



## 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 a brief analysis of important developments in the Korean Peninsula.

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## **1. Lee and Ishiba Strengthen Ties in Busan Summit, Pledge Cooperation on Shared Social Challenges**

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba held their third and final summit in Busan on Tuesday, reaffirming their commitment to deepening bilateral ties through cooperation on shared societal challenges such as aging populations, urban concentration, and suicide prevention.

The meeting, held at the [Nurimaru APEC House on Dongbaek Island](#), marked the continuation of shuttle diplomacy between Seoul and Tokyo and is expected to be Ishiba's final diplomatic engagement before stepping down from office. In their joint document, the two leaders agreed that their respective authorities will regularly coordinate on demographic and social policy issues, as well as on agricultural self-sufficiency and emergency management. President Lee expressed hope that the talks would serve as a "cornerstone for rebranded Korea-Japan relations," while Ishiba said he looked forward to sharing "experiences and wisdom" on mutual challenges. Before the summit, Ishiba visited the grave of Lee Soo-hyun, a Korean student who died saving a Japanese man in Tokyo in 2001, a gesture Lee said symbolized the growing maturity of bilateral relations.

Following the talks, President Lee hosted a banquet featuring delicacies symbolizing harmony between the two nations. During the dinner, Lee referred to Ishiba's recent UN General Assembly speech, in which the Japanese leader said that ["no country can forge the path to a bright future unless it squarely faces history."](#) Lee said he agreed with the sentiment, emphasizing that facing the past was key to "moving toward a brighter future." The Busan summit concluded a series of high-level exchanges since June, marking a renewed spirit of cooperation between Seoul and Tokyo amid regional uncertainty. Ishiba's visit, though working-level, was treated by the Korean government with state-visit-level courtesy, underlining the significance both sides place on maintaining momentum in restoring trust and collaboration.



President Lee Jae Myung (right, front) and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba (left, front) enter the Nurimaru APEC House in Busan, where they held their third and final summit on Tuesday. (The Korean Herald)

## **2. Russia Acknowledges North Korea’s Nuclear Reality as Military Ties Deepen**

Ties between Russia and North Korea deepened further this week as officials from both sides reaffirmed military and strategic cooperation, alongside remarks by Russia’s envoy to the United Nations acknowledging [Pyongyang’s nuclear capability as an “open secret” and a “reality.”](#)

On October 1, [North Korean Defense Minister No Kwang-chol met with Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov in Moscow](#), pledging continued support for Russia and unveiling a monument honoring North Korean guerrillas who fought alongside Soviet forces during World War II. The ceremony, attended by Russian presidential aide Vladimir Medinski, commemorated the shared wartime history and was described by Belousov as a symbol of “invincible militant friendship.” No emphasized that this legacy forms the “cornerstone” of the countries’ “comprehensive strategic partnership and alliance,” adding that “only victory and glory” await both nations as they strengthen solidarity.

Meanwhile, in New York on October 2, [Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia](#), during a press conference marking Russia's presidency of the UN Security Council, said North Korea's possession of nuclear arms "is not a matter of recognition — it's an open secret." He noted Pyongyang's recent statements at the UN General Assembly, where Vice Foreign Minister Kim Son-gyong reaffirmed that the North's nuclear program is enshrined in its constitution and "can never be tampered with." Nebenzia blamed "provocative military activities" by South Korea, the United States, and Japan for threatening the North's security, asserting that Pyongyang's nuclear stance is "a reality justified by the threats it experiences." Analysts say the envoy's comments and the Moscow meeting signal Russia's growing strategic alignment with North Korea, echoing patterns seen in relationships with other de facto nuclear powers such as India and Pakistan, and highlighting the two nations' shared opposition to Western pressure.

### **3. Kim Jong-un and Choe Son-hui Reaffirm Deepening North Korea–China Ties Amid Shifting Global Landscape**

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening ties with China, emphasizing that the two nations' "traditional friendship" will endure regardless of changing international dynamics, according to state media reports.

