining significant self-imposed constraints that have defined its postwar security approach.[37]

Following the 2014 reinterpretation of Article 9, Japan has systematically expanded its defense capabilities—increasing defense spending toward 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2027, notably acquiring long-range missiles, and developing advanced air and missile defense systems.[38] While building on earlier initiatives and still facing constitutional restraint, this evolution represents a significant shift from Japan's traditional defensive posture toward a more proactive security role in the region.[39]

Intensifying Sino-Japanese strategic competition has emerged as a defining feature of regional architecture. Beyond territorial disputes in the East China Sea, Japan has positioned itself as a counterweight to China's maritime expansionism and technological ascendance.[40] Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative directly challenges China's Belt and Road investments,[41] while Japan-China competition extends to technological domains including 5G infrastructure, semiconductor production, and rare earth supplies.[42] This rivalry creates a more complex, multipolar regional environment where South Korea faces growing pressure to align with competing blocs.

Concurrently, Washington's approach to alliance management in Northeast Asia has undergone a notable but still evolving shift from its Cold War origins. The Biden administration's pivot toward a "latticework" of interconnected alliances represents a potentially significant structural adjustment, emphasizing direct linkages between allies rather than exclusively bilateral relationships with Washington. This emerging architecture—exemplified by the

Camp David Trilateral Summit mechanism, integrated missile defense frameworks, and formalized intelligence-sharing agreements—explicitly prioritizes Japan-ROK-U.S. coordination as an essential counterweight to both China's regional influence and North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Whether this marks a lasting transformation or a contingent adaptation remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it has opened new political space for South Korean policymakers—and segments of the public—to engage with Japan in the security realm and beyond, reframing cooperation as a strategic necessity rather than a historical concession.[43]

For South Korean policymakers across the political spectrum, Japan's security normalization creates a transformed strategic landscape that demands a response. This structural change particularly challenges progressive foreign policy, which has historically incorporated strong opposition to Japan as a core element of its political identity, reflecting both colonial-era grievances and contemporary disputes. Notably, a top adviser to DP presidential candidate Lee Jae-myung has recently indicated that he would not seek to reverse recent trilateral security gains made under the Yoon and Biden administrations, signaling an evolving stance on the strategic value of institutionalized cooperation with Japan—even if his long-term positioning remains uncertain.[44] The increasing strategic appeal of trilateral coordination creates tensions between ideological positioning and security imperatives that all Korean leaders must navigate.

Taken together, these structural transformations—intensifying U.S.-China competition, North Korea's nuclear advancement, China's economic leverage, and Japan's security normalization—have collectively narrowed the policy space available to South Korean leaders. External constraints, rather than purely ideological preferences, now limit South Korea's foreign policy calculus regardless of which party holds power. These fundamental changes in the regional security environment create the essential context for understanding the recalibration of progressive foreign policy. As the international environment has become more constrained, progressive policymakers have been forced to adapt traditional principles to new realities, producing a more pragmatic approach that acknowledges security imperatives while maintaining core progressive values.

Domestic Drivers of Change

Beyond the shifting international landscape, internal transformations in South Korean society have profoundly reshaped progressive foreign policy thinking. Three key domestic forces—generational shifts in national identity, political economy considerations, and digital polarization—have emerged as critical factors that differentiate today's approach from its predecessors. These sociological changes influence both the strategic outlook of progressive policymakers and the specific foreign policy preferences they advance.

Generational Divide and National Identity

Recent survey data reveal a fundamental generational realignment in how South Koreans conceptualize their national identity, with important implications for foreign policy. Traditionally, Korean identity has been rooted in ethnic nationalism, with notions of ethnic homogeneity and historical hardship—from Japanese colonization through war, dictatorship, and democratization—forming the basis of citizenship and national belonging on either side of the political aisle.[45] This understanding long positioned unification with North Korea as a moral imperative grounded in shared bloodlines and divided families.[46]

Yet for younger Koreans, national pride derives less from ethnic uniqueness and more from Korea's democratic resilience, technological innovation, and cultural soft power. As researcher Hanwool Jeong observes from the 2020 Korean Identity Survey, while national identification rose to 90 percent, ethnic affinity declined to 64 percent, signaling a growing decoupling of national identity from ethnicity. Survey respondents—especially in their twenties and thirties—expressed rising pride in Korea's "mature democracy," health and welfare systems, and international cultural status. The proportion of respondents expressing pride in Korea's healthcare and welfare system stood at an overwhelming 96 percent, while pride in the maturity of democracy rose from 52 percent in 2015 to 74 percent in 2020. This shift reflects what Jeong calls the rediscovery of civic and cultural—though not necessarily ethnic or racial—values as the core of national pride.[47] These shifting identity markers may help explain younger Koreans' pragmatic skepticism toward unification, which they evaluate primarily through cost-benefit calculations rather than ethnonational imperatives.

This identity transformation creates salient tensions within progressive foreign policy discourse. Traditional narratives emphasized ethnic solidarity with North Koreans as "one Korean people" (*han minjok*) temporarily divided by foreign powers—a framing that resonated with ethnonational identity concepts.[48] As younger voters increasingly conceptualize their identity through South Korea's civic achievements and global integration, these ethnonational appeals lose persuasive weight.

Most fundamentally, this identity transformation reflects younger Koreans' pride in their country's remarkable journey from devastation to global influence.[49] Whereas previous generations defined Korean identity largely through victimhood and resistance to external domination, younger citizens emphasize South Korea's positive achievements—its vibrant democracy, economic innovation, and global cultural reach.[50] This pride in South Korea's distinctive accomplishments generates an expectation that foreign policy should assert the country's rightful place as a respected middle power with independent agency rather than positioning it as a perennial victim of great power politics.

