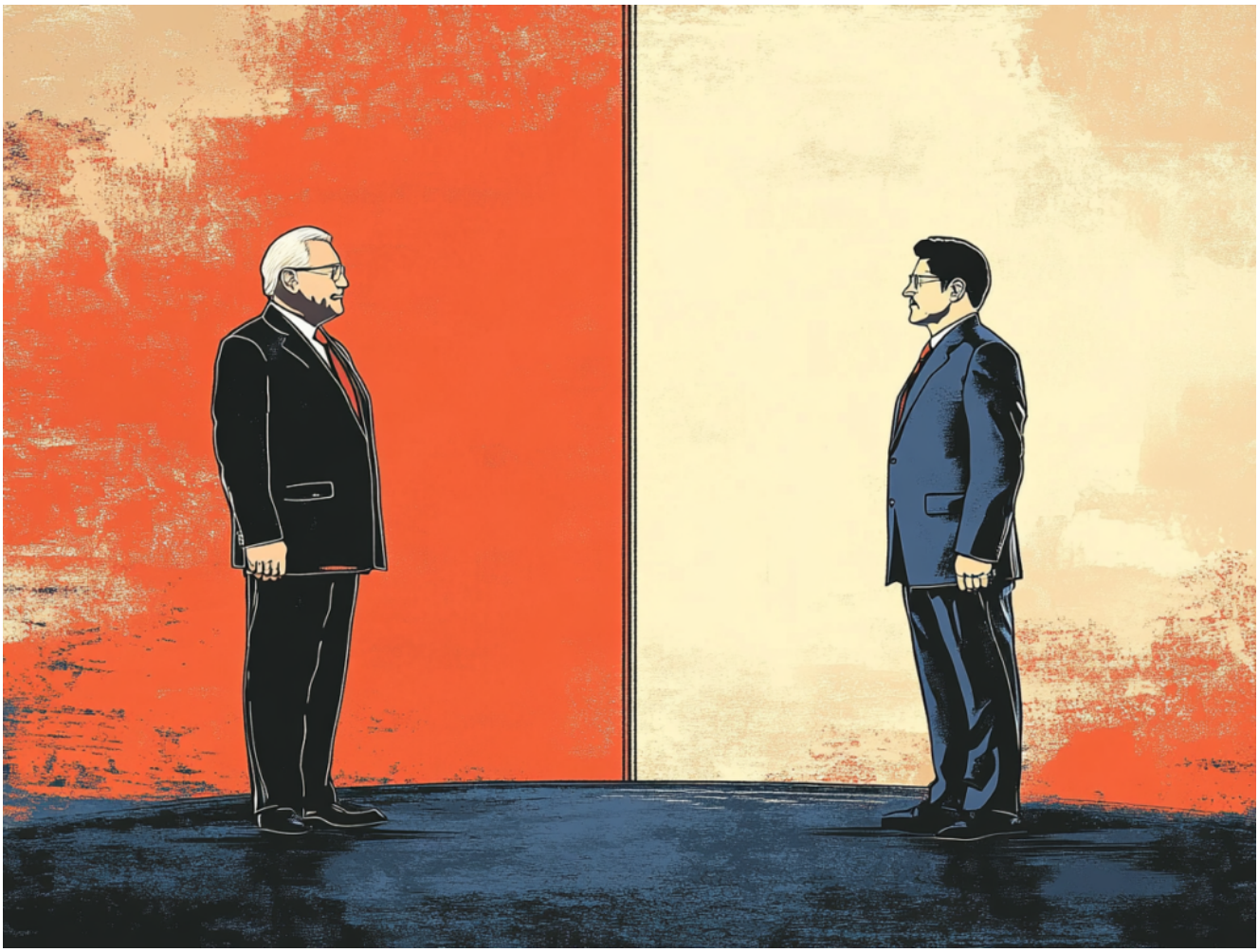
India-South Korea Relations after Yoon’s Impeachment

March 25, 2025



South Korea’s hard-won democracy came under threat when President Yoon declared martial law in 2024. This shocking declaration triggered a series of events, plunging the nation into uncertainty and raising serious questions about its relationship with key partners like India.

How did South Korea descend into political turmoil?

On the night of December 3, 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared emergency martial law to ‘protect’the country from alleged threats of North Korean communists and to

eradicate pro-Pyongyang 'anti-state' forces who, according to him, sought to destabilize his government. By 'anti-state' forces, Yoon was referring to the opposition, which holds a majority in the 300-member parliament. He accused them of repeatedly attempting to paralyze his government, citing 22 impeachment motions filed since May 2022. Just before December 3, the opposition-led National Assembly had cut the government's budget and initiated impeachment proceedings against the chief of the state audit agency and the chief prosecutor.

