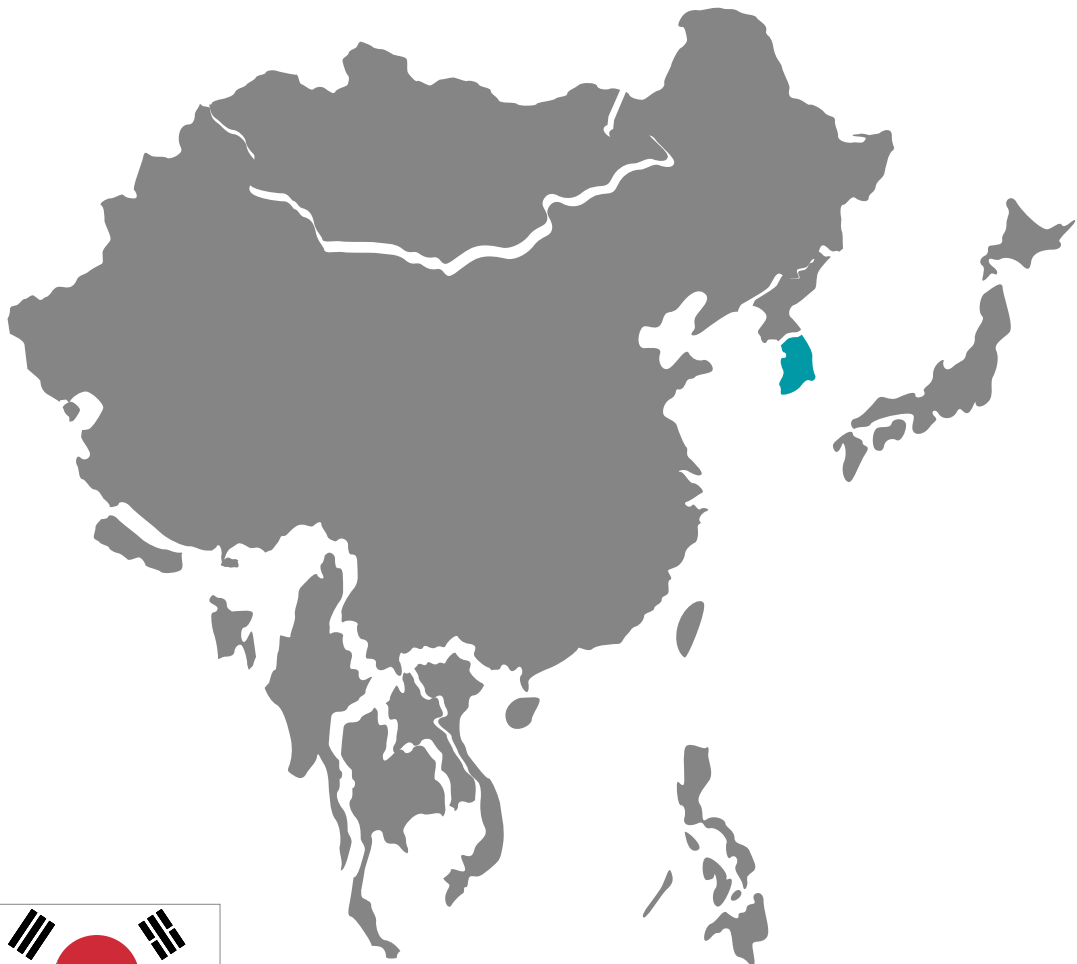




Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

South Korea - GCC Relations





Key Domestic Developments

South Korea has been navigating a multifaceted crisis encompassing political upheaval, economic challenges, and social unrest since late 2024. The political landscape remains turbulent following President Yoon Suk Yeol's brief imposition of martial law on December 3, 2024, which was swiftly annulled by the National Assembly. Subsequently, President Yoon was impeached and arrested on charges of inciting rebellion. As of March 22, 2025, the Constitutional Court continued to deliberate on his impeachment. In the interim, Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, who assumed the role of acting president, was also impeached on December 27, 2024, for obstructing judicial appointments and investigations into the president and first lady. Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok has been serving as acting president since then. The political crisis has polarized the nation, leading to massive rival rallies both supporting and opposing the impeached president. Notably, conservative religious groups have mobilized in favor of Yoon, reflecting deep societal divisions. Additionally, security measures have been heightened for opposition leader Lee Jae-myung due to a suspected assassination plot, further underscoring the tense political climate.

