



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. National Assembly Deputy Speaker Kim Young-joo joined the conservative People Power Party after leaving DP

National Assembly Deputy Speaker Kim Young-joo, a four-term lawmaker from the Democratic Party (DP), has made a significant political move by [joining the ruling People Power Party](#) (PPP) on March 4th. This decision followed a meeting with PPP interim leader Han Dong Hoon on March 1st. Kim's departure from the DP came after the party cited his low parliamentary activity, jeopardizing his chances of securing a nomination for the upcoming April 10th general election. At a ceremony marking his official membership in President Yoon Suk Yeol's party, PPP Interim Leader Chairman Han Dong Hoon warmly welcomed Kim. Analysts view Kim's switch as a strategic move that could enhance the PPP's appeal to centrist voters, particularly those unaffiliated with any party. Furthermore, Kim's defection underscores the internal divisions within the DP, notably between factions aligned with DP Chairman Lee Jae-myung and those opposed to him. This development highlights the DP's internal turmoil and casts doubt on its prospects for success in the upcoming general election.



2. 10th ROK-India Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) held in Seoul

The 10th [ROK-India Joint Commission Meeting](#) (JCM) convened on March 6, 2024, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Seoul, with Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and Indian Foreign Minister Dr. Subramaniam Jayashankar co-chairing the session. Representatives from various government ministries and departments attended the meeting, marking the first in-person interaction between the foreign ministers since their appointments. Both ministers acknowledged the robust high-level engagement between the two nations, including two summit meetings in 2023 commemorating the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations. They reiterated their commitment to bolster strategic communication and cooperation as key partners in the Indo-Pacific, emphasising their shared values as Special Strategic Partners. The gathering paved the way for a comprehensive assessment of bilateral cooperation encompassing trade, investment, development cooperation, defense, security, science and technology, culture, and people-to-people exchanges within the framework of the [India-ROK Special Strategic](#)

[Partnership](#). Additionally, the ministers pledged to facilitate the smooth procurement process for the second batch of K-9 self-propelled howitzers (Vajra), emblematic of defense industry collaboration. They also affirmed their intent to enhance cooperation in defense and defense industries, with plans to convene a 2+2 meeting of foreign and defense deputy ministers at the earliest opportunity.

Furthermore, both sides agreed to explore avenues for expanding collaboration to ensure a resilient supply chain and modernise the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, including the Korean Peninsula and South Asia, as well as cooperation in the international arena, were among the topics deliberated. Both ministers reiterated their dedication to jointly contributing to regional peace, stability, and a rules-based order, aligning Korea's ["Indo-Pacific Strategy"](#) with India's ["Vision for the Indo-Pacific."](#)



3. South Korea updated its unification vision for the first time in 30 years

On March 8, 2024, South Korea's Unification Ministry announced plans to develop a [new vision for unification](#), departing from North Korea's recent commitment to avoid pursuing unity with the South. This marks the first update to the National Community Unification Formula since its inception in 1994 under President Kim Young-sam. The new vision aims to secure the rights and freedoms of North Korean citizens upon the peninsula's eventual reunification. The Ministry [outlined three primary objectives](#): enhancing understanding of North Korea, facilitating its transformation, and bolstering unification capabilities. Minister Kim Yung-ho presented these plans to President Yoon Suk Yeol, emphasizing a liberal philosophy as the foundation. The Ministry stressed the importance of considering evolving security dynamics and garnering global support. President Yoon reaffirmed that the pursuit of unity is grounded in the universal value of freedom. Given the current inter-Korean tensions and impending parliamentary elections, this initiative reflects a significant political maneuver by the Yoon administration.



4. South Korea and the United States held their annual Freedom Shield joint military exercises.

South Korea and the United States recently [concluded their annual Freedom Shield exercise](#), which ran from March 4 to 14. This intensive 11-day exercise focused on enhancing joint defense capabilities against the escalating threats posed by North Korea. Unlike previous years, this iteration of the exercise featured over double the number of fields training exercises, totaling more than 48. The exercise, conducted through computer simulations, encompassed land, sea, air, cyber, and space domains, aiming to bolster the allies' preparedness against diverse security challenges. In conjunction with Freedom Shield, Seoul and Washington also conducted the five-day Buddy Squadron aerial exercise at Osan Air Base, Pyeongtaek. This joint air drill involved approximately 20 fighter jets, including South Korean F-15Ks and US F-16s, focusing on defensive counter-air tactics. Notably, some member states of the United Nations Command participated in the exercise, under the watchful eye of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission. The Freedom Shield exercise marks the first significant joint military maneuver since North Korea withdrew from the 2018 inter-Korean military accord in November last year, following Seoul's partial suspension of a border tensions reduction agreement signed during the previous Moon Jae-in administration.

