

Korean Peninsula Update, June 23, 2026

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North Korea is likely expanding its port facilities to accelerate the construction of a green-water navy. Expanded shipbuilding capacity could also support Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) General Secretary Kim Jong Un's ambitions to develop larger surface fleet combatants.

Radio Free Asia reported on June 16 that it had obtained satellite imagery that showed North Korea expanded shipbuilding infrastructure at the port cities of Nampo and Chongjin.[1] Radio Free Asia reported that satellite imagery showed expanded workers' barracks, rail tracks, and new construction halls at the shipbuilding sites.[2] Kim directed North Korean shipbuilding in March to deliver two Choe Hyon

-class guided missile destroyers per year over the course of five years, giving North Korea a total of 12 destroyers.[3] South Korean media has reported that the third ship of the class is under construction at the Nampo shipyard.[4] The expansion at Chongjin could indicate that the construction of the fourth vessel is underway at the facility.[5] North Korea will likely struggle to complete delivery of both vessels to the Korean People's Army Navy (KPAN) before the end of 2026, given the timeline between lay-down and launch required for its two existing destroyers.[6] Expanded port infrastructure at two shipbuilding sites could indicate North Korea is aiming to accelerate the timeline for delivery of the two new destroyers.

North Korea may also be aiming to expand its shipbuilding infrastructure to support Kim's ambition for a larger surface combatant. North Korean media claimed in June that the state intended to construct a 10,000-ton warship, which would provide the KPAN with a surface combatant approximately twice the displacement of the

Choe Hyon

-class.[7] North Korea may have to rely on its ties with Russia or the People's Republic of China (PRC) to support the accelerated design and construction of a larger class of warship due to North Korea's lack of experience in developing a warship of this size.[8] Such a surface combatant could significantly increase the firepower of the KPAN but could also burden the service with a high-value asset that it must allocate significant resources to defend.

ISW-CDOT has assessed that Kim aims to develop the KPAN into a green-water navy that retains the KPAN's traditional coastal defense responsibility while also having the capacity for deploying beyond North Korea's immediate waters.[9] A green-water navy would enhance North Korea's ability to defend critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs), threaten adversary SLOCs, and allow North Korea to more forcibly contest its maritime boundary with South Korea.[10] North Korea has also stated its intention to field nuclear missiles on its surface fleet, which will likely enhance the survivability of its nuclear deterrent by spreading it across multiple domains and platforms.[11]

North Korea is unlikely to accept engagement overtures by US President Donald Trump unless Washington accepts Pyongyang's nuclear status.

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung on June 17 urged US President Donald Trump to support Seoul's efforts to resume dialogue with North Korea during the Group of Seven (G7) summit in France.[12] Trump expressed a willingness to play a constructive role in advancing progress on Korean Peninsula issues during the summit.[13] The G7 leaders subsequently issued a joint statement calling for North Korea to denuclearize and condemning its cryptocurrency theft and cybercrime activities.[14] Director of the WPK General Affairs Department Kim Yo Jong, sister of WPK General Secretary Kim Jong Un, denounced the G7 statement on June 18 as an infringement of North Korea's sovereignty, without referencing the engagement overtures signaled by Lee and Trump.[15] The Lee administration has consistently urged Washington to aid in facilitating inter-Korean communication, likely based on the belief that Kim Jong Un may be willing to engage directly with Trump. Kim signaled conditional openness to talks with Washington on February 26, provided that the United States abandons its longstanding commitment to North Korea's denuclearization.[16] The Trump administration has not yet articulated a coherent North Korea policy since the beginning of the second Trump administration. The United States approved United Nations (UN) sanctions exemptions for 17 humanitarian assistance projects in North Korea in February, likely in an effort to create conditions for future engagement with North Korea.[17] North Korea has not responded to the measure. The Lee administration has pursued a dual-track approach of engagement signaling and deterrence-focused measures, which North Korea has criticized as a

-façade.[18] It is therefore unlikely that North Korea would agree to resume dialogue solely in response to diplomatic outreach and humanitarian assistance initiatives.

Key Takeaways

North Korean Military Development:

North Korea appears to be expanding its shipbuilding infrastructure in the port cities of Nampo and Chongjin, likely as part of Kim Jong Un's efforts to rapidly increase the number of KPAN destroyers. These expanded port facilities would also likely aid in North Korean efforts to construct a 10,000-ton warship.

