



KOREA DIGEST

Korea Digest is a monthly publication of the Korea Centre, School of International Relations and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi University, that compiles major political, security, economic and diplomatic developments in the Korean Peninsula. Korea Digest aims to track, highlight and provide brief analysis of important developments in the Korean Peninsula for the Indian audience.

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1. South Korea joins an international call for ending the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar

On February 1, 2024, marking three years since the military coup in Myanmar, South Korea joined an international call to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. For that, the foreign ministers of the Republic of Korea, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and the representative of the European Union issued a [joint statement](#) acknowledging the worsening humanitarian situation under the current military rule. They also expressed support for the role of the United Nations and ASEAN in addressing the crisis and reiterated the commitment of the international community to support Myanmar's efforts for a peaceful, inclusive and democratic future. After all, this highlights the reflection of the ROK's ongoing efforts to contribute to a peaceful resolution of the Myanmar crisis in close collaboration with the international community.



2. South Korea Secures \$3.2 Billion Cheonggang-II Missile Order from Saudi Arabia

On February 1, 2024, the South Korean Defense Ministry confirmed the sale of 10 [Cheonggang-II missile defense systems to Saudi Arabia](#) in a deal worth \$3.2 billion. The announcement came following President Yoon Suk Yeol's visit to Riyadh last October, during which discussions regarding the sale had reached their final stages. The contract between LIG-Nex1, the manufacturer of the system, and the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense was signed in November. The export deal was revealed during Defense Minister Shin Won-sik's tour to UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar from February 1 to February 7, 2024. The Cheonggang-II, also known as M-SAM 2, is a domestically developed medium surface-to-air missile system capable of intercepting ballistic missiles at altitudes ranging from 15 to 40 kilometers above the ground. This marks the second sale of the Cheonggang-II system to a Middle Eastern country, following a previous deal with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in January 2022.

The agreement with Saudi Arabia can be seen as evidence of South Korea's ambition to join the ranks of the world's largest arms exporters. Therefore, South Korea has established itself as a major player in the international arms market. According to 2022 estimates, South Korea's arms sales reached \$17 billion that year, more than double the previous year's record sales of \$7.25 billion. Under the Yoon Suk-yeol government,

South Korea has set an ambitious goal of becoming the world's fourth-largest arms exporter by 2027. Arms deals with West Asian countries can be seen as a result of South Korea's diplomatic and political efforts to boost arms exports to meet the needs of a “global pivotal state” with a new global demand for arms.



3. North Korea abolished the laws on inter-Korean economic cooperation

During the plenary session of the Supreme People's Assembly on February 7, 2024, North Korea announced the revocation of laws governing inter-Korean economic cooperation, [as reported by state media](#). This move follows North Korea's declaration that pursuing reunification with South Korea is futile, designating South Korea as its primary adversary. The tensions between the two Koreas have escalated, prompting North Korea to nullify regulations such as the DPRK's Law on North-South Economic Cooperation and the Law on the Special Zone for International Tourism of Mount Kungang, along with associated agreements. Enacted in 2005, the Law on Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation provided the legal framework for economic relations between the two countries, including mechanisms for dispute resolution. However, North Korea's recent actions coincide with increased military provocations, contributing to the escalating tensions between the Koreas.



4. South Korean and US defence authorities signed a framework on the Nuclear Consultative Group (NSG) to strengthen extended deterrence

On February 12, 2024, officials from South Korea and the United States convened at the Pentagon to ink a pivotal [Nuclear Consultative Group \(NCG\) framework document](#). The agreement, signed by US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Space Policy, Dr. Vipin Narang, and ROK Defense Minister, Shri Cho Chang Lay, marks a significant step in bolstering advanced deterrence measures in response to North Korea's nuclear threat. [The NCG Framework Document](#), a product of the landmark April 2023 Washington Declaration between Presidents Joe Biden and Yoon Suk-Yol, delineates the objectives, structure, and functions of the NCG. It outlines a roadmap for joint efforts in establishing guidelines for a shared nuclear strategy by mid-year, underscoring the leadership roles of defense authorities from both nations in future consultations. Against the backdrop of concerns in Seoul regarding the potential impact of Donald Trump's potential return to the White House on the alliance and US nuclear commitments, the signing of this document assumes heightened significance.