Scandals and sinking approval

Yoon's public approval rating continued to decline, hovering around 30% for most of his presidency. Since taking office in May 2022, he has been plagued by a series of scandals. For example, during his presidential campaign, he vowed to abolish the Ministry of Gender and Equality, which hurt his standing among women. Additionally, his administration faced severe criticism for mishandling the 2022 Halloween festivities, which led to the deaths of more than 150 people.

Public frustration grew due to soaring housing prices, inflation, a struggling economy, a job crunch, and more. Most importantly, controversies surrounding First Lady Kim Keon-hee—such as allegations of "stock manipulation, plagiarism of research papers, and the acceptance of Dior handbag"—further eroded his legitimacy.

Public discontent became evident when the opposition (Democratic Party) won the National Assembly elections in April 2024, gaining an upper hand in parliament. Meanwhile, Yoon's party (People Power Party or PPP), failed to secure a majority, effectively turning Yoon into a lame duck for the remainder of his presidency. The PPP's defeat in the National Assembly elections created significant obstacles for advancing party-led initiatives, budget proposals, foreign policies, and

domestic reforms.

Repeal of martial law and Yoon's impeachment process

In less than six hours, Yoon was forced to rescind the martial law order. This was made possible by the efforts of South Korean legislators who entered the National Assembly despite the heavy presence of police and armed soldiers. Within an hour of Yoon's announcement, hundreds of protestors and legislators gathered outside the National Assembly, clashing with security forces. Out of 300 parliament members, 190 managed to enter the National Assembly building.

At 12:50 a.m., parliament convened an emergency session and passed a resolution to repeal martial law by 1:00 a.m. In a rare display of complete unity, all 190 lawmakers, including members of both the ruling and opposition parties, voted unanimously to revoke it.

On December 14, the National Assembly voted to impeach President Yoon. Later, On December 27, the Assembly also voted to impeach Prime Minister and acting President Han Duck-soo for obstructing the special investigation and rejecting appointments to the Constitutional Court. Eventually, Yoon was arrested on January 15 on charges of insurrection and attempting to subvert civilian rule.

However, on March 7, the Seoul Central District Court ordered Yoon's release, allowing him to stand trial without being physically detained. The court deemed his arrest illegal, ruling that prosecutors had indicted Yoon beyond the legal detention period.

President Yoon must still face the Constitutional Court, which will determine whether he is formally removed from office. If the court upholds the impeachment, South Korea is expected to undergo a significant power shift.

Shock of martial law and public uproar

A Nation remembers authoritarianism

What happened on December 3 was unprecedented in 45 years. The public, already angered by the Halloween tragedy and controversies surrounding the first lady, erupted in protests following Yoon's declaration of martial law. For many, this shocking move evoked painful memories of South Korea's brutal authoritarian past.

Democracy is a hard-earned and deeply cherished achievement for South Korea. It did not come easily, as many endured bullets, curfews, and repression before the nation's transition to democracy in 1988. This transition was the result of the June Democratic Uprising of 1987, which led to the establishment of a democratic system. In the late 1980s, students, farmers, and intellectuals protested against the military regime, ultimately bringing an end to military dictatorship. As a result, South Korea held its first free and fair presidential election in 1987 and its first parliamentary election in 1988. Before that, the country experienced prolonged military rule and 16 martial law declarations, each severely restricting civil liberties.

The people rise up

This explains why both civilians and legislators rushed to the National Assembly to block the martial law order immediately after its declaration at 10:30 p.m.

Shortly after Yoon declared martial law, helicopters transported heavily armed troops into the National Assembly compound. Soldiers climbed over fences and smashed windows to enter the building, only to be pulled away by protesters. Parliamentary staff barricaded the entrances with piles of sofas, tables, and couches to prevent soldiers from entering.

Meanwhile, An Gwi-ryeong, a spokesperson for the Democratic Party, scuffled with a soldier in an attempt to seize his rifle. Some MPs, including opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, climbed over fences to enter the building and vote on the resolution.

Reactions from neighbors

The political crisis has created doubts among South Korea's neighbors. Japan fears that if Yoon's impeachment is upheld, it could reverse the political momentum in Japan-South Korea relations, which had strengthened under his administration. Meanwhile, speculation has emerged that South Korea may lean toward China if Yoon loses his presidency. The opposition party (DP) is considered to be "very pro-China" and is expected to reorient South Korea's policies in ways that could benefit Beijing.

Under Yoon's leadership, South Korea improved its strained relationship with Japan and also closely cooperated with the US on East Asian security. However, the DP—especially under Lee Jae-myung—has accused Yoon of downplaying Japan's historical war crimes against South Korea and has also criticized his pro-US stance. Lee's ally, National Assembly speaker Woo Won-shik, also met Chinese President Xi Jinping in February 2025, reassuring him that a DP-led government would prioritize stronger relations with China.

Implications for India-South Korea relations

India and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1973. In 2009, they signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which strengthened economic ties by creating a favorable business environment. Today, India-South Korea relations are driven by strong cooperation in the

economic, defense, and technology sectors, with bilateral trade surpassing USD 27 billion in 2023-24. In 2015, both countries upgraded their ties by signing the Special Strategic Partnership, which will mark its 10th anniversary in 2025.