In a congratulatory message sent Wednesday to Chinese President Xi Jinping on the 76th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, Kim vowed that it remains the "steadfast stand" of Pyongyang's leadership to ["steadily develop the traditional DPRK–China friendship no matter how the international situation may change."](#) He also expressed his willingness to work closely with Beijing to defend "peace and stability in the region and beyond through strategic communication and cooperation." Kim's renewed pledge follows his September visit to Beijing, where he and Xi held their first talks in over six years during China's grand military parade — a meeting seen as signaling a thaw in relations after a period of strain caused by Pyongyang's growing alignment with Moscow.

Meanwhile, on October 2, KCNA reported that Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui had sent her own congratulatory message to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, vowing to further strengthen diplomatic exchanges and cooperation. Choe wrote that North Korea and China share an ["important mission" to enhance bilateral coordination](#), noting that both sides had reached "complete consensus" on key issues during her four-day visit to Beijing last week, where she met Wang and Chinese Premier Li Qiang. Choe's trip and the flurry of diplomatic exchanges come weeks ahead of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Gyeongju, where Xi is expected to meet South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and U.S. President Donald Trump. Analysts suggest the North's recent gestures toward China may aim to align

positions with Beijing ahead of those high-profile summits, underscoring Pyongyang’s efforts to balance its ties between its two principal partners — China and Russia — amid intensifying global rivalries.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, left, shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during their talks on Sept. 4.

[KCNA]

#### **4. Policy Rift in Seoul: Debate Grows Over “Two States” Approach to North Korea**

A rare policy divide has emerged within President Lee Jae Myung’s administration, as top aides have offered conflicting interpretations of how South Korea should define its relationship with Pyongyang. Unification Minister Chung Dong-young stated on Sept. 25 that the two Koreas are [“already two states, even in international legal terms.”](#) citing their 1991 joint UN membership. He urged transforming the “hostile two-state relationship into a peaceful two-state relationship,” advocating a pragmatic approach to coexistence.

In contrast, National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac, speaking in New York, rejected this view, stressing that under South Korea’s Constitution and the 1991 Basic Agreement, the two Koreas are not separate countries but “parts of one nation in a temporary special relationship.” His remarks reflect the traditional line that recognizing two states undermines the goal of reunification. The dispute, highlighting internal divisions within Lee’s team, has drawn public and political attention. The opposition People Power Party accused Chung of “abandoning reunification,” while

experts like Cho Han-bum of KINU argued that the difference is “largely rhetorical,” as both sides share the goal of easing tensions. The debate comes after North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last year declared the two Koreas “hostile states,” revising the North’s constitution to label Seoul as the “number one hostile state.” Against this backdrop, Chung’s proposal to transform “hostile two states” into “peaceful two states” assumes renewed significance.

President Lee, in his UN General Assembly speech, emphasized peaceful coexistence through his END Initiative — *Exchange, Normalization, and Denuclearization* — which echoes the pragmatic spirit of Chung’s remarks but avoids formal “two-state” terminology. Analysts warn that the contrasting messages could confuse both North Korea and international partners, particularly as Seoul seeks to coordinate with Washington amid renewed U.S.–North Korea diplomatic speculation. As Professor Kim Jae-chun of Sogang University cautioned, “Differences of opinion can exist, but the government must send out a single message. Right now, that’s not happening.”

## **5. North Korea Demonstrates Military Strength and Strengthening China–Russia Ties at Party’s 80th Anniversary**

[North Korea marked the 80th anniversary](#) of its ruling Workers’ Party with a coordinated display of military power and diplomatic signaling, combining the Defence Development–2025 exhibition with a large-scale military parade in Pyongyang. The events highlighted the regime’s rapid weapons modernization, emphasis on nuclear deterrence, and its growing alignment with China and Russia amid heightened regional tensions.

