



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. 33 March 2026

Contents

1. Seoul Calls for De-escalation Amid U.S.–Israel Strikes on Iran, Activates Emergency Response Framework
2. March 1 Protests Reflect Deepening Domestic Polarization as President Calls for Inter-Korean Dialogue
3. North Korea Reacts to Iran Strikes, Reinforces Nuclear Deterrence Logic Amid Expanding Russia Ties
4. Seoul and Singapore Advance Strategic Partnership Through AI, Trade and Energy Cooperation
5. Seoul and Manila Expand Strategic Cooperation Across Defense, Energy and Emerging Technologies
6. Divergent Narratives on Gender Mark International Women’s Day Across the Korean Peninsula
7. Hormuz Crisis Places Seoul in Strategic Dilemma Amid U.S. Pressure and Energy Security Risks
8. Seoul Expands Africa Outreach Through Strategic Partnership with Ghana
9. Pyongyang Hardens ‘Hostile State’ Doctrine as Seoul Reaffirms Dialogue Approach
10. Kim–Lukashenko Summit Signals Deepening North Korea–Belarus Alliance
11. Declassified Files Reveal North Korea’s Alarm Over South’s Ties with China and Russia in 1990s

Prepared by

Gourilakshmi S, Project Fellow, Korea Centre

1. Seoul Calls for De-escalation Amid U.S.–Israel Strikes on Iran, Activates Emergency Response Framework

South Korea moved swiftly to manage the fallout from [escalating conflict in the Middle East](#) following joint U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran and Tehran’s subsequent retaliation. Seoul urged all parties to exercise restraint and “make every effort to ease tensions,” while prioritizing the safety of its nationals across the region.

[President Lee Jae Myung ordered an immediate assessment](#) of the crisis and instructed officials to prepare comprehensive evacuation plans. The Blue House convened emergency meetings of the [National Security Council, reviewing potential impacts on national security](#), energy supply chains and financial markets. The government also maintained a Level 3 travel advisory for Iran, urging citizens to leave. On the ground, Korean embassies across the Middle East activated emergency communication networks as missile exchanges intensified across Israel, Jordan and the Gulf. Korean nationals in Iran reportedly gathered at the embassy in Tehran, while communities in Israel and neighboring countries began coordinating evacuation contingencies. No casualties among Korean citizens were reported as of early March.

The Ministry of National Defense placed overseas troops, including the Dongmyeong and Cheonghae units, on heightened alert, with Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back ordering readiness for immediate evacuation support if required. Meanwhile, [political reactions within Korea remained divided](#), with progressive voices criticizing the strikes as violations of international law. The crisis underscores Seoul’s dual challenge of safeguarding its citizens abroad while navigating broader geopolitical and economic risks, particularly in relation to oil supply disruptions and regional instability.



2. March 1 Protests Reflect Deepening Domestic Polarization as President Calls for Inter-Korean Dialogue

[South Korea's March 1 Independence Movement Day](#) was marked by sharp political polarization, as rival protest groups took to the streets of Seoul while President Lee Jae Myung used the occasion to call for renewed inter-Korean engagement. Conservative activists, numbering around 2,000, rallied near Seoul Station, denouncing the Lee administration and framing their protest as a continuation of the 1919 independence movement's struggle for "freedom." Participants criticized what they described as authoritarian governance and, notably, expressed support for recent U.S. and Israeli military actions against Iran—highlighting how global geopolitical developments are increasingly intersecting with domestic political narratives.

In contrast, progressive groups gathered near the U.S. Embassy, condemning the strikes on Iran as violations of international law and calling for an immediate halt to military action. Though smaller in scale, these demonstrations underscored ideological divisions over both foreign policy and Korea's alliance with Washington. Police increased security presence around key diplomatic sites amid concerns over potential escalation. Amid these competing narratives, [President Lee struck a conciliatory tone in](#) his commemorative address, urging both Koreas to "end the era of confrontation" and resume dialogue. Emphasizing peaceful coexistence, he reaffirmed that Seoul would not pursue unification through absorption and expressed hope that Pyongyang would return to negotiations, particularly as it advances its new five-year development plan. Together, the protests and presidential messaging highlight widening domestic political divides even as Seoul seeks to project stability and diplomatic initiative amid a volatile regional and global environment.

