



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's 2024 April General Election

The 22nd general election in South Korea, held on April 10, 2024, yielded a [repeat victory for the main opposition Democratic Party](#) (DP). With 161 directly contested seats won, the DP maintained its majority in the National Assembly, while the ruling People Power Party (PPP) secured only 90 seats. This outcome, with a high voter turnout of 67%, is seen as a clear message of disapproval towards President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration.

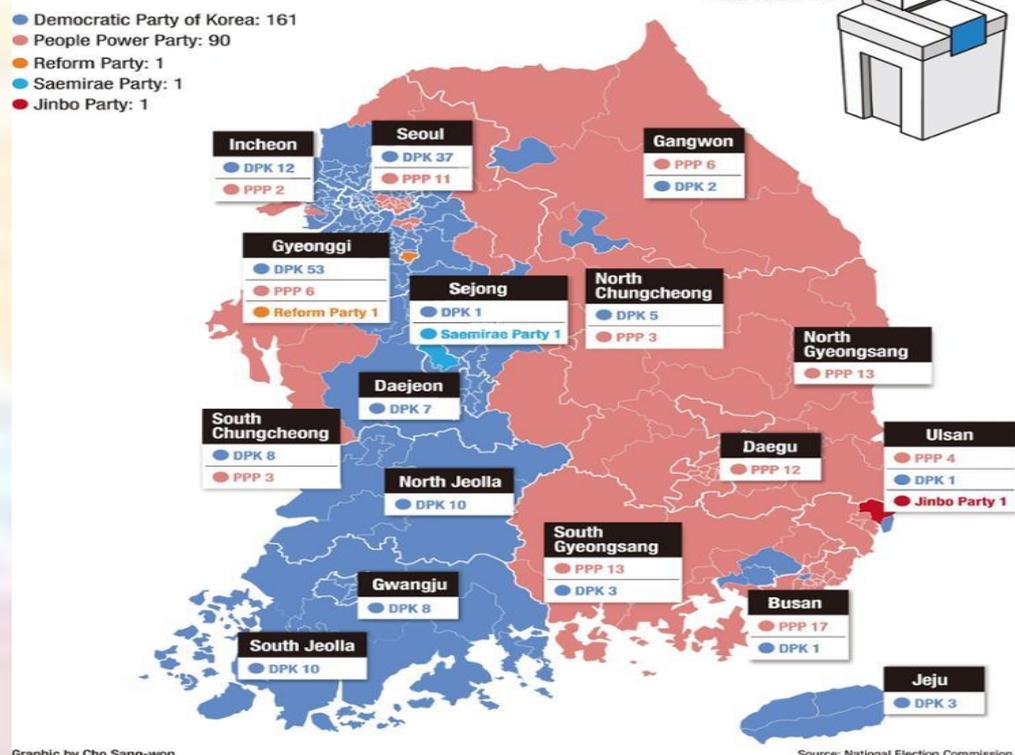
The election, often regarded as a referendum on the incumbent president, highlighted various issues including economic concerns, controversies surrounding candidates, and government policies such as proposed increases in medical school quotas. Rising vegetable prices and criticism of welfare shortcomings significantly influenced voter sentiment.

The victory of the opposition signals a continuation of the strained relationship between President Yoon and the legislature, where his domestic policies have faced strong opposition. Despite promising key domestic policies like increasing housing supply and implementing infrastructure projects, the opposition's success could hinder their advancement.

However, South Korea's foreign policy is expected to remain relatively unchanged, as it is not heavily influenced by domestic election outcomes. President Yoon has maintained a stance of strengthening the U.S.-South Korea alliance, taking a tougher stance on North Korean provocations, and improving relations with Japan, despite political risks.

Moving forward, President Yoon's term will require careful management of both domestic and foreign affairs. While elections do not directly impact foreign policy, they may limit the president's ability to invest more in international relations, as focus shifts towards addressing pressing domestic concerns such as the economy.