5. South Korea established diplomatic relationship with Cuba

On February 15, 2024, South Korea surprised many by officially [establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba](#). In a move that caught observers off guard, ambassadors from both nations exchanged diplomatic notes at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, formalizing their newfound relationship. Prior to this, Cuba stood as the sole nation in Latin America and the Caribbean without diplomatic ties to South Korea. This significant development is hailed as a pivotal moment for South Korea's global diplomacy, expanding its reach into Latin America and bolstering its status as a [Global Pivotal State](#). The establishment of diplomatic relations is anticipated to lay a solid groundwork for increased bilateral cooperation, particularly in economic realms, potentially opening doors for Korean businesses to enter the Cuban market. While previous exchanges have primarily focused on non-political areas such as culture and development cooperation, this diplomatic breakthrough promises to foster deeper ties and collaboration between the two nations.



6. Doctors across the country rallied and protested against the Yoon government's plan to expand medical school admissions.

The Yoon administration's proposal to boost medical school enrollment has sparked [nationwide protests among doctors](#). The plan aims to increase enrollment from 3,038 to 5,038 by 2025, citing the need to address the healthcare demands of an aging population and improve medical services in rural areas. However, thousands of interns and resident doctors have staged rallies and resigned in opposition to the move. Consequently, numerous surgeries and medical appointments have been canceled, exacerbating the healthcare crisis. With nearly 9,000 intern and resident doctors resigning from 96 major teaching hospitals, the situation remains tense. To further support the quota expansion, the health ministry has requested detailed plans from 40 medical colleges and graduate schools by March 4 to accommodate the influx of students. Currently, Korea ranks second lowest in doctor-to-population ratio among OECD countries, highlighting the urgency of addressing the issue.



7. Heightened Tension in the Korean Peninsula Amidst North Korean Belligerence

In February 2024, tensions escalated on the Korean Peninsula as North Korea engaged in increasingly provocative military actions, similar to the previous month. [North Korea fired several cruise missiles](#) off its west coast on Friday morning, February 2. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that an unknown number of cruise missiles were detected firing. Friday's launches mark North Korea's fourth cruise missile salvo since the start of the year. Such actions by North Korea underscore the threat it poses to peace on the Korean Peninsula. In response, the JCS said in its message that the South Korean military is closely coordinating with the United States to monitor for further signs of North Korean provocations. On the same day, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called on the country's navy to be ready for war preparations and reliably protect the country's maritime sovereignty, North Korea's official news agency KCNA reported.

On February 12, 2024, [North Korea claimed to have successfully developed a new "controlled shell and ballistic control system" for multiple rocket launchers](#). According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the Academy of Defense Science conducted a ballistic control test firing of multiple 240 mm caliber guided rocket launcher shells on February 11. The South Korean military reported detecting 240 mm artillery fire around Nampho in South Pyongan on Sunday, February 11, and the artillery shells fell into the Yellow Sea. Significantly, this is the first time North Korea has officially disclosed the test of GPS-guided 240mm multiple rocket launchers.

According to the South Korean military, on February 14, 2024, North Korea fired several cruise missiles into the East Sea. [The Joint Chiefs of Staff \(JCS\) reported](#) that the military detected several cruise missiles fired from Wonsan in North Korea's Gangwon Province around 9 a.m. on February 14. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff accused it of threatening peace on the Korean Peninsula, and the JCS said South Korean and US intelligence agencies were analysing the launch. This is North Korea's fifth cruise missile launch so far this year. On January 24, North Korea began a series of tests by launching a new strategic cruise missile known as the "Pulvasal-3-31" into the Yellow Sea near Pyongyang. Two "Pulvasal-3-31" missiles were then fired from the port city of Sinfo in South Hungyeong Province on January 28. The latest launch comes almost two weeks after the last launch on February 2.



