

# South Korean President Avoids Meeting Pelosi on Official Visit to Seoul

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Global Research, August 05, 2022

[Atalayar](#) 4 August 2022

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)  
Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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*Conservative former attorney general Yoon Suk-yeol, elected in May by the narrowest margin in the country’s history, claims he is on holiday to avoid meeting with the US congressional speaker and contain escalating tensions*

All eyes are still on Nancy Pelosi. The US Speaker of the House of Representatives’ high-profile tour of Asia, whose agenda is at odds with the guidelines outlined by the White House, has led to an unprecedented escalation of tensions between Washington and Beijing, the protagonists of a bitter rivalry for global hegemony. The unannounced but clearly expected landing in Taipei, the heart of Taiwan, raised hackles within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which responded by summoning the US ambassador to Beijing and launching the largest military manoeuvres in its history around the island of Formosa. With live fire.

The combative congressional speaker left Taiwan on Wednesday, less than 24 hours after setting foot on the island. Earlier, Pelosi had met with Tsai Ing-wen, the twelfth president of the so-called Republic of China, with whom she had closed ranks in defence of the enclave’s “vibrant democracy” in the face of pressure from the Asian giant. But the official trip by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, interpreted in regional terms as a pulse on China, did not end there. After visiting Singapore and Malaysia, beyond Taiwan, the next destination on the map was South Korea.

Pelosi, who had been meeting presidents and prime ministers at every stop on her route, had hoped to meet the tenant of the Blue House, South Korea’s presidential residence, Yoon Suk-yeol, on her arrival in Seoul. However, the conservative former prosecutor, a political novice elected to office in May by the narrowest margin in the country’s history, has declined the offer on the grounds that he was on holiday. Foreign Minister Park Jin, who is in Cambodia for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, was also unavailable for a reception. The only contact between the two was a phone call.



Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in Seoul (PHOTO/@SpeakerPelosi)

Yoon's rebuff to the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, denied by his entourage, has generated an avalanche of criticism internally and, above all, externally. The People's Power Party leader has been interpreted as a move to avoid a warming of relations with China, and analysts have been dismayed to see in him a more aggressive profile with respect to Beijing's postulates. The presence of South Korea at the NATO summit in Madrid suggested that Seoul would adopt a more determined stance in favour of the United States, but the strategic weight of China, the country's main trading partner, hindered the plans.

In a turn of events, the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), the platform of former president Moon Jae-in and leader of the opposition, praised Yoon's non-appearance. "For the president] to meet with Pelosi in the midst of the escalating US-China conflicts is like jumping into a fire with a powder keg on his back," said MP Kim Eui-gyeom. On her last official visit to Seoul in 2015 as minority leader in the lower house, Pelosi was able to meet with then-president Park Geun-hye and her Foreign Minister.

On this occasion, the octogenarian speaker was received by her counterpart, the President of the South Korean National Assembly, Kim Jin Pyo, and other high-ranking members of Parliament, with whom she held a meeting lasting about an hour. Pelosi then underlined the strong alliance built between the two countries out of the ashes of the Korean War (1950-1953), one of the first stages of the Cold War that ended with the partition of the peninsula. However, the joint communiqué, issued at the end of the meeting, does not even allude to his visit to Taiwan and China's reactions in the last few hours.



Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, accompanied in Seoul by the US diplomatic delegation in South Korea (PHOTO/@SpeakerPelosi)

For the problems in that part of the region go beyond that. In Seoul's sights is North Korea's nuclear programme, the main source of its national security concerns. Neighbouring Pyongyang has been conducting missile tests at a pace never seen before and observers believe Kim Jong-un's regime is preparing its seventh nuclear test, the first since 2017, posing a direct existential threat to the lower 38th Parallel. Any pronouncement by Pelosi is susceptible to North Korea. Her mere visit prompted a reaction from the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The current situation clearly shows the insolent interference of the United States in the internal affairs of other countries".

In the joint statement issued by Pelosi and Kim Jin Pyo, the parties express concern "about the growing threat" from Pyongyang. "We agree to support the efforts of the two governments to achieve practical denuclearisation and peace through international cooperation and diplomatic dialogue, based on strong and extended deterrence against the North," the note concludes. There is hardly any mention of China or Taiwan, a sign that Seoul is opting for a appeasement approach, continuing the line drawn by former president Moon Jae-in despite the promises with which Yoon Suk-yeol won by the narrowest of margins in May.

Pelosi intends to deliver another coup on her regional tour by reviewing the 28,500 US troops stationed at Panmunjom, the four-kilometre-wide, 238-kilometre-long demilitarised area on the border between the two Koreas. Known as "the most tense place in the world", this site witnessed the signing of the armistice that ended the fratricidal war nearly seven decades ago. If it happens, the visit would be the first by a senior US official to the area since former President Trump visited in the company of North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un in 2019.

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*Featured image: Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi meets with South Korean National Assembly Speaker Kim Jin Pyo in Seoul (PHOTO/@SpeakerPelosi)*

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