



## 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.

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## 1. Heightened Tensions in the Korean Peninsula Amidst North Korean Belligerence

In August 2024, tensions on the Korean Peninsula intensified due to increased military provocations between the two Koreas. On August 11, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) confirmed that [North Korea had released over 240 balloons](#) filled with trash. According to the JCS, only about 4 per cent of these balloons landed in South Korean territory, with several falling in northern Gyeonggi, though the number was fewer compared to a [similar incident last April](#). The balloons were filled with litter, such as paper and plastic bottles, but no hazardous items were found. This marks the 11th instance this year where North Korea has launched garbage-filled balloons across the border. In a previous incident on July 24, some balloons landed near the presidential office in Yongsan, leading to accidents, including a fire on the roof of an apartment building in Goyang, Gyeonggi.



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

On August 13, the [Korean national media reported](#) that the USFK (US army in South Korea) armoured division conducted live-fire drills near the North Korean border to test their readiness for rapid deployment from the U.S. mainland. Soldiers from the 1st Armored Division carried out these exercises at the Rodriguez Live Fire Complex in Pocheon, located about 30 kilometers south of the border. The [drills involved](#) M1A2 Abrams tanks, M109-A6 howitzers, and M2A3 Bradley Fighting Vehicles. Battalion commander Lt. Col. Christopher Lorett stated that the training reinforces the U.S. commitment to maintaining security and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The exercise was part of Operation Pacific Fortitude, which regularly assesses a unit's ability to deploy quickly, train in various environments, and return home.

On August 19, South Korea and the United States [held their joint annual Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise](#) with President [Yoon Suk-Yeol emphasized](#) the need to bolster readiness against potential threats from North Korea. The exercise, held in two phases from August 19 to 29, focused on enhancing preparedness for North Korean provocations, particularly in grey areas like media and cyberspace. The drills included a computer simulation-based command post exercise, field training, and civil defence drills organised by the South Korean government. Reports indicated that the civil defence drills during the first phase involved preparations for a

possible North Korean nuclear attack, while the second phase, held from August 26 to 29, was solely military-focused. The exercise, which drew lessons from recent global conflicts, aimed to address emerging threats from North Korea across various domains. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that around 19,000 South Korean soldiers participated in 48 field training exercises as part of the drill.



*A General Atomics MQ-1C Gray Eagle unmanned aerial vehicle takes off from Camp Humphrey in Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi, on the first day of the joint Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise by the South Korean and U.S. militaries*

On August 27, North Korean state media reported that leader Kim Jong Un supervised the [test launch of a 240mm multiple rocket launch system](#) equipped with a new guidance system. The test was carried out in response to the ongoing Ulchi Freedom Shield joint military exercise between South Korea and the United States. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the rocket system has been enhanced in maneuverability and concentrated firepower, with the test confirming improvements across all key areas, including the newly implemented guidance system, control, and destructive power. KCNA also mentioned that Kim proposed a significant new policy for the development of artillery and equipping military units. In response, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff confirmed that the military had observed the August 27 rocket launch and stated that the ongoing joint drills would continue as planned.



*North Korea's 240-millimeter multiple rocket launcher with a new guidance system is test-fired at an unspecified location under the supervision of leader Kim Jong-un.*

## 2. South Korea's first reconnaissance satellite approved to combat North

South Korea's [first spy satellite has been approved](#) for combat suitability, marking a significant boost in the country's surveillance capabilities over North Korea. The satellite will act as the "eye" of South Korea's kill chain pre-emptive strike system, providing the ability to capture images of North Korea at any time and place. The Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) announced that the military surveillance satellite passed the Ministry of Defense's combat suitability assessment on August 13, following the completion of its system development. Launched from California's Vandenberg Space Force Base on December 2 last year, the satellite has since undergone preliminary tests, space orbit assessments, and operational evaluations.

This satellite is the first of five planned under South Korea's "425 Project," which aims to deploy a constellation of four satellites equipped with advanced Synthetic Aperture Radar (SAR) and Electro-Optical/Infrared (EO/IR) sensors. The current satellite, an EO/IR model, will orbit the Korean Peninsula twice daily, maintaining a sun-synchronous orbit at an altitude between 400 km and 600 km. It will capture images of North Korea using an EO camera during the day and an IR camera at night. According to DAPA, this satellite ranks among the world's best in terms of sub-meter resolution, capable of identifying objects as small as a sheet of newspaper with a resolution of approximately 30 centimeters.