[The Defence Development–2025 exhibition](#), which opened on October 4, showcased North Korea’s latest defense technologies. Leader Kim Jong-un described the exhibition as evidence of efforts to modernize the country’s military structure, centered on strengthening its nuclear forces. He warned that joint military exercises by South Korea and the United States posed new security threats and cautioned that Seoul should reconsider the risks to its own territory.

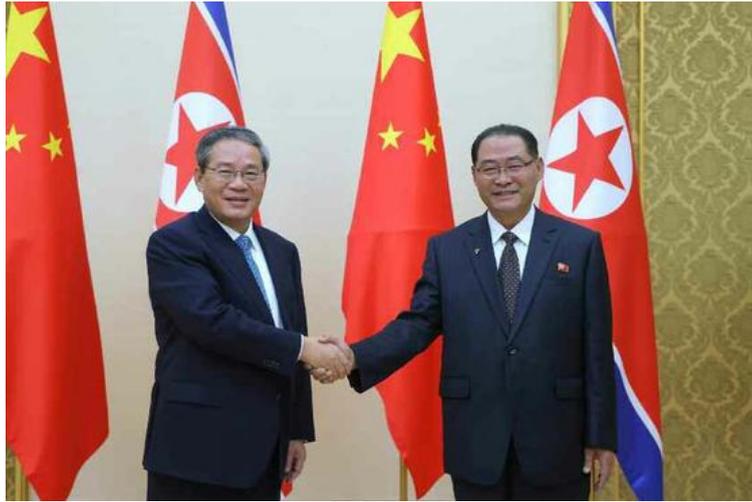
These messages were reinforced during a nighttime military parade held on October 10 at Kim Il Sung Square. The parade featured approximately 16,000 troops and tens of thousands of civilians, along with the unveiling of advanced weapons systems. Among the highlights were the Hwasong-20 intercontinental ballistic missile and the [Hwasong-11Ma hypersonic short-range missile](#), alongside upgraded tanks, rocket launchers, and drone platforms. Analysts believe the new missiles may incorporate solid-fuel propulsion and multiple warhead capabilities, enhancing their survivability and strike potential.

The anniversary celebrations also carried strong diplomatic symbolism. [Chinese Premier Li Qiang led a high-level Chinese delegation and was seated prominently beside Kim Jong-un](#), signaling Pyongyang's renewed prioritization of ties with Beijing. Russia's Dmitry Medvedev and Vietnam's leader To Lam also attended, marking the highest level of foreign participation at a North Korean event in nearly a decade. Observers view this as part of North Korea's effort to position itself within an emerging bloc opposed to U.S.-led security arrangements.

In his remarks, Kim suggested that North Korea's military role could extend beyond its borders, a statement widely interpreted as a response to growing South Korea–U.S.–Japan trilateral cooperation. Following the celebrations, Kim visited the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun to honor past leaders, with state media emphasizing unity and loyalty ahead of the expected 9th Party Congress in 2026.



The Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party, reported on Oct. 11 that a grand military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the party's founding took place on Oct. 10 at Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang. [NEWS1]



North Korean Premier Pak Thae-song, right, shakes hands with Chinese Premier Li Qiang during their talks in Pyongyang on Oct. 11. [NEWS1]

## **6. President Lee Congratulates Japan's First Female Prime Minister Ahead of APEC**

[President Lee Jae Myung congratulated Sanae Takaichi on her election as Japan's 104th and first female prime minister](#), expressing hopes for constructive dialogue during the upcoming APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Gyeongju.

In a Facebook post published in both Korean and Japanese on Oct. 21, President Lee said he looked forward to meeting Prime Minister Takaichi in Gyeongju to discuss “forward-looking, mutually beneficial cooperation” amid growing regional uncertainty. He emphasized that Korea and Japan share “the same front yard” and must work together to strengthen ties across politics, security, economy, and culture. The presidential office echoed this message, highlighting continued “trust and progress” in bilateral relations and confirming that working-level discussions are underway for a potential Korea-Japan summit during APEC.