This generational shift directly impacts progressive foreign policy by undermining the ethnic solidarity framework that justified unconditional engagement with North Korea. It pushes progressive policymakers toward more pragmatic, interest-based approaches that acknowledge both the security imperatives of deterrence and the economic potential of limited cooperation. Moreover, it requires a recalibration of alliance politics away from ideological

anti-Americanism toward a more balanced assessment of the alliance's benefits and constraints for South Korea's global positioning. Progressive politicians have consequently sought to develop new rationales for engagement with North Korea that emphasize practical security benefits and economic opportunities in tandem with more abstract appeals to ethnic solidarity.[51] In addition, civic-based rationales—highlighting peace dividends, economic integration potential, and South Korea's enhanced global status—are increasingly shaping the strategic logic of unification discourse.[52]

As will be discussed further below, the evolving national identity among younger Koreans has in tandem transformed attitudes toward the United States and China. Unlike previous generations, whose anti-American sentiment often reflected opposition to U.S. support for authoritarian regimes and perceived infringements on national autonomy, younger Koreans evaluate international relationships through the lens of South Korea's status as a global economic and cultural power. They maintain generally favorable views of the United States as a partner that respects South Korea's achievements while expressing greater wariness toward China's economic coercion and authoritarian governance.

Political Economy and Domestic Inequality

The evolution of South Korea's progressive foreign policy has been deeply shaped by shifting domestic economic conditions. Rising inequality, youth unemployment, and housing affordability crises have sharpened public demands for a foreign policy that prioritizes economic justice alongside security and diplomacy. Progressive identity remains anchored in the *minjung* (common people) movements of the democratization era, which opposed both political authoritarianism and economic exploitation.[53] These historical roots continue to inform progressive engagement with international affairs, linking democratization at home to distributive fairness abroad.

Although South Korea achieved rapid economic growth and relative equity during the developmental state period, the transition to neoliberal globalization since the late 1990s introduced new forms of socioeconomic stratification.[54] As inequality has worsened since the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the 2008 Great Recession, skepticism toward globalization and elite-driven growth strategies has intensified.[55] Public opinion data show that South Koreans with progressive political views are significantly more likely to perceive economic inequality as a serious national problem, a pattern especially pronounced among younger generations.[56] This economic discontent increasingly frames foreign policy debates around material well-being and equitable opportunity rather than abstract security imperatives.[57]

Progressive approaches to trade and economic integration have similarly evolved. Although both progressive and conservative administrations have pursued free trade agreements, progressive governments have increasingly emphasized labor protections, environmental standards, and inclusive growth strategies. Reflecting broader skepticism toward neoliberal globalization among progressive policymakers, trade policies under progressive administrations have been framed as efforts to mitigate the domestic social costs of liberalization.[58]

Public opinion research confirms that while free trade still garners general support, significant anxiety persists among younger and progressive voters about the impact of globalization on employment, equity, and domestic industrial competitiveness. These attitudes reflect broader public skepticism about whether globalization serves the interests of ordinary citizens, rather than elites, a skepticism that intensified after the 1997 and 2008 economic crises.[59] As economic insecurity has deepened, progressive skepticism toward unregulated globalization has created new challenges for alliance economic cooperation, particularly in areas such as supply chain realignment, digital trade standards, and industrial policy coordination.

The progressive approach to South Korean foreign policy has also drawn from concerns about inequality and social welfare. This shift reflects broader national trends in which defense spending as a percentage of GDP has steadily declined since the 1980s, even as absolute spending has increased.[60] Progressive politicians have capitalized on this trend, arguing that the opportunity cost of excessive military expenditures directly impacts domestic priorities like social welfare, research, and development—areas that younger voters prioritize. This perspective resonates strongly with younger generations of Koreans, who consistently demonstrate greater concern about economic inequality than traditional security threats.

Beyond the shifting international landscape, internal transformations in South Korean society have profoundly reshaped progressive foreign policy thinking. Political economy considerations—specifically the growing salience of inequality, economic insecurity as experienced by the large middle class, and distributive justice—have emerged as critical factors that differentiate today's progressive approach from its predecessors. These sociological shifts not only influence the strategic outlook of progressive policymakers, but also fundamentally reframe the foreign policy agenda itself: prioritizing economic security, technological sovereignty, and equitable burden-sharing alongside traditional goals of peace and stability.

Digital Polarization and Political Fragmentation

While generational and economic shifts have introduced more pragmatic orientations into South Korean foreign policy preferences, these developments coexist with an increasingly polarized media and political environment. This polarization, driven by the dynamics of digital media, presents a growing challenge to the implementation of coherent and sustained policy.

Public opinion research confirms that, despite sensational headlines and a fractious online discourse, the majority of South Koreans maintain centrist positions on foreign policy. Longitudinal survey data shows that while partisan divisions have widened somewhat since the 2010s, a significant plurality of voters continues to self-identify near the ideological center, with relatively moderate views on issues such as the U.S.-ROK alliance and engagement with North Korea.[61] Even within ideological camps, anti-American sentiments coexist with broad support for the alliance, and progressive voters often adopt a pragmatic approach that blends engagement with North Korea and a realistic appraisal of security threats.[62]

Additional public opinion research confirms that attitudes toward alliance management, national defense, and North Korean policy remain broadly clustered around moderate preferences, rather than fragmenting into ideologically extreme camps.[63]

At the same time, political divisions are deepening among politically mobilized segments of the electorate. Digital spaces amplify perceptions of polarization, and empirical research shows that partisan identifiers—voters closely aligned with either major party—have grown increasingly polarized in both ideology and affective attitudes toward the opposition, particularly since 2018. Although the broader electorate remains moderate, these politically active groups—disproportionately influential in shaping digital discourse—exhibit sharper divides on issues ranging from foreign policy to economic redistribution. Together, these trends have widened the gap between a centrist offline majority and the polarized narratives that dominate online spaces and elite-driven debates.[64]

In the algorithmic landscape of YouTube and Facebook, extreme narratives now exert disproportionate influence over political discourse and policymaking. Many users perceive social media sources as more trustworthy than traditional media outlets, eroding the gatekeeping role of professional journalism.[65] YouTube has become a dominant platform for political information and mobilization in South Korea, with 51 percent of respondents citing it as a primary news source—well above the global average of 22 percent.[66] Other research also finds that online political spaces in South Korea increasingly function as polarization-reinforcing environments, where selective exposure to like-minded information hardens existing attitudes rather than encouraging deliberation or tolerance.[67] Additional studies specifically examining YouTube consumption patterns find that viewers who exclusively subscribe to ideologically aligned political channels on YouTube not only perceive the opposing party as more extreme but also exhibit higher levels of emotional hostility toward political opponents, reinforcing both ideological and affective polarization.[68]

Furthermore, political discourse on South Korean social media is not representative of the general public: politically active, ideologically committed users are overrepresented in content production and circulation.[69] Conservatives are disproportionately more active than moderates or progressives in posting, expressing, and sharing political opinions on social media platforms, reinforcing the overrepresentation of partisan voices in the digital political sphere.[70] Moreover, exposure to political information on digital platforms tends to reinforce Koreans' preexisting views rather than encourage meaningful deliberation, particularly among already polarized users.[71] As a result, digital platforms both magnify partisan divides and shape the narratives that define public opinion and policymaking.

