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Spotlight: APEC 2025 in South Korea



*A sculpture at Gyeongju Station heralds the 2025 APEC Summit.
(Photo: Kim Jae-Hwan/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)*

Key Takeaways

- **APEC 2025 will struggle for policy relevance:** The political and economic policy importance of APEC 2025 faces stiff challenges. South Korea's ongoing political upheaval could leave the host country rudderless through much of the calendar year. President Yoon Suk-yeol chose the small city of Gyeongju to host the Leaders Week, creating significant logistical hurdles. Most importantly, APEC 2025 will occur in an era presenting unprecedented challenges to the organization's long-term aspirations for trade and investment liberalization.
- **Nevertheless, Leaders, Ministers, and Senior Officials will gather throughout the year to pursue Seoul's chosen themes of "Connect, Innovate, Prosper:"** The APEC 2025 calendar features six ministerial meetings and seven other senior meetings and high-level dialogues in the lead up to the APEC Economic Leaders'



Meeting, aimed at developing practical initiatives advancing regional digitization, AI, the clean energy transition, and inclusive and sustainable growth.

- **Significant Opportunities for Business Engagement:** As a platform that uniquely guarantees private sector stakeholder access to a breadth of leaders, ministers, and senior officials, APEC provides corporations with strong opportunities for high-level engagement. In addition to established channels of the APEC CEO Summit and the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC), corporations can organize and attend side events, explore public-private partnerships to advance APEC initiatives, and seek bilateral meetings with leaders, ministers, and senior officials.

What is APEC?

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization – which is currently holding its first key round of meetings for the year, concluding on March 9 – is the premier economic policy forum for the region, bringing together 21 member economies representing about 60 percent of global GDP, almost half of global trade, and just under 40 percent of the world’s population. In recent years, APEC has expanded work beyond its original trade and investment facilitation mission to focus on fostering sustainable growth and economic inclusion. South Korea’s host year in 2025 is important as Seoul was expected to revitalize the forum’s momentum after a tepid APEC year in 2024 and be a better champion for market-oriented initiatives than when China hosts in 2026.

Although APEC operates on a consensus basis and its outcomes are non-binding, the group’s ability to forge policy consensus has historically shaped national and regional rules and norms. APEC’s previous successes include adopting the APEC Cross Border Privacy Rules, creating the foundation for the WTO’s Information Technology Agreement, enhancing the ambition and convergence of regional free trade agreements, and pioneering support for women’s economic empowerment and sustainable growth. Unlike most other multilateral and regional groupings, APEC is not a single summit but an iterative process through a series of engagements. Early engagement ahead of ministerial meetings is key to shaping APEC’s policy agenda and potential outcomes.

What to Expect

South Korea has identified the theme for its 2025 APEC host year as **“Building a Sustainable Tomorrow: Connect, Innovate, Prosper.”** In addition to the November



leaders' meeting, South Korea will host seven ministerial meetings and six senior and high-level official meetings and dialogues throughout the year.

As host, South Korea will advance its priorities under the three interconnected pillars of Connect, Innovate, and Prosper:

- **Connect** – Stabilizing and sustaining supply chains will be a central focus to address vulnerabilities and explore innovative strategies boosting resilience to external shocks like climate change. In addition to APEC's ongoing trade and investment facilitation work, South Korea also aims to advance longstanding discussions on the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP) and facilitate seamless mobility for scientists.
- **Innovate** – South Korea will host APEC's **first AI and Digital Ministerial Meeting to tackle governance, digital inclusion, and cybersecurity**. APEC 2025 will also advance discussions on AI regulation and best practices. Additionally, South Korea will host the **APEC Smart Mobility Forum** to advance an initiative to promote eco-friendly mobility technologies, such as low-carbon vehicles, autonomous cars, and Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS).
- **Prosper** – South Korea will seek to further socialize and advance its concept of "carbon-free energy" through the APEC energy track as a way for regional economies to accelerate the energy transition and strengthen energy security through greater utilization of nuclear energy and hydrogen. The Women and the Economy Forum, often attended by ministers, will touch upon empowering women through the digital transformation as well as addressing equal access to work, childcare, and promoting women in leadership roles.

The leaders, ministerial, and senior level meetings, forums, and dialogues will be hosted in various locations across South Korea – including Busan, Jeju, Incheon, and Gyeongju – throughout the year. The October 27–November APEC Economic Leaders' Week, that includes a combined foreign and trade ministerial meeting before the leaders' meeting in Gyeongju, concludes South Korea's host year.

APEC is expected to be well-attended by leaders in 2025, given South Korea's relative importance, and the wide range of bilateral and multilateral issues and meetings that the leaders of the 21 APEC member economies can be expected to want to pursue amid the rising global tumult of 2025.

There have been concerns about Gyeongju's limited lodging and meeting space for delegations, and that the location may complicate planning for CEO-level



participation. Companies participating in or hosting events in Gyeongju should consider on-the-ground support for handling complex logistics.

