

Destination Guide for South Korea



Overview

Destination Guide Content

Destination Risk Levels

 Low Medical Risk for South Korea

 Low Travel Risk for South Korea

Standing Travel Advice

- Travel to South Korea can proceed, subject to an individual risk assessment of the current COVID-19 situation, and the potential for entry restrictions to change at short notice at both country of arrival and departure.
- Take basic security precautions against petty and street crime.
- In the event of any demonstrations, rallies or strike activity, avoid the affected area as a security precaution. Localised clashes could occur between protesters and the police, particularly if the former attempt to block routes, march towards cordoned-off areas or breach security cordons around government buildings.
- In the event of any emergency drills, exercises or military manoeuvres, comply with all instructions issued by the security forces.
- Seek itinerary-specific advice prior to travel to the disputed north-western islands of Yeonpyeong, Baengnyeong, Daechong, Socheong and Woo.

Active Alerts (3)

 Notice

28 October 2024 at 09:26

Monitor developments in coming weeks linked to heightened regional tensions
(Revised)

Location: Asia & the Pacific

Category: Conflict

Situation:

Monitor developments in the Korean peninsula **over the coming months**. On 17 October, North Korea confirmed it has amended its constitution to redefine South Korea as a 'hostile state'. This follows the 15 October development of the North blowing up roads and rail roads in Kaesong and Kangwon linking the country with the South. The South Korean and US authorities have raised concerns about an increase in North Korean provocations before or after the US election on **5 November**. Other ways of military posturing by North Korea, including weapons' testing/launches, along with the release of trash-filled balloons (*see related alert*), are likely to continue. This would lead to persistent related regional tensions **over the coming weeks**.

Advice:

- Closely monitor all developments for potential escalation in tensions.
- Consult reliable media sources for the latest developments, taking care to distinguish between fact and rumour. South Korean media outlets are a dependable source of information regarding domestic military activity, such as air raid exercises.
- Avoid contact with fallen waste balloons and report them to the authorities.
- Monitor our alerts for updates.

More Detail:

Recent developments

The change to the constitution reportedly follows North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's order to change South Korea's status from a 'partner for reconciliation and unification'. On 16 October, the vice foreign ministers of Japan, South Korea and the US met in South Korea's capital Seoul. Following their meeting, they announced the creation of a new multinational team called Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team, who will be responsible for monitoring the enforcement of sanctions against North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes. This development follows the dissolution of the UN Panel of Experts as Russia vetoed its annual renewal in March.

North Korea has been placing landmines and constructing anti-tank barriers along its borders with South Korea since the start of the year. Donghae and Gyeongui railway lines were closed by the North in August. These have been replaced with frontline defence structures to fortify the borders with the South. In response to the 15 October explosions along the stretches of border roads and railway lines, the South Korean military fired warning shots. Rail and road routes in the bordering areas have not been in operation for some time due to heightened regional tensions.

The North also recently accused the South of sending drones over North Korea's capital Pyongyang on 11 October and scattering anti-North Korean propaganda leaflets.

Meanwhile, North Korea on 12 September launched multiple short-range ballistic missiles that fell in the Sea of Japan (East Sea). On 13 September, the North revealed details of its uranium enrichment facility, which was reportedly visited by Kim Jong-un. This marked the first time North Korea publicly revealed details about it. During his visit, Kim called for the building up of a nuclear arsenal for self-defence purposes. The South Korean and US authorities said that North Korea could conduct a nuclear test or an intercontinental ballistic missile launch during the US election period.

Earlier, on 5 September, the North had criticised the recent 'Ulchi Freedom Shield' and 'Ssang Yong' military exercises between South Korea and the US.

Suspension of Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) and aftermath

Tensions along the Korean peninsula have increased since the suspension of the 2018 inter-Korean CMA and South Korea's resumption of live fire drills in Baengnyeongdo and Daechongdo islands. The suspension allows both countries to heighten surveillance, strengthen their military positions and resume drills in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and near the Northern Limit Line (NLL). Kim Jong-un has closed agencies focused on outreach and reunification with South Korea.

South Korean activists resumed a leaflet and loudspeaker campaign across the DMZ. In response, North Korea has started launching trash-carrying balloons into the South, which can cause temporary flight disruption at airports.

Recent military activities

Bilateral military exercises between the US and South Korea have been routinely criticised by the North, which sees such drills as invasion rehearsals. One such activity, the annual three-week 'Hoguk' military exercises, began on 20 October. One element of the drills will be joint US-South Korean amphibious landings of the type that Pyongyang views as invasion rehearsals. In 2022, North Korea fired hundreds of artillery shells in response to that year's Hoguk exercises. In 2023, a reconnaissance satellite was launched into orbit following the drills. On 27 August, North Korea tested a multiple rocket launch system, following similar missile tests on 26 June and 1 July. The June and July tests coincided with the 'Freedom Edge' trilateral exercises between US, South Korea and Japan.

North Korea typically carries out military tests or drills around key dates and events, such as military exercises or important visits. Over the recent months, North Korea has conducted ballistic and cruise missile tests, satellite launches, underwater drones, and tests involving hypersonic missiles and solid-fuel engine capabilities. South Korean officials in May reported GPS radio jamming attacks by North Korea, which disrupted commercial shipping and fishing operations in the north-western islands.

Separately, missile tests and satellite launches can trigger Japan's J-ALERT (Japanese National Early Warning System) or civil defence drills in South Korea, asking people to seek shelter.

Assessment:

Despite the recent developments, we assess that the likelihood of North Korea launching a full-scale, conventional conflict against South Korea and the US is low. This is due to the severe consequences for all involved. However, North Korea may resort to limited provocations along the land and maritime borders with the South, such as sending balloons.

Overall, we expect further provocative, though largely symbolic, North Korean military actions. The country typically launches missiles immediately before or after military exercises involving South Korea, around key dates, sensitive summits and following key statements by the South about regional tensions. Such launches are liable to prompt deterrent actions, such as further military exercises and imposition of sanctions by the US, South Korea and, potentially, Japan.

North Korea's military actions and capabilities

Satellite launches by North Korea are prohibited by the UN as they are considered a cover for testing long-range missile technology. However, the North has largely ignored UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. Missile launches underline North Korea's pursuit of more powerful and harder-to-detect weapons systems, indicating an increase in its technological capabilities. Cruise missiles can fly low and manoeuvre, making them better at evading missile defences. North Korea has described its missiles as 'strategic', implying a possible intent to arm them with nuclear weapons.

North Korea's testing of cruise missile and nuclear-capable underwater attack drones highlights its attempts to reinforce its deterrence capability in the maritime sphere.

Hypersonic missiles, which travel more than five times the speed of sound, theoretically make it harder for adversaries to detect and pre-empt a launch. Solid-fuel engine capabilities make it easier to move and conceal missiles, providing greater responsiveness during a crisis.

