



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. South Korea joined the NATO science and technology group as a partner country

On March 1, [South Korea officially became a partner country](#) in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Science and Technology Group, the Ministry of Defence announced. This move strengthens Seoul's collaboration with the Western military alliance in advanced defence research and development. As part of the partnership, South Korea will participate in joint projects and strategic initiatives under NATO's Science and Technology Committee. With this development, South Korea becomes the third partner country in the group, following Japan and Australia, marking a significant step in multilateral defence cooperation with Europe. Although not a NATO member, South Korea is one of the alliance's four Indo-Pacific partners, alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. The partnership comes amid increasing geopolitical and security challenges, reinforcing South Korea's engagement with NATO in the evolving global defence and technological landscape.

2. South Korea and Poland Strengthened Defense Ties Amid Renewed K2 Tank Deal

On March 5, South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul met with his Polish counterpart, Radosław Sikorski, in Warsaw to discuss bilateral cooperation, defence ties, and regional security. Following their talks, the ministers announced on March 6 that both governments would provide full support for the [swift implementation of the K2 tank contract](#), which had been stalled since Korea's martial law declaration late last year.



Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski pose for a commemorative photo during their meeting in Warsaw. Source: Korea JoongAng daily

During the visit, the first by a Korean foreign minister to a European country in 18 years, Cho reaffirmed the strategic importance of defence collaboration, [highlighting progress in negotiations for the second-phase contract](#) under the 2022 \$44.2 billion framework agreement. This agreement includes the supply of K2 tanks, K9 self-propelled howitzers, and FA-50 light attack aircraft, with Poland set to acquire a total of 1,000 K2 tanks. While the first-phase contract, worth \$3.4 billion for 180 tanks, was signed in 2022, the second-phase deal for 820 tanks had been delayed. However, Cho's visit and the accompanying delegation from Korea's Defence Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) signalled Seoul's renewed commitment to expediting the agreement.

Cho also [visited Poland's 23rd Tactical Air Base](#) in Minsk Mazowiecki, where FA-50 fighter jets are stationed with Korean Aerospace Industries (KAI) personnel supporting maintenance and pilot training. The ministers further discussed Poland's role as a key supporter of Ukraine and South Korea's commitment to providing humanitarian and economic aid, along with contributions to Ukraine's reconstruction.

Following the meeting, Cho and Sikorski [signed a three-year action plan](#) to advance bilateral relations until 2028. Cho's diplomatic focus on Europe, amid Korea's ongoing political instability and a new U.S. administration, follows his participation in the Munich Security Conference in Germany on February 15.



Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul takes a commemorative photo with officials at the 23rd Tactical Air Base in Minsk Mazowiecki. Source: Korea JoongAng Daily.

Additionally, on March 9, South Korean government officials [announced plans to finalize a further arms deal](#) with Poland next month, involving the export of additional 180 K2 tanks worth \$6.2 billion, national media reported. The deal, initially delayed due to disputes between the Polish government and a local company, has gained renewed traction following the foreign ministers' talks, further strengthening bilateral defense ties.

3. Impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol released from prison

On March 8, impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol was [released from a Seoul detention center](#) after 52 days in custody. The Seoul Central District Court overturned his detention on technical grounds, ruling that he had been held longer than legally permitted. While prosecutors had a week to appeal, they opted for his release. However, Yoon remains subject to prosecution on sedition and riot charges, and the decision does not impact the Constitutional Court's ongoing impeachment proceedings.

Following his release, Yoon expressed gratitude to his supporters and the judiciary, framing his legal battle as a defense of [freedom and the rule of law](#). His party, the ruling People Power Party (PPP), welcomed the court's decision, condemning the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) for High-ranking Officials for what they called an "illegal" investigation and arrest. The president's office echoed this sentiment, stating the investigation had exceeded the CIO's legal authority.



President Yoon Suk Yeol greets supporters as he arrives in front of the presidential residence. Source: Korea JoongAng Daily

Conversely, the opposition Democratic Party (DP) [denounced](#) Yoon's release, calling him the "mastermind" of a rebellion and urging prosecutors to appeal the ruling. The CIO clarified that the court had not declared the investigation unlawful but had only considered Yoon's claims. The case continues as political tensions intensify ahead of his upcoming trial.

