



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.

Korea Digest No. 13 July, 2024

Contents

- 1. South Korean Gov't to establish new population policy ministry**
- 2. Heightened Tensions in the Korean Peninsula Amidst North Korean Belligerence**
- 3. Petition to impeach President Yoon surpasses 1 million signatures**
- 4. South Korea to export K9 howitzers to Romania**
- 5. South Korean President Yoon attends the NATO Summit**
- 6. Korea and US hold talks on defence cost sharing**
- 7. South Korea and China resumed vice-ministerial strategic dialogue after a two-year hiatus**
- 8. North Korea and Belarus discussed cooperation as foreign ministers meet in Pyongyang**
- 9. South Korea, the US, and Japan inks trilateral security cooperation agreement**

*Prepared by
Mohammed Unais AV, Project Fellow, Korea Centre*

1. South Korean Gov't to Establish New Population Policy Ministry

On July 1, 2024, the Korean government [announced](#) the creation of a new ministry dedicated to tackling the country's critical demographic issues, such as a low birth rate and an ageing population. This follows President Yoon Suk-yeol's declaration of a "[national demographic emergency](#)" last month. Interior and Security Minister Lee Sang-min stated that the tentatively named Ministry of Population Strategy and Planning would be established within the next three months, with its head serving as deputy prime minister. Speaking at a joint ministerial press conference at the Government Complex in Seoul, Minister Lee emphasised that the new ministry would act as a "strong control tower" to address the challenges posed by a declining birth rate and an ageing society. The ministry's scope will encompass not only low birth rate responses but also comprehensive population policies, including labour and immigration. The creation of this new ministry will raise the number of government departments from 19 to 20, underscoring its significance and positioning it second only to the Ministry of Economy and Finance. It will integrate the current Presidential Committee on Aging Society and Population Policy, taking charge of budget reviews, project evaluations, and coordination under new legislation. A national population development strategy will be formulated every five years. The ministry will streamline social policy efforts related to low birth rates, previously managed by multiple ministries.



Interior and Safety Minister Lee Sang-min delivers a joint briefing with related ministries on the establishment of a new ministry of population strategy and planning at the Government Complex Seoul.

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

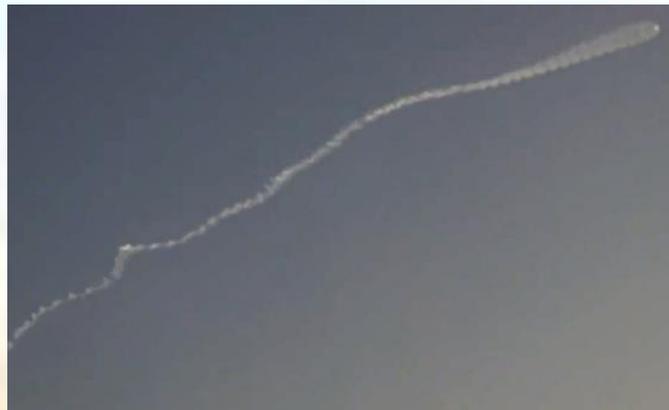
In July 2024, tensions on the Korean Peninsula intensified as North Korea escalated provocative military actions. On July 1, North Korea [launched two ballistic missiles](#), with one failing and landing within its own territory, according to South Korean military officials. The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that a short-range ballistic missile was fired from Jangyon in South Hwanghae Province at 5:05 a.m., travelling approximately 600 kilometres before hitting North Korea's northeast coast. Another missile launched the same day traveled only 120 kilometers.

Following these events, [North Korea announced](#) on July 2 that it had successfully test-fired a new missile equipped with a super-large warhead. State media, Korean Central News Agency

(KCNA), reported that the Hwasong-11Da-4.5 missile, tested on July 1, could carry a 4.5-tonne warhead. The missile was tested with a simulated heavy warhead to assess flight stability and accuracy over a maximum range of 500 kilometers and a minimum of 90 kilometers. This marked the first instance of North Korea testing a strategic ballistic missile with such a large warhead. KCNA added that another test is planned for this month to further evaluate the missile's capabilities, including flight characteristics, accuracy, and blast effects.



North Korea test-fires a tactical ballistic missile equipped with a new "autonomous" navigation system, photo released by the North's Korean Central News Agency.