*A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket carrying South Korea's first indigenous spy satellite lifts off from the Vandenberg Space Force Base in California on Dec. 1, 2023*

Looking ahead, the [media reported](#) that South Korea plans to deploy five or more additional medium to large satellites, along with 30 microsattellites, by the early 2030s. Jeong Gyu-Hyeon, Director General of the Space Command and C4I Program at DAPA, stated that the combined operation of military intelligence satellites and microsatellite systems would greatly enhance South Korea's independent surveillance and intelligence capabilities, ensuring superior monitoring over North Korean satellites.

## 3. North Korea planning to reopen tourism after five years

North Korea will resume group tours to the border city of Sangjeon in December, [reopening its doors to foreign tourists](#) after a five-year hiatus, according to two China-based tour operators. Shenyang-based KTG Tours (Chinese) announced on Facebook that North Korean authorities have approved tours to Sangjeon, with hopes of opening Pyongyang and other locations in the

future. Similarly, Korea Tour in Beijing expressed excitement on its website about the reopening, anticipating that more destinations within North Korea will become accessible soon.

North Korea has been largely closed to foreign tourists since early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with only Russian tourists permitted entry from early 2024. The decision to allow tours to Sangjeon marks the regime's return to international tourism. Sangjeon, located in Ryeonggang Province at the base of Mount Paektu the highest peak on the Korean Peninsula has undergone significant development, including an expanded airport, a sky resort, a new railway, and new hotels, as part of efforts to attract foreign visitors.

#### **4. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeoul unveiled a new vision for Unification**

President Yoon Suk-Yeol [unveiled a new vision for unification](#) with North Korea on August 15, coinciding with South Korea's Liberation Day, which commemorates the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945. Yoon emphasized that true liberation remains incomplete as the Korean Peninsula remains divided. He outlined three key tasks for achieving unification: safeguarding South Korea's independence from misinformation and destabilizing influences, promoting change in North Korea by improving human rights and access to external information, and enhancing international cooperation.



*President Yoon Suk Yeol delivers an address marking Liberation Day at Sejong Center for the Performing Arts in Jongno District, Seoul*

In his speech, Yoon proposed establishing a "working group" between the two Koreas to address a range of issues, including easing tensions, resuming economic cooperation, increasing exchanges, and responding to disasters and climate change. A central aspect of Yoon's unification strategy is the transformation of the Kim regime and the North Korean people, aiming to foster a strong desire for unification among North Koreans based on principles of independence.

Yoon also announced plans to create a North Korea Freedom and Human Rights Fund to support non-governmental efforts promoting freedom and human rights in North Korea. The South Korean government intends to continue advocating for improved human rights in the North and plans to host an international conference on the issue. Yoon urged North Korea to

promptly establish a working-level dialogue channel to address the challenges facing both Koreas.

#### **5. Unification minister calls on the North to accept the proposed working group to reduce tensions**

On August 16, South Korea's Unification Minister [Kim Yung-ho called on North Korea](#) to accept President Yoon Suk Yeol's proposal to form a working group aimed at reducing tensions and restoring communication between the two nations. Speaking at a press conference in Seoul's Central Government Complex, Kim highlighted the importance of discussions on denuclearization, humanitarian aid, and people-to-people exchanges.

Kim emphasized the need for North Korea to agree to President Yoon's plan to establish channels for inter-Korean talks and to reopen existing communication lines, such as the Inter-Korean Liaison Line and military hotlines. In his Liberation Day speech, President Yoon reaffirmed his administration's commitment to dialogue with Pyongyang and efforts to improve human rights in North Korea.

Despite these efforts, North Korea has not yet responded to President Yoon's invitations for dialogue and has historically reacted negatively to criticism of its human rights record. South Korea's push to resume communication comes at a time of increasing military provocations and balloon launches on the Korean Peninsula, highlighting the urgent need for renewed engagement.

#### **6. Lee Jae-Myung re-elected as the main opposition party leader**

Lee Jae-Myung was [re-elected as the chairman](#) of South Korea's main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), on August 18, securing a decisive victory in the party's leadership race. During the DPK's month-long national convention, Lee received 85.4 percent of the total votes, which included party members' votes and public opinion polls. He defeated his rivals, former Interior Minister Kim Doo-Kwan and Kim Ji-soo, who received 12.12 percent and 2.48 percent of the votes, respectively.



*Rep. Lee Jae-Myung waves the party flag after being reelected as chairman of the Democratic Party of Korea*

This victory marks Lee's return to the party's leadership, signaling his and his loyalists' intent to strengthen their influence within the DPK. The party is now expected to begin preparations for the next presidential election in March 2027. Lee is the first leader of the DPK to be re-elected since former President Kim Dae-Jung. Initially elected as DPK chairman in August 2022, Lee stepped down in June 2024 to be eligible for re-election.