The concrete impacts of digital polarization on foreign policy decisionmaking are increasingly evident. During the 2022 presidential campaign, both Lee Jae-myung and Yoon Suk Yeol (2022 –2025) relied heavily on digital media to engage in personalized attacks, bypassing substantive discussions of international affairs. The campaign quickly devolved into a mudslinging contest that diverted public attention from critical foreign policy challenges.[72] Similarly, the debate over the THAAD missile defense system became highly polarized in

digital spaces: progressive networks circulated pro-China and anti-American narratives, while conservative platforms amplified anti-China, security-first messaging that framed THAAD as essential for South Korea's defense.[73] These polarized framings crowded out grounded debate over the complex security and economic tradeoffs involved, further constraining the space for measured policymaking.

The structure of digital media has created a political environment in which the loudest voices—often detached from policy detail or institutional responsibility—dominate public discourse. Progressive politicians, in particular, face a difficult balancing act: appealing to younger and more digitally native voters while resisting entanglement with fringe narratives that erode institutional credibility. In this context, even centrist proposals on alliance cost-sharing, North Korea deterrence, or trilateral cooperation with Japan are increasingly vulnerable to distortion and ideological attack online.

Digital polarization has also deepened broader sociopolitical divides—particularly along the lines of gender, class, and generation—that are reshaping the foundations of the progressive coalition. Gender politics, in particular, has emerged as a volatile axis of division. Anti-feminist mobilization on platforms like YouTube has reshaped conservative strategies and fueled cross-cutting tensions among younger voters, especially men in their twenties and thirties.[74] These dynamics complicate efforts to build a cohesive progressive platform capable of integrating foreign policy priorities with broader agendas of social equity and economic justice. As digital platforms reward polarizing content over consensus-building narratives, sustaining broad-based political coalitions—and by extension, coherent policy frameworks—becomes even more challenging.

The broader consequence is a growing disjuncture between South Korea's aspirational foreign policy narratives and the domestic political conditions that undermine consistent execution. As polarization erodes institutional trust and shortens the time horizons of political leadership, the capacity to sustain multilateral commitments, alliance recalibrations, or values-based diplomacy becomes increasingly precarious. This dynamic was starkly illustrated during the December 2024 constitutional crisis, when Yoon's declaration of martial law and subsequent impeachment revealed how severely polarization had undermined democratic institutions and governance capacity.[75]

These three domestic drivers—generational identity shifts, economic inequality concerns, and digital polarization—are collectively reshaping the foundations of progressive foreign policy thinking. They are pushing progressive policymakers toward more pragmatic, interest-based approaches while simultaneously creating new obstacles to policy coherence and implementation. Together with the structural constraints examined in the previous section, they explain why South Korea's progressive foreign policy today is evolving beyond traditional ideological frameworks toward a more adaptive, if sometimes internally contradictory, approach that acknowledges both external security imperatives and evolving domestic priorities.

Today's Evolution of Progressive Foreign Policy Domains

The changing international environment and evolving domestic context have profoundly reshaped progressive approaches to specific bilateral relationships. This section examines how progressive foreign policy is evolving across three key domains: North Korea, the United States, and Japan. South Korean foreign policy has historically been organized around specific bilateral relationships, with the North Korea relationship serving as the fulcrum that shapes approaches to other powers. Moreover, the progressive-conservative divide has traditionally manifested most clearly in divergent approaches to specific countries—particularly North Korea and the United States. The evolution of progressive thinking is most visible when tracing how approaches to specific bilateral relationships, rather than functional issue areas, have changed in response to both structural constraints and domestic shifts.

