



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. US presidential candidate Trump threatened to withdraw US Forces from Korea

On April 30, Time magazine reported that former President Donald Trump suggested that American troops might be withdrawn from South Korea unless the country increases its financial contributions to support them. With Trump potentially running for president again in the upcoming November election, South Korea is increasingly concerned. During his presidency, Trump pushed for a significant rise in South Korea's financial share for the US Forces Korea (USFK) under the Special Measures Agreement (SMA). The recent release of [Trump's interview](#) by Time coincides with new negotiations between Seoul and Washington over South Korea's contribution to maintaining the 28,500 USFK troops. Trump, as quoted by Time, questioned the need for defending South Korea, stating, "We have 40,000 troops, and it's in a dangerous situation; why would we defend anybody?" Last month, the first round of talks on the new SMA was held in Hawaii, with a [second round of talks](#) held on May 21. The current six-year SMA is set to expire at the end of next year. As South Korea faces deteriorating inter-Korean relations and a tense security environment on the Korean Peninsula, the possibility of Trump's return and his stringent stance on USFK funding raises significant security concerns for the country.



Korean and U.S. officials leading talks on defence cost-sharing held a second round of talks on Tuesday, May 21, at the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis in Seoul.
Retrieved from: The Korea Times

2. South Korea-Australia pledges to strengthen partnership in the Indo-Pacific

South Korea and Australia held a ["two plus two"](#) meeting in Melbourne on May 1, 2024, where their foreign and defense ministers exchanged views on their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, defense matters, and regional issues, including the Korean Peninsula. Discussions also included the possibility of South Korea joining the AUKUS alliance with Australia, the UK, and the US. South Korea was represented by Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and Defense Minister Shin Won-sik, while Australia's delegation included Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles and Foreign Minister Penny Wong. This marked the sixth such meeting between the countries' foreign and defense ministers. [According to Seoul's foreign ministry](#), this meeting was particularly significant as it was the first since the new governments took office and South Korea declared its [Indo-Pacific strategy](#). Both nations agreed to seek ways to advance shared Indo-Pacific agendas, emphasizing their commitment to liberal democracy and

a common perspective on regional and global issues. They also pledged to deepen their strategic and future-oriented cooperation, particularly in the defense sector.



Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul and Minister of National Defense Shin Won-sik, along with Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for National Defense Richard Marles and Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong, held the sixth ROK-Australia Foreign and Defense Ministers' (2+2) Meeting in Melbourne, Australia, on Wednesday, May 1. Retrieved from: MEA, Republic of Korea

3. South Korea votes in favour of UN resolution backing Palestinian membership

On May 10, 2024, [South Korea voted in favour](#) of a UN General Assembly resolution supporting Palestine's bid for UN membership, marking a significant shift from its 2012 abstention on recognising Palestine as an observer state. This move aligns with a resolution backed by 143 of the 193 UN member states, including South Korea, urging the Security Council to consider Palestinian membership favourably. Notably, nine countries, including South Korea's key ally, the United States and major trading partner Israel, opposed the resolution, while 25 countries abstained. A South Korean foreign ministry official stated that the decision reflects the belief that Palestine will be ready to act as a full member in the future. This stance indicates South Korea's support for the international community's "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Observers note that this decision, diverging from the United States on a sensitive issue, could pose challenges for South Korea but also suggests a strategic aim to strengthen ties with countries in the global south.



The results of a vote on a resolution for the UN Security Council to reconsider and support the full membership of Palestine in the UN is displayed during a special session of the UN General Assembly at the UN headquarters in New York City on May 10, 2024.

4. UN commission urged Korea to withdraw plan to abolish gender ministry

Human rights advocacy groups in Korea, along with the National Human Rights Commission, have urged the [government to reconsider its plan to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family](#). They emphasized the need to enhance gender equality measures in response to a perceived regression in gender equality in South Korea. These calls were made during a session of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) held in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 14, 2024.

The Korea Women's Associations United (KWAU) issued a statement demanding the government immediately retract its plan to dismantle the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. They called for increased funding, expanded organizational capacity, and greater authority for the ministry, as well as an effective ministerial committee for gender equality.

The Korean delegation, led by Assistant Minister Kim Ki-nam from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family's Planning and Coordination Office, included representatives from the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health and Welfare. During the CEDAW session, the National Human Rights Commissioner expressed concerns about a weakening national gender equality policy following the administration's announcement to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the significant reduction in the gender equality budget for the current year. The commissioner also noted the removal of the term "women" from various gender policies after the resignation of former minister Kim Hyun-sook last year.