Economic ties

The political crisis has destabilized South Korea's economy, triggering stock market volatility and a depreciation of the South Korean won. Amid political uncertainty, South Korea's major companies have taken matters into their own handsby sending delegations to India. Recently, India has been gaining traction as a key market for South Korea due to ongoing uncertainties with the US and China. Many South Korean companies, particularly in the automobile and electronics sectors, are shifting focus from traditional detitanations such as the US and Europe.

For example, in February 2025, the chairman of LG Group spent four days in India, visiting R&D centers, production plants, and sales sites. Similarly, delegations from Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Motor Group, and Lotte Group have also visited India.

South Korea's industrial strength and innovation capabilities allow it to withstand the political challenges without disrupting trade. Moreover, since South Korea is not among India's top five trading partners, overall trade is unlikely to decline significantly. Thus, despite political uncertainty, trade and investment between India and South Korea are expected to remain stable.

Diplomatic relations and people-to-people connections

Like other nations, India has expressed concerns over the ongoing political crisis in South Korea. On December 6, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, stated that India is closely monitoring developments

in South Korea. He also emphasized India's strong investment-trade linkages and defense cooperation with the country. Later, Jaiswal clarified that there was no need to evacuate Indian nationals, as life remained normal and there were no reports of disruptions affecting travel between the two countries.

In fact, to boost tourism and strengthen people-to-people ties, Thomas Cook India and SOTC (travel agencies) signed a two-year MoU with the Korea Tourism Organization (KTO) in February 2025. The agreement aims to promote South Korea as a prime destination for leisure, business, and tourism among Indians.

Additionally, a bilateral meeting between President Yoon and Prime Minister Modi was expected to advance key initiatives. President Yoon was expected to visit India to finalize discussions on upgrading the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) , which had been stalled for years. However, the leadership vacuum in South Korea has delayed such high-level visits, putting these plans on hold.

Lingering strategic partnership

Although business and investment are likely to continue, a change in leadership may disrupt South Korea's stance on the Indo-Pacific.

Yoon is a strong proponent of deepening India-South Korea ties. In 2022, he introduced Seoul's Indo-Pacific vision, marking a sharp departure from former President Moon Jae-in's strategic ambiguity. Unlike Moon, who avoided upsetting China, Yoon aligned South Korea more closely with the US, India, and Japan. His administration pursued a Global Pivotal State (GPS) strategy, expanding South Korea's role beyond the Korean Peninsula and strengthening ties with India, Japan, the EU, ASEAN, and NATO. As part of this strategy, South Korea was keen to join the Quad and enhancedefense and space

cooperation with India, including the development of additional K9 Vajra howitzers and deeper collaboration in the arms industry. India, as a 'special strategic partner', played a key role in South Korea's GPS vision, sharing common interests in an inclusive Indo-Pacific and regional collaboration.

However, due to the political crisis, South Korea had to cancel the Indo-Pacific High Level Forum that was scheduled for December 13, 2024. The forum was set to include government representatives from 13 countries within and outside the Indo-Pacific region to build a multilateral partnership aimed at countering China.

If a China-friendly government comes to power in South Korea, security cooperation with India may decline as Seoul aligns more with Beijing's strategic interests. This could reduce collaboration, particularly in areas where South Korea's policies intersect with US-led regional initiatives.

China may also push South Korea to uphold former President Moon's 'Three Nos' policy—restricting THAAD deployment, participation in US-led missile defense, and trilateral military ties with the US and Japan. A less engaged South Korea in the region could embolden China's assertiveness, making it harder for India (and its Quad partners) to counterbalance Beijing's influence.

In the short term, a pro-China shift in South Korea could undermine India's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific by reducing Seoul's security alignment with Washington and Tokyo, thereby limiting joint efforts in maritime security and regional stability.

South Korean President Yoon's declaration of martial law in December 2024 led to his impeachment. While India-South Korea economic relations remain stable with bilateral trade exceeding $27 billion, strategic cooperation may decline if a

China-friendly government takes power, potentially undermining regional security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific that counter Beijing’s influence.

What’s next?

President Yoon’s fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which will decide whether to formally remove him from office. If the court uphold the decision, South Korea will be required to hold a new presidential election within 60 days.

While India-South Korea economic relations remain resilient for now, a potential leadership change could impact the trajectory of their partnership, particularly in regional stability. To safeguard bilateral during this period of instability, both countries should focus on areas that require minimal political intervention. They should continue engaging through business forums, strengthening business-to-business ties in key sectors like technology and semiconductors, participating in multilateral engagements, and expanding cultural and academic exchanges.

By prioritizing these areas, both nations can maintain momentum and ensure long-term stability despite political uncertainties in Seoul.