North Korea-Russia collaboration

North Korea's increased military activity can be viewed through the lens of its growing collaboration with Russia, especially amid Russia's ongoing conflict with Ukraine.

Reports have recently indicated the presence of North Korean troops in Russian occupied areas of Ukraine. Since 2023, there has been a marked increase in high-level diplomatic exchanges between the two countries. This culminated in Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea on 18-19 June. The visit resulted in the two countries signing a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' that promises immediate military assistance to each other in the event of war.

Furthermore, according to South Korea's National Intelligence Service, North Korea's successful launch of its first military satellite in November 2023 can be attributed to significant design and data assistance from Russia. This followed two previous failed attempts.

Foreign intelligence agencies have accused North Korea of supplying Russia with arms and ammunition in exchange for military technology and other supplies, including fuel. As per a South Korean military assessment, the North's expansion of winter training drills in January is indicative of an increase in fuel supplies from Russia. This took place in violation of UNSC sanctions.

Separately, US imagery evidence indicates Russia's use of North Korea's Hwasong-11 class short-range ballistic missiles in Ukraine. This provides North Korea with a rare opportunity to test its weapons in real-world combat scenarios, and thus work to improve their performance.

Escalation triggers

Recent developments indicate an escalation of tensions in the Korean peninsula, especially along the DMZ and NLL. The CMA prevented accidental clashes in the border regions and installed channels of communication between the two governments. With the agreement's suspension, there is an increased risk of tensions reaching previous levels.

In 2010, North Korean artillery fire on Yeonpyeong Island killed two civilians and two South Korean security personnel, injured 18 people and damaged more than 100 buildings. In 2015, when South Korea resumed loudspeaker broadcasts after a 11-year hiatus, North Korea fired artillery rounds across the border. In 2017, North Korea held a series of ballistic missile tests and issued nuclear threats to South Korea and Australia. This was compounded by a US-South Korea military exercise.

North Korea's growing relations with Russia and its close relations with China are likely to provide it with requisite international support. China and Russia have previously shielded North Korea from punitive action by the UN.

The high-impact nature of any military confrontation requires that managers maintain robust plans to identify signs of a genuine escalation. Managers should also continue to closely monitor a series of triggers that could precipitate escalated tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the wider region. These may require a deferral of inbound travel and the maintenance of an appropriately heightened level of preparedness.

The triggers are as follows:

- A move by South Korea to increase its military preparedness from the current DEFCON 4 (second lowest on a five-tier scale) to DEFCON 3 (middle tier), which last occurred in 1983.
- An increase in the level of warnings and advice regarding tensions in the Korean peninsula issued by various governments, such as those of Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, the UK and the US.
- A missile test in the vicinity of US military assets in the region.

Notice

24 October 2024 at 03:56

Monitor developments, expect disruption linked to refuse-filled balloons (Revised)

Location: South Korea

Category: Transport disruption, Diplomatic issue

Situation:

Monitor developments **over the coming weeks** related to balloons filled with refuse, which continue to land across South Korea. On 24 October, North Korea reportedly released approximately 20 balloons towards South Korea. One of the balloons was reported inside the [Yongsan Presidential compound](#) in the capital Seoul. This incident follows the overnight launch of around 20 balloons on 19-20 October. Flight disruption has previously been reported when balloons have been detected near or within airport perimeters. Balloons may also carry timer devices that could potentially start fires. In response to the launches, the South Korean military use leaflets and loudspeakers along the border to distribute and play anti-North Korean propaganda since July.

Advice:

- Expect temporary disruption linked to the balloon landings, which may include short-notice flight disruption.
- **We do not hold information on specific flights.** In the event of disruption, contact the airport or airline to reconfirm flight schedules before setting out.
- Avoid contact with fallen waste-filled balloons and report them to the authorities.
- Monitor our South Korea alerts for updates.

More Detail:

The latest launch on 24 October consisted of balloons carrying leaflets allegedly criticising the South Korean president and the first lady. There have been no reported damage or casualties. More than 10 balloons were reported within the metropolitan area of Seoul.

Since late May, North Korea has sent around 6,000 such balloons on approximately 29 separate occasions across the border, with landings reported in the capital Seoul and Gangwon, Gyeonggi and Incheon provinces. On 11 October hundreds of balloons were launched from the North.

Operations at Seoul's Incheon International Airport ([ICN](#)) on 23 September were suspended after a balloon was spotted in the air. Flights resumed more than an hour later after it was confirmed that the balloon had fallen into the sea. However, operations were briefly suspended again after the remains of a balloon were found in a warehouse at the airport.

Troops have refrained from shooting the balloons down due to public health and security concerns. The South Korean authorities have warned people to be careful of falling objects and refrain from touching the balloons. Once a balloon lands, the police cordon off access and send in an explosive ordnance disposal team to collect the debris. On 15 October, a balloon ignited a blaze on the roof of a four-storey building in Seoul. Some balloons sent in August had detonators intended to go off prior to landing, raising tensions between the two countries.

North Korea's balloon campaign is unusual but constitutes a so-called 'grey zone' tactic that falls below the threshold for a conventional conflict. The latter remains unlikely due to the severe consequences for all parties involved. We expect North Korea to continue its hostile rhetoric in tandem with further provocative – though largely symbolic – actions.

Notice

18 October 2024 at 20:19

Seoul: Expect heightened security, disruption in coming days during protests by civic society groups

Location: South Korea

Category: Protest/Rally, Road disruption

Situation:

Expect heightened security and disruption **in the coming days** during demonstrations by several civic society groups in the capital Seoul. Protesters will gather from **15.00** (local time) on **19 October** near Exit 7 of [City Hall station](#) to demand President Yoon Suk-yeol's resignation. They will then march towards [Euljiro 1\(il\)-ga](#) and [Myeong-dong](#) stations before returning to City Hall station. Some 7,000 people reportedly participated in a related protest march on 12 October. While further such events should pass off peacefully, they are liable to disrupt nearby traffic.

Advice:

- Expect disruption during related demonstrations and plan journeys accordingly.
- Monitor the Seoul Traffic Information Center [website](#) for up-to-date information on traffic conditions. If travelling near areas affected by protests, allow extra time for journeys.
- Expect heightened security around the demonstrations and follow all official directives.
- Monitor our South Korea alerts for updates.

More Detail:

Related events have been held since 2022, usually occurring on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. Although low turnouts have been reported for protests on Mondays and Wednesdays, gatherings on Saturdays have attracted greater participation. City Hall, Sungnyemun Gate and [Yongsan Station Square](#) have been regular venues for such events. Previous demonstrations have also garnered support from opposition groups.