The trail of North Korea's missiles near South Korea's northwestern border island of Yeonpyeong. Retrieved from: Korea Joongang Daily

Responding to the North Korean missile testing, on July 2, South Korea near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for the first time in six years, as reported by [Korean national media](#). During the exercises, troops fired approximately 140 live rounds from K-9 and K105A1 self-propelled howitzers at forward ranges located within 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) of the military demarcation line inside the DMZ. These drills marked the first land-based exercises since the suspension of the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement on September 19, 2023. The South Korean military stated that the drills aimed to enhance the artillery's readiness and response capabilities in the event of provocations from the North.



A Spike anti-tank missile is fired from Yeonpyeong Island during the South Korean Marine Corps' first live-fire artillery exercise in seven years near the Northern Limit Line. Retrieved from: Korea Joongang daily

On July 18, the JCS in Seoul [reported](#) that North Korea resumed launching garbage-filled balloons into South Korea, marking the eighth round of such incidents this year. The balloons, which landed in the northern part of Gyeonggi, prompted authorities to warn the public against touching them and to report any sightings to military or police officials. Between May 28 and June 26, North Korea had previously sent approximately 2,000 such balloons in seven rounds in retaliation for South Korean defector groups and activists distributing anti-North Korean leaflets.



A firefighter clears a waste balloon that fell on the roof of a villa in Hakiddong, Incheon



Staffers from local authorities clean the site where North Korea's trash-carrying balloons landed in Jung District, central Seoul

On July 24, the Presidential Security Service (PSS) [found trash-filled balloons](#) at the presidential office compound in central Seoul, including the Ministry of National Defense and the Presidential Office in Yongsan District. Reports indicated that these balloons caused around 27 million won (\$19,000) in damages in Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi province. In

retaliation, South Korea's military [resumed broadcasting](#) propaganda via loudspeakers along the inter-Korean border, playing K-pop songs and anti-North Korean speeches criticising Kim Jong-un and promoting democracy.



Loudspeaker broadcasts blare from a guard post on the South Korean side of the border near Paju, Gyeonggi.

In response, on July 23, South Korea and the United States [launched joint air exercises](#) to bolster their combined combat capabilities in response to North Korea's growing threats. The drills, taking place at an air base in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, will continue until August 8. They feature a range of aircraft, including the US Marine Corps F/A-18C/D and F-35B fighter jets and South Korea's F-16, FA-50, KA-1, and F-15K aircraft. The exercises focus on base fighter tactics, close air support, air interdiction, and defense counter air training. This initiative aims to enhance the interoperability of the allied forces' different aircraft types. The joint air drills occur amid heightened tensions and recent missile tests by North Korea.

3. Petition to impeach President Yoon surpassed 1 million signatures

On July 3, 2024, more than [one million South Koreans signed](#) a parliamentary petition demanding the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-Yeol. The online petition, which was posted on the National Assembly's website on June 24, gathered 1,018,503 signatures within ten days—averaging over 100,000 signatures per day. The petition urges the current 22nd National Assembly to immediately propose an impeachment motion against President Yoon. The petitioners cited several reasons for this action, including allegations of abuse of power in a military investigation, interference with the rights of Korean forced laborers from the Japanese occupation era (1910-1945), increased tensions between South and North Korea, bribery, and negligence in addressing public health concerns related to the release of treated radioactive water from Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

On the same day, the Liberal Democratic Party (DP) [strongly criticised](#) President Yoon and his administration. During a Supreme Council meeting at the National Assembly in western Seoul, DP floor leader Park Chan-dae remarked that despite the April 10 general election, which showed the public's strong disapproval of the Yoon administration, there had been no substantial changes. The DP condemned the government's promises of state affairs reform and cabinet modernisation as empty and ineffective. They also suggested that the petition could

have received more than 5 million signatures if the National Assembly's petition platform had been more accessible, [according to media reports](#).

4. Korea to export K9 howitzers to Romania

[South Korea has secured a deal to export](#) 1.3 trillion won (\$938.7 million) worth of K9 self-propelled howitzers to Romania, marking Romania's largest arms purchase in seven years. The agreement, signed on July 9 between Hanwha Aerospace, the manufacturer of the K9, and the Romanian Ministry of National Defense, includes 54 K9 howitzers, 36 K10 ammunition delivery vehicles, and ammunition. According to the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) on July 10, deliveries will begin in 2027, with Hanwha Aerospace collaborating with local Romanian companies.