Constituency vote results



Retrieved from: *The Korea Times*

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

In April 2024, tensions escalated on the Korean Peninsula as North Korea intensified its provocative military actions. South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that on Tuesday, April 2, [North Korea launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile \(IRBM\)](#) from the Pyongyang region, which flew approximately 600 kilometres before landing in the East Sea. This marked the third ballistic missile launch by Pyongyang this year. Additionally, on April 3, North Korea [declared the successful test-firing](#) of a new Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM) equipped with a hypersonic warhead, as reported by the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). Amidst these provocations, President Yoon criticised North Korea for attempting to disrupt South Korean society with its missile tests ahead of the general election.

Later in the month, on April 19, North Korea [conducted a "super-large warhead"](#) power test for a strategic cruise missile, along with testing a new anti-aircraft missile in the Yellow Sea. This was North Korea's sixth cruise missile launch of the year. Furthermore, on April 22, [North Korea fired](#) several short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea, drawing strong condemnation from South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) for destabilising the region's peace and security.



This photo released by the Korean Central News Agency- Retrieved from Yonhap

3. South Korea, U.S., Japan conducted joint aerial exercise with B-52 bombers

On April 2, in response to North Korea's recent ballistic missile launch, South Korea, the United States, and Japan [conducted joint air exercises](#) near the Korean Peninsula. These drills, which involved nuclear-capable B-52 bombers and fighter jets, occurred over waters southeast of Jeju Island. The Defense Ministry stated that the exercise aimed to address North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile capabilities while bolstering the response capabilities of allied nations. This marks the first trilateral exercise of the year, with plans to further expand joint exercises to counter ongoing North Korean threats.



A U.S. B-52 strategic bomber, upper left, takes part in a combined air exercise with South Korean F-35A fighter jets over the Korean Peninsula- Retrieved from: The Korea Times

4. Local governments look to foreign talent to solve labour shortages

Local governments in South Korea are [implementing measures to attract foreign talent and provide employment assistance to students](#) studying in their regions amidst a shortage of workers. In line with this effort, North Gyeongsang Province unveiled new immigration policies on April 2nd. These policies include the establishment of support centres in foreign countries to offer Korean language education and job training programs tailored to meet the high-demand skills of local companies. The province aims to draw foreigners to North Gyeongsang for both work and study through these initiatives. Additionally, plans involve expanding the fast-track visa system for outstanding international students and launching a job website called WorkNet, which will feature job listings and information for foreigners. Furthermore, a global business boot camp program will be introduced to provide start-up courses for foreign entrepreneurs. Governor Lee Cheol-woo expressed optimism that these immigration policies would inject new life into the local economy and position North Gyeongsang as a hub for immigrants.



Chung Sung-hyun, head of North Gyeongsang's Local Era Policy Bureau explains the province's policies for foreigners during a press conference- Retrieved from: Korea JoongAng Daily

5. South Korea seized ship suspected of violating sanctions on North

On Wednesday, April 3rd, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs [revealed the seizure of a vessel suspected of breaching sanctions against North Korea](#), marking a significant move in Seoul's efforts to enforce sanctions. The detained ship, the Dei, weighing 3,000 tons, departed from North Korea's Nampo port last month and was headed to Vladivostok, Russia, with a stopover in China's Shandong province. The vessel was apprehended in South Korea's territorial waters near Yeosu, South Jeolla, on March 30th, following its refusal to comply with a stop order. Despite South Korean authorities' ongoing investigation into the nature of the suspected violations, the ship's captain declined to cooperate, refusing to open the cargo hold. The vessel, crewed by individuals from China and Indonesia, was towed to Busan's Namhang Port. The United States is believed to have supplied South Korea with evidence suggesting potential sanctions breaches.