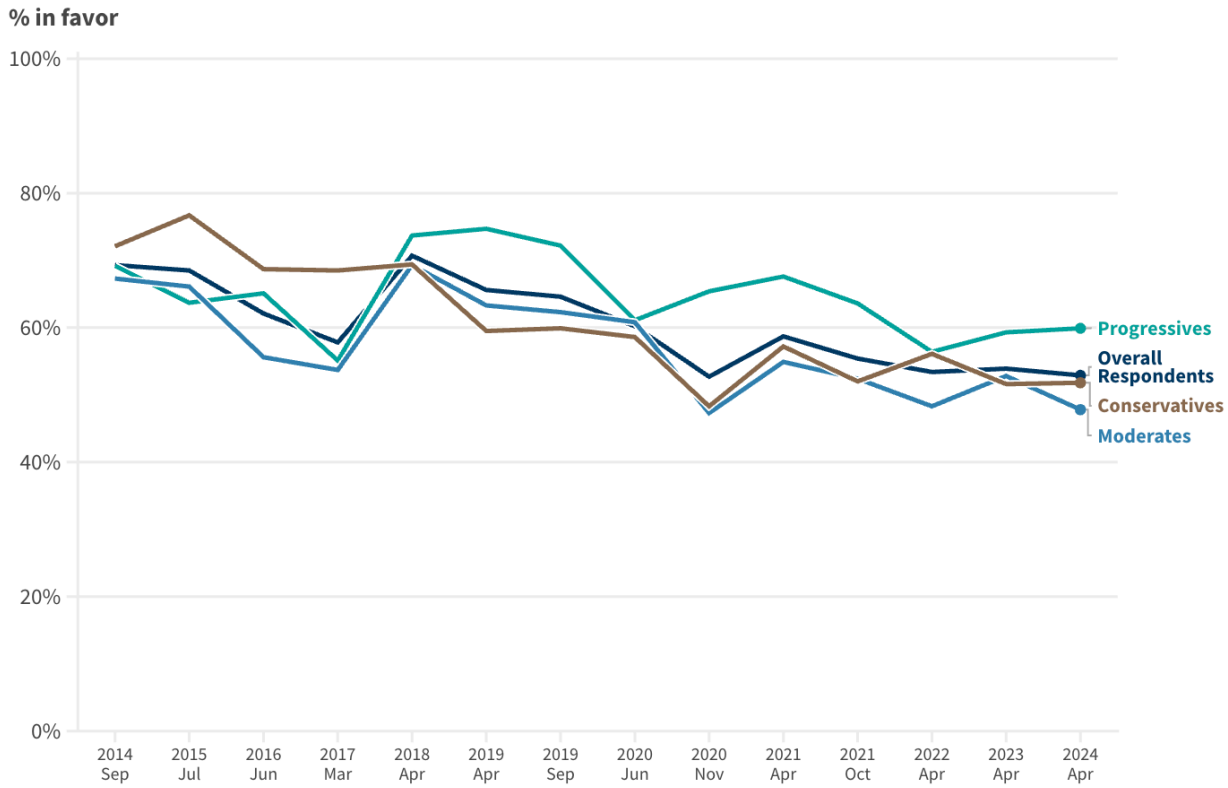
Reframing North Korea Policy

Overall, contemporary progressive North Korea policy reflects a significant strategic recalibration: engagement remains a goal, but it is now subordinate to managing military risks, safeguarding South Korea's security, and promoting stable coexistence rather than pursuing rapid unification. This pragmatic shift aligns not only with the transformed regional security environment but also with evolving domestic expectations, particularly among younger Koreans who prioritize peace, prosperity, and South Korea's independent global status over nostalgic visions of ethnic reunification.

Externally, North Korea's nuclear advancement has transformed it from a potential partner in gradual reconciliation to a mature nuclear power, complicating engagement strategies. Domestically, younger generations' pride in the Republic of Korea as a sovereign, successful, and modern state now plays a greater role than pan-Korean ethnic solidarity in shaping foreign policy preferences. This has challenged the ethnonational solidarity that once underpinned progressive policy frameworks. In this environment, progressives are not abandoning engagement altogether, but recalibrating their approach toward a more pragmatic, security-conscious strategy centered on peaceful coexistence rather than immediate unification.

During the early 2000s, progressive visions of inter-Korean relations were anchored in the Sunshine Policy's emphasis on economic cooperation and reconciliation through shared ethnic identity. However, North Korea's 2024 constitutional revision—formally renouncing peaceful unification and designating South Korea a "principal enemy"—marked a decisive break with the foundational assumptions of this approach. Recent public opinion data reinforces this trend: only 22.4 percent of Koreans in their twenties now consider unification necessary, compared to 49 percent of those over sixty.[76]

Figure 1. Changes in Public Opinion on the Necessity of Unification



Source: Sangsin Lee et al., "KINU Tongiluisik Chosa 2024: Bukhan Ui 2gukgaron Gwa Tongilinsik / Miguk Daetongnyeong Seongeo Jeonmang Gwa Hanmi Gwangye [KINU Unification Perceptions Survey 2024: North Korea's Two-State Theory and Unification Perceptions / U.S. Presidential Election Outlook and U.S.-ROK Relations]" (Seoul: Korean Institute of National Unification, 2024), 16 (Fig. II-1), https://www.kinu.or.kr/library/10150/contents/6863412.

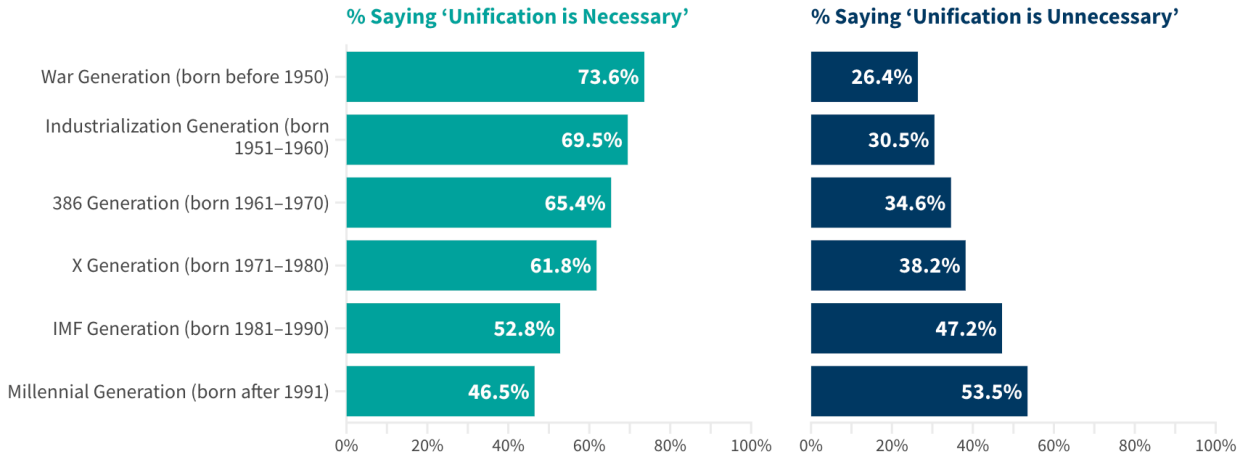
Today's progressive strategy increasingly emphasizes phased, conditional engagement tied to security risk management. While humanitarian assistance, crisis communication channels, and dialogue initiatives remain important pillars, large-scale economic projects like the Kaesong Industrial Complex or Mount Kumgang tourism are now treated as contingent tools rather than essential pathways to reconciliation. Progressives broadly recognize that economic cooperation must be carefully structured to avoid strengthening Pyongyang's nuclear and military capacities.