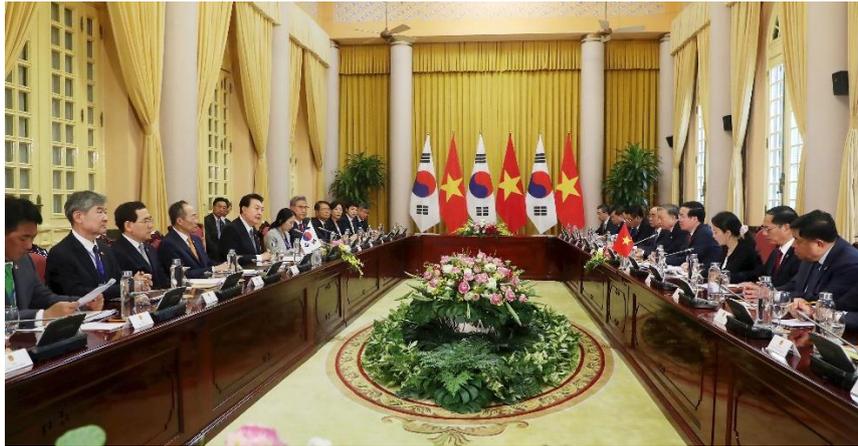


5. The ROK-Vietnam Maritime Dialogue was held in Hanoi, Vietnam

The inaugural "[ROK-Vietnam Maritime Dialogue](#)" took place on March 15 in Hanoi, Vietnam, chaired by Mr. Kim Dong-Bae from the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador Trinh Duc Hai from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This dialogue, a key component of the "Action Plan for the Implementation of [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#)" signed by President Yoon Suk Yeol during his visit to Vietnam in June of the previous year, signifies a deepening collaboration between the two nations. Attended by about 30 officials from both sides, discussions centered around fostering sustainable maritime development, bolstering cooperation in the maritime economy, ensuring maritime security, and advancing regional multilateral maritime agendas.

South Korea outlined its commitment to enhancing maritime cooperation with ASEAN nations, leveraging the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI). Moreover, they expressed their intent to diversify maritime-related partnerships with Vietnam and other ASEAN countries through the establishment of the 'ROK-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership', marking the 35th anniversary of the ROK-ASEAN Dialogue. Both parties emphasized the importance of establishing a peaceful maritime rules-based order, considering themselves maritime and open trade nations.

Furthermore, they agreed to deepen cooperation in joint training and maintain close communication for future dialogues, with plans to hold the next ROK-Vietnam Maritime Dialogue in Korea. The dialogue aims to serve as an exemplary platform for maritime cooperation, contributing to the development of the Korea-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and fostering a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.



6. South Korea conducted large-scale military exercises near border islands.

South Korea's military [conducted extensive exercises](#) near the western border islands to simulate troop deployment in response to potential provocations from North Korea, as announced by the military on March 17. The drills, held around Baengnyeong and Yeonpyeong islands in the northern Yellow Sea border on Friday, involved a swift maneuver force comprising Marines, a Navy landing ship (LST-II), a MUH-1 Marineon helicopter, and a Korean assault amphibious vehicle. Additionally, military helicopters including the AH-64E Apache were engaged in the exercise. Reports from national media suggest that these drills occurred amidst concerns over potential regional provocations from North Korea, particularly ahead of South Korea's parliamentary elections scheduled for April 10. The current state of instability in inter-Korean relations and heightened security tensions suggests that military actions from both sides are exacerbating the security situation on the Korean peninsula.



7. South Korea hosted the third Summit for Democracy in Seoul.

South Korea hosted the [third Summit for Democracy](#) in Seoul from March 18 to 20, 2024, marking the first time a country other than the US has hosted such an event. President Yoon Suk-yeol inaugurated the summit under the theme "Democracy for Future Generations," with over 30 countries represented, including notable figures like US Secretary of State Anthony

Blinken and British Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden. The summit centered on the growing threats to democracy posed by digital means, such as disinformation, deep fakes, and artificial intelligence. President Yoon emphasised the importance of nations collaborating to harness technology for democratic advancement. The summit highlighted concerns that AI-driven fake news and disinformation pose grave risks not only to individual liberties and human rights but also to democratic governance itself. The Summit for Democracy, originally launched by US President Joe Biden in 2021, aims to confront challenges stemming from authoritarianism and uphold human rights.



