

South Korea politics & policy

Seoul rattled by threat to drills at heart of US-Korean alliance

Donald Trump's eleventh-hour demand to 'reduce' annual exercises and praise of Kim Jong Un unsettles ally



Daniel Tudor in Seoul

Published 5 HOURS AGO | Updated 15:09

By dawn, they were ready. From command centres at the sprawling Camp Humphreys to air bases near the heavily fortified North Korean border, thousands of US and South Korean personnel were poised for simulated conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary.

But hours before the drills were set to begin on Monday, Donald Trump sent a shockwave through the US-South Korean alliance, announcing that he had ordered the Pentagon to “substantially reduce” them, and citing his “very good relationship” with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The US president’s unexpected salvo via Truth Social post rattled South Korea’s security establishment, deepening concerns in Seoul about the reliability of its most important security partner.

Analysts said major exercises such as Ulchi Freedom Shield, which the US and South Korea have been holding since 1976, are a cornerstone of the allies' efforts to maintain military readiness against North Korea. This year's drills were set to include 14 exercises over 11 days, ranging from drone attacks and GPS jamming to electronic and cyber warfare.

While Seoul and Washington would publicly deny any impact on that readiness, "in private", said John Lee of Korea Risk Group, "people will begin to ask uncomfortable questions".

Meanwhile, Trump's language "sounds like he is parroting Pyongyang's line", said Mason Richey, professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul.

The US president said the drills were "inappropriate and hostile" to North Korea, a country deemed "unthreatening and respectful". Trump also said his decision was "somewhat related" to Seoul's refusal to support US military action against Iran — piling further pressure on Seoul.

"This is just another example of how unreliable the US is as an ally right now, whether that be to allies in Asia or Europe," Richey added.



Military drills such as the Ulchi Freedom Shield have been a cornerstone of the US-South Korean alliance since 1976... © Song Kyung-Seok/Pool/Reuters



... and are seen as a crucial part of military readiness against North Korea © Ahn Young-joon/AP

The exercises began as scheduled on Monday and neither Washington nor Seoul specified which parts could be cut. But Trump's intervention was just the latest in a series of tests to the alliance that has lasted since the Korean war.

In March, the Pentagon relocated parts of the Thaad missile defence system — an important layer of South Korea's air defences — from the country as it shifted resources towards the Middle East.

Weeks earlier, Seoul had complained it had not been fully briefed about a US exercise involving F-16s from Osan Air Base flying close to China's air-defence identification zone.

Lee of Korea Risk Group noted the reduced drills would coincide with the redeployment of the USS George Washington strike group to the Middle East, which would leave “the western Pacific without an American aircraft carrier for the foreseeable future”.

Economic ties have also been strained. Trump officials are increasingly frustrated by what they see as Seoul's foot-dragging in identifying projects for the \$350bn of investments it pledged to make in the US in exchange for lower tariffs, according to several people familiar with the situation.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has strengthened his position in recent years and has fewer reasons to entertain diplomacy...
© KCNA/Reuters



...with South Korea's President Lee Jae Myung, left, or US President Donald Trump © Evelyn Hockstein/Reuters

Analysts said Trump's move could be an overture to revive diplomacy with Pyongyang, a major unfulfilled priority of his first term. North Korea has long seen the joint exercises as particularly threatening, and last week described Ulchi Freedom Shield as "a rehearsal for a war of aggression".

On Saturday, Trump posted a photo of himself with Kim, declaring that the two "get along GREAT". At the G7 summit in France in June, Trump told South Korean President Lee Jae Myung that he wanted to renew engagement with Pyongyang.

Trump on Monday said Kim had responded to outreach to have a conversation without providing any details.

"By scaling these [exercises] down, the US president appears to be extending an olive branch to draw Kim in," said Victor Cha, Korea chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Trump similarly suspended joint drills that coincided with his summit with Kim in 2018, the first of three meetings between the pair.

Lee has sought to reopen dialogue with Pyongyang and this weekend used an annual liberation day address marking the end of Japanese colonial rule to reiterate calls for "peaceful coexistence" with North Korea.

South Korea's president's office, the Blue House, on Monday said it hoped Trump's comments would lead to renewed US-North Korean talks.



Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump met three times during the US president's first term but failed to find a diplomatic breakthrough © Kim Hong-Ji/Reuters



Trump has also put pressure on South Korea to support the US war against Iran © Kim Dohyeon/ZUMA/Reuters

In the seven years since the flurry of Trump-Kim summitry, North Korea has expanded its arsenal of nuclear and conventional weapons, deepened military and economic co-operation with Russia and gained valuable modern battlefield experience in Ukraine.

“Kim has no compelling need to meet now given all the support from Russia and China,” said Cha, who added that the North Korean leader may believe he will have better leverage after US midterm elections in November.

Even if Kim returns to the negotiating table, Seoul could be frozen out. Pyongyang has consistently rebuffed Lee’s efforts to restart inter-Korean dialogue. It has also revised its constitution to formally drop the aim of reunification with South Korea, which it now treats as a separate, hostile state.

Choi Eun-joo, researcher at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, said: “South Korea needs to prepare for the possibility that issues directly related to its security, such as joint military exercises or the deployment of strategic assets, could be used as bargaining chips during future US-North Korea dialogue.”

The latest episode could also strengthen calls for South Korea to take greater control of its own defence. Lee has pledged to regain wartime operational control of South Korean forces before his presidency ends in 2030, or even as early as next year.

Korea Risk Group’s Lee said Trump’s transactional approach, and demands on US military resources elsewhere, “may not spell doom for the alliance, but would certainly increase the Lee administration’s sense of urgency in expediting wartime Opcon transfer”.

Choi said: “What matters is not just the reduction of the joint exercises, but the background and manner in which the decision was made. We need to wait and see whether this decision is the result of a pre-planned policy or an impulsive judgment.”

Additional reporting by Demetri Sevastopulo in Washington

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

South Korea politics & policy

US foreign policy

North Korea

Donald Trump

Demetri Sevastopulo