Civic society groups are highlighting multiple points of contention with Yoon's administration, including alleged economic mismanagement, corruption and threats to media freedom. Large-scale protests also took place in August 2023, when Yoon failed to oppose the release of treated water from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Japan. The Democratic Party of Korea has supported the demonstrations in recent months.

Most demonstrations are peaceful. However, any attempt to breach security cordons or march towards cordoned-off areas, such as the president's office in Yongsan, may prompt scuffles with the police. Any ensuing disturbances would pose incidental risks to bystanders.

Destination Guide for South Korea



Before You Travel

Destination Guide Content

Visa Requirements

IMMIGRATION REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES

British

- Passport Required Yes
- Visa Required No
- Return Ticket Required No

Australian

- Passport Required Yes
- Visa Required No
- Return Ticket Required No

Canadian

- Passport Required Yes
- Visa Required No/1
- Return Ticket Required No

USA

- Passport Required Yes
- Visa Required No
- Return Ticket Required No

Visas

All nationals referred to in the above chart can stay without visas for three months except:

1. Nationals of Canada can stay for six months.
2. Nationals of Portugal can stay for 90 days.

Additionally, citizens of countries mentioned in the [list](#) do not require visas for stays of up to 90 days. Foreign nationals eligible for visa free entry mentioned [here](#) are generally required to obtain [Korean Electronic Travel Authorization](#) (K-ETA). However, this has been temporarily waived for [22 countries](#) until 31 December 2024. Travellers aged under 18 years or over 65 years are also exempt from K-ETA. All other nationals should consult their nearest South Korean diplomatic mission to check their visa requirements.

Business travellers intending to stay beyond 90 days are required to get a long-term visa prior to arrival. The cost of a visa varies from country to country. Generally, five working days are required for visa processing. Business travellers planning to attend conferences should check with their local embassy if they should apply for a specific visa in advance as changing a visa status is generally not possible and visitors will have to exit the country and reapply for a new visa.

Business travellers planning to stay past their visa expiration date should apply for an extension well in advance at the Korea Immigration Service. Travellers that overstay their visa will be required to pay a fine before leaving.

Procedures

All travellers will be subject to health screening measures at airports. In addition, the Korea Immigration Service (KIS) gathers the biometric data of travellers at ports of entry. Foreign nationals whose passports contain evidence of travel to North Korea may face thorough and time-consuming checks. Foreigners intending to stay beyond 90 days are required to apply for an Alien Registration Card. Travellers should consult the Immigration Bureau [website](#) for further details.

Entry/Exit Requirements

Entry/Exit requirements

Nationals of all countries require a passport valid for a minimum of three months beyond their stay. Nationals of all countries require a passport valid for a minimum of three months beyond their stay. As of September 2024, anyone who has visited, stayed, or transited through locations mentioned [here](#) must submit a Q-CODE or health declaration form upon entering the country.

Visitors are required to fill out an arrival card and submit a customs declaration form on arrival. Additionally, foreign nationals need to record their fingerprints and facial scan (biometrics) upon entry into the country. However, diplomats, international organisation officials and their immediate family members are exempted. Travellers carrying foreign or local currency exceeding US\$10,000 must declare the amount on arrival.

Cultural Tips

CULTURAL ISSUES AND ETIQUETTE

General Tips

- Remove your shoes before entering a Korean home or temple.
- US and Japanese nationals are advised not to broach potentially inflammatory subjects, such as the US military presence or Japan's occupation in the early 20th century. Avoid discussing current affairs and international relations during periods of strained relations.
- There are some legal restrictions relevant to LGBTQ individuals but these are not enforced or adhered to in the legal system. Societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ community are highly varied. Violence is rare but may be more likely in rural than in urban settings.

Getting There

METHOD OF ARRIVAL

By air

Incheon International Airport ([ICN](#)), situated in the eponymous port city adjacent to Seoul, replaced Gimpo International Airport ([GMP](#)) as the main international airport serving the capital. Gimpo (previously known as Kimpo) now serves mainly domestic flights and short-distance international flights. Other international airports are Gimhae International Airport ([PUS](#)), located in the city of Busan; Cheongju International Airport ([CJJ](#)); and Jeju International Airport ([CJU](#)). Daegu International Airport ([TAE](#)), Yangyang International Airport ([YNY](#)) and Muan International Airport ([MWX](#)) have flights between China and South Korea.

Airlines have variable security standards. You may wish to consult the European Commission's [website](#) for a list of airlines banned within the EU and the US Federal Aviation Administration's [website](#) for a database of aviation accidents and statistics.

By sea

Ferry services are available from China, Japan and Russia. However, sea journeys are time-consuming and therefore less efficient for business travellers. In addition, ferry services are vulnerable to adverse weather conditions, particularly during winter months.

Procedures

All travellers will be subject to health screening measures at airports. In addition, the Korea Immigration Service (KIS) gathers the biometric data of travellers at ports of entry. Foreign nationals whose passports contain evidence of travel to North Korea may face thorough and time-consuming checks. Foreigners intending to stay beyond 90 days are required to apply for an Alien Registration Card. Travellers should consult the Immigration Bureau [website](#) for further details.

Getting Around

BY AIR

[Korean Air](#) is the national carrier. Foreign nationals must carry passports on domestic flights. Wonju Airport ([WJU](#)), Gunsan Airport ([KUV](#)), Pohang Airport ([KPO](#)), Gwangju Airport ([KWJ](#)), Yeosu Airport ([RSU](#)), Sacheon ([HIN](#)) Airport and Ulsan Airport ([USN](#)) are the domestic airports. Charter flights are also available.

BY ROAD

The complexity of road layouts, the density of traffic and the need to understand Korean road signs is likely to make driving inconvenient for most short-term business travellers. Excellent motorways link major cities, but road surfaces on less-travelled routes can be poor. Traffic drives on the right. An international driving permit is required. Deaths due to poor or rash driving are common and car drivers are presumed to be at fault in accidents involving motorcycles or pedestrians. Drivers should be careful of motorcyclists and pedestrians. The charges are accompanied by heavy penalties in the event of injury. If the accident results in an injury or there is dispute about the cause, the police may impound the traveller's passport. The legal blood-alcohol limit is extremely low; motorists found guilty will be liable to pay a hefty fine and may face licence suspension or cancellation.

Heavy rain during the monsoon season (mid-June to mid-August) can temporarily block isolated sections of roads. Additionally, road closures due to heavy snow can cause significant disruption to overland travel in more rural areas. Avalanches and landslides can also block roads in mountainous areas during winter. Delays should be expected during the Lunar New Year (late January-early February) holiday period due to increased traffic.

