

20 May 2026

## Japan and South Korea, united in insecurity

### Key takeaways

- Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae and South Korean President Lee Jae-myung held their fourth summit meeting in Lee's hometown on Tuesday, 19 May.
- The discussions focused heavily on the impact of the Hormuz crisis on their countries and the broader region, and they announced several energy security initiatives.
- The summit shows that the two US allies are increasingly looking to each other for support amidst uncertainty about the US role in Asia; shared interests will continue to outweigh the leaders' political differences.

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Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae took a break from parliamentary deliberations to visit South Korean President Lee Jae-myung in his hometown of Andong, reciprocating Lee's visit to Nara earlier this year and holding their fourth meeting since Takaichi took office in October. The two leaders continue to show that despite their political differences – Lee from the Japan-skeptic Korean left and Takaichi from the Korea-skeptic Japanese right – national interests are pulling the two governments together even in the absence of sustained engagement from the United States to promote trilateral cooperation.

In fact, the agenda for the 19 May summit, which featured energy and economic security prominently, highlights the extent to which Tokyo and Seoul are looking to each other as a hedge against US unreliability. Readouts from the summit noted that the Hormuz crisis and its impact on Asia were at the center of discussions between Lee and Takaichi, and the most tangible outcomes from the summit were energy-related. They discussed cooperation to bolster stockpiles across the region through the POWER Asia initiative and bilateral cooperation through swap arrangements for crude oil, petroleum products, and liquefied natural gas. They may also be preparing to launch a

trade and industry dialogue to facilitate coordination on economic security and technology development.

These deliverables point to the convergence between the two governments. Both are sensitive to their vulnerabilities to global supply chain disruptions and economic coercion and are determined to strengthen relationships in the region amidst concerns that the Trump administration is focused on other priorities. Indeed, Seoul is likely even more motivated than Tokyo to bolster the bilateral relationship, insofar as trade friction between the US and South Korea has been worse than that between the US and Japan; South Korea experienced a tangible demonstration of its low priority to Washington when the US redeployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system from South Korea to the Middle East; and South Korea entered the Hormuz crisis with more limited reserves than Japan and has been more heavily impacted by supply disruptions.

To be sure, neither wants to break with the United States. But they are acutely aware that the trilateral relationship is a low priority – the last trilateral meeting of foreign ministers was in October 2025 and there has not been a trilateral leaders’ summit since the Biden administration – and that they both need to deepen political, economic, and security ties in response to uncertainty. The risks of friction cannot be entirely ruled out, whether due to activist pressure from Lee’s base or actions by Takaichi (a visit to Yasukuni Shrine, for example) to satisfy her own core supporters. But the apparently warm relationship between Takaichi and Lee – they have already discussed holding their next summit at an onsen resort in Japan – and their mutual insecurity suggest that the momentum in favor of closer cooperation will continue.

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