*A 3,000-ton ship, Dei, is forced to dock in waters off Gamcheon Port in the southeastern city of Busan
Retrieved from: Korea JoongAng Daily*

6. South Korea launched second spy satellite into orbit

South Korea's Ministry of Defense announced on Monday, April 8, 2024, that the country's second [domestically developed spy satellite was successfully deployed](#) into orbit by a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket launched from the John F. Kennedy Space Centre. This satellite is part of South Korea's initiative to bolster its satellite surveillance capabilities against Pyongyang, with plans to deploy five military surveillance satellites by 2025 under the 1.2 trillion won (\$927 million) 425 projects. The launch is significant as it follows North Korea's recent deployment of its first spy satellite in November 2023 and its intention to launch three more this year. The newly launched South Korean satellite is equipped with synthetic aperture radar sensors, differentiating it from its predecessor, which had electro-optical and infrared sensors. This advancement allows the satellite to collect data irrespective of weather conditions. The Defense Ministry emphasized that with the addition of this synthetic aperture radar satellite, South Korea has fortified its independent surveillance and monitoring capabilities. Three more satellites, also equipped with synthetic aperture radars, are slated for launch. Together, these five satellites will provide regular updates every two hours. Defense Minister Shin Won Sik, speaking to reporters after observing SpaceX's live stream, suggested that

North Korea may launch a second satellite later this month following technical adjustments.



South Korea's second homegrown military surveillance satellite, aboard SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket, lifts off from Kennedy Space Center in Florida- Retrieved from: The Korea Times

7. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meets China's top legislator, Zhao Liji, to deepen bilateral ties

On Sunday, April 14, the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that North Korean leader [Kim Jong Un held discussions with China's official Zhao Liji](#) to strengthen bilateral ties, marking the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations. Kim declared the year as the "year of DPRK-China friendship," emphasizing the enduring bond between Pyongyang and Beijing. They deliberated on enhancing multilateral exchanges and cooperation, reaffirming the significance of their relationship. Zhao's visit, the first high-profile one since the Covid-19 pandemic began in 2020, underscores the commitment to further solidifying ties. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs echoed the sentiment, highlighting the enduring strategic importance of the relationship and pledging increased high-level exchanges to enhance mutual cooperation.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, right, meets with Zhao Leji, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China, in Pyongyang- Retrieved from: Korea JoongAng Daily

8. Seoul rebukes Tokyo for repeating its claim to Dokdo

The Korean government on Tuesday, April 16, [strongly protested Japan's latest claim to the easternmost Dokdo Islands](#) in the latest edition of Tokyo's annual diplomatic bluebook while demanding its immediate withdrawal. Through the Blue Book released earlier, Japan has repeatedly argued that the islands it calls "Takeshima" are Japanese territory that Korea is "illegally occupying". Meanwhile, Tokyo has reaffirmed its rejection of a Korean Supreme Court ruling ordering Japanese companies involved in forced labour during Japan's colonial period from 1910 to 1945 to compensate Korean victims. The phrase about the "illegal" occupation of Korea was retained for the seventh consecutive year since it first appeared in the [2018 edition](#). As announced in the Diplomatic Bluebook released on April 16, the Korean government has strongly protested the Japanese government's repeated unjust territorial claims on Dokdo, our own territory historically, geographically and under international law, and has called on Japan to withdraw them immediately, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lim Sook said in a press release. Furthermore, Lim added, such claims by Japan in no way affect Korea's sovereignty over Dokdo. While the Blue Book reiterates Tokyo's position on Dokdo, it also emphasizes the importance of Japan's relationship with Korea. The report also referred to its western neighbour as a "partner" for the first time in 14 years.



Source: The Korea Times

9. President Yoon's approval rating hits all-time low following PPP's crushing defeat

President Yoon Suk Yeol's [approval rating has plummeted to an all-time low following his conservative party's loss](#) in April's general election. According to a recent biweekly poll by Embrain Public, KStat Research, Korea Research, and Hankook Research, Yoon's approval rating dropped by 11 percentage points to 27 percent in the third week of April. This marks the lowest point in his approval ratings since taking office. The decline is stark, considering that his previous lowest rating was 28 percent in August 2022. This recent drop follows a downward trend from 36 percent in March and 38 percent in April. The defeat of his conservative People Power Party (PPP) in the general election contributed to the record low approval ratings. The Liberal Democratic Party (DP) and its satellite party, the Democratic United Party (DUP), emerged victorious

with a total of 175 seats, including 14 proportional representation seats, while the PPP and its affiliate, the People's Future Party (PFP), secured only 108 seats, including 18 proportional representation seats.