BY TAXI

Taxis are safe, convenient and can be hired at a taxi rank or hailed on the street. There are two types of taxis; the regular grey, white or orange taxis, and the deluxe black taxis with yellow roof signs. Black taxis are generally more comfortable, though they are more expensive. Metered fares are strictly applied in cities. However, there have been isolated reports of taxi drivers tampering with the meter when conveying foreign passengers.

Orange taxi's initially symbolised a Seoul taxi, but the regulation was abolished in 2021. International taxis, whose drivers can speak English, Chinese and Japanese, are discernable by an international taxi logo. However, the price is about 20% higher than the normal taxis. Most normal taxi drivers do not speak languages other than Korean. International taxi services also offer translation facilities upon request. However, business travellers are advised to have the destination name written in Korean for convenience. People in major cities also increasingly utilise phone applications such as Kakao T to arrange taxi services.

BY TRAIN

[Korean National Railways](#) runs a good railway network that connects all major cities. Services are safe and divided into three categories – non-stop Saemaeul trains, Mugunghwa trains and KTX express trains. [S-RAIL](#) also provides Super Rapid Train (SRT). KTX and SRT express trains are the fastest and most comfortable. Business travellers should have their destination and the type of ticket required written down in Korean characters (hotels will be able to assist). Station signs and timetables are often in both Korean and English.

BY OTHER MEANS

Comfortable air-conditioned buses run intercity services.

By Sea

Domestic ferry services are available throughout the country. Similar to international ferry journeys, domestic sea journeys are time-consuming and therefore less efficient in terms of travel time, particularly when compared to other forms of transport within South Korea.

Business Women

BUSINESSWOMEN

There are no specific risks for female business travellers or workforce. However, all women are advised to follow commonsense precautions such as:

- Exercise caution if travelling alone at night.
- Politely decline invitations that would take you beyond your personal comfort levels, even if faced by amicable pressure to behave otherwise.

Working Week

WORKING WEEK

- Working week: Monday to Friday
- Office hours: 09.00-18.00
- Bank hours: 09.00-16.00

Language & Money

LANGUAGE

Korean is the official language. English is widely spoken in official and business circles and is spoken by staff at most good hotels. Not all Korean business associates speak English.

MONEY

The local currency is the South Korean won (W). ATMs are widely available; majority of foreign bank and credit cards are accepted. Banking services are sparser in rural areas compared to metropolitan areas. Traveller's cheques are accepted and can be exchanged easily at banks and bureau de change.

Tipping

TIPPING

Tipping is not customary as a service charge is usually included in the bill.

Geography & Weather

GEOGRAPHY

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) is bordered by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) to the north. The two states are separated by a 2.5-mile (4km) wide Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). South Korea is surrounded by the Sea of Japan (East Sea) to the east, the East China Sea to the south, and the Yellow Sea (West Sea) to the west. Its capital is Seoul and other big cities are Incheon, Busan, Daegu, Gwangju and Daejeon. The country is administratively divided into nine provinces, six metropolitan cities, one special city (Seoul) and one governing city (Sejong).

CLIMATE

Climate overview

- South Korea has a temperate climate with four distinct seasons: spring (March-May), summer (June-August), autumn (September-November) and winter (December- February).
- The average temperature of the country is 14°C (57°F) and peaks in August, while January is the coldest month.
- The spring and autumn seasons are sunny and dry, while winters are dry and cold. Summers are hot and humid and record the highest precipitation in the months of July and August.

- Monitor the website of [Korea Meteorological Administration](#) for weather-related updates.

Flooding and landslides

- Heavy rainfall during the rainy season and the aftermath of typhoon season results in flooding, landslides and travel disruption.
- Torrential rainfall can sometimes cause the Han river to overflow, leading to flooding in southern districts of Seoul such as Seocho, Gangnam and Gwanak.
- In July 2023, heavy rain caused significant damage to agriculture and infrastructure, resulting in the deaths of over 30 people and the displacement of thousands. The most affected provinces included Sejong, North Chungcheong, South Chungcheong and North Gyeongsang.
- Heavy rainfall on Jeju island (Jeju province) in July 2024 disrupted nearly 100 flights at the Jeju International Airport (CJU) and passenger ferries were cancelled. Landslides, flash floods and power outages were also reported.

Tropical storms

- Tropical storms occur between July and September.
- Such powerful storms can bring strong winds and heavy rainfall, causing flash floods and landslides which may result in infrastructural damage, evacuations and disruption to power, communication and water supplies.
- In August 2023, around 350 flights and 410 train routes were cancelled and more than 10,000 people were evacuated due to Tropical Storm Khanun.
- Coastal regions including Gangneung, Sokcho (both Gangwon province) and Jeju island are mostly affected by the tropical storms.

Earthquakes

- South Korea experiences minor earthquakes.
- Large earthquakes, though infrequent, have the potential to cause significant damage and casualties.

Heatwaves

- South Korea experiences heatwaves during the summer months.

- In June 2024, two heatwave advisories were issued amid a record number of heatwave days, when daily maximum temperature reached 33°C (91.4°F) or higher. The previous record was set in 2018.
- In August 2023, the country raised its heatwave warning to the highest serious level for the first time since 2019.
- The authorities have previously issued heatwave advisories for citizens to take preventive measures.

Forest fires

- Dry weather and strong winds can exacerbate forest fires.
- Fires can result in road disruption, casualties and infrastructural damage.
- Fires can also prompt evacuation orders.
- In March 2022, a forest fire in Uljin (North Gyeongsang province) destroyed more than 77.2 sq miles (200 sq km) of land. The authorities were able to prevent the fire from reaching a liquefied natural gas plant in Hosan (Gangwon province) and the Hanul Nuclear Power Plant (Uljin). More than 7,400 people were evacuated and over 460 buildings were destroyed. The fire was extinguished after over a month.

Tsunamis

- Tsunamis are mostly triggered by earthquakes in areas along the Pacific Ring of Fire.
- Low-lying coastal areas are susceptible to storm surges and tsunamis, which can cause coastal flooding.
- In January 2024, South Korea's east coast experienced its first tsunami, following a massive earthquake in Japan.
- Monitor the website of [Korea Meteorological Administration](#) for tsunami-related updates.

Snowfall and cold waves

- Heavy snowfall, blizzards and cold waves occur during the winter season and can result in power outages, flight disruption, business closures and casualties.
- Extreme temperatures can also result in road and sea route closures, including in the capital Seoul.
- Temperatures can go below -36°C (-33°F) during a period of cold waves.

International Dialing & Power

DIALLING CODES

Country Code 82

IDD Prefix (International Direct Dialling) 001

NDD Prefix (National Direct Dialling) 0, 082

COMMUNICATIONS

Both domestic and international telephone services in South Korea are excellent and equipped with new technologies. There are no restrictions on the use of satellite phones. South Korea also enjoys roaming agreements with foreign mobile phone companies. Business travellers can either rent phones or purchase prepaid SIM cards upon arrival at an airport. The major GSM mobile telephone networks are KT Corporation, LG Uplus and SK Telecom. Public telephones accept coins and phone cards. Internet cafes can be found in public places such as airports, train stations and bus terminals across the country. Postal services are widely available.

