

KOREA CORNER

Korea Steps Up Global South Diplomacy: Four Summits and a New Direction



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Upon taking office, President Lee Jae Myung pledged to expand Korea's engagement with the Global South. His March visits to Singapore and the Philippines, followed by India and Vietnam in April, marked an initial effort to translate this vision into practice. The selection of three ASEAN member states as early destinations—including both the current and incoming ASEAN chairs—signaled that ASEAN remains central to Korea's foreign policy. While President Lee had previously visited Kuala Lumpur for the ASEAN-ROK summit last year, these were his first dedicated bilateral visits to ASEAN member states. The visit to India carried

particular strategic weight, as India represents both a leading voice of the Global South and a key partner in Korea's economic diversification efforts.

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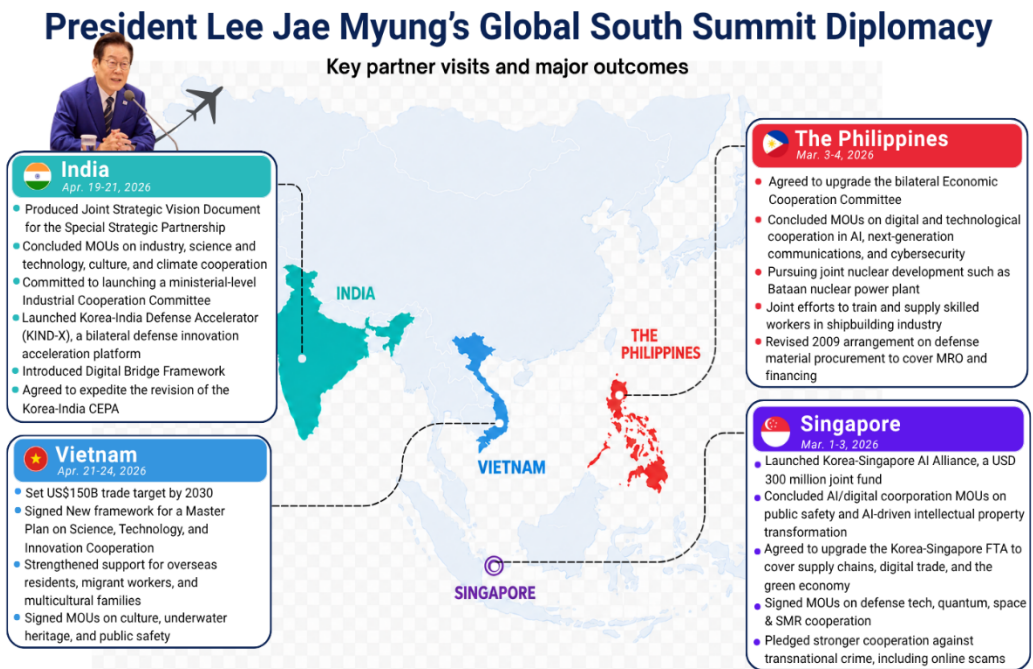


Figure 1: President Lee Jae Myung's Global South Summit Diplomacy:
Key Partner Visits and Major Outcomes Source: Compiled from the author's manuscript

SINGAPORE: AI AS THE CORNERSTONE OF A NEW ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The Singapore summit stood out for the sheer ambition of its agenda. The centerpiece was the Korea-Singapore AI Alliance, a USD 300 million joint fund for AI development. Managed through Korea Venture Capital Corporation and anchored in Singapore, the Alliance is designed to attract private capital and accelerate bilateral AI collaboration. It is also poised to springboard Korea's venture and start-up ecosystem into global markets. Relevant MOUs followed, covering AI and digital cooperation in public safety and AI-driven transformation in intellectual property. The Alliance underscores both countries' growing ambitions in the global AI race, while offering a pathway to

develop credible AI capabilities independent of both Washington and Beijing.