In response, the Korean government stated it was reorganizing ministerial committees to more effectively address potential gender conflicts. South Korea has been a signatory to CEDAW since 1984.



Kim Ki-nam, assistant minister of Planning and Coordination Office at the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and head of the Korean delegation to the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), speaks during a committee session held in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 14. Retrieved From: Korea JoongAng Daily.

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

In May 2024, tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalated as North Korea intensified its provocative military actions. On May 17, [North Korea fired](#) several short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea, just 25 days after a similar launch on April 22, according to the Joint

Chiefs of Staff (JCS). These missiles, launched from Wonsan on North Korea's eastern coast, traveled approximately 300 kilometers (186.4 miles) before hitting the East Sea. This launch followed joint air exercises by South Korea and the United States involving South Korean F-35A fighters and US F-22 Raptors. Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, had stated that these new weapons were for defence against South Korea. On the same day, [North Korea announced](#) the testing of a strategic ballistic missile with a new "autonomous" navigation system. Overseen by Kim Jong-un, the test aimed to enhance the accuracy and reliability of their weapons. This marked an expansion in the range of North Korea's tactical guided weapons, previously estimated at 100 to 110 miles. The provocation came after support from Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, prompting a joint statement from the US and its allies against military intimidation by North Korea.

On May 27, [North Korea's attempt to launch a spy satellite](#), Malligyong-1, failed when the rocket exploded mid-air after liftoff from the Sohae Launching Station. This was North Korea's third failed attempt to orbit a spy satellite. South Korea's military detected the launch and found parts in South Korean waters. The explosion was attributed to issues with a new "liquid oxygen plus petroleum" engine, with further investigations underway.



TV screen shows a file image of North Korea's spy satellite launch. The rocket launch ended in an explosion mid-air, Pyongyang said on May 27.

On May 28, [South Korea reported that over 260 balloons](#) carrying feces and trash were sent from North Korea, the largest such launch ever. These balloons, rigged with timers and explosives, traveled across several South Korean regions, prompting condemnation from the JCS for violating international law and threatening security. This follows a similar incident in 2016.



Two balloons were discovered in South Chungcheong on May 28 Tuesday, and a package presumed to contain trash carried by a balloon was found in

northern Gyeonggi on May 29 Wednesday. Retrieved from: Korea JoongAng Dially

On May 30, [North Korea fired](#) about 10 short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea, with the missiles flying approximately 350 kilometers (217 miles). These were believed to be super-large multiple rocket launchers, marking an unusual scale of missile launch. The JCS condemned this as a serious threat to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.



Short-range ballistic missiles are being fired in this file photo from the North Korea's Central Television. Retrieved from: Yonhap News Agency

6. South Korea and the US staged joint air drills with stealth fighters

On May 24, 2024, [South Korea and the United States conducted joint air combat exercises](#) featuring advanced stealth fighters, demonstrating a formidable show of force in response to growing North Korean military threats. The drills, held in central South Korea, involved two South Korean F-35A fighters and two U.S. F-22 Raptors, which arrived in the country earlier in the week. This marked the first exercise of its kind, with the aircraft alternating between offensive and defensive missions against each other. Previously, in December 2022, South Korean F-35As and U.S. F-22s conducted a joint sortie with a U.S. B-52H bomber. The recent exercises coincide with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's test of a new strategic missile system, showcasing Pyongyang's expanding arsenal. The F-35 and F-22 are cutting-edge fifth-generation fighters, renowned for their stealth capabilities and advanced avionics, making them some of the world's most formidable jets.



South Korean F-35A and U.S. F-22 fighters take part in a joint combat drill in a photo provided by the U.S. Air Force on May 16 Thursday. Retrieved from: Korea JoongAng Dially.

7. Britain and South Korea co-hosted the AI summit in Seoul

On May 21 and 22, 2024, [Britain and South Korea co-hosted an AI Summit](#) in Seoul, themed "Building on the AI Safety Summit: Innovative and Inclusive Future." This event, featuring both virtual and in-person sessions, addressed the risks and opportunities associated with the rapidly evolving technology and aimed to present a framework for global AI governance. Leaders from major countries, representatives from leading tech firms, and global organizations participated in the summit. This event followed the first Global AI Security Summit held in Britain last November.