The following are some of the key events on the APEC calendar for 2025:

Date	Event	Location
Feb 24 – Mar 9	First Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM I) and Related Meetings	Gyeongju, Korea
Mar (TBD)	Finance and Central Bank Deputies’ Meeting (FCBDM)	Gyeongju, Korea
Apr 30 – May 1	APEC Ocean-Related Ministerial Meeting (AOMM)	Busan, Korea
May 3 – May 14	Second Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM 2)	Jeju, Korea
May 8 – May 9	Senior Finance Officials’ Meeting (SFOM)	Jeju, Korea
May 15 – May 16	APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade (MRT)	Jeju, Korea
Jul 26 – Aug 15	Third Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM III) and Related Meetings	Incheon, Korea
Jul 31 – Aug 1	APEC High Level Dialogue of Anti-Corruption Cooperation	Incheon, Korea
Aug 4 – Aug 6	Digital Ministerial Meeting (DMM)	Incheon, Korea
Aug 10 – Aug 12	Women and the Economy Forum (WEF)	Incheon, Korea
Aug 27 – Aug 28	Energy Ministers’ Meeting (EMM)	Busan, Korea
Oct (TBD)	Finance Ministers’ Meeting (FMM)	Incheon, Korea
Oct 27 – Nov 1	APEC Economic Leaders’ Week (AELW)	Gyeongju, Korea
Late Oct (TBD)	Concluding Senior Officials’ Meeting (CSOM)	Gyeongju, Korea
Late Oct (TBD)	APEC Ministerial Meeting (AMM)	Gyeongju, Korea
Late Oct (TBD)	APEC Economic Leaders’ Meeting	Gyeongju, Korea

How Companies Can Maximize APEC Engagement

APEC is unusual in being a government forum that affords business leaders both formal and informal opportunities to influence policy makers, from across the region. Careful engagement strategies are a useful way for companies to create and maximize opportunities to strategically enhance their corporate profile, influence policy landscapes across APEC economies, and explore collaborations.



The APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) is the formal body representing the region's business community, participating in senior meetings, directly offering APEC members policy advice, and devising work plans. However, ABAC membership is limited to three members from each economy, who are selected by their own governments well in advance. ABAC often produces documents and position papers that are useful in pushing APEC governments in business-friendly policy directions – although just as in the government meetings, the Chinese and Russian delegations can act as spoilers.

The premiere APEC business event is the APEC CEO Summit (October 28–31 this year), a subscription event targeting CEOs that provides a platform to meet and hear from APEC leaders. The CEO Summit will be chaired this year by SK Group's Chey Tae-won, who is also chair of the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI). U.S. companies often access the CEO Summit via the National Center for APEC (NCAPEC), a U.S. business group dedicated to supporting and influencing the forum.

Beyond ABAC and official convenings, APEC presents a range of informal engagement opportunities that can be just as impactful. High-level meetings – whether at the leader, minister, or senior official level – create space for direct engagement outside formal sessions, where companies can raise issues, explore partnerships, and gain critical insights into regulatory trends. Strategic sideline meetings and curated interactions can provide direct access to key decision-makers, allowing companies to build relationships and advocate for priorities in more flexible and dynamic settings.

Additionally, hosting events around APEC's major gatherings – particularly in alignment with the host economy's thematic focus – can generate valuable visibility while fostering deeper discussions with government and industry leaders. Businesses that proactively leverage these informal avenues can maximize their influence on APEC's agenda while positioning themselves as key contributors to regional economic dialogue.

Companies can also explore ways to align with APEC's long-term policy priorities through sustained engagement, ensuring their issues remain relevant across multiple host cycles. Public-private partnerships, targeted industry discussions, and multi-year advocacy initiatives offer avenues to drive substantive outcomes beyond a single year's agenda. South Korea, as the 2025 host, is expected to emphasize key economic policy priorities, presenting an opportunity for companies to align their initiatives with broader policy discussions in ways that reinforce their standing with stakeholders across APEC economies.



South Korea's Political Uncertainties Expected to Subside

Following President Yoon Suk Yeol's six-hour martial law declaration on December 3, 2024, South Korea has faced severe political turmoil. This leadership vacuum, however, has not disrupted logistical or working-level policy preparations for the APEC Summit, which continues to receive strong public and private-sector support in South Korea. This broad backing means that a potential mid-year change in administration will not necessarily hinder the country's ability to host a successful event in November. It remains to be seen, however, whether a new South Korean president can exhibit meaningful regional political leadership, or overcome the problems posed by President Yoon's choice of Gyeongju for the Leaders Week meetings.

During Yoon's ongoing impeachment process, Acting President Choi Sang-mok has focused on stabilizing the economy. If the Constitutional Court upholds Yoon's impeachment in mid-March, a snap presidential election will take place 60 days from the impeachment, resulting in a new leadership, likely in mid-May. Consequently, this year's APEC's leaders', ministerial, and senior official meetings and discussions will also be seen as critical forums where business leaders might engage South Korea's new administration in shaping its policy priorities.