Hanwha Aerospace's K9 self-propelled howitzer (right) and K10 ammunition resupply vehicle (left).

This contract makes Romania the ninth country to purchase the K9, joining others like Australia, Egypt, India, Norway, Estonia, Turkey, Poland, and Finland. DAPA highlighted Romania's growing partnership with South Korea's defense industry, noting the country's recent acquisition of Chiron man-portable surface-to-air missiles and now the latest K9 howitzers. Romania's decision follows its defense minister Angel Tilver's confirmation of the purchase during a visit from his South Korean counterpart, Shin Won-sik, last month, amidst active high-level exchanges between the two nations. Hanwha Aerospace's bid succeeded over other NATO member offerings, including Germany's PzH2000 and Turkey's Fertina howitzers.

5. South Korean President Yoon attends the NATO Summit

South Korean President [Yoon Suk-Yeol attended](#) the 75th NATO Summit in Washington, DC, from July 9 to 11, marking South Korea's third consecutive invitation to the summit as a non-NATO partner in the Indo-Pacific region. During the event, President Yoon emphasized concerns over increasing military ties between North Korea and Russia, pledging greater support for Ukraine. He held approximately [ten bilateral meetings](#) with global leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

This participation came shortly after Russia and North Korea signed a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement at a summit in Pyongyang, heightening concerns about their military cooperation. President Yoon [received a security briefing](#) at the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, where he offered encouragement to the troops. Additionally, he met with leaders from four Indo-Pacific NATO partner countries and addressed the Indo-Pacific session at the NATO Public Forum.



President Yoon Suk Yeol and first lady Kim Keon Hee arrive at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii Monday to begin their five-day trip to the United States ahead of the NATO summit in Washington.



President Yoon Suk Yeol gives an address during a visit to the Indo-Pacific Command's headquarters in Camp Smith, Hawaii

On the summit's final day, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, collectively known as the IP4, [issued a joint statement](#) condemning the deepening military ties between Russia and North Korea. They called for an end to these collaborations, citing violations of UN Security Council resolutions that ban arms transfers to North Korea. The IP4 countries also committed to working together in four key areas: supporting Ukraine, enhancing cyber defense, sharing information, and advancing artificial intelligence.



Leaders of South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand pose for a photo with U.S. President Joe Biden after their meeting on the sidelines of the NATO summit.

During a special bilateral meeting on July 11, President Yoon and US President Joe Biden updated the guidelines of the Nuclear Consultative Group, outlining procedures for a joint nuclear response to a North Korean attack. They reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to South

Korea's extended deterrence, including the use of nuclear weapons, to counter North Korean threats, [according to the joint statement](#).



U.S. President Joe Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol meet on the sidelines of the NATO Summit.

In support of Ukraine, [President Yoon announced](#) plans to double South Korea's contribution to the Ukraine Trust Fund to \$24 million next year. Additionally, South Korea will provide a \$2 billion long-term low-interest loan through the Economic Development Cooperation Fund and donate 200 power generators to support Ukraine's energy sector.

On the summit's final day, President Yoon met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to agree on sharing information about North Korean weapons used in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. During the meeting, President Yoon also welcomed the [signing of an airworthiness certification agreement](#) between South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration and NATO's Aviation Committee. This agreement ensures NATO's official recognition of South Korea's airworthiness certification process for domestically manufactured aircraft.



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met with the President Yoon Suk Yeol and they signed an agreement on mutual recognition for military airworthiness certification.

Additionally, President [Yoon engaged in bilateral talks](#) with leaders from the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland. These meetings aimed to enhance South Korea's international standing and explore potential future deals with these European nations.

6. Korea and US hold talks on defence cost sharing

On July 10, South Korea and the United States held the fifth round of negotiations on cost-sharing for the upkeep of US Forces Korea (USFK). The three-day discussions in Seoul marked the latest round of talks that began in April to renew the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), which determines Seoul's financial contributions towards the deployment of around 28,500 US troops. The current six-year SMA is set to expire at the end of next year.

