



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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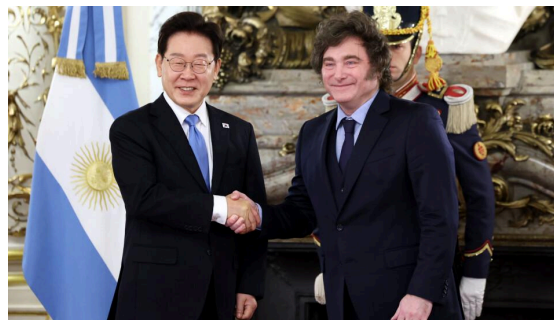
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1. Lee Jae Myung's Latin America Tour Strengthens Korea's Critical Mineral and Economic Diplomacy

President [Lee Jae Myung's 11-day overseas tour](#) in late July and early August 2026 strengthened South Korea's economic partnerships across the Americas, with major agreements covering semiconductors, critical minerals, energy and trade. During the visit, Korea secured approximately \$950 billion in semiconductor-related cooperation with global technology companies at the San Francisco AI Summit, while also expanding partnerships with resource-rich Latin American countries.

Critical minerals emerged as a central focus of the South American leg of the tour. During his visit to Brazil, Lee and President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva agreed to cooperate across the critical-mineral supply chain, including rare earths. In Chile, Korea signed an agreement to strengthen cooperation on copper and lithium, while talks with Argentina produced an agreement to pursue joint projects across the lithium value chain, including exploration and mining. [Energy security was another important outcome of the Argentina summit.](#) Seoul announced plans to begin regular imports of Argentine crude oil from 2027, following trial imports, while the two countries agreed to explore cooperation in natural gas and nuclear power. Korea also concluded a long-pending double taxation avoidance agreement with Argentina, aimed at improving investment conditions for Korean companies.

The tour also advanced Seoul's efforts to diversify trade partnerships amid intensifying US–China competition and global protectionism. Korea and the leaders of Brazil and Argentina agreed to work toward resuming Korea–Mercosur trade negotiations, while Seoul and Santiago agreed to modernize their existing free trade agreement to reflect emerging sectors such as artificial intelligence. The tour highlights South Korea's growing emphasis on economic security diplomacy, linking technology, trade, energy and critical-mineral security. By strengthening ties with resource-rich Latin American economies while expanding its role in the global semiconductor and AI ecosystem, Seoul is seeking to build more resilient supply chains and broaden its strategic and economic partnerships beyond East Asia.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, left, and Argentine President Javier Milei pose for a commemorative photo ahead of their first bilateral summit at Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, in Buenos Aires on July 31.

2. North Korea Warns Against NATO's Expanding Indo-Pacific Military Role

North Korea issued a strong warning against NATO's expanding military engagement in the Asia-Pacific, [threatening a "resolute counterattack"](#) in response to the alliance's plans to modernize its military fuel infrastructure. Pyongyang's warning followed NATO's approval of a €27 billion Fuel Supply Chain Capability Programme Plan on July 22, which includes new fuel storage and distribution facilities, particularly in eastern and southeastern Europe. Through its state media, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) accused NATO of preparing for war and criticized what it described as the alliance's growing military presence in the Asia-Pacific. Pyongyang specifically pointed to the participation of NATO member states in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise, arguing that such activities demonstrate NATO's increasing involvement in the region. North Korea's reaction reflects its broader concern over the expansion of security partnerships involving the United States and its allies beyond the traditional boundaries of the Euro-Atlantic region. Pyongyang has increasingly framed developments in the Indo-Pacific and Korean Peninsula as interconnected elements of a broader security confrontation.

The statement comes amid growing cooperation between NATO members and Indo-Pacific partners, including South Korea, Japan and Australia. North Korea's response therefore highlights the widening geopolitical scope of the Korean Peninsula security environment and the increasing intersection between European and Indo-Pacific security dynamics.

3. South Korea Considers Role in Securing Strait of Hormuz

South Korea is considering ways to contribute to the protection of commercial shipping through the [Strait of Hormuz amid discussions with the United States](#). [National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac](#) said Seoul was reviewing several options in response to Washington's consultations with allies, although the United States had not made a specific request for South Korean military deployment. The government has reportedly considered deploying military assets for surveillance and reconnaissance near the strait, including a Navy logistics support ship, maritime-operation helicopters and P-8A maritime patrol aircraft. Any deployment would require relevant legal procedures, including consultation with the National Assembly and broader public discussion.