Information Security

People should anticipate a degree of government surveillance in South Korea, particularly over internet and social media, primarily due to the threat of cyberactivity from North Korea. Sharing of any sensitive information against national security is subject to screening and punishment under the National Security Law. Also, the government is known to co-operate with private telecommunications organisations to detect any threats to national security. People working in the defence, high-technology, financial, manufacturing, telecommunications and energy sectors are likely to be monitored more closely.

Cybercrime against individuals and organisations continues to pose a threat, though the government has increased protection requirements and enhanced security measures against hacking, denial of service (DoS) attacks, malicious programmes and internet fraud. Most cybercriminals target individuals for financial purposes by illegally obtaining personal information.

Various laws and regulations have been implemented that stipulate stiff penalties for crimes against national security, information network infringement and illegal use of information networks or personal information, among others.

Advice

- Minimise the number of devices you bring in-country. Only carry devices that are absolutely essential. Clean devices, containing only data necessary for the trip with no access to shared networks, should be used if targeted attacks are likely.
- Ensure all devices you bring in-country are well secured, with strong passwords. Ensure all storage devices have full disk encryption.
- Ensure all software, including anti-virus protection, is up to date prior to travel. Avoid updating software while away.
- Avoid connecting to insecure Wi-Fi networks where possible. Public Wi-Fi connections are almost always unencrypted. This allows attackers to easily instigate man-in-the-middle attacks, where they redirect your browsing request to a malicious website and then run malware on your device.
- If necessary, only connect to public networks using a virtual private network (VPN). Always familiarise yourself with the legal status of any VPN or application in your destination country prior to travel. Be aware of other relevant legislation, including compliance requests which allow authorities to inspect devices.
- Keep devices on your person as much as possible. If unattended, ensure devices are powered down and well secured. If using hotel safes, secure them with a secondary personally lockable device.
- Limit location tracking/turn off your phone's location function to deter surveillance, with the exception of our Assistance app or other essential applications. Turn off Wi-Fi and Bluetooth when not in use, unless instructed otherwise by the authorities for COVID-19 contract-tracing purposes.
- Run a thorough check of all devices upon your return and use the 'forget network' setting if you did connect to any public Wi-Fi networks.
- Comply with local legislation. This includes any official requests to inspect devices. If this occurs, inform your IT department as soon as possible and exercise caution when using the device after. Power off devices prior to approaching customs.
- Obtain profile-specific advice, taking into account your industry and position in the company.

ELECTRICITY

This is the most common plug type used:

Calendar

Holidays & Security Dates

2024

25 Dec Christmas Day

In some countries, if this holiday falls on a Saturday or Sunday, a public holiday is declared for the following Monday.

2025

01 Jan New Year's Day

In many countries, if this holiday falls on a Saturday or Sunday, a public holiday is declared for the following Monday.

01 Mar Independence Movement Day

05 May Children's Day

07 May Substitute holiday for Children's day

06 Jun Memorial Day

15 Aug National Liberation Day

Protests by civil society groups are likely on this day.

01 Oct Armed Forces Day

Temporary public holiday. Expect heightened security and travel disruption in the capital Seoul and Gyeonggi province during related events.

03 Oct National Foundation Day

09 Oct Hangeul Proclamation Day

Destination Guide for South Korea



Medical

Destination Guide Content

Medical Care

Good

Standard of Health Care

Let International SOS assist you.

International SOS will assist you to find suitable inpatient or outpatient care, will provide language assistance and may be able to pay your medical expenses.

A doctors' strike at university (tertiary) level training hospitals has been ongoing in the country since early February 2024. Expect an increasing number of health services to be impacted, including emergency services, elective surgery, in-patient treatments, and some outpatient appointments at these hospitals. Anticipate delays in accessing routine and emergency healthcare services, too. Non-training hospitals are operating as usual.

Inpatient care

Medical care in South Korea is of an international standard. There are no major differences between the public and private sectors. However, private hospitals tend to be more service oriented.

Generally, nursing care may differ from what is practiced in other countries. Family members or privately hired care-giving aids are usually expected to assist the patient for non-medical support (such as feeding, bathing etc...). Many physicians in the major hospitals speak English. If there is a language barrier, most hospitals are able to facilitate language assistance services through interpreters. International clinics will have English speaking staff.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Ambulance 119

Fire service 119

Police 112

Hospitals & Clinics

Asan Medical Center

Category: Hospital

Address: 4th Floor New building 88 Olympic Ro 43 Gil, Seoul

Phone: [82 230105001](tel:82230105001)

Email: int@amc.seoul.kr

Inje University Haeundae Paik Hospital

Category: Hospital

Address: 875 Haeun-daero, Busan

Phones: [82 517970566](tel:82517970566),

[82 517970567](tel:82517970567)

Emails: h19249@paik.ac.kr,

top@paik.ac.kr

Pusan National University Hospital

Category: Hospital

Address: 179 GudeokRo, Busan, Gyeongsangnam-do

Phone: [82 512407472](tel:82512407472)

Email: global7472@gmail.com

Samsung Medical Center

Category: Hospital

Address: 81 Irwon-ro, Seoul

Phones: [82 15993114](tel:8215993114),

[82 234100200](tel:82234100200),

[82 234100232](tel:82234100232)

Email: ih.s.smc@samsung.com

Severance Hospital

Category: Hospital

Address: 3rd Floor Main Building 50-1 Yonsei-ro, Seoul

Phones: [82 222281004](tel:82222281004),

[82 222285800](tel:82222285800)

Vaccinations

COVID-19

Vaccination is recommended for all travellers.

Hepatitis A

Recommended for all travellers and international assignees, especially groups at higher risk including:

- long-term and frequent visitors.
- adventurous travellers who travel to more remote locations or stay in areas with poor sanitation.
- gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (see [US CDC](#)).
- people who use illicit drugs.
- those with liver disease.

Hepatitis B

Recommended for most travellers and international assignees, especially:

- For long-term or frequent visitors, and health-care workers.
- For adventurous travellers who travel to more remote locations.
- If possibility of new sexual partner, needle sharing, acupuncture, dental work, body piercing or tattooing during visit.

Many travel health professionals recommend hepatitis B vaccination for all travelers, regardless of destination.

Japanese encephalitis

Vaccine is recommended for people who will participate in 'higher risk' activities while in an area where Japanese encephalitis risk exists.