Leaders of major global powers participate in a virtual session of the AI Seoul Summit, co-hosted by President Yoon Suk Yeol and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak on May 21 Tuesday.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak led the Virtual Leaders Session, which included participants from seven countries: the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Japan. Eleven private sector organizations, such as Google, DeepMind, Samsung Electronics, Naver, Amazon Web Services, OpenAI, and META, along with the United Nations and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, also took part.



Retrieved from: Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

A key outcome of the summit was the endorsement of the [Seoul Declaration](#) by the leaders of major global powers. This declaration acknowledges the interconnected goals of AI security, innovation, and inclusion, and seeks to address the broad spectrum of opportunities and challenges associated with AI. The Seoul Declaration represents a significant advancement from the previous year's summit, emphasizing the global community's enhanced efforts to tackle AI risks. It highlights the importance of interoperability between AI governance

frameworks, employing a risk-based approach to maximize benefits while addressing a wide range of AI-related risks

8. China slams Korean lawmaker for attending Taiwanese president's inauguration

China's embassy in South Korea has issued a [strong condemnation of a South Korean lawmaker's attendance](#) at the inauguration ceremony of Taiwan's President Lai Ching-tee on Monday, May 20, 2024. The event saw the participation of over 500 foreign dignitaries from 51 countries, including Cho Kyong-tee, a member of South Korea's ruling People's Power Party, and Lee Yun-ho, South Korea's representative to Taiwan. However, South Korea did not dispatch an official delegation, a move perceived as an effort to balance relations with Beijing, which views Taiwan as part of its territory. A spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy expressed strong opposition and condemnation of the Korean lawmaker's visit, asserting that it contradicts the China-South Korea strategic cooperative partnership. Additionally, Beijing has urged to South Korean government to refrain from interfering in China's internal affairs. South Korea cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 1992 in favor of establishing relations with China, and in 1993, set up a mission in Taipei to sustain unofficial relations and cooperation. Last year, President Yoon Suk-yeol declared that Taiwan's status as a democracy is not merely a China-Taiwan issue but a global one, affirming Seoul's support for a democratic and independent Taiwan.



Retrieved from: The Print.

9. President Yoon Suk-yeol unveiled ambitious space exploration goals

[President Yoon Suk-yeol announced](#) on Thursday, May 30, 2024, that South Korea is advancing its space program with ambitious goals to send a lunar probe by 2032 and plant the national flag on Mars by 2045. This declaration was made during the inauguration of Korea's new space agency, the Korea Aerospace Administration (CASA), held in Sacheon, located 300 kilometers south of Seoul. President Yoon revealed plans to invest 100 trillion won (\$72.5 billion) by 2045 to achieve these milestones. Emphasizing South Korea's commitment to space exploration, Yoon pledged to boost funding for the space and aerospace sectors, with a targeted increase in the space exploration budget to 1.5 trillion won by 2027 and an aim to attract nearly 100 trillion won in investments by 2045. President Yoon also announced the establishment of Space Aerospace Day, to be observed on May 27 annually, aimed at raising awareness about space exploration. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning global space race, Yoon stressed South Korea's determination to play a leading role in shaping standards within the space and related industries. Notably, South Korea's recent achievements include the successful launch of the

200-tonne Noori (KSLV-II) rocket, which deployed eight satellites into orbit. Additionally, the nation has plans to bolster its surveillance capabilities with the acquisition of five spy satellites by 2025 and 60 small, micro-level spy satellites by 2030.



President Yoon Suk Yeol speaks at the opening ceremony of the Korea AeroSpace Administration (KASA) in Sacheon, South Gyeongsang Province on May 30, Thursday. Retrieved from: The Korea Times.

10. The Ninth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit held in Seoul

The 9th [Trilateral Summit of South Korea, China, and Japan](#) convened in Seoul on Monday, May 27, 2024, marking a significant milestone in their 25-year trilateral cooperation history. Attended by President Yoon Suk-yeol of South Korea, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan, and Premier Li Qiang of China, the summit aimed to bolster regional ties amidst evolving geopolitical dynamics. Despite interruptions due to bilateral conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic since 2019, the summit signaled a renewed commitment to enhancing cooperation between the three nations.



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea

Emphasising the importance of popular support in driving trilateral cooperation forward, the summit focused on laying the groundwork for institutionalizing collaborative efforts. Acknowledging the need to improve the public's daily lives in the three countries, the leaders outlined mutually beneficial projects in six key areas critical to citizens' daily lives. These areas encompassed climate change response, sustainable development, public health, aging societies, science and technology cooperation, digital transformation, disaster prevention, and security.



