



Korean Peninsula Update

Korean Peninsula Update is issued on a regular basis by the Asia Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). For previous issues and to subscribe, please visit

<https://www.ui.se/english/research/asia/korean-peninsula-update/>



#4 2026-08-19

As Pyongyang Courts Beijing and Moscow, Seoul Turns to Brussels

In early June, Chinese leader Xi Jinping arrived in North Korea for his first state visit since 2019 while South Korean President Lee Jae-myung visited Brussels – which was the first such visit of a South Korean president in eight years.

The two visits captured a widening split in how the two Koreas are positioning themselves this summer. North Korea has spent the past two years deepening military and economic ties with China and Russia, both of which have shielded Pyongyang from further United Nations sanctions at the UN Security Council. Under the Lee administration, South Korea, on its part, has moved to strengthen its security ties with the EU. Hence, ROK seeks to build strategic ties with the EU beyond trade.

From June 8 to 9, Xi's visit marked his first trip to Pyongyang in seven years. The visit doubled as a return call after Kim Jong Un, leader of North Korea, travelled to Beijing last September when he attended a military parade in Beijing marking the 80th anniversary of China's victory in World War II.

During the summit, the two sides publicly referenced military-field exchange for the first time as part of their relationship, according to the South's Unification Ministry. This detail mattered because China and North Korea have historically kept their relationship centred on economic support and diplomatic backing, leaving military cooperation to Pyongyang's relationship with Moscow since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. China has also long supported the denuclearisation principle on North Korea even as it opposed sanctions, which it viewed as excessive. As Beijing refrains from mentioning

the denuclearisation of North Korea, however, Xi may be abandoning its long-held position on North Korea's denuclearization.

Six weeks after Xi's visit to Pyongyang, North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui travelled to Russia from July 18 to 21. The visit builds on a relationship that has deepened since late 2024 when North Korea began deploying troops to Russia's Kursk region to help repel a Ukrainian counteroffensive on Russian territory. South Korea's National Intelligence Service has estimated that roughly 2,000 of the 15,000 North Korean soldiers sent to Kursk have been killed. Pyongyang has memorialized those killed at home, including through a museum opened in Pyongyang in April to honour troops killed while supporting Russian forces, according to the North's state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). In Moscow, Choe met Russian President Vladimir Putin on July 19, where he thanked North Korea for the contribution of its troops to the war effort and passed greetings to Kim.

Choe also held a strategic dialogue with her counterpart Sergey Lavrov, covering implementation of the comprehensive strategic partnership treaty the two countries signed in 2024 – a pact whose mutual defense clause commits each side to military assistance if the other is attacked. Several South Korean analysts interpreted Choe's trip as groundwork for a visit by Kim to Russia later this year, a step that would follow through on the invitation Putin extended when the two leaders met in Beijing in September 2025.

Against this backdrop, Lee and EU leaders Antonio Costa and Ursula von der Leyen met on June 10 at the 11th EU-Korea summit in Brussels. They issued a joint statement condemning what they called illegal military cooperation between Russia and North Korea and stated that neither side would recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, according to the South's presidential Blue House. The two sides also opened negotiations on a security of safe sharing of sensitive information and boost related industrial and research cooperation. Separately, they signed a digital trade agreement covering cross-border data flows, moves Seoul described as expanding the security and defense dimension of the relationship beyond the trade ties that have defined it since 2011.

Taken together, these events suggest a summer in which Pyongyang's diplomacy has moved further into alignment with Beijing and Moscow, even as Seoul works to anchor itself more firmly in Europe. The connection between European security and NATO's eastern flank and developments on the Korean Peninsula, once seen as abstract and distant, is becoming more concrete and evident by the day.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'MITCH SHIN' in a stylized, cursive script.

Mitch Shin
Associate Fellow, Swedish Institute of International Affairs
Chief Correspondent, The Diplomat