You are engaging in a 'higher risk' activity if you:

- Travel during the peak Japanese encephalitis season (consult the "Health Threats" section of the International SOS country guides to see specific season details for this country).
- Spend a significant amount of time outdoors, particularly in the evening and night-time, in areas outside of cities. (ex. camping, trekking, biking,

fishing, hunting, farming).

- Stay in accommodation that will likely have mosquitoes indoors, ex. lacking air conditioning, window screens, and bed nets.
- Spend a month or more in a risk area during transmission season.

Japanese encephalitis vaccine is not available in many of the risk countries. Have the complete vaccine series before departure.

Typhoid fever

Recommended for adventurous and long-term travellers, especially those who will:

- Visit friends and relatives.
- Eat from local vendors or restaurants.
- Be exposed to conditions of poor sanitation.
- Visit smaller cities or rural areas.

Routine Vaccinations

Influenza

Influenza occurs in:

- Temperate southern hemisphere: April to September.
- Temperate northern hemisphere: November to March.
- Tropics: year-round.

Annual vaccination is recommended. Vaccination is especially important for people at higher risk of severe disease. People who are at higher risk for severe disease include:

- People over the age of 65.
- People with underlying health conditions.
- Pregnant women.

Measles-Mumps-Rubella

Vaccinations against measles, mumps and rubella are routine in childhood, and are usually available as a combined vaccine "MMR". See routine childhood vaccination schedules: [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [USA](#), [UK](#)

All adults should ensure they are immune to these diseases before they travel abroad. If unsure of your immunity, consult your health professional. You may need to be vaccinated.

Polio

Vaccination against polio is routine in childhood in many countries. See routine childhood vaccination schedules: [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [USA](#), [UK](#)

All adults should ensure they are immune to the disease before they travel abroad. If unsure of your immunity, consult your health professional. You may need a *primary vaccination* or a *booster*. Booster recommendations vary by country.

Tetanus-Diphtheria-Pertussis

Vaccinations against tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis are routine in childhood.

See routine childhood vaccination schedules: [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [USA](#), [UK](#)

All adults should ensure they are immune to these diseases before they travel abroad. If unsure of your immunity, consult your health professional. You may need a *primary vaccination* or *booster*. Booster recommendations vary by country.

Varicella

Varicella (chickenpox) vaccinations are included in the routine childhood immunization schedule of some countries. See routine childhood vaccination schedules: [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [USA](#), [UK](#)

All adults should ensure they are immune to varicella before they travel abroad. If unsure of your immunity, consult your health professional.

Malaria

Limited risk

Malaria is transmitted by mosquitoes that usually bite from dusk to dawn. Symptoms can develop as early as seven days or as late as several months after exposure. Early malaria symptoms are flu-like and can include fever, sweats/chills, head and body aches, and generally feeling tired and unwell. People also sometimes feel nauseous and vomit or have diarrhoea. Untreated, malaria can cause serious complications like anaemia, seizures, mental confusion, kidney failure and coma. It can be fatal.

Follow the ABCDEs to minimise malarial risk:

A: Awareness - Be **Aware** of the risk, the symptoms and malaria prevention.

B: Bite Prevention - Avoid being **Bitten** by mosquitoes, especially between dusk and dawn.

C: Chemoprophylaxis - If prescribed for you, use **Chemoprophylaxis** (antimalarial medication) to prevent infection and if infected reduce the risk of severe malaria.

D: Diagnosis - Immediately seek **Diagnosis** and treatment if a fever develops one week or more after being in a malarial area (up to one year after departure).

E: Emergency - Carry an **Emergency** Standby Treatment (EST) kit if available and recommended (this is the kit which contains malaria treatment).

Limited risk of malaria is present (between March to December) in South Korea: rural areas in the northern parts of Kyonggi (Gyeonggi) and Kangwon (Gangwon) provinces, Incheon (towards the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ]).

Prevention:

- mosquito bite avoidance

MALARIA RISK



Yellow Fever

Routine and additional

Health Threats

Hantaviruses

Hantaviruses are a group of viruses that belong to the *bunyaviridae* family. They can cause two different types of illness in humans: Haemorrhagic Fever with Renal Syndrome (HFRS) involves the kidneys while Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS) involves the respiratory system. Regardless of which illness they cause, hantaviruses are carried by infected rodents. Virus is present in the animal's saliva, urine and faeces. Droplets of these excretions can contaminate the air in a process called aerosolisation. Humans become sick when they inhale the virus.

The incubation period of HPS is not positively known. Limited data suggests that people become sick within one to eight weeks after being exposed to the virus. The incubation period for HFRS is usually 1 to 2 weeks after exposure but could be as long as 8 weeks.

Initial symptoms of HPS include fatigue, fever, and muscle aches. About 50 percent of HPS patients also experience headache, dizziness, and abdominal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, pain). The "late stage" symptoms of HPS are cough/shortness of breath and a feeling of overall tightness in the chest. Heartbeat and breathing may both become rapid at this stage of illness. Symptoms of HFRS appear suddenly and include intense headaches, back and abdominal pain, fever, chills, nausea and blurred vision. As the disease progresses, patients may develop flushing of the face, inflammation, redness of the eyes or a rash. Later symptoms include bleeding from the skin, conjunctiva of the eye, and mouth. In the most severe cases renal failure develops.

There is no specific treatment or cure. Patients are treated supportively, meaning their symptoms are addressed even though the disease itself cannot be cured. Patients usually require hospitalisation in an intensive care unit. An antiviral medication, ribavirin, may be used to treat the HFRS although its effectiveness has not been proven in HPS.

There is no vaccine for HPS. Vaccines against HFRS are being used in many Asian countries. The best way to avoid infection is to eliminate rodents from your living space and worksite, and/or avoid contact with them. Keep food in tightly sealed containers, clean dishes immediately after use, do not leave pet food out all day, and seal holes to the outside – generally, make your environment inhospitable to rodents.

Cases of hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome (HFRS) are known to occur although primarily in rural areas. Peak disease activity is observed during autumn and winter.

Rabies

Rabies is a viral disease contracted when bitten or scratched by an infected (rabid) animal, often a dog. Once it enters the body, the virus travels along nerves and causes paralysis. As it reaches important organs like the spinal cord and the brain, it causes coma and death.

In countries where rabies is present in animals or bats, ALL animal / bat bites, scratches and licks to broken skin must be treated seriously. Rabies vaccination is very effective in preventing rabies, even after a bite/scratch by a rabid animal.

Rabies vaccination

Pre-exposure vaccination is often recommended for expatriates and long-term visitors to destinations where rabies is present. It's especially recommended if quality medical care may not be available after being bitten or scratched by an animal. Pre-exposure treatment can be especially useful for children, since they may not tell their parents that they have been bitten/scratched.

Pre-exposure vaccination makes it easier to treat a bite or scratch. That's important because some types of rabies treatment can be in short supply in many countries, even in cities.