At the institutional level, progressive administrations have already begun adapting to this reality. The Moon Jae-in government pursued a dual-track strategy: maintaining diplomatic overtures toward North Korea while simultaneously increasing South Korea's independent deterrence capabilities, expanding defense budgets, and investing in indigenous missile programs. This approach reflected a pragmatic recognition that engagement could no longer proceed on assumptions of North Korean good faith or peaceful intent.

These shifts in national identity have altered the logic underpinning public support for unification, moving younger South Koreans toward a more interest-based and conditional approach to inter-Korean relations. According to the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, in 2023 only 2.4 percent of South Koreans aged 19–29 and 3 percent of those aged 30–39 favored unification "at any cost," while 41.3 percent and 32.4 percent, respectively, preferred maintaining the current division—a marked increase from 27.4 percent and 30 percent in 2019. Expectations for unification have also dimmed: the proportion of South Koreans who believe unification is "impossible" rose to a record 30.2 percent in 2023, compared to just 13.3 percent in 2007.[77]

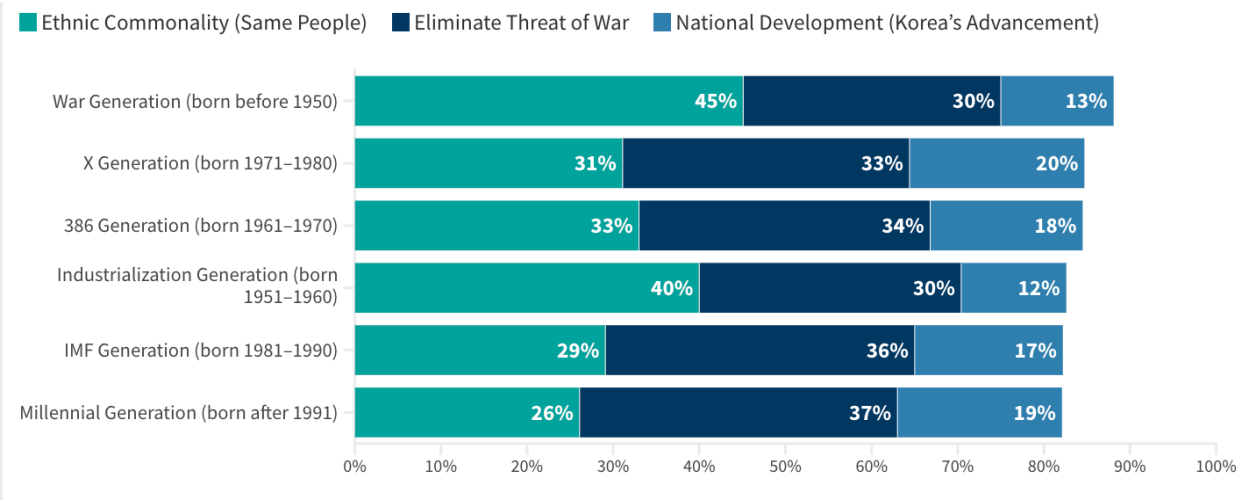
Generational differences in the perceived necessity of unification are also striking. The (KINU) National Unification 2024 survey finds that while 73.6 percent of the "War Generation" (those born before the Korean War broke out in 1950) believe unification is necessary, only 46.5 percent of millennials (born after 1991) share that view, with 53.5 percent believing unification is unnecessary.[78] Notably, motivations for unification have shifted across generations: while older South Koreans continue to prioritize ethnic commonality as the principal reason for unification, younger cohorts increasingly cite eliminating the threat of war as their top concern, with a growing secondary emphasis on advancing South Korea's development and global standing.[79]

Figure 2. Support for Unification by Generation



Source: Sangsin Lee et al., "KINU Tongiluisik Chosa 2024: Bukhan Ui 2gukgaron Gwa Tongilinsik / Miguk Daetongnyeong Seongeo Jeonmang Gwa Hanmi Gwangye [KINU Unification Perceptions Survey 2024: North Korea's Two-State Theory and Unification Perceptions / U.S. Presidential Election Outlook and U.S.-ROK Relations]" (Seoul: Korean Institute of National Unification, 2024), 17 (Fig. II-2), https://www.kinu.or.kr/library/10150/contents/6863412.

Figure 3. Reasons for Supporting Unification by Generation



Note: Rows may not add up to 100% as respondents were not required to check an answer.

Source: Sangsin Lee et al., "KINU Tongiluisik Chosa 2024: Bukhan Ui 2gukgaron Gwa Tongilinsik / Miguk Daetong-nyeong Seongeo Jeonmang Gwa Hanmi Gwangye [KINU Unification Perceptions Survey 2024: North Korea's Two-State Theory and Unification Perceptions / U.S. Presidential Election Outlook and U.S.-ROK Relations]" (Seoul: Korean Institute of National Unification, 2024), 17 (Fig. II-2), https://www.kinu.or.kr/library/10150/contents/6863412.

The evolution is also visible in emerging debates among progressive foreign policy thinkers. Whereas earlier progressive discourse often framed nuclear disarmament as a precondition for peace, some younger progressives now advocate for nuclear hedging—pursuing a phased pathway of enrichment toward potential armament—a previously taboo subject.[80] Although still a minority position, this development illustrates the growing tension between the traditional ideals of denuclearization and the rising desire for autonomous security solutions.

Alliance Pragmatism and the United States

The evolution of South Korea's progressive foreign policy toward the United States reflects a broader recalibration away from ideological contestation toward pragmatic adaptation. As outlined above, the intensification of U.S.-China strategic competition and the collapse of South Korea's traditional hedging space have narrowed strategic options across the political spectrum. In this context, progressives have increasingly framed the alliance not as an ideological liability but as a pragmatic platform for safeguarding South Korea's security, prosperity, and global influence.

Historically, the U.S.-ROK alliance has been a topic of contention for South Korean progressives. "Anti-Americanism" (*banmijuui*) became particularly salient during the Cold War, rooted in opposition to U.S. support for South Korea's authoritarian regimes and perceived

infringements on Korean sovereignty. Events such as the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, where American forces were seen as complicit in government repression, deeply entrenched these grievances. Even as democratization progressed, anti-American sentiment resurfaced in the early 2000s amid the 2002 candlelight vigils protesting the deaths of two schoolgirls struck by a U.S. military vehicle.