Seoul views the free movement of commercial vessels through the Strait of Hormuz as an important economic-security interest, given South Korea's dependence on energy imports from the Middle East. The government has therefore indicated that it

wants to contribute to maintaining freedom of navigation while carefully assessing the legal, diplomatic and security implications of any involvement. The issue highlights the expanding geographical scope of South Korea's security interests. Beyond the Korean Peninsula, Seoul is increasingly linking maritime security, energy security and its alliance with the United States. Any decision on Hormuz could therefore become an important test of the Lee Jae Myung administration's approach to balancing alliance responsibilities with its broader economic and strategic interests.

4. Indonesia Offers Potential Role in Inter-Korean Dialogue

[Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto said he was willing to visit North Korea at the request of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung.](#) potentially opening a channel for dialogue on the Korean Peninsula. Prabowo revealed that Lee made the request during his state visit to Seoul in April and said Indonesia's longstanding policy of non-interference could allow it to contribute to diplomatic engagement. Indonesia maintains diplomatic relations with both North and South Korea and has traditionally pursued a nonaligned foreign policy, maintaining relations with major powers including the United States, China and Russia. Prabowo emphasized Indonesia's interest in promoting reconciliation and dialogue between countries rather than interfering in their domestic affairs.

South Korea welcomed the possibility of Indonesia playing a constructive role. An official from the presidential office noted that countries maintaining friendly relations with both Koreas could contribute to Seoul's objective of achieving peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula.

The development highlights the potential role of middle and regional powers in facilitating inter-Korean dialogue. For Seoul, engaging countries such as Indonesia could provide additional diplomatic channels at a time when direct communication with Pyongyang remains difficult. It also reflects Lee Jae Myung's broader emphasis on diplomacy and peaceful engagement in addressing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.



Korean President Lee Jae Myung, right, and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto shake hands during their bilateral summit at the Blue House in central Seoul on April 1. JOINT PRESS CORPS

5. South Korea Pushes for Greater Defense Autonomy While Strengthening U.S. Alliance Readiness

President Lee Jae Myung called for faster progress in returning former U.S. military bases and emphasized the need for greater [self-reliance in South Korea's national defense](#) during a comprehensive policy briefing on August 5. Lee criticized delays in returning former U.S. installations, noting that South Korea had invested heavily in the relocation of U.S. forces to Camp Humphreys. He linked the issue to the broader goal of strengthening Seoul's ability to take greater responsibility for its own defense. A key element of this agenda is the planned transfer of wartime operational control (Opcon) from the U.S.-led Combined Forces Command to South Korea. Seoul is seeking to complete the transition during Lee's presidential term, while Washington has emphasized that the transfer should depend on the fulfillment of agreed operational conditions.

Against this backdrop, South Korea and the United States conducted the annual [Ulchi Freedom Shield \(UFS\) exercise from August 17 to 27](#). The exercise focused on strengthening combined defense readiness and included realistic, all-domain operational scenarios. It also supported preparations for the conditions-based Opcon transition, with the allies evaluating South Korea's capacity to lead combined forces. The scale and character of field exercises have also evolved under the Lee administration. While the number of major field-training drills was reduced compared with 2025, the exercises incorporated lessons from recent conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine war and the Middle East conflict. The adjustment reflects Seoul's attempt to maintain military readiness while preserving diplomatic space for engagement with North Korea.

The developments highlight a central challenge for South Korea's security policy: strengthening defense autonomy without weakening the U.S.-ROK alliance. Seoul's efforts to assume greater responsibility for its own defense are therefore taking place alongside continued combined military planning and cooperation with Washington.



Weeds grow thick at Camp Red Cloud (CRC), a returned U.S. military base in Uijeongbu, Gyeonggi, on July 1, 2025. YONHAP

6. North Korea Resumes Ballistic Missile Tests Ahead of U.S.–ROK Military Drills

North Korea resumed its ballistic missile testing in August, [launching short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea from the Wonsan area on August 6](#) and again on August 12. The August 6 launch marked Pyongyang's first ballistic missile test in 42 days, while the subsequent launch flew approximately 690–700 kilometres. Both launches came ahead of the annual [Ulchi Freedom Shield \(UFS\)](#) South Korea–U.S. joint military exercise, which North Korea has consistently denounced as preparation for an invasion.

The repeated launches were notable not only for their timing but also for Pyongyang's unusual silence. Unlike its usual practice of reporting missile tests through state media, North Korea did not immediately acknowledge either launch. South Korean analysts suggested that the missiles could have been part of an ongoing weapons-development programme, potentially involving upgraded short-range or hypersonic systems. The absence of official reporting may also have been intended to assess the detection and intelligence capabilities of South Korea and the United States.

The launches prompted closer coordination among [South Korea, the United States and Japan](#), with their diplomatic and military authorities sharing information and discussing possible responses. The August tests therefore demonstrated how North Korea's weapons development continues to reinforce trilateral security cooperation among the three countries, particularly in the areas of missile detection, intelligence sharing and deterrence.