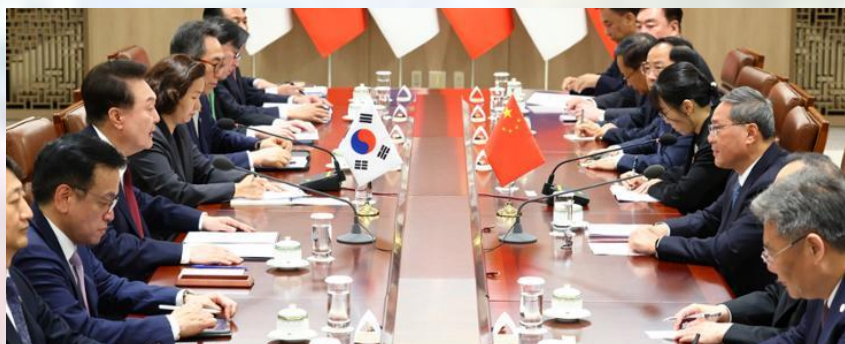
Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

Furthermore, the trilateral cooperation pledged to contribute to regional and international peace and prosperity. Reaffirming their commitment to peace, stability, and prosperity in Northeast Asia, the three nations stressed their shared responsibility in maintaining these principles. Specifically addressing concerns regarding the Korean Peninsula, the leaders reiterated their positions on regional peace, the denuclearisation of North Korea, and the abduction issue.

Highlighting their partnership with ASEAN, the summit emphasised the importance of expanding trilateral cooperation within ASEAN frameworks. Recognising the symbiotic relationship between trilateral cooperation and regional stability, the leaders underscored the necessity of continuing to enhance collaborative efforts within ASEAN's context.

11. President Yoon's Meeting with Chinese Premier

On May 26, 2024, President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang [held a bilateral summit](#) in Seoul, just one day before the China-Japan-South Korea trilateral summit, which resumed after four and a half years. During their discussions, South Korea and China agreed to initiate high-level diplomatic and security dialogues, with the first session scheduled for next month, as [reported by Korean national media](#). The leaders emphasized the importance of maintaining close communication regardless of internal and external challenges to ensure the smooth development of their bilateral relations. They committed to establishing and revitalizing communication channels on diplomacy and national security, including Dialogues on Diplomacy and National Security, 1.5-track dialogues, and strategic discussions between Deputy Foreign Ministers.



President Yoon Suk Yeol speaks during a meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, second from right, during their meeting at the former's office in central Seoul's Yongsan District on May 26. Retrieved from: The Korea Times

On economic and trade matters, both leaders acknowledged that bilateral cooperation is essential for the economic growth and welfare of both nations. They decided to relaunch a joint investment cooperation committee, which had been inactive since 2011, to boost bilateral trade and investment. Additionally, they planned to hold a meeting of chief delegates early next month to advance negotiations on a free trade agreement.

This bilateral meeting holds significant importance as both countries strive to improve their relations amidst the growing rivalry between the United States and China, South Korea's increasing alignment with the US, and North Korea's escalating aggression. In the context of an uncertain regional and international political climate, the restoration of Sino-South Korean relations is expected to help reduce regional tensions and promote development through regional cooperation.

12. South Korea sanctioned 7 North Koreans and 2 Russian ships for UNSC resolution violations

On Friday, May 24, 2024, [South Korea imposed independent sanctions on seven North Korean individuals and two Russian ships](#) for their involvement in illegal arms and fuel trade with Russia, actions that violate UN sanctions. This move is part of South Korea's efforts to intensify measures against North Korea's activities banned by multiple UN Security Council resolutions. The imposition of sanctions follows the recent conclusion of the UN panel monitoring North Korea's sanctions compliance, which was not extended due to a Russian veto. Among the sanctioned individuals is Rim Yong-hyok, head of the Syrian unit of North Korean arms dealer Korea Mining and Development Trading Corporation, who is suspected of managing arms deals with Russia's Wagner mercenary group. Another individual, Han Hyok-chol, head of Taeryong Trading Company, is accused of importing Russian diesel into North Korea in violation of UN Resolution 2397.