At the National Convention, Lee emphasised the responsibility of politicians to improve citizens' lives and restore hope. He also expressed his intention to engage in open discussions with President Yoon about national issues and the well-being of the people. With his leadership reaffirmed, the DPK is poised to start laying the groundwork for the upcoming presidential race.

### **7. The absence of denuclearisation in the U.S. Democratic Party's platform raises concerns in Seoul**

The U.S. Democratic Party's newly [released platform has raised concerns in Seoul](#) by omitting the long-standing goal of denuclearising the Korean Peninsula, particularly as Vice President Kamala Harris seeks the presidency. Although the platform does not explicitly indicate a shift away from denuclearisation, it may signal a change in U.S. policy under a potential Harris administration, with a focus on nuclear disarmament agreements instead. This has led to subtle disagreements with the South Korean government, as President Yoon Suk-yeol has maintained that talks with North Korea will only proceed if Pyongyang makes significant progress toward denuclearisation.



*U.S. Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris raises her hand with President Joe Biden at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago*

The 92-page platform, released ahead of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on August 19, mentions South Korea seven times and North Korea six times but notably omits any reference to the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, a goal included in the 2020 Democratic platform under President Biden. Instead, the document emphasises trilateral cooperation between Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo to stabilise the region while sharply criticising former President Donald Trump's approach to North Korea.

Some analysts believe this shift reflects a growing consensus within the Democratic Party that pursuing a nuclear disarmament agreement with North Korea may be more realistic than striving for complete denuclearisation. In response, Cho Han-bum, a senior analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification, suggested that the Yoon administration should consider negotiating with the U.S. to secure support for South Korea's nuclear capabilities or the redeployment of strategic nuclear weapons in exchange for tacitly recognising North Korea's nuclear status.

#### **8. U.S. approves \$3.5 billion sale of Apache attack helicopters to South Korea**

South Korea is set to purchase \$3.5 billion worth of Apache attack helicopters and related logistical and support components from the United States, [according to national media reports](#). This significant arms deal comes as the two countries continue defence cost-sharing discussions, aiming to avoid uncertainties ahead of the U.S. presidential election in November.

On August 19, the U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announced the [approval of this government-to-government](#) foreign military sale. South Korea has requested 36 AH-64E Apache helicopters, along with 76 T700-GE-701D engines, 456 AGM-114R2 Hellfire missiles, 152 AGM-179A combined air-to-ground missiles, and 40 AAR-57 missile warning systems. This deal is expected to enhance South Korea's defense capabilities, enabling it to better counter current and future threats. Additionally, it aligns with U.S. foreign policy objectives by strengthening the security of a key ally in the Indo-Pacific region, according to the DSCA. The AH-64E Apache is regarded as the most advanced attack helicopter, capable of operating in all weather conditions, day or night. It can reach a maximum cruising speed of 269 km/h (145 knots) and is equipped with a range of weapons, including Hellfire missiles, Stinger air-to-air missiles, 70 mm rockets, and a 30 mm cannon.



*Apache choppers take off at U.S. Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi*

Although this arms purchase is part of South Korea's planned acquisition of heavy attack helicopters and not directly related to defense cost-sharing talks, it is viewed as a strategic move to demonstrate the country's commitment to the U.S.-South Korea alliance. The deal may also play a role in the ongoing Special Measures Agreement (SMA) discussions, particularly given

former U.S. President Donald Trump's preference for countries that buy American-made weapons.

#### **9. Korea and the US held the 7th round of talks on defence cost-sharing**

Korea and the United States [held their seventh round of negotiations](#) to determine Seoul's share of the costs associated with the deployment of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). The discussions, led by Korea's Lee Tae-woo and the U.S.'s Linda Specht, took place from the 27th to the 29th, as both nations aim to renew the current six-year Special Measures Agreement (SMA). Since 1991, this agreement has required Seoul to partially cover the costs of USFK personnel in Korea, including the construction of military facilities and other logistical support.

The latest talks began in April, with Korea seeking an early agreement to avoid potentially difficult negotiations if former U.S. President Donald Trump returns to office. During his presidency, Trump demanded a substantial increase in Seoul's payments, asking for \$5 billion over five times the previous amount. Korea is pushing for a reasonable level of contribution, while the U.S. is focused on reaching a mutually acceptable deal. The current SMA, signed in 2021, requires Korea to pay \$1.03 billion, marking a 13.9% increase from 2019, with further annual increases tied to Seoul's defence spending.

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