South Korea has called for a fair and reasonable share of the costs, while the US aims to reach a mutually agreeable deal. There is concern in Seoul that the bargaining could become more challenging if former President Donald Trump returns to office, who previously demanded a significant increase in South Korea's contributions to \$5 billion. The existing agreement requires [South Korea to pay \\$1.03 billion in 2021](#), a 13.9% increase from 2019, with payments set to rise annually according to increases in Seoul's defence spending. Since 1991, South Korea has been sharing the cost of USFK personnel, including the construction of military facilities and providing support for various logistical needs.

7. South Korea and China resumed vice-ministerial strategic dialogue after a two-year hiatus

On July 24, 2024, [South Korea and China held](#) their first sub-ministerial strategic talks in two years, amidst increasing military and economic ties between North Korea and Russia. The meeting in Seoul was attended by South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun and Chinese Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu. The five-hour-long discussions focused on bilateral relations, security concerns on the Korean Peninsula, and broader regional and global issues, reported by South Korean foreign ministry



Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun, and China's Executive Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Ma Zhaoxu pose for a photo during a meeting at the foreign ministry building in Seoul.

This dialogue was the first high-level meeting between Seoul and Beijing since North Korea and Russia signed a new strategic partnership agreement on June 19. Both countries agreed to increase high-level exchanges and enhance cooperation. The talks come at a critical time, with North Korea heightening tensions in the region through its cooperation with Russia. South Korea voiced serious concerns over North Korea's recent actions and the agreement with Russia, urging China to contribute positively to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and to support denuclearisation efforts.

Additionally, South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul emphasised the country's commitment to maintaining strategic diplomacy with China. In response, China reiterated its unchanged policy on the Korean Peninsula and promised to play a constructive role in resolving related issues. China also stressed the importance of South Korea's efforts to protect North Korean defectors and requested active cooperation from China. The Korea-China strategic dialogue followed a May agreement between South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol and Chinese Premier Li Qiang to reactivate diplomatic and security communication channels.

8. North Korea and Belarus discussed cooperation as foreign ministers meet in Pyongyang

On July 24, 2024, [North Korean and Belarusian foreign ministers met in Pyongyang](#) to discuss regional and international cooperation. North Korea's state media reported that Foreign Minister Cho Son-hui and Belarusian Foreign Minister Maxim Vladimirovich Ryshenkov had an in-depth discussion on strengthening the traditional friendship and cooperation between their countries. The meeting, which occurred amid speculation of increased trilateral cooperation with Russia, North Korea and Belarus, included conversations that likely expressed support for Russia during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, as well as shared sentiments of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism.



Belarusian Foreign Minister Maxim Vladimirovich Ryshenkov, left, shakes hands with North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui

Belarus has been few countries with whom North Korea maintained closer ties in recent years other than China and Russia. Minsk received North Korean workers despite UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions aimed. During a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin last September, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko proposed trilateral cooperation with Russia and North Korea. Additionally, North Korea's Foreign Economic Relations Minister Yun Jong-ho met with Ryshenkov to explore potential areas of economic cooperation not restricted by UNSC resolutions. These discussions covered topics such as food security, education, and healthcare. Belarus is interested in exporting food to North Korea and importing North Korean cosmetics. This visit is marked to be the first by a Belarusian foreign minister to North Korea.

9. South Korea, the US, and Japan inks a trilateral security cooperation agreement

On July 28, the defence chiefs of South Korea, the United States, and Japan [signed a memorandum on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework](#). South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara endorsed the agreement in Tokyo. The memorandum marks the first formal document to institutionalise joint security efforts among the three nations' defence authorities, aimed at responding to threats from North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, as well as its increasing military ties with Russia.



From left, South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara pose for a photo after signing a memorandum of cooperation on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework in Tokyo.

The document outlines a framework for high-level policy consultations, information sharing, and trilateral military exercises. It signifies a new era of unwavering cooperation, as the ministers emphasised in a [joint press statement](#). The agreement includes plans to enhance real-time sharing of North Korean missile data and to conduct regular joint exercises, such as the multidomain Freedom Edge exercise, based on a multi-year plan.

This development follows a proposal made by South Korea at a trilateral security meeting in February and a subsequent agreement at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June. The defence chiefs also condemned North Korea's expansion of nuclear delivery systems and ballistic missile tests, as well as other actions that raise tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The next trilateral ministerial meeting is scheduled to take place in Seoul next year.
