Korean Peninsula Update

Korean Peninsula Update is issued on a regular basis by the Asia Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).



#5 2026-11-02

South Korea's European Security Turn

As North Korea and Russia deepen their military cooperation, South Korea is strengthening ties with Western security institutions – moving closer to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and supporting Ukraine. However, this closer alignment has encountered friction, most recently in a dispute over Ukraine's transfer of two captured North Korean soldiers to South Korea. As Seoul simultaneously seeks to improve relations with Pyongyang, its growing engagement with Europe also raises questions about how the support to Ukraine may affect South Korea's diplomacy efforts to the North. Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) has warned of the security risks posed by Russia's growing partnership with North Korea.

At a NATO summit in Ankara on July 7, South Korean President Lee Jae-myung proposed upgrading defence-industrial cooperation with the alliance into joint research, production and operation, and South Korea began negotiating a NATO procurement framework agreement. He pledged 100 million US dollars in comprehensive support for Ukraine on the same trip.

The pairing does not look coincidental. Supporting Ukraine functions as a kind of admission price for entry into the defence market of NATO, and for an unspoken membership in NATO's broader community of like-minded Western states. South Korea has also been weighing whether to contribute to a NATO fund for Ukrainian weapons procurement known as Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL).

That broader push ran into friction on September 23. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told the UN General Assembly that Ukraine had recently transferred two captured North Korean soldiers to South Korea. Lee said on social media the next day that Ukraine had broken a confidential agreement by disclosing the transfer. The Blue House, the presidential office of South Korea, hardened its stance on the night of September 27.

It accused Kyiv of issuing a false statement by denying any confidentiality agreement. The South Korean foreign ministry summoned Ukraine's acting ambassador on September 28 and demanded an official apology, according to the Korea Herald. Lawmakers briefed by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) of South Korea on September 30 said there had been no direct agreement between the two leaders, only a working-level understanding to keep the transfer quiet.

The NIS assessed that Zelensky disclosed the transfer to build Korean public support for more assistance, according to the South Korean local news agencies. For Kyiv, Zelenksy might have disclosed the transfer to shed light on and prove North Korea's growing direct military involvement in the war. The dispute has also split opinion within each country's own political ranks. Some ruling party lawmakers in South Korea criticised the government for leaving them in the dark, while opposition lawmakers faulted it for letting the public learn of the transfer from the speech of a foreign leader. Still, both governments are more likely to defuse the dispute quietly than let it derail the broader relationship.

In Europe, the deepening Russia-North Korea partnership remains under scrutiny. The EU has criticised Moscow's support for Pyongyang and its opposition to North Korea's denuclearisation. On September 8, the Union delivered a statement to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Board of Governors in Vienna, condemning Russia's "particularly disappointing" position that the denuclearization of North Korea is a closed issue. The statement also reiterated concern over a clause in the 2024 Russia-North Korea partnership treaty that references cooperation on nuclear energy. The statement counted at least three of North Korea's ballistic missile launches during August as continuing violations of UN Security Council resolutions. The EU also called on Russia to cease what it described as illegal military cooperation with Pyongyang.

The account from the EU of an expanding nuclear infrastructure in North Korea and the shielding role played by Russia makes one point clear – Russia's role in strengthening North Korea's military capabilities ensures that developments related to the Korean Peninsula will remain a concern for Europe.



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