8. Wartime forced labourers received compensation from Japanese company for the first time

On February 20, 2024, [forced labourer's from the 1910-1945 Japanese occupation era received compensation from a Japanese company for the first time](#), marking a significant legal victory for victims. Hitachi Sosen Corporation, a prominent Japanese industrial and engineering firm, has granted compensation to the family of a forced labor victim named Lee, who endured exploitation during Korea's occupation. Lee's case, filed against Hitachi Sosen in 2014, culminated in a court ruling favoring damages and interest for delay. This development comes amidst a broader landscape where 63 similar cases have been brought against Japanese companies by forced labor victims. The historical grievances of forced labor and the coercion of Korean women into Japanese military brothels have long strained Japan-Korea relations, prompting ongoing efforts towards reconciliation. President Yoon Suk-yeol's recent proposal for a Korean-funded reparations plan aims to address the legacy of these injustices, signaling a potential shift towards improved relations with Tokyo.



9. Korean Foreign Ministry summons Japanese Diplomat over Dokdo Event

On February 22, 2024, the South Korean government expressed its dissatisfaction with Japan's annual "Takeshima Day" event, which asserts Japan's claim over Korea's Dokdo Islands. [Officials summoned a high-ranking Japanese diplomat](#), Taisuke Mibe, to convey their deep regret and demand the cancellation of the event. "Takeshima Day" has been organized by the Shimane Prefectural Government since 2006 to emphasize Japan's stance on Dokdo. Despite Japanese participation, South Korea maintains that Dokdo is an integral part of its territory historically, geographically, and according to international law. The islands hold significance as a reminder of Japan's colonial past in Korea. Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul also raised objections to the event during a recent meeting with Japanese Counselor Yoko Kamikawa at the G20 foreign ministerial gathering in Brazil.



10. North Korea has shipped 6700 containers of munitions to Russia

North Korea has reportedly sent a substantial shipment of ammunition to Russia, comprising 6,700 shipping containers. [South Korea's defense minister, Shin Won-sik, revealed this information during a press conference](#) on February 26, 2024. The shipment is estimated to include around 3 million rounds of 152mm artillery shells or the equivalent of 500,000 122mm shells. These exports are apparently part of a larger trade arrangement between the two countries, with North Korea receiving food and other essentials from Russia in return. This exchange also involves raw materials and components for weapons manufacturing. The increase in arms exports from North Korea to Russia has been a concern for US and South Korean intelligence agencies, particularly since the meeting between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin in September the previous year. Additionally, there are suspicions that Russia may have provided satellite technology to North Korea, facilitating the launch of its first military spy satellite in November.



11. South Korea to tighten export controls on Russia, Belarus

In a recent announcement on February 26, 2024, [South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy declared](#) tightened export controls towards Russia and Belarus concerning items with potential military applications. This measure follows the addition of 682 items to the list of restricted exports in early February. The ministry emphasizes the reinforcement of export control enforcement in collaboration with relevant organizations to prevent circumvention of restrictions. Additionally, the US Bureau of Industry and Security listed 93 firms, including South Korean company Daesung International Trading, for export restrictions on February 23. Responding to this, South Korea's Foreign Ministry confirmed an investigation into the company's ties with Russia, sharing pertinent information with the US for joint scrutiny. The ministry pledges continued cooperation with key allies, including the US, to effectively implement sanctions against Russia. In response, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken expressed commitment to utilizing all available measures to disrupt Russia's financial and military capabilities, support democratic aspirations within Russia, and deem Putin's invasion as a strategic setback for Russia.



12. Seoul's major shipbuilders vying for a 5.8 billion defence deal to build new stealth guided-missile destroyers

Korea's leading shipbuilders are vying for a lucrative \$5.8 billion contract to construct cutting-edge stealth guided-missile destroyers for the Korean Navy, [according to reports from national media](#). The competition has intensified due to concerns about the eligibility of Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) following past incidents of sensitive military technology leaks, prompting other contenders like Hanwha Ocean to enter the fray. Both companies are locked in a fierce 1 trillion won bidding war for the detailed design and construction of this year's flagship vessel. The Korean Next-Generation Destroyer (KDDX) project represents a significant milestone as it marks the first instance of a destroyer being entirely constructed with domestic technology, including indigenous detection and combat systems, matching the capabilities of the Republic of Korea Navy's (ROKN) most advanced vessel, the "King Jeong-jo the Great" (KDX-III batch). The ambitious program, totaling \$5.8 billion, aims to see the ROK Navy equipped with six of these state-of-the-art destroyers by 2036.