The episode also highlights the persistent security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula: allied military exercises are presented by Seoul and Washington as measures of readiness and deterrence, while Pyongyang interprets them as hostile military preparations and responds through weapons demonstrations. North Korea's August activity consequently underscored the continuing difficulty of combining deterrence with efforts to reopen dialogue and reduce military tensions on the peninsula.



A news report on North Korea's ballistic missile launch is broadcast at Seoul Station in Jung District, central Seoul, on Aug. 12, ahead of the joint Korea-U.S. Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise. YONHAP

7. North Korea–Russia Military Cooperation Raises Security Concerns Beyond Europe

North Korea's military cooperation with Russia continued to deepen in August, with [Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky](#) warning that Pyongyang could deploy an additional 30,000–50,000 troops to Russian territory to support Moscow's war in Ukraine. Ukrainian intelligence reportedly estimated that around 9,500 North Korean ground troops were already deployed in Russia, while discussions were underway over expanding the deployment to western Russian regions bordering Ukraine.

The reported expansion follows the 2024 Russia–North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, including its mutual-defense provisions, and builds on Pyongyang's earlier deployment of troops and military personnel to support Russian forces. North Korea has also reportedly supplied Russia with ballistic missiles and other military equipment, while North Korean personnel are gaining practical experience with contemporary battlefield conditions.

For the Korean Peninsula, [the development has implications beyond North Korea's relationship with Moscow](#). Exposure to Russia's military technology and operational experience could strengthen Pyongyang's capabilities, while closer military ties provide North Korea with opportunities to obtain technological, economic and diplomatic support in return for its assistance to Russia.

The developments have also created new possibilities for South Korea–Ukraine cooperation. Zelensky called for greater cooperation with Seoul, particularly in areas such as air defence and drones. More broadly, the growing Russia–North Korea military relationship demonstrates how the war in Ukraine and security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula are increasingly interconnected, creating challenges for South Korea that extend beyond the immediate Northeast Asian security environment.



North Korean soldiers deployed to Russia's Kursk region are shown in a photo released by the Korean Central Television on Aug. 31, 2025. YONHAP

8. South Korean Public Support for Nuclear Armament Rises Amid Growing Security Concerns

Public support for South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons remained high in August, with a new survey by the [East Asia Institute \(EAI\)](#) showing that [69.1 percent](#) of respondents supported nuclear armament if the North Korean nuclear threat persists. The figure increased from 67.5 percent in 2025 and has remained above the mid-60 percent range in recent years, reflecting sustained public concern over North Korea's expanding nuclear and missile capabilities.

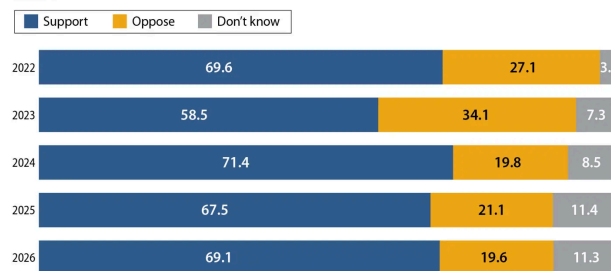
North Korea remained the most significant perceived military threat, identified by 88.4 percent of respondents. At the same time, perceptions of China and Russia as security threats also increased, with 78.9 percent identifying China and 51.1 percent identifying Russia. The survey suggests that South Korean threat perceptions are increasingly shaped not only by the inter-Korean confrontation but also by the broader regional security environment and the deepening cooperation between North Korea, China and Russia.

The debate over nuclear armament has also fluctuated in response to developments in the U.S.–South Korea alliance. Support fell substantially after the 2023 Washington Declaration, which strengthened U.S. extended-deterrence commitments, but subsequently increased as North Korea's military capabilities and its security cooperation with Russia developed.

These domestic trends gained further significance at the end of August when [North Korea reaffirmed that it would not abandon its nuclear weapons](#) and rejected Washington's continued commitment to complete denuclearization. Pyongyang described its nuclear arsenal as essential to national security and vowed to continue strengthening its nuclear forces. Together, these developments point to an increasingly difficult security environment in which North Korea's pursuit of permanent nuclear status is contributing to a growing South Korean debate over the credibility of extended deterrence and the possibility of greater strategic autonomy.

South Korean views on nuclear armament amid North Korean nuclear threats

Unit: %



Source: East Asia Institute

9. North Korea and Russia Deepen Strategic Partnership Amid Shifting Security Dynamics

North Korea and Russia reaffirmed their increasingly close strategic partnership in August, with leader Kim Jong-un expressing confidence in a “[more excellent future](#)” for bilateral relations in a message to Russian President Vladimir Putin marking Korea’s Liberation Day. Kim emphasized the two countries’ shared history and expressed support for Russia’s efforts to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Putin, in turn, described bilateral relations as having reached an unprecedented level under their comprehensive strategic partnership.