Source: JoongAng Daily

10. Seoul, Washington to hold first talks on defence cost sharing in Hawaii

South Korea and the United States commenced discussions in Hawaii from April 23 to 25 [regarding the sharing of expenses for maintaining US troops stationed in South Korea](#). Led by Korea's chief negotiator Lee Tae-woo and his US counterpart Linda Specht in Honolulu, Hawaii, this marked their first meeting since the appointment of two diplomats the previous month. The talks aim to determine South Korea's contribution to the 28,500-strong US Forces Korea (USFK) stationed there. The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized the importance of reaching a fair agreement to support the permanent presence of US troops and enhance joint defence capabilities. Speculation arose about the timing of the negotiations, with some attributing it to potential political shifts in the United States. Notably, during Donald Trump's presidency, negotiations on the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) were contentious, with demands for a significant increase in South Korea's share of USFK spending. The current SMA, the 11th iteration, sees South Korea agreeing to a 13.9 percent increase in contributions, amounting to \$1.03 billion in 2021. The current agreement set to expire by the end of 2025.



11. Korean official development assistance increased by 11%

South Korea's Official Development Assistance (ODA) [witnessed a significant surge, reaching \\$3.13 billion last year](#), marking an 11.4 per cent increase from the previous year. This places South Korea at 14th position among the 31 OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member countries. Bilateral aid, totalling \$2.3 billion, and indirect multilateral aid through international organizations, amounting to \$830 million, saw equal increments, according to a Foreign Ministry press release. The surge in ODA is attributed to increased deposits and contributions to international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF, despite relatively stable dollar-to-dollar exchange rates. Notably, bilateral aid saw a 3.4 percent uptick from the previous year, with grant aid and concessional loans rising to \$1.57 billion and \$730 million, respectively. Grant aid focused on social sectors such as education and health, while concessional loans expanded to meet the growing financial demands of recipient countries, particularly for climate change responses and industrial development. The Korean government aims to further amplify ODA to address international demands, including humanitarian support in conflict zones and climate change mitigation.

12. South Korean HD Heavy Industries delivered 3,000-t Shin Chae-ho submarine to Navy

South Korea has [officially received its latest 3,000-ton diesel submarine](#), the Shin Chae-ho, marking a significant addition to its naval capabilities. The submarine, named in honour of Korean independence activist Shin Chae-ho, was transferred in a ceremony held at the HD Hyundai Heavy Industries shipyard in Ulsan. Attended by officials from the Defence Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), HD Hyundai Heavy, and representatives from nine countries including the United States, Poland, and Australia, the event highlighted the submarine's role as a key component in South Korea's "kill chain" system aimed at deterring North Korean threats. The Shin Chae-ho is the third submarine of its kind, following the Dosan Ahn Chang-ho in 2021 and the Choreography ship last year, completing the 'Jang Bogo-III Arrangement-I' submarine program initiated in 2007. Featuring advanced technologies such as fuel cells, lead-acid battery propulsion systems, and noise reduction capabilities, the submarine enables stealthy and sustained operations. Additionally, it is equipped with a vertical projectile system capable of firing submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Following its handover to the Navy, the Shin Chae-ho is set to undergo operational readiness processes, with plans for full electrification expected to be completed by the end of the year.



*domestically developed 3,000-ton diesel submarine, the Shin Chae-ho, was delivered to the Navy
Retrieved from: Korea JoongAng Daily*

13. NATO invited Korea to the summit for the third consecutive time

The Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, [announced that leaders from South Korea](#) and three other Indo-Pacific nations have been extended invitations to attend the NATO summit in Washington in July. This marks the third consecutive year that South Korea has received such an invitation, joining Japan, Australia, and New Zealand as non-NATO partners in the region. Stoltenberg emphasized the significance of collaboration between NATO allies and Russia's Asian friends in supporting Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict. He underscored the importance of like-minded countries uniting to address various security challenges, including technology and cyber threats. Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul represented South Korea at the NATO Allies and Partners session, reaffirming Seoul's commitment to enhancing cooperation with NATO.



*Yoon shakes hands with NATO Secretary-General Stoltenberg at the 2023 NATO summit
Retrieved from: JoongAng Daily*