3. North Korea Reacts to Iran Strikes, Reinforces Nuclear Deterrence Logic Amid Expanding Russia Ties

[North Korea issued a strong condemnation of U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran](#), reflecting growing concern over regime security and the broader implications of U.S. military power. Responding to the reported killing of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Pyongyang denounced the attacks as a violation of sovereignty and warned of wider geopolitical consequences. The reaction highlights the strategic calculations of leader Kim Jong-un, who is likely to interpret the Iran episode as reinforcing the necessity of nuclear weapons for regime survival. The statement notably avoided directly criticizing U.S. President Donald Trump, suggesting

Pyongyang may still seek to preserve space for future diplomacy despite heightened tensions.

[Parallel to this, South Korean intelligence reported a significant expansion](#) in North Korea's military support to Russia. Pyongyang is believed to have shipped approximately 33,000 containers of weapons and ammunition, potentially amounting to millions of artillery shells, while also deploying over 16,000 troops since late 2024. Together, these developments point to a dual strategy: reinforcing nuclear deterrence in response to perceived external threats while deepening strategic alignment with Russia to offset international isolation.

4. Seoul and Singapore Advance Strategic Partnership Through AI, Trade and Energy Cooperation

[South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's state visit to Singapore](#) in early March marked a significant step in consolidating bilateral ties, with both sides moving to operationalize their recently upgraded strategic partnership. The visit, which included summit talks with Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, underscored a shared emphasis on expanding cooperation in advanced technologies, economic security, and energy transition.

At the summit, the two countries adopted a joint statement and signed [multiple memorandums of understanding](#) spanning artificial intelligence (AI), intellectual property, digital technologies, and civil nuclear energy. Notably, both sides agreed to pursue collaboration on small modular reactors and to launch negotiations to upgrade the Korea–Singapore Free Trade Agreement to better reflect emerging dynamics in the digital economy and supply chains. These developments signal a shift from traditional trade ties toward a more integrated, future-oriented economic partnership. A central pillar of the visit was AI cooperation. Speaking at the [AI Connect Summit](#), Lee announced plans to establish a \$300 million global investment fund in Singapore by 2030 to support startups and joint research initiatives. The launch of the Korea–Singapore AI Alliance further institutionalizes collaboration between governments, private firms, and research communities, with the aim of positioning both countries as leading innovation hubs in Asia.

Beyond technology, the visit also highlighted policy learning and soft diplomacy. [Lee expressed interest in Singapore's state-led housing model](#)—where public housing accommodates a majority of the population—as a potential reference point for addressing South Korea's domestic real estate challenges. Symbolic gestures, including the naming of an orchid hybrid after Lee and [First Lady Kim Hea Kyung](#), [reinforced the diplomatic warmth underpinning](#) the partnership. Taken together, the visit reflects Seoul's broader strategy of deepening ties with technologically advanced middle powers, leveraging sector-specific cooperation to enhance resilience and competitiveness in an increasingly uncertain global environment



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, left, hugs Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong after their joint press briefing at the Foreign Ministry in Singapore on March 2. [JOINT PRESS CORPS]

5. Seoul and Manila Expand Strategic Cooperation Across Defense, Energy and Emerging Technologies

[South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's state visit to the Philippines](#) in early March marked a significant step in advancing bilateral ties, with both sides seeking to broaden cooperation beyond traditional sectors into emerging strategic industries. The visit included summit talks with [President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., their second meeting](#) following earlier discussions on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2025. At the summit in Manila, the two countries signed a series of agreements and memorandums of understanding covering a wide range of sectors, including artificial intelligence (AI), defense industry cooperation, digital technology, trade and investment, and cultural exchange. The breadth of these agreements reflects a deliberate effort to institutionalize cooperation across both economic and security domains.

A key focus of the discussions was [energy collaboration, particularly in the nuclear sector](#). Seoul and Manila agreed to deepen cooperation on nuclear power development, building on previous feasibility studies related to the Bataan nuclear power plant. With the Philippines seeking to address persistent energy shortages and diversify its energy mix, nuclear cooperation has emerged as a central pillar of the partnership. The two sides also emphasized the importance of supply chain resilience, agreeing to expand collaboration in critical minerals. The Philippines, a major global producer of nickel, is positioned as a key partner for South Korea's battery and high-tech manufacturing sectors. In parallel, defense ties continue to deepen, with

Manila having procured Korean military platforms such as FA-50 light combat aircraft, highlighting Seoul's growing role as a defense exporter in Southeast Asia.