4. South Korea and Saudi Arabia sign space cooperation agreement

On March 12, the Korea Aerospace Administration (KASA) announced that [Korea signed a cooperation agreement](#) with the Saudi Space Agency (SSA) in Riyadh to strengthen bilateral collaboration in the space sector. The agreement, formalized during a visit by a South Korean public-private delegation to Saudi Arabia, focuses on cooperation in deep space technology, communications, human spaceflight programs, satellite launches, and capacity-building in space science and engineering. The South Korean delegation included representatives from major aerospace firms such as Korea Aerospace Industries, Hanwha Systems, Hanwha Aerospace, and Innospace. Established in 2018, the SSA plays a key role in Saudi Arabia's national strategy to develop the space industry, with significant investments in satellite technology, including the SaudiSat initiative. This partnership is expected to advance Saudi Arabia's space ambitions while fostering new opportunities for Korean space companies in the global market. Strengthening international collaboration is crucial for Korea's efforts to position itself as a leading space power, and this agreement with a major Gulf nation marks a significant step in expanding investment and technological exchange in the sector.

5. Rising U.S.-South Korea Tensions Amid Trump's Criticism on Tariffs, Military Aid and 'Sensitive country' Status

On March 4, US President Donald [Trump criticized South Korea](#) for imposing high tariffs on American products while benefiting from the US military presence. In his first address to Congress since returning to the White House, Trump claimed that South Korea's average tariff rate is four times higher than that of the United States and suggested that Seoul should bear more of the financial burden for maintaining U.S. troops in the country. Additionally, Trump pledged to end subsidies under the Chips and Science Act, a move that could significantly impact South Korean semiconductor giants like Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix by cutting

billions in funding. He asserted that his tariff policies would drive investment into U.S. chip manufacturing without the need for economic incentives, as companies would seek to avoid tariffs by producing domestically. In response, South Korea's government issued a joint statement rejecting Trump's claims, emphasizing that under the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, most tariffs between the two countries have been eliminated, resulting in an average tariff rate of less than 1%. Analysts suggest that Trump's remarks on military aid may be aimed at renegotiating Seoul's financial contributions to the U.S. Forces Korea, despite a five-year cost-sharing agreement signed last year. South Korea is expected to take a more cooperative approach in addressing the tariff dispute with the Trump administration.

On March 13, Trump reiterated his [characterization of North Korea as a nuclear power](#) and expressed interest in reestablishing ties with its leader, Kim Jong Un. Speaking alongside NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte at the White House, Trump emphasized his "very good relationship" with Kim and his intent to bring [Pyongyang back to the negotiating table](#). This marks the second time since his return to office that he has publicly acknowledged North Korea's nuclear capabilities, having made a similar remark on January 20. His statements have fueled speculation about a potential revival of direct diplomatic engagement with Kim.

On March 15, the U.S. [Department of Energy \(DOE\) confirmed](#) that South Korea was added to the "Sensitive and Other Designated Countries List (SCL)" in January, marking the first time the long-standing U.S. ally has received this designation. The SCL includes nations considered potential security risks or facing political instability. While the designation does not outright prohibit technical cooperation, it imposes additional scrutiny on engagements, particularly in areas such as military intelligence, nuclear energy, and artificial intelligence. South Korea's inclusion expanded the SCL list to 26 countries, which already features China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Syria, Israel, and Taiwan. The DOE did not specify the reasons for this decision, though SCL designations are generally linked to national security, nuclear non-proliferation, and terrorism concerns. In response, South Korea's Foreign Ministry stated that it is closely coordinating with U.S. agencies to mitigate potential repercussions on bilateral cooperation in energy and science. Meanwhile, a scheduled visit to Seoul by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth this month has been canceled, reportedly due to ongoing political unrest following the recent martial law controversy.

