



THE PENINSULA

Kim Jong Un Builds a Wall With South Korea at Party Congress

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The Ninth Congress of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party covered familiar ground this past week from its last gathering five years ago. Kim Jong Un proclaimed his goals of state-driven economic development, a military buildup focused on nuclear weapons, and his singular and unchallenged leadership.

Even the message to the United States was not new: stop your "hostile" attitude and accept North Korea as a nuclear-armed state, and maybe we might be willing to talk to you.

The only surprise lay in Kim's deep antagonism toward South Korea, making it clear that the demilitarized zone was no longer just a temporary demarcation line but now a wall of deep and unalterable division of the Korean Peninsula into two completely separate states.

This shift in North Korean policy away from the long-held aspiration of reunification was first expressed in late 2023 at a meeting of the nominal legislature, the Supreme People's Assembly. At that time, [Kim declared](#) that the two Koreas were now belligerent states, and the South was an enemy against whom even nuclear weapons could be used.

"That is in sharp contradiction with what our line of national reunification was: one nation [minjok], one state with two systems," Kim said, according to state media.

At that time, this shift was at least partly seen as a response to conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who had staked out a tough, even provocative, stance toward North Korea. But Kim Jong Un made clear at the party congress that this break applies as well, if not more so, to the liberal government of Lee Jae Myung.

Kim characterized the efforts of progressive South Korean administrations to engage, starting with Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy," as malicious subversion aimed at undermining and overthrowing his regime. "They have insidiously sought to spread their culture within us through opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation," he told his loyal followers, "seeking to bring about change in some people through this, and furthermore, they have attempted to bring about the collapse of our system."

North Korea "has absolutely no business dealings" with the "most hostile" South Korea, Kim opined, and will not consider them as "fellow countrymen." Instead, "We will perpetuate the current situation in which all ties with Korea have been completely eliminated, and we will not revive the misleading past under any circumstances."

Kim paired this forceful declaration of permanent hostility with clear threats to use military force, including nuclear weapons, against their formerly brotherly Koreans. He claimed the right to use "the preemptive strike mission of deterrence," and in other parts of his lengthy address, detailed the further development of their nuclear weapons capability for tactical use.

"If South Korea's reckless actions at the doorstep of a nuclear power are deemed to be damaging to our security environment, we may initiate arbitrary action," Kim said in a clear threat. And he made equally apparent that the goal of unification, this time at the point of a bayonet, had not been entirely abandoned.

"As an extension of that action," Kim continued, "the possibility of (South) Korea's complete collapse cannot be ruled out."

Intensifying Militarization

This fierce attitude toward South Korea was accompanied by an extended discussion of the growing militarization of North Korea and its economy.

Framed as a response to American and "imperialist" aggression, Kim laid out a program of continued modernization and buildup of the Korean People's Army (KPA), not only nuclear weapons but a range of conventional weapons, some of them being tested in Ukraine, where more than 10,000 North Korean forces have been deployed in combat.

Kim told the party congress that they will invest further in "nuclear trigger" capabilities, a crisis response system that will allow rapid use, including preemptive attack, of nuclear weapons. All their measures are intended to ensure the survival of nuclear forces and the ability to retaliate in the event of an attack. "This will include a more powerful ground- and underwater-launched intercontinental ballistic missile complex that integrates accumulated technologies, various artificial intelligence unmanned attack complexes, special assets for attacking enemy satellites in times of emergency, extremely powerful electronic warfare weapon systems for paralyzing enemy command centers, and even more advanced reconnaissance satellites," according to the leader.

Left unsaid was the assistance that North Korea may be receiving from its strategic ally, Russia, in these modernization efforts. The work report submitted during the congress, and a shorter concluding statement, did not mention either Russia or China, North

Korea's treaty and economic allies. This may be due to the largely domestic audience for these events and the desire to assert North Korea's self-reliance.

But at a military parade to conclude the party congress, Kim gave a place of honor to a rank of KPA soldiers who had fought in Ukraine. The unit was led by soldiers holding both North Korean and Russian flags.