If bitten, scratched or licked (on broken skin) by an animal:

- Immediately cleanse the wound with soap and water and a povidone-iodine solution if available.
- Seek medical advice from a qualified source or your assistance company.
- Notify local health authorities immediately. You may need *post-exposure vaccination*, even if you have had pre-exposure vaccination. (THIS CAN BE LIFE SAVING.)

Japanese encephalitis

Japanese encephalitis is serious viral illness, spread by mosquitoes. It occurs in most of Asia as well as some parts of the Western Pacific, mostly in rural agricultural areas. Although many people won't have any symptoms, it can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) with permanent brain damage, or be fatal. Prevention is through preventing mosquito bites. In addition, vaccination is recommended for travellers at higher risk.

Sporadic cases of Japanese encephalitis can occur in much of the country, particularly in Gangwon, Gyeonggi, and Seoul. Transmission occurs from May to November with peak transmission from August.

Lyme disease

Lyme disease occurs in North America, Europe and Asia. It is transmitted to humans by the bite of a particular species of tick. Lyme disease can cause an expanding rash at the site of the bite, fever, arthritis and nerve problems such as facial palsy.

To prevent tick bites:

- Avoid tick habitats
- Use insect repellents

- Check daily for ticks

Lyme disease vaccination is no longer available.

If you develop a rash at the site of a tick bite or other symptoms of Lyme disease, seek medical attention. A course of antibiotics can cure Lyme disease.

Sporadic cases are reported in the country. Infections are commonly reported during autumn months.

Scrub typhus

The bacterial disease scrub typhus is also known as tropical typhus or "chigger fever". Humans become infected when bitten by disease-carrying mites. A lump develops at the bite site. It ulcerates and forms an eschar (like a cigarette burn). Glands near the bite swell. Sudden onset symptoms progress, including high fever, headaches and sore muscles. About a third of those infected develop a rash.

Complications, such as pneumonia and nervous system impairment, can occur. Treatment with timely appropriate antibiotics will cure the disease. Untreated, mortality can be as high as 30 percent. No vaccine is available. Prevent infection by avoiding mite habitats (such as rodent infested areas, recently cleared forests clearings and rice paddies) and by preventing mite bites.

COVID-19

COVID-19 is predominantly a respiratory illness, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Transmission is from person to person via contaminated respiratory droplets. People are infected when these droplets are inhaled or land directly on the mouth/nose/eyes, or indirectly when transferred by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the mouth/nose/eyes.

Most people will develop a mild to moderate illness only which lasts up to two weeks, or have no symptoms. Symptoms vary greatly. Common symptoms include fever, cough and sore throat. Sometimes there is a loss of or change in the sense of smell or taste. The illness can progress to being severe and can be fatal. Older people and people with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of severe disease and death. Antiviral treatment is available and is particularly important for people at higher risk of severe illness.

Some people may continue to have symptoms that last for weeks or months after the initial infection has gone.

Prevention is through vaccination, hand hygiene, and physical distancing. Wearing a mask, and ensuring adequate ventilation in enclosed spaces can reduce the risk of infection.

The first imported cases were identified on 20 January 2020. The latest updates on COVID-19 in South Korea can be found on the [Ministry of Health website](#).

Air Pollution

Poor air quality, also known as "haze", "smog" and "air pollution", can negatively impact one's health. Some groups are especially vulnerable to problems caused by polluted air. These include children, the elderly and anyone with underlying chronic health problems such as heart disease, emphysema, bronchitis or asthma.

The chemicals in polluted air can affect the lungs resulting in wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath and even pain. Polluted air can also irritate the eyes and nose, and may interfere with immune system function. Long-term exposure can result in reduced lung function, particularly in children. It can also lead to lung cancer.

Limiting exposure to polluted air is the best way to prevent health problems. When air quality is poor, it may be advisable to avoid outdoor physical activities. While indoors, keep doors and windows closed, and use an air conditioner on 'recirculate' if possible. If the air quality is frequently problematic, consider using an air cleaner. During particularly bad periods, you may want to wear a mask while outside. Ask your healthcare provider before using a mask, especially if you have underlying health conditions. See the International SOS [Air Pollution website](#) - use your membership number to log in.

Rapid industrialisation with emissions from automobiles, construction and power plants are a major source of air pollution in the country. Episodes of poor air quality also occur due to high concentration of fine dust blown across borders (transboundary pollution).

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a viral disease that causes liver inflammation. The virus is present in the faeces of an infected person. It spreads through contaminated food and water and is common in areas with poor sanitation. Person-to-person spread also occurs, when the virus is inadvertently transferred into the mouth, including during sexual activity. People at higher risk of infection include men who have sex with men, illicit drug users and people with liver disease.

Not everyone gets symptoms. If symptoms do occur, they begin two to four weeks or more after infection and can last for weeks or months. Symptoms include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, diarrhoea, nausea/vomiting, abdominal pain/discomfort, jaundice (yellow colour of the skin and eyes), dark urine, clay-coloured stool, joint pain and itching. Many infected people suffer only a mild illness. Most cases recover fully after four or more weeks. However, for some, the disease can be severe, and occasionally is fatal. There is no specific treatment and cases are managed through supportive therapy.

Prevention is through vaccination, attention to hygiene, and access to safe food and water.

Travellers diarrhoea

Travellers' diarrhoea is the most common travel-related illness. It usually occurs within the first week away from home. It is spread through contaminated food and water.

Prevention is through choosing safe food and water, and paying attention to hygiene. Select food that is thoroughly cooked while fresh and served hot. Avoid undercooked or raw meat, fish or shellfish. Avoid salad and raw vegetables unless you can wash them with clean (treated) water and you peel them yourself.

Unless you are certain that the tap water is drinkable - choose bottled water and beverages, avoid ice.

There is a moderate risk of developing travellers' diarrhoea when staying outside first class hotels and tourist resorts.

Typhoid fever

Typhoid fever is a serious infection caused by *Salmonella typhi* bacteria. People are infected through ingesting contaminated food or water. Choosing safe food and water and vaccination reduces the risk of developing the disease.

Symptoms usually begin one to three weeks after exposure. Although typhoid fever is often called a diarrhoeal disease, some patients do not have diarrhoea. Persistent, high fever is typical. Other early symptoms are flu-like: body aches and pains, weakness, loss of appetite and a continuous dull headache. A rash with pink spots may appear on the chest and abdomen of some patients. In severe cases, perforation of the bowel can cause severe bleeding or infection in the abdomen, which can be fatal.

Typhoid is treated with antibiotics. However there is a growing problem of antibiotic resistance. "Extensively drug-resistant" (XDR) typhoid is present in some locations and does not respond to many of the antibiotics which are usually used against typhoid, making preventive measures even more important.