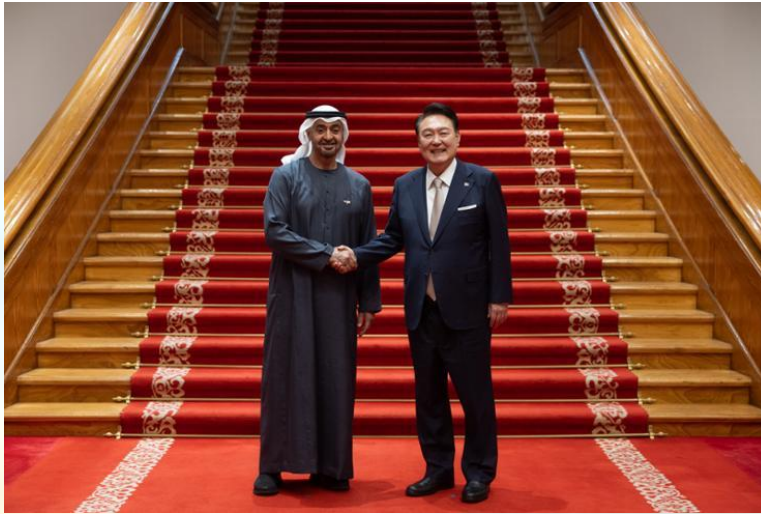


Source: The Economic Times

The five other North Koreans sanctioned—Kim Jong-gil, Jang Ho-yong, Ri Kyong-sik, Ri Yong-min, and Park Kwang-hyeok—are believed to have illegally worked at IT companies in Vladivostok, Russia, to earn foreign currency for North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, actions prohibited under UN Resolution 2375. Additionally, the Russian ships MAIA-1 and MARIA are suspected of transporting military materials to North Korea and Russia. Consequently, these embargoed vessels now require special permission from South Korean port authorities to dock in South Korean ports.

13. South Korea inked FTA with UAE during President Yoon's state visit

On May 29, 2024, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan [held bilateral talks in Seoul](#) to discuss enhancing trade and investment between their countries. Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan arrived in South Korea on Tuesday, May 28, for a two-day visit, during which his plane was ceremonially escorted by four South Korean Air Force F-15 fighter jets upon entering the country's air defence identification zone. During their meeting, the two leaders focused on strengthening cooperation in energy, defence, and investment, signing several agreements and memorandums of understanding. A [joint statement](#) highlighted their commitment to expanding the special strategic partnership and enhancing collaboration in finance, energy, defence technology, cyber security, and other critical areas. Additionally, they explored potential trilateral cooperation and discussed global issues such as terrorism.



President Yoon Suk Yeol, right, and United Arab Emirates President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan shakes hands after dinner at Cheong Wa Dae in Seoul, May 28.
Retrieved from: Yonhap News Agency.

In conjunction with the visit, the [Korea-UAE Business Investment Forum was inaugurated in Seoul](#), gathering around 200 government officials and business leaders, including South Korean Trade Minister Cheong In-kyo and the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. Discussions centered on boosting economic cooperation and forging business partnerships in emerging industries like clean energy and information and communication technology. Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1980, South Korea and the UAE have developed extensive partnerships, notably exemplified by the Barakah nuclear power plant in Abu Dhabi. Bilateral trade reached an estimated US\$20.8 billion in 2023, making the UAE South Korea's 14th largest trading partner. Following the signing of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement in October last year, the recent summit signifies a push to broaden collaboration beyond traditional sectors into new and innovative industries.

14. South Korea falls to 62nd place in press freedom index

South Korea [dropped to 62nd place in the annual Global Press Freedom Index](#), a significant decline from 47th place the previous year, according to a [report](#) released on May 31, 2024, by Reporters Without Borders. The Paris-based NGO, which advocates for press freedom, rated [South Korea with a score of 64.87 out of 100](#), placing it behind Italy (69.8), the US (66.59), and Japan (62.12). North Korea, on the other hand, was noted as one of the most repressive countries for journalists. The report highlighted that, although journalists in South Korea generally work under satisfactory conditions, they often face online harassment with little protection. A 2023 survey by the Korea Press Foundation revealed that 30 percent of journalists

experienced harassment related to their work. This harassment typically occurs through phone calls, text messages, emails, and internet trolls, along with malicious legal actions. Additionally, over 40 percent of harassed journalists reported inadequate support from their employers, underscoring the need for better legal support. Norway maintained its top position in this year's Press Freedom Index, followed by Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland, Estonia, and Portugal.



Source: The Korea Times