US-North Korea Engagement:

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung urged US President Donald Trump to help facilitate inter-Korean dialogue during the June 17 G7 summit. Trump expressed a willingness to engage with North Korea and has approved sanctions exemptions for North Korean humanitarian assistance projects, but such actions are unlikely to result in dialogue due to the United States maintaining its position on North Korean denuclearization.

North Korean Domestic Politics

Nothing significant to report.

North Korean Military Developments

US-based cybersecurity firm Nisos released a report on June 18 detailing the operations of a North Korean employment fraud cell.

[19]

North Korean fraud operations earn hundreds of millions of dollars for Pyongyang and violate international sanctions.

[20]

Nisos reported that the 22-member North Korean employment fraud cell submitted at least 166,893 job applications and participated in over 21,645 interviews in a nine-month period from 2024 to 2025. The North Korean employment fraud cell targeted jobs with high salaries and remote work, with developer jobs and engineering jobs comprising 71.7 percent of the job applications. The cell received only 76 job offers out of 20,645 job interviews, suggesting a quantity over quality approach. North Korean efforts avoided sensitive fields such as defense and government positions, suggesting that profit-maximization was the priority instead of espionage and infiltration. The Nisos report identified key characteristics of the North Korean employment fraud cell's operations. The cell has a hierarchical structure with an administrator, two managers, and three team leads, and the operation is

coordinated exclusively in English over Discord. Each operative managed one to four personas and provided employment verification for one another's personas. They recruited at least three natives, or US-based American citizens to act as front-facing interviewees or employees and manage laptop farms for remote access.

The United States Department of Justice most recently sentenced two US citizens for hosting laptop farms for North Korean IT workers in an effort that generated over \$1.2 million and affected almost 70 US companies.[21] The US Departments of State and Treasury issued an advisory in May 2022 warning about North Korean IT workers posing as foreign nationals when seeking employment.

Artificial intelligence (AI) technologies since then have only further enabled such efforts.[22]

North Korean Foreign Relations

North Korea withdrew its ambassador to the United Kingdom in response to UK sanctions against a North Korean international children's camp due to links to Russia and potential political indoctrination of Ukrainian children.

North Korea withdrew Ambassador Mun Myong Sin from the United Kingdom only a month after his appointment in response to UK sanctions against Songdowon International Children's Camp, located near Wonsan, North Korea.[23] The United Kingdom accused the camp of backing Russia's program of forced deportation and re-education of Ukrainian children.[24] ISW has previously reported on additional allegations from US Senate testimony and media reports on December 11, 2025, and January 8, 2026, which accused the camp of hosting children from Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine and subjecting them to political indoctrination, including Russification and militarization efforts as well as anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric.[25] The North Korean embassy stated that it was recalling Ambassador Mun and downgrading its level of diplomatic relations with the UK to that of chargé d'affaires until the sanctions against the camp were lifted.[26]

North Korea maintains embassies in 12 European countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, and Austria, but the United Kingdom appears to be the only country that has sanctioned Songdowon.[27] North Korea established diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom in 2000, opening embassies in Pyongyang and London.[28] The United Kingdom has traditionally used this connection to promote human rights issues while maintaining a critical position of North Korea's nuclear program.[29] North Korea's UK ambassador withdrawal is most likely to be a reaction to the sanctioning of Songdowon itself, particularly given its importance to North Korea's international presence and political influence, but signals a tacit level of support for Russia's war in Ukraine and forced deportation of Ukrainian children.[30] North Korea has historically used Songdowon as a means of international exchange, hosting children from Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America, but has only resumed programs for children from Russia and Russian-occupied areas since reopening after the COVID-19 pandemic.[31] Russian children sent to Songdowon are often reported to come from Russian military and defense manufacturing centers as well as youth military-patriotic organizations.[32]

North Korean Cognitive Warfare

North Korea likely seeks to cement its status as a nuclear power by pushing narratives favorable to its objectives through media cooperation with Russia.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Alimov said in a June 16 interview with Russian state media

