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Iran's Precarious Moment: Uprising, Intervention, and Uncertainty

From December 28, 2025, Iran has been convulsed by its most severe wave of civil unrest since the 2022 protests, marking a critical juncture in the nation's political and economic trajectory. The uprising emerged from an acute financial crisis that has devastated ordinary Iranians: the Iranian Rial collapsed to a record 1.42 million against the US dollar, hyperinflation drove food prices up an average of 72 percent over the preceding year, and the government simultaneously removed subsidised dollar access for certain importers while raising taxes in the new budget. These economic catastrophes transformed isolated grievances into widespread political dissent that rapidly spread across all 31 provinces, signalling profound public discontent with the regime's management of the national economy and international standing.

The timing of Iran's internal upheaval coincided with the intensification of external pressure from the incoming Trump administration. During Trump's December 29 meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the latter advocated for "round two" strikes against Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile facilities. Trump subsequently adopted an unusually interventionist posture, using Truth Social and media appearances to encourage demonstrators while threatening to "eradicate" Iran's nuclear weapons and missile programs. On January 12, 2026, Trump escalated by cancelling all diplomatic meetings with Iranian officials and imposing a punitive 25 percent tariff on states trading with Iran, demonstrating Washington's intent to compound economic and political pressure simultaneously. This aggressive stance created ambiguity about American intentions when, by January 14, Trump acknowledged that Iranian government sources told Washington the crackdown had halted, raising questions whether the US would follow through on repeated military threats. The reduction of American military personnel and assets at Al-Udeid base, paralleling movements before the June 2025 Iran-Israel war, amplified regional anxiety about a potential full-scale military confrontation.

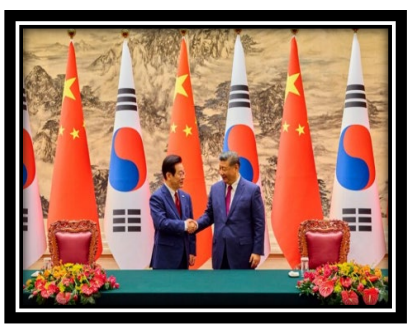
Europe's response proved more measured but still delegitimising. The European Parliament president, Roberta Metsola, announced a comprehensive ban on all Iranian diplomats and representatives from parliamentary premises in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Luxembourg, strategically aimed at isolating and condemning the regime. Israel adopted a more complex stance, with the Foreign Affairs Ministry amplifying symbolic support for Iranian protesters through social media while senior officials publicly framed the unrest as an "historic opportunity" to overturn Tehran's government. However, Israeli cabinet ministers received instructions to refrain from public commentary, recognising that explicit Israeli backing could undermine the protest movement and validate Tehran's narrative of foreign conspiracy. Israel nevertheless raised its military alert level, recognising that Iran might weaponise domestic anger through external confrontation or retaliation. Remarkably, Israel and Iran reportedly exchanged secret assurances through Russian intermediaries in late December 2025, suggesting mutual interest in avoiding preemptive strikes despite the surrounding chaos.

The Iranian leadership's response has oscillated between limited conciliation and hardline intransigence. President Masoud Pezeshkian acknowledged the legitimacy of economic grievances while attributing Iran's crisis to foreign sanctions and Western pressure, appointing Abdolnaser Hemmati as central bank governor and removing university security officials implicated in mishandling student demonstrations. Yet these conciliatory gestures have been overshadowed by ominous warnings from the judicial and security apparatus. Prosecutors have threatened protesters with moharebeh charges—waging war against God—which carry death penalties. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has resurrected its familiar dichotomy between "genuine economic protesters" and "foreign-backed rioters." Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei adopted a defiant posture, accusing the US and Israel of exploiting economic hardship to destabilise Iran while praising pro-government rallies and vowing that the Islamic Republic would not retreat under internal or external pressure.

Tehran's official narrative increasingly emphasised foreign infiltration, claiming "terrorist elements" have infiltrated genuine demonstrations to target security forces and civilians. The UN mission framed sanctions, military threats, and "engineered chaos" as components of a longstanding American destabilisation strategy. Ali Larijani, chief of the Supreme National Security Council, labelled Trump and Netanyahu "main killers of the people of Iran." Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf warned that any American or Israeli intervention would constitute legitimate targets for Iranian response. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi simultaneously warned of Iranian readiness for war while indicating that communication channels remained open—a carefully calibrated message combining deterrence with diplomatic possibility.