The strengthening relationship was also reflected in [Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s praise for North Korea’s military](#) support in Russia’s war against Ukraine. Lavrov described North Korean troop deployments to the Kursk region as evidence of the countries’ “militant friendship” and stated that Moscow and Pyongyang were working together toward a multipolar international order based on national sovereignty. The rhetoric indicates that their partnership is increasingly framed not merely as bilateral cooperation but as part of a broader challenge to the existing international order.

The developments have significant implications for the Korean Peninsula. North Korea’s military assistance to Russia provides Pyongyang with opportunities for battlefield experience, technological cooperation and potentially greater access to Russian military capabilities, while Russia gains personnel and military support for its war in Ukraine. This reciprocal relationship could contribute to the further modernization of North Korea’s military capabilities and complicate regional deterrence calculations.

At the same time, the United States appeared to pursue a more conciliatory approach toward Pyongyang. President [Donald Trump cited his “very good relationship”](#) with Kim Jong-un while ordering a substantial reduction in the scale of the U.S.–South Korea joint military exercises. The contrasting developments—deepening North Korea–Russia military ties alongside renewed U.S. interest in engagement with Pyongyang—illustrate the increasingly complex strategic environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the wider Indo-Pacific.



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, left, and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands during their meeting at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia’s Amur region on Sept. 13, 2023, in this photo released by the Korean Central News Agency the following day. YONHAP

10. China–South Korea Engagement Supports Seoul’s Renewed Peace Diplomacy

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Seoul in August for talks with South Korean officials, marking his first visit to the country for bilateral discussions in five years. [Wang held talks with Foreign Minister Cho Hyun and met President Lee Jae Myung](#) and National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac to discuss bilateral relations, the Korean Peninsula and wider regional and international issues. The visit came at an important moment for Seoul’s renewed efforts to improve inter-Korean relations. Following his Liberation Day speech, President Lee proposed multiparty dialogue on formally ending the Korean War and emphasized peaceful coexistence with North Korea. Seoul has sought to position itself as a “pacemaker” capable of facilitating renewed communication between Washington and Pyongyang, while also encouraging Beijing to contribute constructively to the process.

China’s role is particularly significant because of its longstanding political and strategic relationship with North Korea. Seoul’s engagement with Beijing therefore provides an additional diplomatic channel for addressing the peninsula’s nuclear and security tensions. However, China’s willingness to actively pressure or influence Pyongyang remains uncertain, given Beijing’s cautious approach to North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities. Beyond the peninsula, Wang’s visit also reflected efforts to consolidate the restoration of China–South Korea relations and prepare for further high-level exchanges, particularly as China prepares to host the 2026 APEC summit in Shenzhen. The episode demonstrates Seoul’s broader strategy of balancing relations with major powers while pursuing a more active diplomatic role in managing regional security.



Korean Foreign Minister Cho Hyun, left, shakes hands with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Beijing, China, on Sept. 17. NEWS1

11. Trump Revives Dialogue with Kim as North Korea Maintains Strategic Caution

[U.S. President Donald Trump renewed his outreach to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un](#) in August, stating that Kim had responded to his offer of dialogue and raising speculation about a possible summit during Trump's planned Asia trip in November. [Trump also repeatedly emphasized his positive personal relationship with Kim and ordered](#) a reduction in the scale of the annual Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise with South Korea, signalling an attempt to create conditions more conducive to renewed engagement.

However, North Korea now approaches potential negotiations from a considerably stronger position than during Trump's first term. Its deepening strategic relationships with China and Russia, including military cooperation with Moscow, have reduced Pyongyang's dependence on sanctions relief or immediate concessions from Washington. North Korea may therefore have greater room to delay negotiations while continuing to strengthen its nuclear and missile capabilities.

Pyongyang's public silence toward Trump's overtures was particularly significant. While Trump repeatedly signalled his willingness to meet [Kim](#), [North Korean state media did not publicly acknowledge the proposals](#). Analysts suggested that Kim may be deliberately waiting to assess the U.S. approach while strengthening his domestic political and economic position, particularly given the failure of the 2019 Hanoi summit.

Meanwhile, Seoul sought to maintain close coordination with Washington. Foreign Minister [Cho Hyun](#) and [U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio](#) agreed to maintain a robust combined defence posture while supporting efforts to restart U.S.–North Korea dialogue. The episode illustrates the complex balance facing South Korea: supporting renewed diplomacy with Pyongyang while ensuring that changes to allied military exercises do not weaken deterrence or create uncertainty within the alliance.



U.S. President Donald Trump, left, shakes hands with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Hanoi, Vietnam, on Feb. 27, 2019
AP/YONHAP