In this militarized state, the KPA has a leading role in the pantheon of party and state. To some extent, this is a throwback to the "army first" policy laid down by Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, in the mid-1990s. Kim Jong Un has not reverted to the idea that the military has primacy over the party or the state. But he made it clear at the party congress and in a short speech at the military parade that the army is not just a military force but also a key part of ideological and political control.

"The People's Army must continue to reliably play the leading role of our great era as a revolutionary armed force loyal to the Party, as the core of national defense, as a pioneer of great changes, and as a creator of the people's happiness," Kim said at the parade.

Future Prospects for U.S.-North Korea Engagement

These themes were the dominant messages of Kim's work report and other statements. The reiteration of willingness to engage the United States has to be seen in this context, not as an open door to a return to a warm reunion with Donald Trump.

Kim offered a view of the international situation that mirrored the rhetoric and beliefs of his patrons in Beijing and Moscow:

"The world today is completely different from even five years ago, and international relations have entered a whirlwind of chaos and upheaval. The foundations of peace and security around the world are being seriously shaken by America's hegemonic policies and tyranny, and armed conflicts are occurring one after another. The current international situation is moving in a more chaotic direction and is becoming more volatile and unpredictable as time passes."

Kim laid responsibility for this "chaos" solely at the doorstep of Trump, accusing the president of disregarding "sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security interests of other countries" under the "America First" banner. U.S. hostility toward North Korea is unchanged, the North Korean leader claimed at the party congress. But if the United States is ready to accept its status as a nuclear power and abandon all talk of denuclearization, "we have no reason not to get along."

Conclusion

In response, a White House official told Yonhap News Agency that "President Trump remains open to talking with Kim Jong-un without any preconditions."

Kim, however, is very much setting preconditions for talks. Rather than an opening, it is more accurate to read his words as an invitation to surrender to a North Korea that is an emergent nuclear-armed military power, positioned in a profoundly aggressive posture toward the U.S. ally, South Korea. At best, this party congress was an assertion of confidence by Kim in the rule of his family regime and a return to policies of isolation—this time, however, bolstered by a new alliance with its neighbors in Russia and China.

With “a people and an army that single-mindedly support the policies of the Party and the state, and a self-reliant economy with great development potential,” Kim concluded his address to the party congress, “there is no fortress that we cannot conquer and no great undertaking that we cannot accomplish.”

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Feature image from North Korean state media.

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Return to the Peninsula



THE PENINSULA

The Trump Administration's Next Trade Moves After IEEPA Ruling

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The Supreme Court's ruling that President Donald Trump's tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) are unconstitutional is being read as a constraint on executive power. But the administration retains substantial authority to pursue aggressive trade policy through sections 122, 301, and 338, as well as non-tariff mechanisms such as quotas, licensing regimes, and embargoes that are harder to litigate and less visible to markets. What the ruling signifies is a shift in the U.S. trade policy's center of gravity back toward traditional trade institutions, making the road ahead murkier rather than clearer.

The Immediate Economic Impact Is Minimal

Trade-sensitive stocks fell after the Supreme Court's Friday ruling triggered the reimposition of 15 percent tariffs, but it did not lead to a market collapse that Trump had warned about if the justices ruled against him. Equity markets barely reacted, suggesting that the outcome was largely anticipated and already priced in. At its core, the case focused on whether the president can use IEEPA to raise revenue through tariffs, a power the Constitution assigns to Congress, not the White House. The ruling does not break new ground—rather, the markets reflect a boundary that was always there.

The elimination of IEEPA tariffs does not mean the end of tariffs. The administration can, and likely will, pivot to other legal authorities, including sections 201, 232, and 338. Section 122 allows for across-the-board tariffs (up to 15 percent) to address balance-of-

payments concerns, though these measures are subject to a 150-day limit. Meanwhile, Section 301 permits substantially higher tariffs, often exceeding 25 percent, but requires lengthy investigations. President Trump relied heavily on this mechanism during his first term and may do so again during his second, leaning on the U.S. trade representative to execute these investigations. Section 301 could also be used to target digital services disputes. The most immediate example is South Korea's regulatory treatment of Coupang, the Seattle-based e-commerce giant whose [data breach investigation](#) has already drawn a Section 301 petition from U.S. investors and a congressional subpoena.