On Oct. 24, in her first policy speech before [Japan's National Diet](#), Prime Minister Takaichi described Korea as an ‘important neighbor’ and pledged to deepen bilateral cooperation through dialogue. She reaffirmed Tokyo's commitment to the Japan-U.S. alliance as the cornerstone of its foreign policy and expressed intentions to enhance multilateral coordination through frameworks such as the Japan-U.S.-Korea and Japan-U.S.-Philippines partnerships. Takaichi, a long-time conservative known for her hawkish views on historical and territorial issues, assumed office as Japan's first woman prime minister since the cabinet system was established in 1885. Her

government is expected to balance continuity in regional security ties with cautious engagement toward Seoul.

The new Japanese leader is also preparing for her first summit with U.S. President Donald Trump, expected during his visit to Japan later in the month, where discussions will likely focus on China's regional assertiveness and North Korea's missile activities. As both Seoul and Tokyo navigate leadership transitions and shared security challenges, observers view the upcoming APEC summit as a potential venue to sustain momentum in Korea-Japan cooperation amid a changing Indo-Pacific landscape.



Japan's new Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi delivers a policy speech at the Diet in Tokyo on Oct. 24. [EPA/YONHAP]

## **7. North Korea Conducts Series of Missile Launches Ahead of APEC Summit**

[North Korea conducted a series of missile provocations](#) ahead of the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Gyeongju, firing multiple ballistic and cruise missiles in what analysts view as a strategic show of force aimed at influencing regional security discussions.

On Oct. 22, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that Pyongyang fired a ballistic missile into the East Sea, marking its first launch since President Lee Jae Myung's inauguration in June and its fifth of the year. Later that day, North Korea launched several short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) from Chunghwa County in North

Hwanghae Province, which flew approximately 350 kilometers before landing in the country's northeast. Military authorities suspect the projectiles were modified [Hwasong-11Da-4.5 missiles](#), an upgraded version of the KN-23 series modeled after Russia's Iskander system. The missiles, capable of carrying a 4.5-ton conventional warhead, are designed to strike underground command posts and key assets across South Korea, and potentially reach U.S. bases in Japan if further enhanced.

Experts interpret the timing of the launch — just days before U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping are set to attend APEC — as a calculated bid to raise Pyongyang's leverage ahead of renewed diplomatic activity. The presidential office in Seoul convened an emergency national security meeting, pledging close coordination with allies. In a separate move on Oct. 28, [North Korea test-fired strategic cruise missiles for sea-to-surface attacks in the Yellow Sea](#), claiming the weapons successfully hit their targets after 7,800 seconds of flight. Senior military officials, including Pak Jong-chon and Jang Chang-ha, oversaw the test, though Kim Jong-un did not attend, suggesting a controlled messaging strategy. The latest series of launches, including both ballistic and cruise systems, underscores Pyongyang's continued weapons development and its intent to assert regional influence on the eve of major multilateral diplomacy.



A short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) is seen being launched by North Korea on Sept. 19, 2024, in this file photo released by the state-run Korean Central News Agency. [KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY]

## **8. Trump Visits Korea Ahead of APEC, Receives Nation's Highest Honor**

[U.S. President Donald Trump visited Korea for a two-day trip ahead of the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Gyeongju](#), following stops in Malaysia and Japan, the White House announced. Arriving on Oct. 29, Trump held a bilateral summit with President Lee Jae Myung in Gyeongju, their second meeting after talks in Washington in August. The two leaders signed the guest book, attended an official welcome ceremony and discussed economic and security cooperation. During the ceremony, [President Lee presented Trump with the Grand Order of Mugunghwa, Korea's highest](#)