8. Top diplomats of Korea, Indonesia agree to continue cooperation on delayed fighter jet project.

High-level officials from South Korea and Indonesia have reiterated their dedication to [collaborating on the joint production of the KF-21 fighter jet](#), despite setbacks caused by Indonesia's halted payments, the South Korean foreign ministry disclosed on Monday, March 18th. Discussions between Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and his Indonesian counterpart, Retno Marsudi, occurred during the sidelines of Korea's third Summit for Democracy. In 2015, Jakarta had committed to funding approximately 20 percent of the 8.1 trillion won (\$6.07 billion) project aimed at developing the KF-21 fighter jet by 2026. This agreement included provisions for receiving a prototype, technology transfers, and the production of 48 units. However, Indonesia's contribution has been inconsistent, with payments suspended for nearly two years, leaving a significant outstanding balance of around 1 trillion won, despite approximately 278 billion won being paid to date. Additionally, an incident involving an Indonesian engineer attempting to steal technology related to the project has stirred controversy within the country. Notably, Indonesia's reaffirmed commitment to the joint development of the KF-21 fighter jet coincides with ongoing [police investigations](#) into the attempted theft by the said engineer.



9. Heightened Tensions in the Korean Peninsula Amidst North Korean Belligerence

Tensions surged on the Korean peninsula in March 2024 as North Korea intensified its provocative military maneuvers, echoing recent escalations. According to the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), [North Korea launched an unidentified ballistic missile](#) into the East Sea on Monday morning, March 18. The missile's specifics, including its type and launch speed, remained undisclosed. This marked Pyongyang's second ballistic missile launch this year, following a similar incident on January 14. Notably, North Korea's missile launch coincided with the conclusion of the annual Freedom Shield exercises between South Korea and the United States, as well as the arrival of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in Seoul to participate in the Third Summit for Democracy, which commenced on March 18, as per national media reports. Just two days later, North Korea's state media, Rodong Sinmun, announced a [successful ground-jet test of a solid-fuel engine for an intermediate-range hypersonic missile](#). In response, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) vehemently denounced the missile launches as blatant provocations undermining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.



10. President Yoon pledged to invest 500 trillion won to turn Yongin province into global semiconductor base

In the 23rd public livelihood debate on March 22nd, President Yoon Suk-yeol unveiled ambitious plans to [transform Yongin into a global hub for semiconductor manufacturing](#), earmarking approximately 500 trillion won (\$372.86 billion) for the city's development. This initiative is part of a larger strategy to establish a semiconductor mega-cluster in South Gyeonggi. The envisioned project aims to position Yongin as a prominent player in the semiconductor industry on a global scale. President Yoon further pledged legislative measures to enhance the autonomy of key special cities like Yongin, Suwon, Goyang, and Changwon, with the objective of expediting urban development initiatives and nurturing strategic sectors. The debate, attended by officials and citizens alike, emphasized the pivotal role of Yongin as Korea's new growth engine hub, stressing the urgency of discussions to accelerate the construction of the semiconductor mega-cluster and facilitate the relocation of existing businesses. Boasting a current population of 1.1 million and a consistent record of rapid growth over the past three decades, Yongin is projected to surpass 1.5 million residents with the establishment of the semiconductor cluster and the construction of a new city to accommodate its workforce.



11. South Korea expressed ‘deep regret’ over historical inaccuracies in Japanese textbooks

The Korean government [expressed profound disappointment](#) on Friday, March 22nd, following Japan's endorsement of middle school textbooks asserting sovereignty over the eastern Dokdo islands. Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology greenlit 18 history textbooks slated for use from 2025, a move heavily criticized by Korea. The texts depict Korea's presence on the Korean-controlled Dokdo Islands, referred to as "Takeshima" in Japan, as illegal. Furthermore, media reports reveal that many textbooks downplay wartime atrocities such as sexual slavery and forced labor, as well as distort the historical context of Japan's colonization of Korea (1910-45). In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement vehemently opposing the approval of these textbooks and summoned Japanese ambassador Koichi Aiboshi to express their protest. However, opposition voices have [condemned](#) this reaction as emblematic of President Yoon Suk-yeol's perceived policy of "all-surrendering" diplomacy.



12. Marriages in Korea rise for first time in 12 years in 2023

The latest data from Statistics of Korea reveals a promising shift in South Korea's marriage landscape, [marking the first increase in marriage rates in over a decade](#). In 2023, the number of marriages surpassed the 200,000 marks for the third consecutive year, totaling 193,657 couples—a 1.0 percent rise from the previous year. This uptick is attributed to couples finally tying the knot after pandemic-related delays, particularly in the latter half of 2022 and early 2023. Notably, the average age at first marriage reached an all-time high of 34 for men and 31.5 for women in 2023. However, amidst this positive trend, the country grapples with a significant decline in birth rates, with the total fertility rate dropping to a record low of 0.65 in the fourth quarter of 2023. With demographic pressures intensifying, experts stress the need for more effective interventions despite the hopeful increase in marriage rates.