U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer's [official statement](#) following the court ruling noted that he expects Section 301 investigations to be "areas of concern" for major trading partners, specifically highlighting "discrimination against U.S. technology companies and digital goods and services" and "digital services taxes." Again, the Supreme Court's decision reshapes how that uncertainty is created and managed. As tariff authority shifts away from emergency powers, traditional trade institutions, particularly the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR), move back to the center of the policy process, reestablishing investigations, negotiations, and procedural delays as critical tools for U.S. trade.

But Section 301 is not the administration's only remaining tool. Even without IEEPA tariffs, the Trump administration retains wide latitude to restrict trade through non-tariff barriers such as quotas, export and import licensing, and embargoes. These non-tariff barriers raise a different set of economic concerns because they can disrupt supply chains in ways that are far less transparent than tariffs. Much of this opacity comes from the import licensing process.

Consider Korean automobile imports. Many Hyundai dealerships in the United States are owned by Americans, but if the U.S. government were to impose quotas on Korean cars, those dealerships would need government approval—an import license—to receive vehicles. When licenses are limited, who gets them is no longer determined by the market but by administrative decisions. In practice, this creates incentives for lobbying and preferential treatment, as firms seek access through political channels rather than competition. A dealership spending money on a trade attorney to secure its allocation means the dealership is not spending that money on inventory, staff, or customers. If non-tariff barriers become more common, the drag on the economy will compound over time.

Implications for Korea

The U.S.-Korea trade framework negotiated following the April 2025 "Liberation Day" tariff was premised on IEEPA-based measures that are now invalid. This creates space for renegotiation and leverage on both sides.

But the worst part may be that none of this will be resolved quickly. Congress is not a realistic venue for trade policy, and the administration knows it. President Trump has already indicated [little interest](#) in working with Congress to draft more durable alternatives to IEEPA tariffs. If Democrats retake the House of Representatives or the Senate during the midterm elections in November, passing tariff legislation becomes even more difficult. That gridlock makes it more, not less, likely that the administration will continue [testing the limits of executive trade authority](#) through regulation and litigation.

The ruling also leaves important questions unanswered, most notably, whether tariff revenues collected under IEEPA should be returned to U.S. firms or consumers. As a result, legal challenges are likely to continue for years. Future lawsuits will likely test IEEPA, as well as the boundaries of Section 122, Section 301, and other trade statutes.

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THE PENINSULA

South Korea's Salt Farm Problem: How Local Labor Failures Create

Trade Risk

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In April 2025, U.S. authorities [issued a Withhold Release Order \(WRO\)](#) on salt from Taepyeong Salt Farm, South Korea's largest producer, citing concerns over forced labor and blocking its entry into the U.S. market. Months later, officials at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul [reviewed allegations of exploitation](#) involving intellectually disabled workers at a major salt farm in South Jeolla Province.

While these cases involve a single industry, they reveal how local enforcement failures can escalate into trade and diplomatic liabilities. What began as a domestic labor oversight failure has become a test of South Korea's credibility as a high-standard economic partner in the U.S.-Korea relationship.

A Recurring Problem

These recent revelations are not isolated incidents. Reports of abusive labor conditions in Sinan County—the home of the Korean salt industry, roughly four hours southwest of Seoul—have [surfaced repeatedly](#) over the past decade. The U.S. Department of State's 2015 [Trafficking in Persons Report](#) documented cases in which Korean workers with physical or intellectual disabilities were coerced into working at salt farms under abusive conditions, including unpaid wages, excessive hours, and unsafe living and working environments.

Media investigations helped drive the Korean government to crack down on abusive employers, expand labor inspections, update disability protection guidelines, and tighten registration requirements for salt farms receiving government support. Local governments were also tasked with closer monitoring of labor conditions in designated high-risk rural industries.