The political instability has exacerbated existing economic challenges. South Korea's economy grew by 2.0% in 2024, but growth is projected to slow to 1.6% or 1.7% in 2025, below the estimated potential of around 2%. The Bank of Korea has expressed concerns over rising household debt and a potential loss of economic momentum, particularly in the face of global uncertainties and domestic political turmoil. In response to these challenges, the government has implemented several measures, including pension reform, which was approved by parliament to increase the contribution rate from 9% to 13% over the next eight years and raise the income replacement rate to 43% by 2026, extending the viability of the \$830 billion state pension fund to

around 2071. Additionally, South Korea plans to offer visa-free entry to Chinese visitors in the third quarter to boost tourism, aligning with China's extension of visa-free entry to South Koreans. This initiative also supports the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Gyeongju. Major conglomerates are restructuring to enhance competitiveness amid escalating competition from China and potential U.S. tariffs, divesting non-core businesses, and focusing on growth areas such as artificial intelligence.

Despite domestic challenges, South Korea continues to engage in significant military activities. Recently, South Korea and the United States concluded 11 days of annual joint military drills, known as Freedom Shield, which included a river-crossing exercise near the demilitarized zone with North Korea. These exercises involved 600 troops, 100 armored vehicles, and an array of aircraft underscoring the commitment to maintaining a robust defensive posture amid regional tensions. In summary, South Korea is grappling with a complex interplay of political, economic, and security challenges. The outcomes of the ongoing political proceedings, particularly the Constitutional Court's impending decisions on the impeachments of President Yoon and Prime Minister Han, are poised to significantly influence the nation's trajectory in the coming months.

Key South Korea Economic and Social Data

- GDP: \$1.71 trillion USD (2023)
- GDP per capita: \$33,121.4 USD (2023)
- Annual Growth Rate: 1.4% (2023)
- Inflation: 3.6% (2023)
- Unemployment Rate: 3.7%
- Population: 51,712.619 million (2023)
- Human Development Index (HDI): 0.916 (very high)
- Standard & Poor: AA with a stable outlook (2024); Moody's: Aa2 with a stable outlook (2024); Fitch: AA- with a stable outlook (2024)



South Korea's Foreign Policy

Key Foreign Policy Initiatives

During this time in office, President Yoon undertook a major shift in the South Korean government's foreign policy in the transition from a left-wing political party to a conservative democratic government. President Yoon's key foreign policy initiatives were:

- Achieving sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula through the complete and verifiable denuclearisation of North Korea
- Developing East Asian diplomacy based on liberal democratic values and common interests
- Strengthening the coalition defence system between the US and South Korea
- Expanding US-ROK cooperation for economic security, including supply chain stabilisation, digital economy, and clean energy issues
- Expanding cooperation with China, particularly in the areas of the economy, supply chains, health, climate change, environment, and cultural exchanges
- Restoring trust and resolving pending issues with Japan through the revival of shuttle diplomacy as well as expanding exchanges between the two countries' younger generations
- Managing stable relations between Russia and the Republic of Korea in tune with the efforts of the international community to resolve the Ukrainian issue, including sanctions against Russia

South Korea Trade in Goods with GCC Countries 2023 (USD Millions)

Source: <https://kita.org/>

Country	Exports	Imports	Balance of Trade
Bahrain	154	499	-345

Kuwait	558	9,659	-9,101
Oman	503	5,365	-4,862
Qatar	764	14,999	-14,235
Saudi Arabia	5,325	32,763	-27,438
United Arab Emirates	4,432	16,423	-11,991
GCC Total Amount	11,736	79,708	-67,972

Establishment of Diplomatic Relations:

Saudi Arabia: 1962

Oman: 1974

Qatar: 1974

Bahrain: 1976

Kuwait: 1979

United Arab Emirates: 1980

Current Diplomatic Representation:

Bahrain: South Korean Ambassador to Bahrain in Manama: H.E. Koo Heon-Sang

Currently, Bahrain does not have representation in South Korea.

Kuwait: South Korean Ambassador to Kuwait in Kuwait City: H.E. Park Chong-suk

Currently, Kuwait does not have representation in South Korea.

Oman: South Korean Ambassador to Oman in Muscat: H.E. Kim Kie-joo

Currently, Oman does not have representation in South Korea.

Qatar: South Korean Representation to Qatar in Doha: H.E. Yun Hyun-soo

Ambassador of Qatar to South Korea in Seoul: H.E. Khalid bin Ebrahim Al-Hamar



Saudi Arabia: Acting South Korean Ambassador to Saudi Arabia in Riyadh: H.E. Moon Byungjoon

Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to South Korea in Seoul: H.E. Sami M. Alsadhan

United Arab Emirates: South Korean Ambassador to the UAE in Abu Dhabi: H.E. Yoo Jeh-Seung

Ambassador of the UAE to South Korea in Seoul: H.E. Abdulla Saif Ali Slayem AlNuaimi

