



## 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. 23, May, 2025

### Contents

1. South Korea Heads to the Polls on June 3 to Elect New President After Yoon's Ouster
2. Pentagon denies USFK troop reduction claims, reaffirms strong US commitment to South Korea
3. China Escalates Yellow Sea Tensions with Three No-Sail Zones in PMZ
4. Korea Launches Mars Task Force to Collaborate with U.S. Mission
5. South Korea Allocates \$79 Million for Next-Gen Defence Tech Development
6. Heightened Tensions in the Korean Peninsula Amidst North Korean Belligerence
7. North Korean Security Chief Visits Russia Amid Deepening Military Ties
8. North Korea Condemns U.S. 'Golden Dome' Missile Defence as Path to Space Nuclear War
9. South Korea and India Hold Fourth Dialogue on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

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

## **1. South Korea Heads to the Polls on June 3 to Elect New President After Yoon's Ouster**

South Korea [will hold a snap presidential election on June 3](#) following the impeachment and removal of President Yoon Suk-yeol, who was ousted on April 4 for constitutional violations, including imposing martial law. In accordance with South Korean law, a new election must be held within 60 days of a president's dismissal, marking the country's most severe constitutional crisis in recent history.

Seven candidates have officially registered for the 21st presidential election, according to national media. The frontrunners are Lee Jae-myung of the liberal Democratic Party and Kim Moon-soo of the conservative People Power Party (PPP). Kim, who joined the race on the final day of registration, emerged as the PPP's nominee after a contested selection process. Other candidates include Lee Jun-seok of the right-wing Reform Party, Kwon Young-gook of the Korean Democratic Labor Party, Koo Ju-wha of the Liberty Unification Party, and independents Song Jin-ho and Hwang Kyo-ahn.

Lee Jae-myung, backed by large-scale campaign efforts, currently leads in opinion polls. Kim Moon-soo, a late entrant, faces a fragmented conservative base, particularly due to the candidacy of Lee Jun-seok, a former PPP leader now critical of Yoon's martial law and unwilling to form a conservative alliance.

The [Ministry of Interior announced that 44.39 million](#) people are eligible to vote, including 44.13 million domestic voters and overseas voters. This marks an increase of 194,179 voters compared to the 2022 presidential election.

Voters are expected to focus on restoring stable governance, leadership and addressing key issues such as economic recovery, housing, employment, and national cohesion. Policy positions also vary significantly between the leading candidates: Lee supports progressive reforms and engagement with North Korea, while Kim advocates deregulation and strengthening ties with the U.S. and Japan. The outcome is likely to influence South Korea's foreign policy stance, particularly regarding China, the U.S., and regional trade and security dynamics amid global uncertainties.

## **2. Pentagon denies USFK troop reduction claims, reaffirms strong US commitment to South Korea**

On May 23, the Pentagon strongly denied media reports suggesting that the United States is considering a withdrawal of approximately 4,500 troops from the 28,500-strong US Forces Korea (USFK). The Wall Street Journal had reported on May 22 that the U.S. was evaluating plans to [redeploy some forces to other Indo-Pacific locations](#), including Guam.

Chief Pentagon Spokesperson Sean Parnell issued a statement [dismissing the report as false](#), reaffirming the U.S.'s unwavering commitment to South Korea's defence. He emphasised that the Department of Defence has no plans to reduce American military presence in the Republic of Korea and looks forward to continued cooperation with the incoming South Korean administration to strengthen the bilateral alliance.

The news reportedly caught Seoul by surprise, raising concerns over the potential weakening of its defence posture against persistent threats from North Korea. The speculation also reignites debates over burden-sharing, as former President Donald Trump, now back in office, has long criticised South Korea for what he perceives as insufficient contributions to the cost of the U.S. military presence. Although a cost-sharing deal had been reached before Trump's second term, now there are growing rumours that the administration may seek to renegotiate the agreement, potentially using the troop presence as leverage.

### **3. China Escalates Yellow Sea Tensions with Three No-Sail Zones in PMZ**

China has [announced the establishment of three no-sail zones](#) within the Temporary Measures Zone (PMZ) in the Yellow Sea, prompting concerns from South Korea over potential military expansion in the contested waters. The move, confirmed by Seoul on May 20, follows earlier reports of unverified Chinese structures being erected in the PMZ, an area where the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of China and South Korea overlap and remain legally unsettled.

According to South Korean officials, the no-sail zones, publicised by the Lianyungang branch of China's Maritime Safety Administration (MSA), are believed to be linked to Chinese military exercises. Maps released by the MSA indicate that parts of these zones [encroach on South Korea's EEZ](#). While similar exercises have occurred in the past, the repeated nature of China's activities, including the installation of salmon farming structures, has raised concerns about a broader strategic intent to consolidate its maritime claims ahead of any formal boundary agreement.

Under the existing PMZ guidelines, both nations are expected to avoid unilateral actions such as non-fishing-related facility construction or resource development. South Korean defence authorities view China's latest actions as potentially undermining this understanding.

### **4. Korea Launches Mars Task Force to Collaborate with U.S. Mission**

In a major step toward expanding its space ambitions, South Korea's Korea Aerospace Administration (KASA) [has launched a dedicated task force](#) to explore future cooperation with the United States on Mars exploration missions. The initiative was announced by KASA's chief during a press conference in Sacheon, marking the agency's first anniversary. The task force aims to align with U.S. plans for human exploration and long-term presence on Mars, particularly as Washington allocates increased budgetary focus toward the Red Planet. According to the KASA head, the initiative seeks to foster both scientifically and economically viable space programs, enabling greater participation from private companies.