Beyond economic and strategic considerations, the visit underscored longstanding historical ties between the two countries, commemorating the 77th anniversary of diplomatic relations. These include the Philippines' contribution during the Korean War, which continues to serve as a symbolic foundation for contemporary cooperation. Taken together, the visit reflects Seoul's broader effort to strengthen its engagement with Southeast Asia by integrating traditional security cooperation with emerging areas such as clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and digital innovation, positioning the Korea–Philippines partnership as an increasingly multifaceted strategic relationship.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, left, and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. toast during a state banquet following their bilateral summit at the presidential palace in Manila on March 3. [JOINT PRESS CORPS]

6. Divergent Narratives on Gender Mark International Women's Day Across the Korean Peninsula

Marking International Women's Day, both South and North Korea highlighted the role of women in society, though their messaging reflected starkly different political priorities and institutional realities. [In South Korea, President Lee Jae Myung reaffirmed his administration's commitment to advancing gender equality](#) and rebuilding institutional support for women's rights. In a public message, Lee emphasized efforts to restore policies that had been weakened under the previous government, including strengthening the role of gender-focused governance

frameworks. Framing gender equality as central to building an inclusive society, he underscored the need to address persistent structural inequalities and ensure dignity and safety for all citizens. The statement reflects Seoul’s broader attempt to reposition gender policy within its domestic reform agenda amid ongoing demographic and social challenges.

In contrast, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un used the occasion to reinforce ideological narratives centered on women’s contributions to state and society. Attending a commemorative performance in Pyongyang alongside his wife Ri Sol-ju and daughter Kim Ju-ae, Kim praised women as [“pillars of the revolution”](#) and emphasized their role in advancing socialist development. The event, treated as a national celebration, served both symbolic and political functions—highlighting social unity while showcasing Kim Ju-ae’s growing public visibility, widely interpreted as part of ongoing succession signaling.

Despite the rhetorical emphasis on women’s importance, [structural gender disparities remain evident in North Korea’s political system](#), where female representation in core leadership bodies continues to be limited. The contrast between Seoul’s policy-oriented framing and Pyongyang’s ideological messaging underscores the broader divergence in governance approaches on the peninsula, even when addressing shared global themes such as gender equality.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, right, and his daughter Kim Ju-ae, watch a performance marking International Women's Day on March 8 at Pyongyang Indoor Stadium, in this photo released the next day by the Korean Central News Agency.

[NEWS1]

7. Hormuz Crisis Places Seoul in Strategic Dilemma Amid U.S. Pressure and Energy Security Risks

Rising tensions in the Strait of Hormuz during the escalating conflict involving Iran have placed South Korea in a complex strategic position, as calls from Donald Trump for allied naval participation collided with Seoul's cautious diplomatic approach and acute energy security concerns. [In mid-March, Trump urged South Korea, alongside key global economies,](#) to deploy naval assets to ensure the security of the vital shipping route, which carries roughly one-fifth of global oil supplies. The request came amid intensified U.S. military operations against Iran and growing disruptions to maritime traffic, including reports of stranded Korean vessels and seafarers. However, within days, Trump reversed his position, asserting that U.S. military "success" rendered allied assistance unnecessary, while simultaneously criticizing NATO partners for their reluctance to participate.

For Seoul, [the episode underscored the strategic dilemma of balancing alliance expectations with broader geopolitical and economic risks.](#) South Korea remains heavily dependent on Middle Eastern energy imports, with over 70 percent of its crude oil transiting through the strait. Any prolonged disruption thus poses immediate risks to industrial supply chains, particularly in sectors such as petrochemicals, semiconductors, and manufacturing. While South Korea has the operational capacity to expand the mandate of its Cheonghae naval unit—currently deployed for anti-piracy missions—any such move carries significant political and security implications. Domestically, deployment would require legislative approval, while externally, it risks entanglement in a volatile regional conflict involving Iran and U.S.-led military operations.

Instead, [Seoul has adopted a cautious, multi-pronged approach,](#) engaging in diplomatic consultations with regional actors, including Iran, while coordinating with international partners to stabilize maritime transit. Its participation in joint statements condemning disruptions in the Gulf further reflects a calibrated response aimed at safeguarding national interests without direct military escalation. Overall, the Hormuz crisis highlights South Korea's vulnerability to external energy shocks and the growing complexity of its middle-power diplomacy, as it navigates competing pressures between alliance commitments, economic security, and regional stability.