Key South Korean Officials Responsible for the Gulf Region

- Cho Tae-yul – South Korea’s Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Ahn Duk-geun – South Korea’s Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy
- Choi Byung-hyuk - South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense

Key Research Centers and Think Tanks

- MEIKO (Middle East Institute at Korea University)
- [Korea Institute for International Economic Policy](#)
- [Samsung Economic Research Institute](#)
- [Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security](#)
- Centre for Middle East and Islamic Studies at Korea University

Selected Key Regional Experts

- Dr. Gedaliah Afterman Head, Asia Policy Program, Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy, Israel
- N. Janardhan, Director of Research, Anwar Gagash Diplomatic Academy, UAE
- Jeongmin Seo, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul

- Kwon Hyung Lee, Senior Research Fellow, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy

- Hae Won Jeong, UAE National Defense College

Key Recent Literature

South Korea’s energy security and cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) by Leena Srivastava and Shalu Agrawal (2021)

South Korea’s Economic Ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council: Prospects and Challenges by Mohamed Ramady, published in the *Journal of Economic Cooperation and Development* (2020)

Gulf-South Korea Ties: Special, Smart and Strategic, (2020), published by the Emirates Diplomatic Academy available under <https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/Publications/eda-insight-jul-2020-eng-dr-kwon-hyung-lee.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

South Korea’s FTA Strategy in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Region: A Comparative Analysis with Japan by Dong-Heon Kim and Jong-Hyun Park, published in the *Journal of International and Area Studies* (2019)

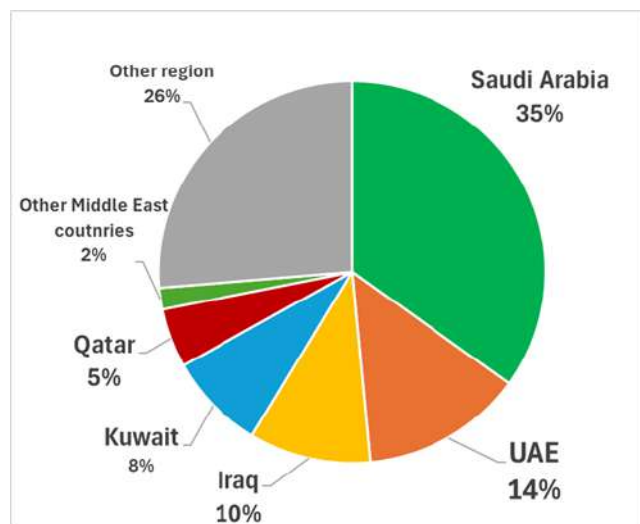
Key Developments in South Korea-GCC Relations

Trade relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and South Korea have grown significantly over the years, fostering mutually beneficial economic ties and cooperation. The GCC and South Korea’s trade relations are primarily characterized by the exchange of energy resources, particularly crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG).

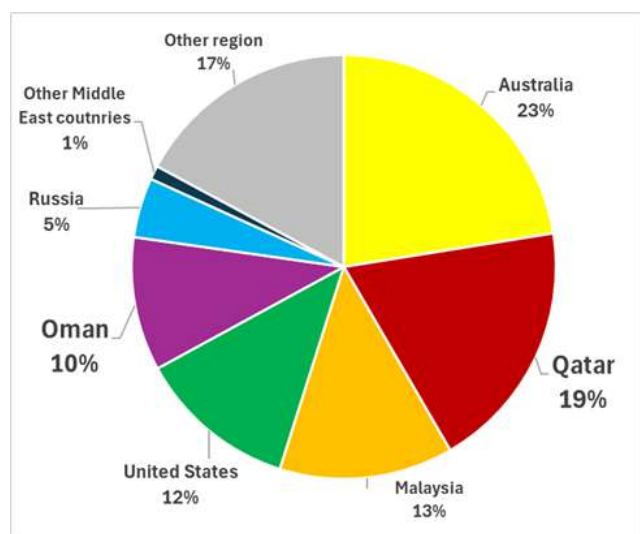
Of South Korea’s total crude oil imports, 60% come from the GCC, as well as 30% of LNG imports in 2024. South Korea is among the top three LNG world importers from Qatar.



South Korea's Crude Oil Imports by Country (2024)



South Korea's Natural Gas Imports by Country (2024)



Source: KITA (Korea International Trade Association) K-Statistics

To facilitate trade and economic cooperation, the GCC and South Korea have engaged in various initiatives and agreements. The GCC-South Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) came into effect in 2015, reducing or eliminating tariffs on a wide range of goods and services, thus promoting bilateral trade. The FTA has also helped create a more favorable environment for investment and the establishment of joint ventures between companies from both regions.

