



G7 ATTENDANCE HIGHLIGHTS SOUTH KOREA'S GROWING STATURE

BY JENNIFER AHN

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South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's attendance at the G7 summit May 19-21 in Hiroshima capped almost three months of high-level and unprecedented diplomatic endeavors. As part of its aim to make South Korea a "global pivotal state," the Yoon administration has increased efforts to expand its regional and global stature that reflect Seoul's growing political, economic, and cultural influence.

Since March, the administration has: proposed a compensation plan to address the forced labor issue with Japan; paid a state visit to Japan as the first South Korean president in 12 years; resumed shuttle diplomacy by welcoming Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio to Seoul; concluded a state visit to Washington that involved an address to a joint meeting of Congress; and participated in the G7 meeting (as only the second South Korean president to do so).

South Korea first attended the G7 summit in June 2021 under President Moon Jae-in, following an invitation by then-US President Donald Trump to the 2020 G7 summit (subsequently canceled due to COVID-19). At that time, Trump had also proposed inviting South Korea to join an expanded G10 or G11 group. As the first South Korean president to attend the G7 summit, Moon's participation highlighted a turning point in South Korea's presence on the global stage, as it became the 10th-largest economy that year and emerged as a leading success story during the onset of the pandemic.

Yoon has effectively leveraged South Korea's increasing global influence, as evident during his first G7 summit. On the sidelines of the summit, Yoon held bilateral meetings with the leaders of Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, Comoros, and Ukraine—highlighting both South Korea's expanding international reach and growing demand from allies and partners to see South Korea play a larger role abroad. Yoon, in particular, reinforced Seoul's efforts to align itself alongside the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue to address regional challenges and provide infrastructure and developmental aid by meeting with Quad country leaders. Yoon also participated in a trilateral meeting with US President Biden and Kishida during which the three leaders [agreed](#) to enhance trilateral cooperation to "new heights" in addressing North Korea's growing missile and nuclear threats, economic security, and regional strategic coordination. In his speech to G7 member countries, Yoon emphasized South Korea's continued commitment to upholding the international rule of law and the need to protect freedom and peace in both Ukraine and North Korea.

The most notable takeaways from Yoon's first G7 attendance are the normalization and strengthening of trilateral US-Japan-South Korea cooperation and South Korea's increasing role in international cooperation and development initiatives. Yoon's meeting with Biden and Kishida marked the third trilateral meeting since his inauguration, with a fourth proposed for the summer. Yoon's efforts to improve bilateral relations with Japan have facilitated regular trilateral military exercises in the region, as well as set the foundation for expanding trilateral cooperation to areas beyond the traditional security domain.

Additionally, Yoon's meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the first meeting between the two leaders since the war in Ukraine broke out, reaffirmed South Korea's provision of non-lethal and humanitarian aid and pledged South Korean participation in Ukraine's postwar reconstruction, with Yoon previously [suggesting](#) the possibility of providing lethal aid under certain conditions. Yoon's

commitment to partnerships on global health, international development, and climate change further highlighted South Korea's continuing progress toward expanding its assistance to countries around the world to have a meaningful presence on the global stage.

However, Yoon's diplomatic endeavors have provoked concern from critics who [argue](#) that the Yoon administration's value diplomacy is exacerbating the "China risk" to South Korean national interests and [stress](#) the need for South Korea to quickly restore high-level diplomacy with China to manage such risks. China has already [criticized](#) the G7 summit for manipulating China-related issues and the United States for fomenting divisions among Asian countries by pulling Japan and South Korea into a potential proxy war against China.

In an apparent response to the Yoon administration's G7 participation, China has [reportedly blocked](#) all access within the country to Naver, South Korea's largest search portal, on May 22. Whether China's action is only the beginning of a series of retaliatory measures meant to signal warnings to the Yoon administration or a sign of continued downturn in China-South Korea relations remains to be seen. However, it is clear that the Yoon administration will continue to pursue strengthened alignment and cooperation with the United States in pursuit of its values-based diplomacy and realization of status as a global pivotal state.

The most important task facing the South Korean government in this regard is the need to maintain the domestic support and consensus necessary to continue pursuing Yoon's desired foreign policy agenda. Particularly due to the possibility of Chinese retaliation and the economic risks that accompany a weakened China-South Korea relationship, the Yoon administration should clearly convey the benefits to the South Korean public of greater alignment with the United States (and Japan) and an enhanced South Korean role in the global arena.

Furthermore, South Korea should continue creating and bolstering minilateral partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region so as to expand its foreign policy

influence beyond its immediate neighborhood and gain recognition as a formidable player within the international community. South Korea's recent election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council will further support such efforts. As such, the United States should expand the membership for groupings such as the Quad and G7 and support South Korean inclusion in these expanded forums. Doing so would not only allow South Korea to increase the reach and depth of its global contributions, but the United States would also be strengthening a key member of its network of like-minded partnerships in countering the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.