Despite these reforms, enforcement gaps persisted. The recurrence of similar abuses suggests that enforcement capacity, rather than the absence of legal protection, remains the central issue.

Structural Labor Vulnerabilities

South Korea's labor laws are comprehensive on paper, but enforcement remains highly uneven, especially in small, geographically isolated workplaces. In urban manufacturing and service sectors, more frequent inspections and stronger union presence have generally resulted in quicker remediation when violations occur. But in rural areas like Sinan County, limited inspection capacity, driven by staffing shortages and logistical obstacles, reduces the frequency and depth of workplace monitoring. Reliance on vulnerable workers, particularly individuals with disabilities or limited social support, lowers reporting rates. At the local level, economic dependence on one or a small handful of dominant industries makes it easier for firms in these sectors to exploit labor.

These dynamics reinforce one another: weak monitoring allows violations to persist, while worker dependency and local economic pressures discourage intervention. The result is a regulatory blind spot where legal standards exist but are inconsistently applied.

Rural Labor Shortages and Demographic Pressures

The Sinan salt farm cases reflect broader stresses across South Korea's rural labor market. Agriculture, fisheries, and food processing—sectors concentrated outside urban centers—face chronic labor shortages and increasingly rely on migrant workers to fill gaps that domestic labor no longer covers.

Korea has special work visas designed to address these shortages, but these visas often lock migrant workers to a single employer. Although the recent cases involved Korean nationals with disabilities, these oversights may affect many foreign workers as well.

These pressures are likely to intensify. South Korea is aging more rapidly than nearly any other country. The average age in Sinan County, for example, is 55.7, compared to 45.4 in Seoul (as of January 2026). This urban-rural divide is seen across the country. As the working-age population declines, incentives to bypass labor standards may intensify in the absence of stronger oversight.

Trade and Reputational Spillovers

The U.S. customs ban on Korea's largest salt exporter illustrates how labor violations can move from a domestic human rights concern to broader economic and diplomatic risks.

For the United States, such cases complicate efforts to deepen economic cooperation under frameworks that increasingly emphasize labor standards, ethical sourcing, and supply-chain resilience. Enforcement actions against Korean products risk introducing friction into the U.S.-Korea trade relationship, particularly if additional industries are drawn into labor-related reviews. More broadly, allegations of forced labor in one

industry undermine Korea's standing as a trusted supplier across all sectors, carrying significant downstream risks for U.S.-Korea trade as the two countries execute the [USD 350 investment package](#) agreed to last year.

Perhaps cognizant of these spillover effects, the Ministry of Employment and Labor recently announced a [significant increase](#) in nationwide inspections targeting labor abuses, including joint enforcement initiatives focused on foreign workers in rural and fishing communities.

Beyond general inspection increases, Seoul could consider establishing dedicated rural labor inspection units with authority to conduct unannounced audits in high-risk industries such as agriculture, fisheries, and food processing. Concentrating expertise in these regions would help overcome logistical barriers and reduce uneven enforcement across provinces. For workers on temporary work visas, expanding job-transfer flexibility would reduce employer leverage and lower barriers to reporting violations. Together, these measures shift oversight from reactive enforcement to more preventive, sustained compliance.

Conclusion

The Sinan salt farm case reflects deeper governance challenges linking demographic decline, rural labor markets, enforcement capacity, and global supply-chain scrutiny. For Korea, strengthening workforce oversight is now a strategic economic imperative to sustain an economic pivot toward the United States.

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Feature image from the [South Korean government's Flickr account](#).

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THE PENINSULA

Iran Conflict Hardens North Korea's Nuclear Posture

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North Korea's list of close partners keeps shrinking. After the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024, Iran became North Korea's sole ally in the Middle East. Now, after the U.S.-Israel strikes on Iran and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's death, it appears that even that once close-knit relationship is on the fritz.

The Iran crisis will reinforce the belief that nuclear arms are the ultimate guarantor of regime survival. The fate of non-nuclear "rogue" states under U.S. military pressure serves as a cautionary tale for Kim Jong Un.