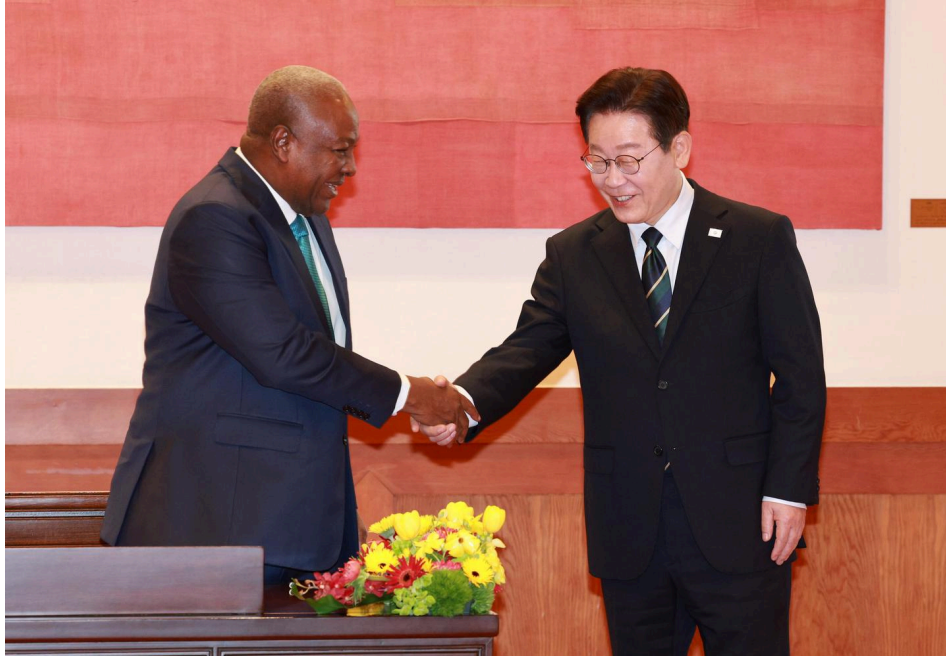
Tankers sail in the Gulf, near the Strait of Hormuz, as seen from northern Ras al-Khaimah, near the border with Oman's Musandam governance, amid the U.S.-Israeli conflict with Iran, in United Arab Emirates on March 11. [REUTERS/YONHAP]

8. Seoul Expands Africa Outreach Through Strategic Partnership with Ghana

South Korea advanced its engagement with Africa through a high-level summit between [President Lee Jae Myung and John Dramani Mahama in Seoul](#), signaling a renewed push to deepen ties with key partners on the continent. Mahama's five-day visit marked the first by an African head of state since Lee took office, underscoring Seoul's intent to elevate its diplomatic and economic footprint in Africa following the 2024 Korea–Africa Summit. The summit produced concrete outcomes across climate cooperation, maritime security, and digital innovation. Notably, the two countries signed an agreement enabling the exchange of emissions reduction outcomes under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, reflecting South Korea's strategy of leveraging international partnerships to meet its climate targets while supporting Ghana's development goals. This positions Ghana as a key partner in Seoul's evolving climate diplomacy.

[Maritime security cooperation also emerged as a priority](#), with both sides agreeing to enhance coordination against piracy, arms trafficking, and other transnational crimes in the Gulf of Guinea—one of the world's most volatile maritime regions. For South Korea, which relies heavily on secure global shipping routes, such collaboration aligns with broader efforts to safeguard international trade flows. Economically, Ghana's role as a regional hub—hosting the African Continental Free Trade Area secretariat, was highlighted as a gateway for Korean businesses seeking entry into West African markets. Agreements on digital and innovation cooperation further reflect a shift toward future-oriented sectors, complementing traditional trade and investment ties.

Overall, the summit illustrates South Korea’s growing emphasis on diversifying its diplomatic partnerships beyond traditional regions, positioning Africa—and Ghana in particular—as an increasingly important component of its middle-power strategy in a changing global order.



President Lee Jae Myung, right, shakes hands with Ghanaian President John Dramani Mahama after Mahama signed the guestbook at the Blue House in central Seoul on March 11. [JOINT PRESS CORPS]

9. Pyongyang Hardens ‘Hostile State’ Doctrine as Seoul Reaffirms Dialogue Approach

Escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula were underscored in late March as North Korean leader Kim Jong-un formally labeled South Korea as the [“most hostile state.”](#) marking a further consolidation of Pyongyang’s hardline stance toward inter-Korean relations. The remarks, delivered during a session of the Supreme People’s Assembly in Pyongyang, reinforce the regime’s “two hostile states” doctrine, which reframes relations with the South as adversarial rather than rooted in shared national identity. Kim’s speech emphasized the irreversibility of North Korea’s status as a nuclear weapons state and framed nuclear deterrence as the central guarantee of regime security and national development. By explicitly linking military strength with economic and political stability, the address signaled Pyongyang’s intent to pursue a long-term strategy of “hostile coexistence,” while maintaining readiness to respond forcefully to any perceived provocation.