[national honor](#), and a replica of the Cheonmachong gold crown, symbolizing Silla heritage — making Trump the first U.S. president to receive the award. In return, Trump gifted Lee an autographed baseball bat from Washington Nationals player Dylan Crews and a baseball bearing Trump's personal seal, signifying the nations' historic cultural ties through baseball. Trump later attended the APEC CEO luncheon, the leaders' dinner, and a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping before departing Korea on Oct. 30



President Lee Jae Myung, right, presents U.S. President Donald Trump with the Grand Order of Mugunghwa and a model of the Cheonmachong gold crown at the Gyeongju National Museum in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang on Oct. 29. [YONHAP]

## **9. President Lee Outlines Partnership and Peace Vision at ASEAN Summit**

[President Lee Jae Myung attended the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur](#), presenting Korea's new initiative to deepen cooperation with Southeast Asian nations and promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. In his first appearance at the annual ASEAN gathering since taking office in June, President Lee proposed strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) established last year and suggested hosting a special Korea-ASEAN summit in 2029 to mark 40 years of diplomatic relations.

According to National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac, the CSP vision emphasizes Korea's role as a "contributor" supporting youth development, a "springboard" for growth and innovation, and a "partner" for peace and stability in the region. President Lee also introduced his "END" initiative — Exchange, Normalization, and Denuclearization — aimed at easing inter-Korean tensions and seeking ASEAN's support for dialogue and peace efforts.

On the sidelines, Lee held bilateral meetings with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet to discuss online scam crimes and strategic cooperation, and with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to enhance bilateral ties. He later joined the ASEAN Plus Three Summit with Japan and China to discuss broader regional cooperation.

## **10. Korea Hosts APEC Summit in Gyeongju, Calls for Cooperation Amid Global Uncertainty**

[South Korea hosted the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in the historic city of Gyeongju](#), where President Lee Jae Myung urged global cooperation and solidarity in the face of rising protectionism, supply chain disruptions, and technological shifts.

The week began with the [APEC CEO Summit on Oct. 29](#), where President Lee delivered a keynote address emphasizing the role of business leaders in fostering inclusive growth and shared prosperity. He warned against economic nationalism and unveiled Korea's AI Initiative, comparing the potential of artificial intelligence to the ancient Cheomseongdae Observatory, a symbol of knowledge and foresight. The event gathered around 1,700 global business leaders, including top executives from Samsung, Hyundai, LG, SK, Google, Microsoft, AWS, and Citigroup, marking the largest CEO Summit in APEC's 30-year history.

During the main APEC summit on Oct. 31, President Lee highlighted that ["cooperation and solidarity are the surest path to a better future"](#) amid shifting global orders. The meeting, themed *"Towards a More Connected, Resilient Region and Beyond,"* brought together leaders from 21 APEC member economies, including guest delegates such as the UAE's Crown Prince Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed Al Nahyan.

President Lee met Chinese President Xi Jinping for the first time during the summit—Xi's first visit to Korea in 11 years. The two leaders are set to discuss denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula in a bilateral meeting. Lee welcomed Xi with Hwangnam-ppang, a traditional Gyeongju pastry, sending over 200 boxes as gifts to visiting delegations.

Earlier in the week, U.S. President Donald Trump visited Gyeongju for a bilateral summit with Lee before attending regional meetings in Busan. He later departed Korea ahead of the APEC sessions, represented by Treasury Secretary Scott

Bessent. The summit also featured a working lunch with the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC), where Lee outlined Korea's policies on AI and demographic change, envisioning the Asia-Pacific as a "bridge to the AI era." South Korea aims to adopt a "Gyeongju Declaration" at the summit's conclusion, spotlighting technological innovation and demographic transformation. The APEC meetings concluded with a welcome dinner hosted by President Lee, emceed by actor Cha Eun-woo and prepared by Korean American chef Edward Lee, celebrating Korea's cultural and culinary heritage.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, right, speaks during the first session of the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting at the Gyeongju Hwabaek International Convention Center in Gyeongju, North Gyeongsang on Oct. 31. [JOINT PRESS CORPS]

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