Yet even during this period of heightened emotion, progressive administrations emphasized recalibration rather than rupture. Roh Moo-hyun sought a more reciprocal alliance structure, balancing calls for greater autonomy with recognition of the security value of the relationship. Moon Jae-in continued this pragmatic recalibration, expanding South Korea's contributions to global governance and seeking a broader definition of alliance cooperation in domains like public health, climate change, and sustainable development.

Today, progressive approaches to the U.S.-ROK alliance are increasingly driven by strategic calculation rather than ideological opposition. South Koreans broadly view the United States favorably, grounded not only in shared security interests but also in long-standing economic ties and social links fostered through decades of Korean American migration. In April 2024, the United States maintained the highest general favorability score among major powers (6.42 out of 10), compared to China's much lower rating of 3.25.[81] Furthermore, about 75 percent of South Koreans identified the United States as their preferred future partner over China amid ongoing U.S.-China rivalry.[82] Notably, in 2018 South Korean public perceptions of the U.S. as their most important economic partner had overtaken views of China for the first time—52.6 percent versus 33.9 percent—and the U.S. has maintained that lead ever since.[83]

At the same time, domestic political economy concerns have profoundly reshaped progressive approaches to alliance burden-sharing and defense spending. During the Moon Jae-in administration, renegotiation of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) was approached cautiously, balancing the need to maintain export opportunities with political demands to protect vulnerable sectors such as agriculture and automobiles.[84]

Perhaps most significantly, debates over alliance burden-sharing are entangled with domestic economic justice concerns. Korea's defense budget is 2.8 percent of its GDP,[85] and its total defense expenditures rank among the highest in the world.[86] Progressive administrations have resisted American demands for higher defense spending, arguing that rising defense costs constrain resources needed for addressing inequality and expanding social welfare.[87] During negotiations over the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) in 2020, progressive politicians and civic groups framed excessive U.S. cost-sharing demands as unfair burdens on Korean taxpayers, particularly amid worsening economic insecurity.[88] Public protests in late 2019 reflected widespread sentiment that defense costs should not be increased at the expense of domestic welfare priorities, with overwhelming opposition to sharp cost hikes.[89] Public opposition to dramatic increases in defense costs, particularly during the first Trump administration, reflected a broader national anxiety that military expenditures were crowding out investments in social welfare, research, and development.

Nevertheless, the structural asymmetry of the alliance persists.[90] Washington's evolving expectations for allies—as global partners across military, technological, and industrial domains—create both opportunities and risks for South Korean progressives. On the one hand, active participation in initiatives like shipbuilding or semiconductor supply chain realignment offers Korea new avenues for global leadership. On the other, these pressures constrain Seoul's ability to exercise independent diplomacy, particularly amid heightened Sino-American rivalry. Progressive administrations have often lacked durable institutional mechanisms to shape the alliance beyond reactive positioning, complicating efforts to translate strategic aspirations into lasting policy frameworks.

Despite these challenges, what has emerged is not a rupture in progressive alliance thinking but a strategic recalibration: an effort to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance as a foundation for South Korea's security and prosperity, while simultaneously seeking greater autonomy, diversification, and fairness within the relationship. Ultimately, the progressive stance toward the United States is no longer defined by simple binaries of loyalty or resistance. Instead, it reflects the adaptive pressures of structural realignment, domestic generational transition, and rising demands for economic equity. This pragmatism is likely to shape not only the future of progressive foreign policy but also the contours of the U.S.-ROK alliance in an era of intensifying global competition.

Recalibrating Relations with Japan

Among the three major bilateral relationships shaping South Korean foreign policy, none carries more historical baggage—or more political volatility—than that with Japan. For progressives, Japan policy has long been a moral litmus test, with unresolved historical issues such as forced labor and comfort women defining the tone of bilateral engagement. But this framing, while politically powerful, is also being reshaped by generational change, alliance politics, and shifting regional dynamics.

Recent regional shifts, however, have narrowed South Korea's options. Japan's growing defense capabilities, rising tensions between the United States and China, and North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal have created strong incentives for closer U.S.-Japan-ROK cooperation. As the strategic landscape changes, progressive leaders are facing increased pressure to find new ways to engage Japan without abandoning core historical concerns.

At the same time, political divisions inside South Korea have made recalibration difficult. During the Moon Jae-in administration, progressive leaders prioritized historical justice initiatives over security ties, suspending the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and overturning past settlement efforts. Conservative critics argue that these moves weakened South Korea's position in regional security discussions and were driven more by partisan politics than by public demand.[91]

Recent polling highlights the challenges facing progressive policymakers. In 2024, only 28.3 percent of DP supporters expressed favorable views of Japan, compared to 57.9 percent of People Power Party supporters. Just 18 percent of progressives viewed the Yoon administration's efforts to improve ties with Japan positively, versus 66.6 percent of conservatives. Trust in Japan remains sharply divided as well, with only 19.5 percent of DP supporters expressing trust, compared to 53.8 percent among conservatives.[92] This wide partisan gap limits how far progressive leaders can move, even when strategic needs call for closer cooperation.

Generational change has opened limited space for a more pragmatic approach. Younger South Koreans, including younger progressives, are more open to cultural and economic exchanges with Japan. Many prioritize South Korea's global standing and security needs over historical issues. Yet this trend coexists with deep skepticism about Japan's intentions, especially among middle-aged Koreans who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s.[93]

Polarization also plays a major role. Political leaders on both sides of the aisle have increasingly framed Japan-related issues—such as the Fukushima water release and the UNESCO designation of the Sado Mine[94]—as partisan contests between "pro-Japan" and "anti-Japan" camps. This framing deepens public divisions and raises the political costs of diplomatic flexibility.[95] Social media amplifies these divides, making it even harder for progressive leaders to shift policy without risking political backlash.

