

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*The Lee Jae-Myung Victory
in South Korean Politics:
Context and Implications*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Sandip Kumar Mishra

18 June 2025

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Speaker: Prof. Sandip Kumar Mishra, Professor, Korean Studies, Centre for East Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Amb. Skand Ranjan Tayal, former Ambassador of India to the Republic of Korea; and, Chairperson, India-Republic of Korea Friendship Society, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar focused on the recently held 2025 South Korean presidential elections, where Lee Jae-myung of the Democratic Party emerged victorious. The Chair, Amb. Tayal emphasised the importance of this election and noted that despite the political turbulence in the preceding months, the results held no major surprises. However, it is important to note that President Lee failed to secure over 50% of the vote, underscoring the deep political polarisation within South Korean society. Amb. Tayal framed the discussion within the context of democratic resilience and institutional robustness in Korea, despite a pattern of growing dissatisfaction among democratic electorates.
- He pointed to the global rise of far-right movements, referencing the US under Donald Trump, and several European nations, and highlighted a shift from ideological to transactional politics. The dominance of short-term national interests and diminishing space for moral foreign policy signal a concerning ideological drift, with implications for domestic cohesion and international relations.
- Prof Mishra stated that despite the dramatic political upheaval triggered by martial law, Lee Jae-myung won by a narrow margin — only 1.6% more than his previous performance in the 2022 election, which he had lost by 0.7%. This suggests that his popularity remained stable rather than surging. Interestingly, over 41% of voters still supported the ruling People Power Party candidate, indicating that public dissatisfaction with martial law did not entirely translate into rejection of the party.

- South Korea demonstrated remarkable democratic vitality through a 79.38% voter turnout — the second highest in its history. Mechanisms such as early voting (with over 34% participation) and overseas voting across 118 countries were efficiently implemented. These figures underscore the strength of South Korea's democratic infrastructure and the political engagement of both domestic and diaspora populations, despite the authoritarian overreach preceding the election.
- Prof Mishra noted that former President Yoon Suk-yeol justified his imposition of martial law as a response to alleged anti-state activities involving North Korea and China, electoral rigging, and institutional paralysis. However, the speaker clarified that the actual motive was likely political frustration. Yoon faced an uncooperative National Assembly, was under pressure over corruption allegations against his wife, and saw his appointees threatened with impeachment — factors that likely prompted his unconstitutional move.
- The impeachment of President Yoon unfolded over two attempts in the National Assembly, requiring a two-thirds majority (200 out of 300 members). The second attempt succeeded and was upheld by the Constitutional Court in April 2025. This episode highlighted the robustness of Korea's constitutional framework, which, despite intense partisan divides, ultimately checked executive overreach through legal and legislative processes.
- Prof. Mishra argued that Lee Jae-myung inherits a divided polity and a weakened presidency. Domestically, he must navigate ideological divisions, social polarisation, and economic concerns with projected GDP growth as low as 0.8%. With regard to foreign policy, he seeks to maintain strong ties with the US, while managing economic relations with China. His pragmatic stance on Japan and North Korea, and the likely revival of the New Southern Policy, signal a cautious but strategic diplomatic approach.
- Amb. Tayal observed that if Mr. Cho Hyun, a well-regarded former ambassador to India, is appointed as South Korea's new foreign minister, it could significantly improve bilateral diplomatic engagement between India and South Korea. Mr. Cho's familiarity with Indian affairs and prior goodwill may serve as an asset in

strengthening South Korea–India relations under the new Lee Jae-myung administration.

- Concluding the discussion, Amb. Tayal raised the issue of aligning South Korea’s presidential and parliamentary election cycles and asked whether constitutional reform was realistic under President Lee’s term. Prof. Mishra responded affirmatively, citing the Democratic Party’s majority (192 seats) in the National Assembly. The speaker also highlighted that the proposed reforms include expanding the Supreme Court, curbing prosecutorial powers, and changing the presidential term to two four-year terms — likely to be pursued before the Assembly term ends in 2028.

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