



By: TA | AP Insight

The dispute with Ukraine could complicate Seoul's push for talks with Pyongyang



South Korea's president threatened Friday to take unspecified punitive steps against Ukraine if it refuses to apologize over its **revelation** of a supposedly secret transfer of two **North Korean prisoners of war** to South Korea.

Seoul and Kyiv are embroiled in a diplomatic dispute, with Seoul strongly protesting against Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's disclosure of the transfer during his U.N. speech last week.

South Korea accuses Ukraine of violating a nondisclosure agreement on the transfer, but Kyiv has denied agreeing to such a deal.

The arrival of the North Korean soldiers last month could also spell trouble for South Korea's liberal government, which hopes to improve ties with Pyongyang.

But despite an escalation in its rhetoric, many experts say Seoul isn't likely to take any drastic steps because good relations with Ukraine is in its national interests and will support its partnerships with other Western nations.

A look at the latest Seoul-Kyiv rift surrounding the **transfer of the soldiers**, who were among thousands of North Korean troops sent to support Russian President Vladimir Putin's war against Ukraine.

Seoul pushes for better ties with Pyongyang

The North Korean soldiers' transfer could complicate Seoul's push for talks with Pyongyang, because North Korea has previously reacted with fury to defections of its citizens and accused the South of kidnapping them.

"Our government's policy is restoring severed dialogue with North Korea and easing tensions ... So it wanted to handle the POW issue in a low-key manner," said Moon Seong Mook, an analyst for the Seoul-based Korea Research Institute for National Strategy.

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has said his government has been making coordination efforts to resume **talks** between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump, hoping that would help restart its own talks with the North and boost peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Recent mine explosions at the Korean border that injured three South Korean soldiers threaten to derail South Korea's reconciliation bid

North Korea has so far **shrugged off** Trump's latest overture — scaling back a military exercise with South Korea in August that Kim views as an invasion rehearsal.

South Korea's spy agency told lawmakers Wednesday that it assessed there was about a 50% chance of U.S.-North Korea talks occurring around November, when Trump plans to travel to Asia to attend the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in China.

But recent mine explosions at the Korean border that injured three South Korean soldiers threaten to derail South Korea's reconciliation bid.

Blaming North Korea-planted mines for the blasts, South Korea has demanded North Korea apologize and halt its border fortification efforts.

On Friday, Kim's sister and senior official, Kim Yo Jong, called the South Korean request "utterly pathetic," saying the North intends to cut ties with the South permanently.

South Korea's leader says Ukraine made him look like 'a liar'

In his post on X on Wednesday, Lee accused Ukraine of making him look like "a liar"

because it contradicted his earlier claim about the nondisclosure agreement.

Lee said his government will take “additional measures” if Ukraine refuses to admit the existence of the nondisclosure agreement and apologize publicly. “This is a matter of national dignity ... so we can’t overlook it,” Lee wrote.



Ukraine Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha on Thursday called the latest spat a diplomatic misunderstanding

Ukraine Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha on Thursday called the latest spat “a diplomatic misunderstanding.”

He told reporters that he had been communicating with his South Korean counterpart daily, saying that “I very much want this situation to be resolved in the short term.”

South Korean officials say Zelenskyy likely hoped his revelation would generate public support in South Korea for providing Ukraine with much-needed missile defense and other weapons systems.

Lee's office earlier said the nondisclosure accord was reached because Kyiv worried about possible domestic criticism for giving up an opportunity to use the North Korean soldiers in future POW exchanges with Russia.

It said Seoul was concerned about the safety of the soldiers and their families, as well as other unspecified foreign policy and **security issues**.

Good ties with Kyiv serve South

Korean interests

Lee's warning was likely not meant to signal any substantial hostile measures such as reducing aid to Ukraine, experts say.

“In view of our international standing, following through on our commitment to provide support isn’t only a matter of bilateral ties with Ukraine. The international community is watching us,” said Moon, the analyst.

Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said South Korea's relationship with Ukraine is important in many ways.

“Kyiv also has valuable intelligence about Russia-North Korea military cooperation and extensive battlefield experience, especially with drones, that can contribute to South Korean security,” Easley said.

South Korea has provided \$445 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since 2022

“If the Lee administration appears to prioritize possible reactions of Kim and Putin over cooperation with Ukraine, it could raise questions among Western partners — with which Seoul has more significant economic and security relationships, including substantial defense trade,” he added.

South Korea has provided \$445 million in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since 2022. In July, Lee pledged \$100 million in aid to Ukraine in a meeting with Zelenskyy on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Turkey.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said Thursday it would continue to explore ways to help Ukraine with humanitarian and reconstruction assistance.

South Korea, a growing arms exporter, has refrained from sending weapons to Ukraine, in line with its policy of not supplying arms to countries actively engaged in conflict.