Despite these constraints, some progressives are moving toward a "two-track" approach: defending historical justice issues while selectively expanding cooperation with Japan on economic security, supply chain resilience, and regional stability. The Moon administration's decision to ultimately preserve GSOMIA, despite earlier hardline positions, reflected an early step in this direction. More recent discussions among progressive leaders focus on engaging Japan on areas like clean energy, technology, and regional crisis management—less politically sensitive fields that avoid direct clashes over history.

Still, these shifts remain fragile. Historical memory is a powerful force in South Korean politics, reinforced by civic groups, the media, and activist networks. Political institutions and public debates continue to anchor South Korean national identity closely to unresolved history with Japan.[96] Even when strategic logic favors closer ties, progressive leaders must balance external needs with internal political realities.

In short, while progressive foreign policy toward Japan is adjusting under external pressure, it remains shaped by domestic divisions, historical grievances, and political polarization. Sustaining progress will require careful diplomacy and a clear understanding of South Korea's internal political landscape.

Taken together, these evolving approaches to North Korea, the United States, and Japan reveal how South Korea's progressive foreign policy tradition is being reshaped by changing structural and domestic conditions. Engagement idealism no longer serves as the dominant anchor, but the emerging orientation remains incomplete and contested. Rather than being

firmly moored to a new doctrine, progressive strategies today reflect a pragmatic, sometimes ad hoc adaptation to external constraints and shifting public expectations. Deep domestic polarization, unresolved debates over national identity, and generational divides continue to complicate the search for a coherent strategic vision. The Democratic Party faces a critical test in the 2025 presidential election: whether it can articulate a foreign policy agenda that reconciles these competing pressures and resonates with an electorate increasingly focused on economic security, national autonomy, and cautious regional engagement. The following section examines how Lee Jae-myung and the progressive camp are attempting to navigate this volatile political landscape.

The 2025 Election and the Unfinished Recalibration of Korean Progressivism

The recalibration of South Korea's progressive foreign policy across its core bilateral relationships sets the stage for a consequential 2025 presidential election. Amid intensifying great-power competition and domestic political fragmentation, progressive leaders no longer operate in an environment where ideological coherence or historical memory alone suffice. Instead, they must navigate a transformed landscape of economic insecurity, national security anxieties, and generational realignment. Lee Jae-myung's candidacy crystallizes these pressures: he embodies both the pragmatic adaptations underway and the growing disjuncture between the progressive tradition's institutional roots and its uncertain future trajectory.

Lee's rise reflects the erosion of traditional progressive infrastructure rather than its revitalization. Following his razor-thin loss to Yoon Suk Yeol in 2022, Lee rapidly consolidated control of the DP, sidelining Moon Jae-in–aligned factions and positioning loyalists in key posts.[97] Yet this consolidation is likely tactical, not ideological: it reveals a party operating less as a coherent movement and more as a vehicle for personalistic mobilization. Lee's self-styling as a centrist pragmatist—recasting the party as a "growth-oriented, centrist-conservative" coalition[98]—epitomizes his broader "right-clicking" (u-keullik) strategy, aimed at courting middle-class and moderate voters disillusioned with both extremes.[99]

Nowhere is this recalibration clearer than in Lee's approach to the U.S.-ROK alliance. Once a critic of American dominance, Lee has reframed the alliance as a strategic asset for South Korea's security and economic resilience. He highlights opportunities for industrial cooperation in shipbuilding and defense, areas where South Korea retains competitive advantages vis-à-vis China.[100] "We have a special relationship with the United States as allies, and we must make good use of it," Lee said during an appearance on popular economics-focused YouTube channel Sampro TV in 2025, going on to say, "But it is not right to be dragged along unilaterally."[101] At the same time, he openly admires aspects of Trump-era economic nationalism, advocating for a more assertive, interest-centered negotiation posture with

Washington.[102] In February, Lee appointed Kim Hyun-jong—veteran trade negotiator and architect of the KORUS FTA—as a key adviser,[103] underscoring his intent to approach alliance management through a framework of strategic economic statecraft rather than ideological loyalty per se.

This politicking, however, is not costless. Lee's rhetoric of sovereignty and economic justice resonates domestically but risks reviving Washington's anxieties about Korean reliability amid heightened Sino-American tensions. His call for "half-price" defense burden-sharing reflects deeper economic grievances but also signals potential turbulence in future alliance management.[104]

On North Korea, Lee embraces dialogue and engagement, but with tempered expectations. He has urged Kim Jong Un to halt provocations while emphasizing the need for strong deterrence and independent agency in any renewed U.S.–North Korea negotiations.[105] His endorsement of Trump's diplomacy—even suggesting Trump for a Nobel Peace Prize in an interview with the Washington Post in February 2025—signals a break from earlier progressive frameworks that sought to mediate between Washington and Pyongyang rather than align with American overtures.[106] Lee's approach recognizes the strategic logic of peaceful coexistence, but its durability remains uncertain amid continued North Korean intransigence and shifting U.S. priorities.

On China, Lee is walking a fine line. In recent months, he has avoided portraying China as an adversary, opting instead for a strategy of calibrated economic engagement while strengthening U.S. and trilateral security cooperation. Regarding Sino-U.S. relations, Lee has reassured the United States that it need not worry about the U.S.-ROK alliance, arguing that the DP stands to lose more from deteriorating ties with the United States than from its relationship with China.[107] However, his earlier comments—particularly his downplaying of the THAAD issue and his suggestion that South Korea should simply "say xie xie" to both China and Taiwan—have sparked skepticism, especially among conservative and centrist voters.[108]

At the domestic policy nexus, Lee's emphasis on economic revitalization over military buildup captures the recalibration of progressive priorities. His "Basic Society" framework, emphasizing investment in infrastructure and future industries like artificial intelligence and defense tech, reflects a view that economic growth and security are mutually reinforcing, not competing imperatives.[109] His proposals to redirect defense funds toward national innovation—while controversial—reflect growing public fatigue with security expenditures perceived as benefiting elite interests rather than ordinary citizens.

