



By: **Sharmila Devi**

Trump's latest pique leaves South Korea scrambling



As many countries count the cost of the US-Israeli war against Iran, a beneficiary has emerged in the form of Seoul's Incheon airport, which has overtaken Dubai to become the world's busiest airport for international passengers.

But this may be scant consolation for South Korea as Donald Trump's caprices may threaten its hopes to capitalise on its growing international appeal after the president this week raised questions about the long-term US commitment to its security.

Trump made an "inane, haphazard decision" – according to Senator Jack Reed – to abruptly scale back joint military exercises with 18,000 South Korean troops on 17-27 August that were cut short by six days.

Trump announced his decision ordering the Pentagon to "substantially reduce" the joint exercises on social media the day before they started and as South Korea was celebrating its liberation from Japan in 1945. The US and South Korean militaries have held joint exercises since 1955 after the 1953 armistice ending the Korean War.

South Korea is being forced back from basking in an economic boom fuelled by AI chips and bumper tourism numbers partly powered by the global popularity of its cultural exports, including Kpop, food and fashion.

Incheon said it recorded 38.4 million international passengers in the first six months of this year, above London's Heathrow and Singapore's Changi airports, after the Iran war cut the number of people going through Dubai.

A return to "Korea passing"

But Washington's transactionalism is forcing Seoul and other Asian governments to look again at their strategies for defence independent of the US while China flexes its muscles, just as European NATO members have had to amid a looming threat from Russia.

Trump's erratic and unpredictable policy-making may come into play again this autumn during a flurry of diplomatic events, including Chinese leader Xi Jinping's trip to Washington on 24 September and November's Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Shenzhen that Trump is expected to attend.

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South Korea's opposition conservative People Power party called Trump's decision to curtail the **joint exercises** a "security disaster" and warned of a return to "Korea passing", a term coined in Seoul to describe the country being ignored in international discussions on North Korea.

Trump said in his social media post on the military exercises that South Korea had said "No thanks!" to helping the US in the "denuclearisation" of Iran.

He also had warm words for North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who Trump said had been "unthreatening and respectful".

"Not a credible partner"

But this was met with dismissal in Pyongyang, raising doubts about whether Trump will be able to move on from the far from settled issue of Iran towards talks with **North Korea**.

"If the US calculates that it can propagate its recent measure as one of so-called good faith, they will not get the desired answer," Kim Yo-jong, the sister of and advisor to North Korea's leader, said in a statement. The shortened military exercises were still "provocative and aggressive," she said.

However, she did refrain from the language used by her brother when, in 2017, he called Trump a "mentally deranged dotard".

Seven years ago, Trump failed to end the nuclear weapons programme of North Korea, which now has an estimated 60 nuclear weapons, raising uncomfortable parallels with Iran that have yet to be addressed by the US administration.

North Korea and Russia signed a comprehensive strategic partnership pact in 2024

Trump suspended US-South Korean military exercises after his first summit with the North Korean leader in 2018 but the US president was left with nothing to show for his zeal.

The president is “not going to get a Nobel prize,” retired Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery told PBS. “And what he’s really doing is working with one of the members of the kind of axis of aggressors that’s challenging the **United States** around the world, whether it’s in China with Taiwan or Russia and Ukraine in Eastern Europe or North Korea and South Korea,” he said.

He pointed out that North Korea had become stronger through helping Russia with sending more than 14,000 troops in Ukraine while Trump had sent a strong signal to South Korea, Taiwan and Japan that the US is not a “credible partner.”

North Korea and Russia signed a comprehensive strategic partnership pact in 2024 and the two countries are also close to completing the first road bridge between them.

A US shortfall

Seoul has tried to respond to Washington in a cool and rational manner even though its military was left scrambling and many Koreans were angered.



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President Lee Jae Myung said Seoul should proceed during his term with the planned transfer of wartime operational control of **South Korean forces** from the US.

He also called for progress on the country’s nuclear submarine programme and “strengthening” the country’s “self-reliant defence capabilities”.

Added to the urgency is a US shortfall in critical weapons and the movement of US military resources from Asia to the Middle East after the protracted Iran war.

These developments have been noted not only by allies in Asia but also in the Gulf and Europe. China will also have watched closely after Iranian attacks forced US troops to leave their bases in the Middle East.

Anyone not in Beijing’s camp will be feeling extremely nervous.