Information about Iran's interior has been severely compromised by an internet blackout imposed January 8 onwards, with monitoring groups documenting nationwide connectivity disruptions extending several days. Casualty figures remain deeply contested, with US-based rights groups estimating over 2,400 deaths and 18,000 arrests, while other sources suggest higher tolls. Iranian officials acknowledge approximately 2,000 deaths but attribute violence to foreign-backed terrorists. This information vacuum has complicated international assessment of the uprising's scale, trajectory, and ultimate implications, leaving critical uncertainties about whether genuine mass mobilisation can sustain momentum against both security force suppression and international military threats.

South Korea between Two Powers: The Stakes behind the Beijing Summit



In early January 2026, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung undertook a strategically important four-day state visit to China, meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in what many observers viewed as a crucial effort to reset relations between Seoul and Beijing. The summit took place against a complex backdrop of geopolitical tensions, maritime disputes, and competing regional interests that have defined East Asia for the past

decade. The visit included stops in Beijing and Shanghai, demonstrating President Lee's strong commitment to pragmatic diplomacy with all major powers in the region—a significant departure from his predecessor's approach and critical for South Korea's economic and security interests.

The roots of Seoul-Beijing tensions run deep, tracing back to 2017 when South Korea deployed the U.S.-built Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to counter escalating North Korean missile threats. Although the defensive system served legitimate security purposes for Seoul, Beijing perceived it as a direct threat to its own security infrastructure, particularly regarding THAAD's powerful radar capabilities. China responded with a series of unofficial economic sanctions targeting South Korean interests. The impact was tangible and far-reaching: Chinese tourists, once vital to South Korea's tourism industry, dramatically reduced their visits. South Korean cultural exports, including the globally popular K-pop industry, faced systematic restrictions in Chinese markets. The cultural and economic toll deepened the rift between the two nations and fueled nationalist sentiment on both sides of the border. Maritime disputes further strained relations when China constructed steel structures in the Yellow Sea's Provisional Measures Zone, actions Seoul interpreted as violations of maritime sovereignty and challenges to international norms.

Recent developments have only complicated matters further. The United States' approval for South Korea to develop nuclear-powered submarines drew sharp concern from Beijing, which views such capabilities as part of a broader containment strategy. Domestically, South Korea faced political turbulence when former President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law in December 2024, triggering constitutional crises and surging anti-China sentiment. Against this turbulent backdrop, President Lee, who took office in June 2025, moved swiftly to improve bilateral relations with Beijing.

Lee's visit held particular significance given he had already met Xi just two months earlier at the APEC summit in Gyeongju, South Korea. The swift succession of high-level meetings underscored Seoul's eagerness to normalize ties. The presidential delegation accompanying Lee included a substantial contingent of South Korean business leaders, signaling China's economic importance and the administration's intent to deepen commercial ties significantly. During presentations at the Korea-China business forum in Beijing, President Lee outlined ambitious cooperation plans, highlighting opportunities in cultural industries, beauty products, and artificial intelligence—sectors where both nations possess complementary strengths.

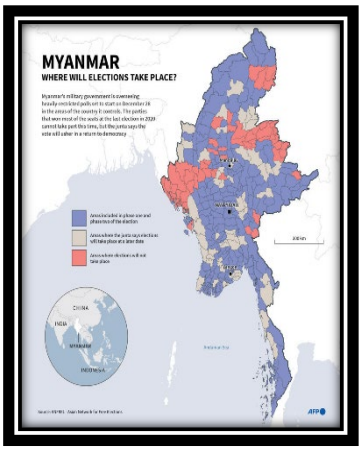
Following their bilateral meetings, Lee and Xi signed fourteen memorandums of understanding covering trade and cooperation in science and technology, concrete evidence of renewed commitment to economic partnership. The leaders discussed mechanisms to address longstanding maritime conflicts, including China's controversial construction projects in the Yellow Sea and persistent illegal fishing by Chinese vessels in South Korean territorial waters. Lee's visit to Shanghai included a ceremonial tribute to Korean independence activists who resisted Japanese colonial rule during 1910-1945, acknowledging both historical connections and China's role as a neighboring Asian nation with its own complex colonial history and experiences.

The summit's implications extended well beyond bilateral economic considerations. For Northeast Asia's broader geopolitical landscape, President Lee used the meeting to request Chinese support for normalizing relations between Seoul and Pyongyang, with particular emphasis on addressing North Korea's nuclear weapons program. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's participation in China's Victory Day celebrations in September 2025, combined with Beijing's recent security documents that omit denuclearization references, prompted analyst speculation that China's North Korea policy may be shifting. Tellingly, North Korea conducted a provocative missile test on the very day Lee arrived in Beijing. Lee also reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to the One-China policy, a position complicated by recent remarks from Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi regarding Taiwan.

