



## THE PENINSULA

### **Korean Investment Will Keep Coming but Washington Must Unclog the Talent Pipeline**

Published September 8, 2025

**Author:** [Arius Derr](#)

**Category:** [U.S. Foreign Policy](#), [Current Events](#), [Economic Security](#), [The United States](#), [US-Korea alliance](#)



The September 4 detention of some 300 South Korean nationals at the Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America (HMGMA) in Georgia exposes a contradiction in the Donald Trump administration's goal to "Make America Great Again." The Trump administration has prioritized deporting illegal immigrants who are viewed as gaining benefits without having established citizenship, but it also desires the restoration of the United States' manufacturing capacity through an influx of foreign investment and technology. The Trump administration must square the circle by expanding lawful pathways by which foreign workers can support the investments the administration wishes to attract, or it will shut down a major pipeline through which good, new American jobs are being created.

The United States has recruited advanced Korean manufacturing with generous state-level agreements, yet immigration rules and visa restrictions choke off the short-term, firm-specific technicians needed to stand these plants up. Korean firms are unlikely to retrench from the U.S. market given its structural advantages and policy incentives, but there are practical remedies—stronger prime-contractor oversight of immigration compliance, a narrow ally-specific visa channel, and administrative adjustments—to align Korean investments with the industrial strategy the United States has chosen.

Most of the Korean nationals apprehended worked for LG Energy Solution, an on-site battery manufacturer for Hyundai's IONIQ line of electric vehicles, and other subcontractors. U.S. officials described it as the largest single-site worksite raid in the Department of Homeland Security's history. Within days, Seoul said it reached a deal with Washington to release and repatriate those in custody under voluntary-departure arrangements, potentially avoiding the legal repercussions of deportation.

It is unclear what laws were broken or under what conditions the Korean nationals entered the United States. The U.S. government has not pressed any charges as of this writing. Regardless, two Trump administration priorities are working at cross purposes to each other. First, the United States has actively courted advanced Korean manufacturing. Hyundai alone has committed USD 12.6 billion to Georgia, the state's largest foreign direct investment (FDI), creating tens of thousands of American jobs. But federal immigration rules and adjudication practices make it difficult to deploy the specific technical talent that the metaplant and other greenfield plants require, especially in their first years of operation. In other words, the United States wants FDI and the high-tech manufacturing that comes with it, yet offers few legally safe pathways for short-term deployment of proprietary, factory-specific expertise.

Battery-cell lines, module assembly, cell-formation protocols, and the factory-automation stacks that integrate them are process-intensive and highly unique to a particular firm. Engineers and other trained specialists must accompany a firm like Hyundai and help train and localize the U.S. workforce. Over time, localization is both the plan and the practice—Hyundai's metaplant is hiring tens of thousands of Americans—but there is a ramp-up period that necessitates the presence of home-market technicians who know the line.

Like Hyundai's investment in Georgia, Samsung's StarPlus Energy joint venture in Kokomo, Indiana, a multi-billion-dollar battery investment that is backed by a conditional federal loan commitment, is designed to increase American jobs but must lean on Korean specialists to help localize production. Samsung's USD 40 billion investment near Austin, Texas, is much the same. None of these projects were intended as plug-and-play without an early infusion of firm-specific know-how from Korea.

U.S. immigration offers narrow channels for short-term business visas at the exact moment strategic investments from Korea are spiking. H-1B visas for non-U.S.-trained specialists are capped at 65,000 annually, with selection windows and months-long processing times ill-suited to the sort of rapid investment Hyundai and others are making in the United States. Many commissioning roles do not fit the "specialty occupation" degree template. Other pathways, such as the B-1 or L-1 visas, either do not allow applicants to earn income in the United States or require extensive corporate documentation and long-term commitments out of sync with turnaround times required at the metaplant, a sprawling complex that houses multiple suppliers and affiliates.

Small and mid-size Korean subcontractors are often the most at risk. They follow large investors into U.S. projects but lack the headcount and legal infrastructure for long-term personnel rotations. Long wait times and reams of paperwork in the U.S. immigration system are potentially existential challenges for firms whose revenue depends on quickly responding to the needs of the larger firm, which may be their only customer. Indeed, as far as is known, no individual directly employed by Hyundai was apprehended in the Georgia raid. When federal enforcement tightens on immigration, small and medium-sized enterprises bear the brunt of the crackdown.

Nonetheless, there are changes that the Korean private sector and the Trump administration can make so that Hyundai and other large Korean companies can sustain the sort of investments in the United States that the administration advocates so strongly for.

First, there must be greater fidelity between large Korean conglomerates and their vendors and subcontractors for immigration compliance across multitiered construction and commissioning networks. That means syncing onboarding and document controls in ways that make work-scope distinctions explicit between lawful visa activity and any productive on-site work. Hyundai, Samsung, and others may also consider a continuous audit regime that mirrors export-control and safety programs rather than treating visas as an afterthought or as solely their contractors' concern.

Second, Congress should create a country-specific, high-skill channel for Korean nationals that is similar to the model used with other partners with which the United States has a free trade agreement. The bipartisan [Partner with Korea Act](#) would add an "E"-class specialty-occupation visa for South Koreans, functioning similarly to Australia's [E-3](#) or Singapore and Chile's [H-1BI](#) categories. A predictable, dedicated-cap channel for time-bound technical deployments would reduce pressure on Korean firms and align with the rapid timelines for FDI in the United States.

Third, Washington can use existing authority to narrow the gap between current law and operational needs without compromising enforcement. One option is to [modernize Schedule A](#)—the list of shortage occupations exempt from the labor-certification step—so that industrial commissioning and factory-automation technologists with verifiable training qualify for permanent employment at sites such as the Hyundai metaplant. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Homeland Security, Customs and Border Protection, and related agencies can also expand and clarify the permissible contours of on-site, nonproductive training under B-1 visas while encouraging firms to use established training visas, such as the J-1 trainee category, where appropriate. The Trump administration should also reconsider whether the deterrent effects of broadcasting such raids online outweigh the negative public sentiment the footage generates in a country like Korea, which is currently one of the biggest investors in the United States.

Without these changes, the Trump administration will struggle to attain its goal of enriching U.S. manufacturing and onshore twenty-first-century technological prowess. If Washington wants the facilities, the jobs, and the strategic insulation that comes with Korean FDI, it will need to align entry and exit mechanics with the industrial strategy it has chosen. The investment is here; immigration policy needs to catch up.

*Arius Derr is Director of Communications at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) in Washington, DC. All views are the author's alone.*

*Photo from [Shutterstock](#)*

*KEI is registered under the FARA as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the government of the Republic of Korea. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.*

