

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

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Assessing China's Intentions from the Korea-China Summit(January 5, 2026) and South Korea's Responses

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Evaluation of President Lee Jae Myung's State Visit to China and the Korea-China Summit Meeting

President Lee Jae Myung paid a four-day state visit to China from January 4 to 7, 2026. This marked the first visit by a South Korean president to China in six years since December 2019. As the first state diplomatic event of the year, the meeting raised expectations for the restoration of Korea-China relations and the expansion of future bilateral cooperation.

At the Korea-China summit held on January 5, the two sides demonstrated strengthened cooperation across a range of areas, including the economy, climate, and technology. Building on the November 2025 summit, the meeting appeared to lay a foundation for restoring bilateral relations and expanding cooperation.

However, a comparison of the Korean and Chinese official releases reveals that differences persist on key diplomatic and security issues, including North Korea's denuclearization, structures in the West Sea, and the ban on Korean cultural content. While the South Korean government stated that both sides reaffirmed the importance of resuming dialogue with North Korea during this summit, the Chinese press made no reference to the Korean Peninsula. Regarding the West Sea structures and the ban on Korean cultural contents—key bilateral issues—the South Korean government described the discussions as having produced a more advanced level of shared understanding, but whether this will translate into tangible progress remains uncertain.

While the overall direction toward restoring relations with China may be correct, South Korea should recognize these limitations and carefully consider how to pursue cooperation with China in ways that maximize its national interests.

China's Intentions Revealed at the Summit: Strategic Objectives Behind China's Pressure

Compared to the Korea-China summit held in November 2025, President Xi Jinping's remarks at this summit contained China's strategic demands and pressure directed at South Korea. Xi stated that South Korea and China "should stand firmly on the right side of history and make correct strategic choices." China has long portrayed itself as a victor of World War II and emphasized its role as a defender of the postwar international order. This framing reflects Beijing's effort to push back against the United States and Western countries, which view China as a revisionist power and seek to constrain its rise.

Xi has used the phrase "the right side of history" in his May 7, 2025 speech at Russia's Victory Day and his September 3 speech at China's Victory Day. In these contexts, he underscored China's self-image as a guardian of the postwar international order and framed China's path as representing "the right side of history." Within this logic, the United States—which seeks to contain China—and Japan—which China accuses of distorting history—are not on the right side of history. In this sense, Xi's remarks at the summit effectively amount to pressuring South Korea to choose sides and align itself with China.

China's pressure on South Korea to make a choice appears to be motivated by several objectives under the current international environment.

1) Inducing Seoul to respond passively to U.S. demands for increased defense contributions by emphasizing the recovery of Beijing-Seoul relations

The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) released in December 2025 emphasizes collective defense with allies to maintain military superiority in the Taiwan Strait. It explicitly calls on regional allies, including South Korea and Japan, to increase defense spending and strengthen capabilities to deter adversaries and protect areas near China's "First Island Chain." In other words, the second Trump administration is expected to focus on defending the U.S. homeland while demanding expanded roles and contributions from regional allies in containing China.

Considering this, China's pressure on South Korea likely intends to encourage Seoul—while it is seeking to restore relations with Beijing—to respond passively to U.S. demands out of concern for its ties with China. Such an outcome would help ease regional containment pressure on China and create opportunities for Beijing to expand its diplomatic and military

influence.

2) Leveraging historical bonds to counterbalance Korea-Japan cooperation and shake the trust within the trilateral security framework

As tensions between China and Japan intensify over the Taiwan issue, Xi emphasized the shared historical experience of China and South Korea in opposing Japanese militarism. China perceives that historical issues make cooperation between South Korea and Japan difficult. Although South Korea currently prioritizes cooperation with Japan, the possibility that historical issues could undermine bilateral relations remains. When South Korea raises historical issues in ways that appear to echo China's position, or if historical disputes between South Korea and Japan draw attention to Korea-China historical bonds, trust between South Korea and Japan could falter. Even without explicit coordination between South Korea and China against Japan, such dynamics could constrain Korea-Japan cooperation, ultimately weakening trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the United States, and Japan.

3) Isolating Taiwan by ensuring South Korea maintains a principled, non-interventionist stance under the "One China" principle

For Xi Jinping, who is preparing for a fourth term in 2027, the Taiwan issue is not only a core national interest but also a political legacy essential for the stability of his rule. Before he visits China, President Lee Jae Myung stated in a January 2 interview with China Central Television (CCTV), "We respect One China, and peace and stability are important in surrounding issues, including Taiwan," expressing a principled stance on the Taiwan issue.

Japan and Taiwan may interpret South Korea's pursuit of improved relations with China as a signal that Seoul will not actively intervene in the Taiwan issue. In Taiwan's current politically unsettled environment, such perceptions could further weaken the Lai Ching-te administration, thereby working to China's advantage in cross-strait relations.

Policy Recommendations

First, the South Korean government must recognize China's intentions to drive wedges within the ROK-U.S. alliance and ROK-Japan relations, and strengthen strategic communication with the United States, Japan, and other like-minded countries. Even if South Korea advocates pragmatic diplomacy centered on national interests, strengthening cooperation with China risks causing the United States and Japan—which seek to contain China—to harbor doubts and distrust regarding South Korea's diplomacy.

Second, the South Korean government should reassess China's role in North Korea's denuclearization and the Korean Peninsula security. The Lee Jae Myung government is counting on China's role in enhancing the Korean Peninsula security and improving inter-Korean relations. However, considering the current international conditions, it is difficult to

expect China to play a substantive role in denuclearization, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, or improving inter-Korean dialogue. If South Korea clings hastily to restoring relations with China based on such expectations, China's demands to constrain the ROK-U.S. alliance and ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral security cooperation are likely to intensify, potentially undermining these frameworks and harming South Korea's national interests amid an increasingly unstable international environment.

Finally, in its communication with China, the South Korean government must clearly articulate its positions on the ROK-U.S. alliance and ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation. Doing so will help mitigate China's attempts to coax or pressure South Korea, which Beijing may perceive as a weak link within the U.S. alliance network. By strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance and ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation, focusing on countering North Korea's nuclear threats, South Korea should use these frameworks as leverage in managing its relationship with China.

About the Author

Dr. LEE Dong-gyu is a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Lee received his B.A. and M.A. from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and Ph.D. in politics from Tsinghua University in China. His research focuses on Chinese politics and foreign policy, South Korea-China relations, and Northeast Asia security. His recent publications include "The Belt and Road Initiative after COVID-19: Implications of Expanding Health and Digital Silkroads," "Is Political Reform of the Chinese Communist Party Going Back: Changes and Durability of Intra-democracy in the Xi Jinping Era," "Xi Jinping Thought from the Perspective of the Chinese Communist Party's Ideological Strategy," "Development Factors and Specificity of Korea-China Relations in the Cold War Era: 1972-1992," "A Study on the Sinicization of Marxism after Reform and Opening Up," etc.

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