Analysts widely recognize that President Lee faces truly formidable challenges in carefully balancing South Korea's complex relationship with China against the growing expectations and significant pressures being exerted by the Trump administration in Washington. The incoming administration has made clear its desire for South Korea to modernize its military alliance as a bulwark against China's growing military dominance throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Navigating these competing demands while pursuing pragmatic diplomacy toward Beijing represents arguably the defining challenge of Lee's presidency, demanding both diplomatic finesse and strategic acuity in equal measure.

Myanmar's Managed Election amid Civil War

Myanmar is conducting a contested general election through a three-phase process unfolding amid civil war. The first round was held on 28 December 2025 in 102 of the country's 330 townships, followed by a second round on 11 January 2026 covering 100 townships. A third phase is scheduled for 25 January in an additional 63 townships. Polling is planned in a total of 265 townships, while voting has been cancelled in the remaining 65 townships—roughly 20 percent of the country—due to insecurity and lack of state control. This fragmented electoral process represents the first significant electoral exercise since the military coup in February 2021, which triggered the armed conflict that continues to devastate the country.



The phased exercise covers 265 constituencies for the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house) from 440 elected seats, within a national parliament of 664 seats. Significantly, 25 percent of parliamentary seats are constitutionally reserved for unelected military appointees and are therefore not subject to electoral contestation.

Official figures indicate more than 24 million eligible voters, roughly 35 percent fewer than in 2020. The government claimed the turnout as a success, stating that over 6 million people cast ballots in the first phase—approximately 52 percent of the 11 million eligible voters. Independent observers, however, reported low voter participation in the second phase, alongside resistance attacks and documented allegations of voter intimidation under heightened security conditions.

While more than 4,800 candidates from 57 parties are competing for legislative seats, only six parties are competing nationwide. More significantly, pro-democratic forces—including the National League for Democracy, which leads the ousted civilian government in exile known as the National Unity Government—were disqualified from contesting under newly introduced political party registration laws. Over forty political parties were barred from participation well before the polls, even as the country remained engulfed in civil conflict. These exclusions have fundamentally altered the competitive landscape, severely limiting meaningful opposition and democratic representation in the electoral process.

The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party dominated the first round, winning between 89 and 91 of the 102 lower house seats contested—nearly 90 percent—in the absence of meaningful opposition. In the first two phases, polling took place in approximately 202 townships, primarily concentrated in central Myanmar and key urban centers where the junta exercised dominant control.

The electoral process has unfolded within a fragmented security landscape. The military has relied on intensive surveillance and martial law to maintain firm control in urban and administrative centers such as Naypyidaw, Yangon, and Ayeyarwady, even as resistance groups retain influence across rural and contested areas. The third phase reflects this uneven geography of authority, underscoring the deeply militarised and asymmetrical conditions under which elections are being conducted.

Since the February 2021 coup, Myanmar's military has promoted elections less as a path to democracy than as a mechanism to reduce international isolation, legitimize continued military dominance, and manage a fragmented opposition. By retaining the 2008 Constitution—which reserves 25 percent of parliamentary seats and key ministries for the armed forces—the junta has foreclosed any prospect of substantive political reform.

Although the military has recovered limited territory by 2025, it controls only about one-fifth of the country, while resistance forces hold a significantly larger share of Myanmar's territory and population. Over 3.5 million people have been displaced from their homes due to the ongoing conflict. Elections conducted amid active conflict, restrictive laws, and widespread exclusions are designed to advantage the military-backed USDP and former officers, entrench political fragmentation, disenfranchise millions, and provide civilian legitimacy to enable selective re-engagement with strategic partners such as China and Russia, rather than advance genuine national reconciliation or democratic governance.

In preparation for the election, the junta implemented stringent security measures, including charging 229 individuals with voter sabotage before the first voting phase. International criticism from the United Nations and lawmakers across the Asia-Pacific region and the United Kingdom has not translated into strategic gains for resistance forces or substantive pressure on the military regime. The opposition remains organizationally fragmented and unable to sustain coordinated pressure on the junta. Instead, the conflict has hardened into a prolonged war of attrition, with the military adapting through intensive manpower mobilisation and sustained heavy firepower—much of it supplied by China and Russia—to retake territory and inflict severe losses on resistance fighters.