RIA Novosti

that the United States lifted 17 applications for sanctions exemptions for humanitarian assistance projects to North Korea. Alimov said that 'common sense prevailed,' when describing the move.[33]

Russian state media

TASS

reported on June 17 that the first North Korea delegation will participate in the 30th 'All-Russia-2026' Forum of Modern Journalism in Russia from August 25 to August 31.[34] Russia and North Korea have increasingly used their state media outlets to amplify narratives favorable to each other. The two countries first formalized this cooperation in June 2024 with the signing of the Russia-North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty by committing to oppose the misuse of information networks to tarnish the 'dignity and image of sovereign countries' and also combat 'false information'. [35]

Russian state media

Rossiia Segodnya

and North Korean state media signed a cooperation agreement in November 2025.[36]

TASS

and North Korean state media also signed an agreement in March 2026 to combat 'fake news'. [37] Russia has increasingly supported North Korea's nuclear weapons program and advocated for international sanctions relief toward the regime at both diplomatic and domestic settings.[38] North Korea, in particular, likely seeks to use bilateral exchanges in journalism to undermine international nonproliferation norms and showcase Russia's backing of its nuclear program.

Inter-Korean Relations

Members of the Lee Jae Myung administration continue to disagree on the most effective North Korea policy, which could present challenges when developing coherent policy measures.

The South Korean Ministry of Unification (MOU) expressed opposition to the designation of North Korea as an 'enemy' of South Korea in the Lee administration's first defense white paper on June 18.[39]

An unnamed MOU official stated that 'South Korea cannot pursue peaceful coexistence with North Korea while defining it as a primary enemy,' arguing that the Ministry of National Defense's (MND) decision contradicts the Lee administration's 'peaceful coexistence' policy.[40] MND Deputy Spokesperson Lee Kyung-ho denied South Korean media reports claiming that the MND might delete the reference to North Korea as an 'enemy' on June 17.[41] The Lee administration's first defense white paper appears to be maintaining the 'primary enemy' designation implemented in the 2022 white paper under conservative Yoon Suk-yeol's administration.[42] Seoul's defense white paper first introduced the 'primary enemy' designation in 1995, following North Korean military threats in 1994.[43] South Korean progressive administrations replaced and scaled down the description of North Korea as a 'military threat' in 2004, 2006, 2008, 2018, and 2020 white papers during periods of active inter-Korean exchanges.[44] MOU Minister Chung Dong-young stated on June 19 that he will discuss the issue with the South Korean National Security Council (NSC).[45] Chung separately remarked on June 17 during the Advisory

Group meeting on Korean Peninsula Peace Strategy that the current inter-Korean relations are a ·tragedy· under the influence of peripheral powers, despite the ·primary stakeholders· in Korean Peninsula affairs being the two Koreas.[46]

The MOU and MND policy disagreements underscore difficulties that have resulted from the inter-ministry approach to North Korea policy since early in the Lee administration. The MOU was previously in conflict with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) over leadership and jurisdiction on inter-Korean policy issues in 2025, prompting Lee to mediate and formalize the MOU's primary role over North Korea policy in December.[47] The MOU once again expressed disagreement with the MOFA and the National Security Office in March regarding South Korea's co-sponsorship of the UN Human Rights Council's North Korean Human Rights Resolution.[48] The MOU continues to curb provocative rhetoric and gestures on North Korea to rebuild bilateral trust with Pyongyang based on the administration's ·peaceful coexistence· policy. The MOU's current posture in favor of leading an inter-Korean dialogue also appears to contradict the current Blue House's (Presidential Office) diplomatic initiatives. Lee requested an active US role in dialogue and interest in Korean Peninsula affairs from US President Donald Trump during a G7 summit dinner on June 16.[49] Lee's statement followed his previous reference to Seoul as a ·peacemaker· for Trump's dialogue with North Korea during his visit to Washington in August 2025.[50] The MND's insistence on maintaining the ·enemy· designation, conversely, likely reflects a strategy to incorporate Washington's demands for Seoul's enhanced regional security role, including a role in deterring North Korean threats. The MND may be acting in an effort to further the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) and acquire nuclear-powered submarines.

South Korean Domestic Politics

Nothing significant to report.

Counter-North Korean Coalition Building Efforts

Nothing significant to report.

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