HIV, Hepatitis B and C, and STIs

HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are spread by contact with bodily fluids (especially blood and semen).

- unprotected sex,
- needle sharing during IV drug use, or
- unsafe blood or medical/dental instruments.

Genital herpes (HSV), genital warts (HPV), gonorrhoea, chlamydia, syphilis and most other sexually transmitted diseases are spread by genital contact.

Prevention:

- In many countries, hepatitis B is now a routine childhood immunisation and need not be repeated. All non-immune travellers should consider vaccination.
- Always use new condoms (preferably brought from your home country).
- IV drug users should not share needles.
- Avoid having tattoos or piercings done.
- In healthcare settings, make sure that needles and syringes are sterile and not shared between patients.
- Call International SOS or your corporate medical department if you are hospitalised.
- Be aware of your risk when assisting anyone with an injury. Protect yourself from contact with bodily fluids.
- Seek medical attention within 24 hours if you accidentally come into contact with someone else's bodily fluids.

Food & Water

Generally safe

Food Risk

Food is safe in South Korea, especially in hotels and restaurants. There are many food stalls which are also safe.

Water and Beverages

Tap water is safe.

Destination Guide for South Korea



Security

Destination Guide Content

Personal Security

STANDING TRAVEL ADVICE

- Travel to South Korea can proceed, subject to an individual risk assessment of the current COVID-19 situation, and the potential for entry restrictions to change at short notice at both country of arrival and departure.
- Take basic security precautions against petty and street crime.
- In the event of any demonstrations, rallies or strike activity, avoid the affected area as a security precaution. Localised clashes could occur between protesters and the police, particularly if the former attempt to block routes, march towards cordoned-off areas or breach security cordons around government buildings.
- In the event of any emergency drills, exercises or military manoeuvres, comply with all instructions issued by the security forces.
- Seek itinerary-specific advice prior to travel to the disputed north-western islands of Yeonpyeong, Baengnyeong, Daechong, Socheong and Woo.

Crime

Petty crime rare

CRIME

The crime rate in South Korea is very low, though robberies and burglaries do occur and foreign nationals can be targeted, particularly in the capital Seoul, the city of Busan and Jeju Island. Violent crime and physical attacks, including sexual harassment, molestation and rape, are occasionally reported. Exercise caution if travelling alone at night. People can reduce the risk of falling victim to crime by adopting basic precautions.

Terrorism

Moderate indirect risk to foreign nationals

TERRORISM

There are no known terrorist groups operating in South Korea and the risk of terrorism from the North is low. Stringent security measures, however, have been implemented at major international airports to guard against the entry of suspected terrorists.

Social Unrest

SOCIAL UNREST

Trade unions, opposition parties and other groups regularly hold demonstrations in the centre of Seoul, particularly near Gwanghwamun Plaza, City Hall and Cheonggye in Jongno - a key business district (see map below) - as well as Samgakji station in the Yonsan area, where presidential office is located. These gatherings are mostly peaceful, though can degenerate into localised scuffles between protesters and the police, particularly if participants attempt to disrupt traffic or break through police cordons. The level of disruption associated with such protests is usually minimal if the gatherings remain contained to these locations, though participants have shown a propensity to march along main streets, which can cause traffic disruption in central Seoul. Nationwide strikes and related protests by healthcare workers against the government's plan to increase admissions to medical schools have been held throughout early 2024, causing localised transport disruption.

Conflict

CONFLICT

North Korea

North Korea and South Korea's diplomatic relationship has been varied over the course of the constantly changing political landscape at the domestic and international levels. Domestic and international factors affecting inter-Korean relations include social and economic stability, the political affiliation of the South Korean ruling party and the standpoint of neighboring countries.

Since President Yoon Suk-yeol took office in May 2022, the tension between two Koreas has intensified. In its 2022 defence white paper, the South Korean government re-identified the North Korean regime and military as its 'enemy'. This expression had been removed from the previous government's version of the paper. In October 2024, North Korea revised its constitution to define South Korea as a 'hostile state'. North Korea's missile launches have also increased in quantity and quality in recent years, having developed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) which are capable of directly targeting continental US territory.

Former president Moon Jae-in's (in office 2017-22) administration attempted to improve relations with North Korea, signing of the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula in April 2018. However, underlying bilateral tensions have persisted, as indicated by North Korea's demolition of the inter-Korea liaison office in Kaesong (North Korea) in June 2020.

North Korea has previously fired short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan (East Sea) to coincide with important dates and announcements. These missiles are below the threshold of weapons that North Korea had agreed to refrain from testing. South Korea still has thousands of soldiers stationed in the demilitarised zone (DMZ), supported by around 28,500 US troops. The US military headquarters is based in Pyeongtaek (Gyeonggi province), south of Seoul.

North Korea continues to urge the end of South Korea's participation in the US-South Korea joint military exercises, which are held annually between February and April and in August, and following any tightening of sanctions against North Korea by the international community. South Korean military's Defense Readiness Condition (DEFCON) level is currently at 4, which is the second lowest level and considered 'peacetime'.

There have been occasional clashes between South Korean and North Korean troops along maritime borders. The last major incidents were North Korea's November 2010 shelling on Yeonpyeong island that killed four people, including two civilians, and the March 2010 sinking of a South Korean navy vessel, killing at least 40 security force personnel (for which North Korea continues to deny responsibility).

Tensions briefly spiked in August 2015 after South Korea accused North Korea of planting land mines in the DMZ, which injured two South Korean soldiers. The situation escalated when North Korea fired an artillery shell at loudspeakers broadcasting anti-North Korean propaganda along the border, triggering retaliatory fire from South Korea. However, no damage or injuries were reported. Tensions eased after North Korea and South Korea reached an agreement after three days of high-level bilateral discussions in 2015.

After its first nuclear test in October 2006, North Korea in 2007 agreed to disable its nuclear facilities. Some sanctions against the country were lifted after it submitted a declaration of its nuclear activities and destroyed the cooling tower in its Yongbyon reactor in June 2008, though the process collapsed shortly after North Korea conducted a second nuclear test in May 2009.

North Korea has since conducted four more nuclear tests: February 2013, January 2016, September 2016 and September 2017. North Korea has a history of alternating threats and aggression with periodic conciliatory gestures and talks to strengthen its negotiating position and extract concessions from the international community. North Korea frequently conducts missile and nuclear tests around important anniversaries. Further such acts of provocation are likely as diplomatic relations on the Korean peninsula remain tense. However, the nature of escalation discernible from more than 50 years of brinksmanship indicates that tense diplomatic relations on the peninsula are not likely to translate into a major conflict.

Japan

South Korea and Japan continue to contest claims over the islets of Dokdo (Takeshima in Japanese). This dispute occasionally escalates, often because of domestic political considerations in either country.