The project is also expected to contribute to the development of cutting-edge technologies that even advanced nations have yet to realize. Strengthening South Korea's satellite capabilities is a core objective, with plans to develop multiple models, including Low Earth Orbit (LEO) and ultra-high-resolution satellites. Further, the government is preparing to finalize an agreement within this year to transfer key technologies of the indigenous Nuri space rocket to Hanwha Aerospace. KASA confirmed that stakeholders have reached a broad consensus on the technology handover, signalling a new phase in South Korea's space industry development. Plans are also in place to establish a solar observation centre at the L4 Lagrange point and to



develop a proprietary lunar lander. These efforts are part of a broader vision to position South Korea as a leader in next-generation space technologies.

## **5. South Korea Allocates \$79 Million for Next-Gen Defence Tech Development**

The [Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy has announced](#) a 32.3% increase in South Korea's defence technology budget for 2025, allocating 113.4 billion won (\$79.1 million) to support the development of advanced systems. This funding will support 132 projects focused on emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and robotics. Key initiatives include the development of amphibious mobile reconnaissance robots, micro-suicide drone systems, and next-generation weapons aimed at boosting defence exports. The government also plans to establish a civil-military council dedicated to the maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) of naval vessels, aiming to deepen defence cooperation with the United States. The initiative seeks to enhance national defence capabilities by fostering innovation through closer integration between private-sector technologies and military applications, positioning South Korea in the rapidly evolving global defence market.

## **6. Heightened Tensions in the Korean Peninsula Amidst North Korean Belligerence**

In May 2025, tensions on the Korean Peninsula escalated as North Korea intensified its provocative military actions. [North Korea has carried out its first live-fire tests](#) of the main weapons systems aboard its newly launched destroyer, Cho Hyon, according to state media reports on April 30. The combat application tests were conducted under the supervision of leader Kim Jong-un on April 28 and 29, marking a significant step in the country's naval capabilities. The destroyer, unveiled just a week prior, is equipped with a range of advanced armaments, including supersonic strategic cruise missiles, strategic ballistic missiles, and other strike systems. In addition to the destroyer tests, North Korea also conducted launches of various missile systems, including supersonic and tactical cruise missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, and 127mm ship-based automatic guns. During the event, Kim Jong-un emphasised the need to accelerate the navy's nuclear weapons development to strengthen maritime defence capabilities.

On April 8, North Korea launched several [short-range ballistic missiles](#) into the East Sea, marking its first such provocation since a similar launch into the West Sea on March 10 and the second since the start of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term in January. The missile tests came just weeks ahead of South Korea's presidential election. According to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, the missiles were fired from the Wonsan area, approximately 180 kilometers east of Pyongyang, and traveled up to 800 kilometers before landing in the East Sea. While specific details were not disclosed, the launch reportedly involved fewer than 10 missiles, possibly including systems like the Super-Large Multiple Rocket Launcher and Iskander-type ballistic missiles.

This launch follows a series of North Korean missile activities earlier this year, including the test of a medium-range hypersonic missile on January 6 and short- and

close-range missiles on January 14 and March 10, respectively. In response, South Korea, the United States, and Japan issued a [joint condemnation and held a trilateral phone consultation](#) to exchange assessments and coordinate further measures.

On May 22, [North Korea conducted another missile test](#), launching multiple cruise missiles into the East Sea from the Sondok area in South Hamgyong Province, according to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This marked Pyongyang's second missile launch in May.

## **7. North Korean Security Chief Visits Russia Amid Deepening Military Ties**

North Korean State [Security Minister Ri Chang-dae visited Russia](#) to participate in a key international security conference, as reported by North Korean state media on May 27. According to the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), Ri led a delegation to attend the 13th meeting of senior officials responsible for national security affairs. During the visit, Ri held talks in Moscow with Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu.

This visit follows North Korea's recent acknowledgement in April that it had deployed thousands of troops to support Russia's military operations in Ukraine. Discussions between Ri and Shoigu are believed to have included issues related to the future deployment of North Korean forces and the repatriation of the remains of North Korean soldiers and prisoners of war.

In a related development, KCNA also reported that a Russian government delegation headed by the country's deputy interior minister has arrived in Pyongyang, signalling further coordination between the two nations.

## **8. North Korea Condemns U.S. 'Golden Dome' Missile Defence as Path to Space Nuclear War**

North Korea has sharply criticised the U.S. Trump administration's [proposed space-based missile defence system, dubbed the "Golden Dome,"](#) labelling it a "blueprint for nuclear war in space." In a memorandum released on May 26 by the Research Institute of North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pyongyang warned that the initiative poses a grave threat, accusing Washington of disguising offensive ambitions under the guise of defence. The statement argued that the Golden Dome could be repurposed as an offensive missile platform capable of launching attacks at any moment. North Korea further denounced the U.S.'s efforts to deepen trilateral military cooperation with South Korea and Japan, asserting that the integrated missile defence network under the new administration aims to serve U.S. hegemonic interests at the cost of its allies' security. The United States is ruthlessly exploiting its allies as tools of war," the statement declared, condemning what it called Washington's "criminal ambition" to militarize space for domination.

## **9. South Korea and India Hold Fourth Dialogue on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation**

South Korea and India convened the [fourth ROK-India Dialogue on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation](#) in Seoul to address regional and global security challenges, including North Korea's advancing nuclear and missile programs. The meeting was co-chaired by Yun Jong-kwon, Director-General for Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Affairs at South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Muyanpui Sayavi, Joint Secretary for Disarmament and International Security Affairs at India's Ministry of External Affairs.

Discussions focused on strengthening cooperation on disarmament, ensuring the effective implementation of UN Security Council sanctions, and tackling emerging threats such as artificial intelligence and space security. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to global non-proliferation norms and explored opportunities for enhanced strategic engagement amid evolving regional dynamics.

\*\*\*\*\*