The rhetoric also reflects a broader strategic recalibration, in which North Korea appears to be moving away from past frameworks that left room for inter-Korean engagement, instead institutionalizing a posture of sustained confrontation. Analysts suggest this shift allows Pyongyang greater flexibility in external relations while reinforcing internal regime legitimacy through a narrative of external threat. In contrast, South Korea's presidential office reiterated its commitment to peaceful coexistence, with President Lee Jae Myung emphasizing dialogue and cooperation as the only viable path to long-term stability. [Seoul's response highlights a persistent policy divergence on the peninsula](#), as it seeks to keep diplomatic channels open despite increasingly hostile signals from the North. The episode illustrates the widening gap between the two Koreas' strategic outlooks: while Pyongyang entrenches a security-first, nuclear-backed posture, Seoul continues to advocate engagement-oriented policies. This divergence raises questions about the near-term prospects for inter-Korean dialogue and underscores the fragile security environment in Northeast Asia.

10. Kim–Lukashenko Summit Signals Deepening North Korea–Belarus Alliance

North Korean leader [Kim Jong-un welcomed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko](#) to Pyongyang in late March 2026, marking a significant step in strengthening bilateral ties and signaling a broader geopolitical alignment involving Russia. Lukashenko's two-day official visit—his first to North Korea—featured a formal स्वागत ceremony at Kim Il Sung Square, complete with a military honor guard and a 21-gun salute. The visit culminated in summit talks between the two leaders and the signing of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, elevating relations to what Belarusian officials described as a [“new stage.”](#)

The agreement is expected to expand cooperation across multiple sectors, including trade, education, culture, and research. Belarusian Foreign Minister Maxim Ryzhenkov emphasized the importance of strengthening “truly friendly, partnership relations,” reflecting a renewed push to deepen engagement despite international sanctions on Pyongyang. The visit also carried strong symbolic undertones. Lukashenko paid tribute at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun and the Liberation Tower, honoring historical ties rooted in Soviet-era cooperation. He also delivered a floral tribute sent by Russian President Vladimir Putin, underscoring Moscow's indirect presence in the evolving partnership.

Analysts view the summit as part of a broader effort to consolidate a [Pyongyang–Minsk–Moscow axis](#), particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and rising tensions with the United States. Both North Korea and Belarus have supported Russia's war efforts, Pyongyang through military assistance and Minsk by providing logistical backing. The strengthening of ties comes as North Korea seeks new economic and diplomatic avenues amid sanctions, while Belarus

looks to diversify its partnerships. Observers suggest that this trilateral alignment could extend beyond economic cooperation to strategic coordination on global security issues, including potential support for Iran amid escalating Middle East tensions. Overall, the summit highlights a shifting geopolitical landscape, where isolated states are increasingly forming tighter alliances to counter Western influence.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, left, and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko attend a welcoming ceremony for the Belarusian leader's visit to Pyongyang at Kim Il Sung Square on March 25, as seen in a photo carried by North Korea's official Rodong Sinmun the following day. [NEWS1]

11. Declassified Files Reveal North Korea's Alarm Over South's Ties with China and Russia in 1990s

Newly declassified diplomatic records reveal that North Korea reacted sharply to the rapid expansion of South Korea's relations with both China and Russia in the mid-1990s, highlighting a period of major geopolitical realignment after the Cold War. The documents show that Pyongyang was particularly angered by Beijing's growing engagement with Seoul, including a planned 1995 visit by then Chinese President Jiang Zemin. In response, North Korean officials warned that they might establish diplomatic ties with Taiwan—an implicit threat aimed at pressuring China over its [“One China” policy](#). Despite these objections, the summit between Jiang and South Korean President Kim Young-sam went ahead, with Beijing emphasizing a balanced approach toward both Koreas.

At the same time, [Pyongyang faced a more structural challenge as Russia](#) recalibrated its foreign policy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow established diplomatic relations with Seoul in 1990 and began shifting its ties with North Korea from ideological alignment to pragmatic cooperation. South Korea actively encouraged this transition, urging Russia to scrap its 1961 treaty with the North, which included a mutual military assistance clause.

Russian officials acknowledged that the treaty’s military component had become obsolete, and then President Boris Yeltsin indicated that Moscow might allow the agreement to lapse. These developments signaled a weakening of North Korea’s traditional alliances and a broader diplomatic isolation during the post-Cold War period. However, the trajectory has since reversed. In recent years, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un have strengthened bilateral ties, signing a new defense pact in 2024, while China continues to maintain close relations with Pyongyang. The documents underscore how the 1990s marked a turning point in regional diplomacy—one that temporarily sidelined North Korea, but whose dynamics are now being reshaped amid shifting global alignments.