A vindicated North Korean nuclear posture could carry real implications for the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Kim will likely double down on expanding and refining his nuclear and missile capabilities rather than entertain diplomatic talks with the United States, which could intensify pressure on the U.S. government to demonstrate the credibility of extended deterrence in visible and tangible ways. It may also reignite debate in Seoul about whether reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella is sufficient over the long term.

At the very least, the Iran crisis will harden North Korea's conviction that nuclear weapons are indispensable, making diplomacy even more difficult and U.S.-South Korea alliance coordination more essential.

Decades-Long Partners

Anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism pushed North Korea and Iran together for most of the past half-century, united in their struggle against U.S. hegemony. In May 1989, then President Ali Khamenei visited North Korea and drove through Pyongyang in a motorcade with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung. Thousands of North Koreans dotted the streets and cheered for the two leaders. According to his biography, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini selected Khamenei as his successor due to the perceived success of that trip.

During Khamenei's more-than-three-decade reign as Iran's supreme leader, North Korea and Iran cooperated on multiple fronts, especially in the military. The two governments sold each other advanced weapons and military technology. For example, during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, North Korea sold Scud missiles to Iran. The arms trade between the two governments evolved into more sophisticated collaboration on solid-fuel missile technology and the sale of the larger Hwasong-7 missile to Iran.

While geographic distance and cultural dissimilarity disinclined both countries from becoming full-blown allies, the two regimes respected each other's peculiarities. In 2013, the avowedly anti-religious North Korea even opened a Shia mosque in Pyongyang for Iranian diplomats. In 2017, amid heightened tensions between the United States and North Korea, Iranian state media applauded the latter for its "success in humiliating the Great Satan."

Validating Nuclear Weapons

While North Korea criticizes the attacks on Iran as the "hegemonic and gangster-like actions" of the U.S. military, the Kim regime must also feel justified in its own pursuit of a nuclear arsenal. Despite pressure and international sanctions, the North Korean regime managed to do something that the much wealthier Iranians could not do: develop and sustain a nuclear weapons program.

But North Korea must also feel that its already small group of friends is now even smaller. While Iran was never as important to the North Korean economy as China or Russia, North Korea and Iran shared many of the same values and principles. Much like the North Korean system, the Iranian regime opposed Western notions of democracy and human rights. The two leaders saw each other as comrades. On a symbolic level, the loss of another friend in the Middle East is a blow to the already isolated Kim regime.

With Iran facing an intensifying U.S.-Israeli military campaign widely perceived as aimed at regime change, North Korea is forced to consider whether entering the conflict would advance its strategic position. Skeptics once doubted that North Korea would meaningfully back Russia's war in Ukraine, but it surprised observers by dispatching 12,000 troops to aid Russia's war efforts.

But it is highly unlikely that North Korea will actively assist the Iranian regime. It is too far away to provide any meaningful military support. Moreover, although North Korea and Iran have maintained military cooperation over the years, their relationship lacks deep economic or cultural foundations. They do not share a common communist legacy, nor do they possess overlapping religious traditions that would compel solidarity at any cost.

Finally, North Korea already counts Russia as its principal military patron. North Korea likely gleaned significant operational lessons from the battlefield in Kursk, and seeking additional combat experience in Iran would offer limited strategic upside while

Conclusion

North Korea will draw a familiar lesson from the Iran crisis: regimes without nuclear weapons are vulnerable, and those with them are far less so. For the Kim regime, the bomb was never just a prestige project—it was a survival strategy. Recent events in the Middle East will harden, not moderate, that conviction.

That reality sharpens, rather than diminishes, the stakes of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. North Korea already fields a growing nuclear and missile arsenal capable of threatening South Korea, Japan, and U.S. forces in Asia. The U.S.-South Korea alliance is treaty-bound and credibility-bound to deter that threat. If Pyongyang believes its nuclear posture has been vindicated, it will continue refining it. The question is not whether North Korea intervenes in Iran. It is whether Washington and Seoul are prepared to manage a hereditary dictatorship that sees its nuclear weapons program as non-negotiable.

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Feature image from [Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#).

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