6. Korea, China, Japan Foreign Ministers Convene for Trilateral Talks in Tokyo

On March 22, the foreign ministers of South Korea, China, and Japan [convened their first trilateral meeting](#) in 16 months, underscoring their shared commitment to [peace on the Korean Peninsula](#) and strengthening regional cooperation. Held in Tokyo, the 11th trilateral summit reaffirmed previous agreements to expand cultural and youth exchanges, alongside collaboration in major diplomatic forums such as the APEC summit. The ministers discussed joint initiatives in sustainable development, public health, aging, trade, science and technology, and digital transformation. South Korea and China agreed to resume cultural exchanges while coordinating with Japan on regional stability, particularly in light of geopolitical shifts following the inauguration of the second Trump administration in the U.S. Wang Yi emphasized the importance of communication, trust, and cooperation in ensuring stability, while the three nations also advanced discussions on regional economic integration, including the resumption of free trade agreement negotiations. Following the trilateral talks, South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul engaged in separate bilateral discussions with his

Chinese and Japanese counterparts. The meeting is seen as a strategic step in reinforcing regional ties and facilitating future high-level summits amid evolving global dynamics.

7. South Korea and US held Annual Joint Military Exercise Amid Peninsula Tensions

South Korea and the United States [conducted their annual Freedom Shield](#) joint military exercise from March 10 to 20, reinforcing their combined defense capabilities against North Korean threats. This year's exercise, the first major U.S. military drill since President Donald Trump took office in January, featured computer-simulated scenarios and large-scale field training to enhance interoperability. Approximately 19,000 South Korean troops participated, with both nations carrying out 16 major on-field drills. However, live-fire exercises were temporarily excluded following a March 6 incident in which South Korean warplanes accidentally dropped bombs on a civilian village, injuring 15 civilians and 14 service members.

On March 10, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that [North Korea launched multiple unidentified ballistic missiles](#) into the Yellow Sea from Hwanghae Province at approximately 1:50 p.m. While specific details were not disclosed, the JCS confirmed that South Korea's military has heightened surveillance and remains in a state of full readiness in coordination with the United States. The missile test coincided with the commencement of Freedom Shield, the annual large-scale joint military exercises between Seoul and Washington. Pyongyang had earlier condemned the drills, labeling them a “provocative act.”

On March 12, North Korea condemned again the ongoing South Korea-U.S. Freedom Shield military exercise, labeling it a provocation that heightens regional tensions. Citing a recent incident in which the South Korean Air Force accidentally bombed a civilian area near the north Korean border, North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) described the accident as a “catastrophic event” warranting serious attention. In its English-language commentary, KCNA accused the joint drills, held from March 10 for 11 days, of being “[nuclear war rehearsals](#)” and the primary driver of instability on the Korean Peninsula. It further warned that such exercises elevate the risk of armed conflict and must be halted immediately.

South Korea, the United States, and Japan [conducted joint trilateral naval exercises](#) from March 17 to 20 in international waters south of Jeju Island, aimed at bolstering deterrence and response capabilities against North Korea's growing military threats, Seoul's Defense Ministry announced on March 20. The drills, the first trilateral naval operation since U.S. President Donald Trump's return to office in January, featured the USS Carl Vinson, which arrived in Busan on March 2, along with six other warships, including South Korea's ROKS Sejong the Great and Japan's JS Ikazuchi. The exercises focused on enhancing maritime security, resilience against nuclear and missile threats, and countering North Korea's underwater capabilities. This marks the latest in a series of coordinated defense efforts, following the trilateral Freedom Edge exercises held in November 2024.

North Korea has successfully [tested its latest anti-aircraft missile system](#), which has now entered full-scale production, state media reported on March 21. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the missile administration conducted the test on March 20 to assess the overall performance of the system, which is being mass-produced at a munitions facility. Leader Kim Jong-un oversaw the test alongside senior officials from the Central

Military Commission. KCNA highlighted that the test confirmed the missile's operational speed and reliability, underscoring its effectiveness in combat scenarios.

8. Prime Minister Han Reinstated as Acting President After Impeachment Dismissal

On March 24, South Korea's Constitutional Court [dismissed the impeachment motion against Prime Minister Han Duk-soo](#), reinstating him as acting president 87 days after his suspension. The court ruled 5-2-1 against the motion, with five justices voting for dismissal, one in favor of impeachment, and two arguing for procedural dismissal without ruling on the case's merits. The National Assembly had impeached Han on December 27, 2024, citing five charges. However, the court found no constitutional or legal violations in three of them. Regarding Han's role in President Yoon's December 3 martial law declaration, the court acknowledged that he called a cabinet meeting for discussions but found no evidence of active interference in the decision-making process.