Lee Jae-myung's appeal to the center is reflected in regional polling shifts since early 2025, particularly in traditionally conservative areas like Daegu and North Gyeongsang, where his centrist economic rhetoric, including pledges like the Korea Composite Stock Price Index (KOSPI) 5000 mark, has won over right-leaning voters.[110] However, this shift has disappointed some traditional progressive voters, especially in the DP's Honam region stronghold,

where a brief dip in support occurred after Lee backtracked on key foreign policy commitments, such as North Korean engagement, Operations Control (OPCON) transfer,[111] and the THAAD deployment. These fluctuations highlight the delicate balance Lee must strike between appealing to center-right voters while retaining his core progressive base.[112]

Yet Lee's flexibility also forebodes a core tension. His ability to navigate shifting domestic and international currents may enhance short-term adaptability, but it risks undercutting the strategic consistency necessary for stable foreign policy execution. Without a deep-rooted ideological or institutional foreign policy tradition to anchor him, Lee's pragmatism may veer into tactical elasticity, undermining predictability for both domestic constituencies and international partners.

For Washington, Lee's candidacy raises strategic uncertainties but also new opportunities. A Lee administration would likely prioritize alliance maintenance, industrial cooperation, and economic statecraft—but it would also be less deferential, more transactional, and more attuned to domestic distributional politics. Managing the alliance in this context will require greater U.S. sensitivity to Korean economic priorities and a recalibration of expectations around defense cost-sharing, supply chain integration, and trilateral coordination with Japan.

Ultimately, Lee Jae-myung represents not merely a continuation or break with South Korea's progressive foreign policy tradition, but a reflection of its evolution: pragmatic, post-ideological, responsive to structural constraints yet vulnerable to volatility. The 2025 election will test whether this new orientation can deliver a coherent strategic vision—or whether progressive foreign policy will fragment further under the weight of unresolved domestic and international contradictions.

Implications for Washington

The 2025 presidential election in South Korea will have far-reaching effects—not only on domestic governance after Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment but also on how the country manages its foreign policy in an era of heightened uncertainty. If Lee Jae-myung wins, he will inherit a political environment shaped more by public mistrust and partisan polarization than by any clear mandate for foreign policy innovation.

As this paper has shown, South Korea's progressive foreign policy traditions are not fixed. They have evolved by balancing democratization-era legacies with emerging challenges: deepening Sino-U.S. competition, North Korea's growing nuclear threat, Japan's military normalization, and domestic political fragmentation. Today, progressive foreign policy is not a unified doctrine but a range of competing approaches, shaped by generational shifts, digital media fragmentation, economic insecurity, and evolving global norms.

Even with a DP victory, any new administration will operate under significant constraints. Persistent conservative opposition, legal controversies surrounding Lee Jae-myung,[113] and

a deeply divided society will continue to limit policymaking. Recent polling shows that over 90 percent of DP supporters approved of Yoon's impeachment, compared with just 6 percent of PPP supporters. Yet the divide is not limited to ideological extremes: a substantial 67 percent of centrists also supported it, indicating that dissatisfaction with Yoon extended beyond the traditional progressive base.[114] Mass mobilizations across Korea's ideological camps suggest that even a decisive electoral outcome will not easily repair these divisions.

These domestic dynamics will directly shape South Korea's foreign policy and its alliance management with the United States. As seen in past controversies over the THAAD missile defense deployment and engagement with North Korea, foreign policy decisions increasingly reflect partisan competition rather than bipartisan strategic consensus. Managing the U.S.-ROK alliance in this context will require greater sensitivity to South Korean domestic politics than in previous eras.

For U.S. policymakers, the opportunity lies in recognizing that a progressive-led South Korea under Lee Jae-myung could become an even more valuable partner in the evolving Sino-U.S. competition. Lee's emphasis on economic security, technological resilience, and national-interest-driven diplomacy does not represent a rejection of the alliance. Rather, it reflects a strategic adaptation to internal and external pressures. As the second Trump administration adopts an extractive approach toward even its most stalwart allies,[115] South Korea should prioritize supply-chain security, deepen energy cooperation, bolster its defense posture, and leverage its middle-power agency through nimble, issue-specific bilateral engagement—ensuring responsiveness to the region's immediate geoeconomic and geopolitical imperatives.

In this context, relations with Japan will remain a sensitive but critical dimension. Progressive administrations are likely to approach trilateral cooperation pragmatically but cautiously, given strong public sensitivities over historical issues. Notably, Lee has signaled that he does not intend to dismantle the trilateral gains made under the Yoon and Biden administrations, suggesting openness to continuity if it aligns with South Korea's national interests. U.S. policy must therefore support incremental, interest-driven cooperation among the three countries—particularly in areas such as critical technology, climate resilience, and regional development—while avoiding actions that risk inflaming nationalist backlash in South Korea.[116]

To maintain a resilient and forward-looking alliance, the United States must also embrace South Korea's evolving pragmatism. The Trump administration will need reliable partners like South Korea to enforce its ultimate goal of a tougher line on China.[117] By backing Seoul's pragmatic shift—focused on concrete, deliverable outcomes in supply-chain security, energy collaboration, and defense cooperation—the United States can extract maximum strategic value while solidifying an alliance built to endure through any post-Trump administration. Treating Korea's evolving pragmatism as an asset rather than a concession will keep the U.S.-ROK partnership strong in this new Cold War and beyond.

More broadly, South Korea exemplifies how democratic pressures, historical memory, and structural change in the strategic environment converge to shape foreign policy. Future South Korean foreign policy will be driven not only by political elites but also by digitally mobilized younger generations who increasingly influence national debates. Ultimately, the most important outcome of the 2025 election will not simply be who wins, but whether South Korea's next leaders can sustain a credible foreign policy vision that bridges domestic divides while positioning the country as an adaptive, constructive middle power in a contested international order.

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Notes

1 This paper uses the term "progressive" to refer to the mainline center-left party in South Korea that has gone through several organizational and name changes since democratization, including iterations such as the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), Uri Party, United New Democratic Party (UNDP), and Democratic United Party (DUP). The current party, known since 2015 as the Democratic Party of Korea (*Deobureo Minjudang*), represents continuity in the progressive tradition despite these shifts.

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