The significance of the summit was not confined to AI. The two sides agreed to launch new negotiations to reframe the Korea-Singapore FTA as a forward-looking framework encompassing supply chains, digital trade, and the green economy. Korea's work with Singapore in shaping next-generation trade rules will likely serve as a useful reference for the forthcoming upgrade of the ASEAN-Korea FTA. The summit also produced a range of MOUs covering advanced defense technology, quantum computing, space and satellite systems, environmental data sharing, and small modular reactors. The two leaders further pledged to step up

cooperation on transnational crime, including online scams.

Ultimately, the summit solidified a shared strategic outlook, deepening ties with a partner that mirrors Korea's own ambitions in next-generation industries. With Singapore assuming the ASEAN chair next year, the visit also lays the groundwork for advancing Korea's broader regional agenda, from economic and technological cooperation to transnational crime.

THE PHILIPPINES: DEEPENING ECONOMIC TIES ON A HISTORIC FOUNDATION

Despite 77 years of diplomatic relations, the Philippines has received less strategic attention in Korea's economic engagement with ASEAN. The March summit marked a deliberate effort to address that imbalance, elevating the long-standing relationship into a more substantive economic and industrial partnership.

Building on the Korea–Philippines FTA, which entered into force in December 2024, the summit focused on deepening economic cooperation across trade, investment, and high-potential industries. Both sides committed to maximizing the FTA's utilization to facilitate market entry and expand bilateral trade. To this end, the two governments agreed to upgrade the Korea–Philippines Economic Cooperation Committee into a standing ministerial platform, sharpening its agenda toward high-potential sectors such as shipbuilding, semiconductors, electronics, and the digital economy. Two MOUs on digital and technological cooperation further extended the partnership into AI, next-generation communications and cybersecurity.

The summit also set out a broad strategic industrial agenda. President Lee emphasized critical mineral cooperation as a strategic priority, highlighting the Philippines' resource base as a key foundation for Korea's industrial resilience. On energy, the two sides agreed to continue pursuing joint nuclear development, building on feasibility studies for reviving the Bataan nuclear power plant. On shipbuilding, cooperation is set to expand through joint efforts to train and supply skilled workers for the local industry. On defense, the two governments revised a 2009 arrangement on defense material procurement to expand the contractor pool and broaden cooperation into maintenance, repair, logistics and financing. With Korean defense exports to the Philippines on the rise—including the recent order of two additional frigates—the revision is expected to improve contracting conditions for Korean firms and deepen their role beyond one-off sales.

Building on long-standing historical ties, the Philippines summit added a stronger economic dimension to the bilateral relationship. President Lee also pledged Korea's active support for the Philippines' ASEAN chairmanship, with both leaders agreeing to align Manila's priorities with Korea's broader ASEAN vision throughout the year.

INDIA: FROM EMERGING MARKET TO STRATEGIC INDUSTRIAL PARTNER

As India's economic and geopolitical weight continues to grow, Seoul increasingly views New Delhi as a key partner in its broader Global South outreach. While Korean firms have rapidly expanded their presence in India, government-to-government engagement has not kept pace with private-sector momentum. President Lee's visit sought to close that gap, establishing a more strategic and institutional footing for bilateral partnership.

The summit produced a dense set of deliverables, headlined by a 52-point Joint Strategic Vision Document for the Special Strategic Partnership with three thematic annexes covering shipbuilding and maritime logistics, sustainability cooperation, and energy security. Fifteen MOUs spanning industry, science and technology, culture, and climate cooperation rounded out the package.

The summit placed strategic industrial cooperation at its core. Both sides committed to launching a new ministerial-level Industrial Cooperation Committee, dedicated to advancing cooperation in strategic sectors including critical minerals, nuclear energy, and clean energy. The two countries also agreed to strengthen AI and digital cooperation through the Digital Bridge Framework, opening new pathways for Korean firms in India's rapidly expanding AI market. In shipbuilding, Korea's technological expertise will be paired with Indian policy support to build a competitive shipbuilding industry. On defense, the 2020 Defense Cooperation Roadmap MOU is set to be reactivated, alongside the launch of Korea-India Defense Accelerator (KIND-X), a bilateral defense innovation acceleration platform. On finance, MOUs on financial hub development and QR code payment interoperability are likely to expand the scope of bilateral financial cooperation.

On the trade front, President Lee pledged to double bilateral trade from approximately USD 25 billion to USD 50 billion by 2030. To support this, both sides vowed to accelerate negotiations for an upgraded India-Korea CEPA, expanding its scope to encompass supply chains, digital trade, and the green economy. They also agreed to establish a bilateral working group to provide systematic support for Korean SMEs entering the Indian market.

The summit reflected a broader recalibration in Seoul's approach to New Delhi—from emerging market to strategic industrial partner. The dense agenda of agreements and institutional commitments helped the two sides cement a more structured and action-oriented partnership with a clearer strategic direction.

VIETNAM: UPGRADING THE KOREA-VIETNAM STRATEGIC BOND

As Korea's third-largest trading partner and the largest recipient of Korean FDI, Vietnam shares an exceptionally dense web of economic interdependence with Korea. President Lee's April visit was, therefore, less about opening new ground than about future-proofing one of Korea's most vital partnerships.

The summit focused on deepening the strategic substance of the bilateral relationship. Both sides committed to reaching USD 150 billion in bilateral trade by 2030, while emphasizing supply chain resilience and reciprocal investment expansion. Energy and infrastructure featured prominently, with agreements covering nuclear energy cooperation and electricity infrastructure. The two governments also pledged close consultation on potential Korean participation in Vietnam's large-scale infrastructure projects.

The summit underscored Vietnam's gradual transition from a manufacturing hub into a more advanced technology partner. A new framework for a Master Plan on Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation is expected to deepen cooperation in AI, semiconductors, biotechnology and digital technology. The framework is designed to integrate joint research, talent development, knowledge dissemination, and infrastructure

support—with the Korea-Vietnam Institute of Science and Technology anchoring the network across Vietnam. Existing Korean investments, including Samsung Electronics' R&D operations, also provide a strong foundation for expanding higher-value-added industrial cooperation.

People-to-people ties received equal attention. With large Korean and Vietnamese communities residing in their respective countries, both governments agreed to strengthen support for overseas residents, migrant workers, and multicultural families. Such commitments captured a growing recognition that Korea-Vietnam ties have evolved well beyond economic cooperation into a partnership sustained by dense people-to-people connections. Three additional MOUs on culture, underwater cultural heritage, and public safety cooperation further broadened the partnership's scope.

President Lee's visit to Hanoi came just eight months after General Secretary To Lam's trip to Seoul in August 2025—the first state guest received under the Lee administration. It was also the first state visit hosted by Vietnam's new leadership since taking office in April. The pace of these reciprocal visits points to the exceptional closeness of the Korea-Vietnam relationship and the shared effort to further upgrade an already mature partnership.

The road ahead, however, lies in implementation. Summit-level agreements are only as consequential as the follow-through they generate

NOT A NEW DEPARTURE, BUT A NEW DIRECTION

President Lee's four-nation tour builds on the legacy of the Moon administration's New Southern Policy, which first elevated ASEAN and India as priorities for Korea's economic diversification. But beneath this continuity lies a meaningful shift in strategic logic. While the New Southern Policy focused primarily on expanding market access in traditional sectors, these summits signal a more ambitious reorientation—one that positions ASEAN and India not merely as export destinations, but as core partners in Korea's strategic industries. AI, semiconductors, clean energy, defense procurement, and critical minerals now define the agenda. The upgrading of trade frameworks to incorporate next-generation trade rules and commitments to industrial partnership across all four visits reflects a Korea intent on building ties that go beyond trade into shared industrial futures.

The reinvigoration of the partnership with India deserves particular note. Bilateral momentum had stalled under the Yoon administration, making the Lee government's early and substantive engagement with New Delhi one of the more significant outcomes of this diplomatic push.

The road ahead, however, lies in implementation. Summit-level agreements are only as consequential as the follow-through they generate. Translating commitments into tangible outcomes will be the true measure of this new direction. For Korea's broader Global South strategy, these four visits offer a promising benchmark: building partnerships grounded in institutional depth, anchored in future industries, and resilient enough to weather a shifting global order.

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