Moreover, the GCC and South Korea have engaged in high-level diplomatic visits and business delegations, which have further enhanced economic ties and promoted collaboration in various sectors. These interactions have led to the signing of numerous memoranda of understanding (MOUs) between government agencies, industry associations, and companies, fostering partnerships in areas such as energy, technology, infrastructure, and tourism.

Outside of the energy sector, South Korea has focused on innovation-oriented areas such as information and communication technology (ICT), renewable energy, health care, and food and water security. South Korea received an order in 2009 from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to build the Barakah Nuclear Power Plant 1. It is the first overseas nuclear power plant built by South Korea. In September 2024, all four units of the Barakah Power Plant in Abu Dhabi, constructed by the Korea Electric Power Corporation in a consortium that included Hyundai, Samsung, Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power, and Doosan Heavy Industries and Construction, became operational, with the capability of meeting up to 25 percent of the UAE's electricity needs.

In addition, South Korean companies are seeking to enter the Gulf arms market in order to secure customers in the arms export industry, which is a growing industry in South Korea. In the 1970s, Korea's then President Park Chung-hee rapidly developed the defense industry, enabling the country to meet its own demand by the early 1980s. Thus, they started trying to revitalize the domestic defense industry, meeting both domestic and foreign demand. In January 2022, South Korea signed a \$3.32 billion contract with the UAE to export M-SAM surface-to-air missiles- also called "Cheongung II" — capable of defending military and industrial facilities against enemy air attacks on the UAE. Similarly, during a visit to Saudi Arabia by South Korean Defense Minister Shin in February 2024, the Korean Ministry of National Defense announced a \$3.2 billion export contract for the Cheongung-II to Saudi Arabia.



South Korea – Bahrain

- December 2024: Ambassador of the Republic of Korea to Bahrain, Koo Heon Sang and Bahrain's Minister of Finance and National Economy, Shaikh Salman bin Khalifa Al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain signed the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of the Kingdom of Bahrain for the Promotion and Protection of Investments.

South Korea – Kuwait

- October 2024: The CEO of Korea National Oil Corporation (KNOC), Kim Dong-sub visited Kuwait and met with the Chairman of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPEC), Shaikh Nawaf Saud Al-Sabah. KNOC signed an agreement with KPC to store 4 million barrels of oil from the Middle Eastern country that can be accessed in case of a global energy crisis, adding to Seoul's efforts to secure a stable supply of energy sources.

South Korea – Oman

- April 2024: Ali Masoud Al Sunaidy, Oman's Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), visited South Korea, meeting with South Korea's Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, Jeong In-kyo. The two sides discussed how to leverage Korean technologies to manage smart industrial cities and how to enhance the two countries' cooperation, specifically in the manufacturing, logistics, and storage sectors.

South Korea – Qatar



- November 2024: Saad Sherida Al-Kaabi, Qatar's Minister of Energy and the President and CEO of QatarEnergy visited South Korea and held a meeting with South Korea's Trade, Industry and Energy Minister, Ahn Duk-geun. Both sides agreed to maintain ties going forward and further discussed measures for expanding the scope of collaboration based on their successful LNG partnership to push cooperation in renewable energy, hydrogen, and clean energy sources.
- July 2024: South Korea's Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Yang Young-mo visited Qatar and held a meeting with Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Affairs, Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah. Both sides "discussed topics of common concern" in addition to the enhancement of cooperation relations.
- July 2024: South Korea's First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, Kim Hong Kyun visited Qatar and held a meeting with Lolwah bint Rashid Al Khater, Minister of State for International Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both sides discussed bilateral cooperation between the two countries, especially in the fields of economy and technology, as well as developments in the Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territories, in addition to several issues of joint interest.
- February 2024: South Korea's Defence Minister Shin Won-sik visited Qatar and met with Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defense Affairs, Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah. The two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Qatari-Korean Joint Committee on Defense Cooperation.
- October 2023: President Yoon paid a state visit to Qatar and held a summit on bilateral cooperation with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. Both sides agreed to upgrade the two countries' relations to



a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” During the summit, Yoon and Sheikh Tamim noted that next year marks the 50th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations and agreed to deepen their partnership to cover not only energy and construction, but also defense, national security, investments, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), agriculture, and other fields.

South Korea-Saudi Arabia



- November 2024: The first Korea-Gulf Cooperation Council seminar organized by the Gulf Research Center and the South Korean embassy hosted around 80 participants to discuss economic cooperation and to come to a shared understanding of regional conflicts in the GCC, specifically in Gaza and the Red Sea, as well as a space to diversify energy cooperation in the nuclear and renewables sectors.
- February 2024: South Korea’s Defence Minister Shin Won-sik visited Saudi Arabia and met with Saudi Arabian Defense Minister HH Khalid bin Salman bin Abdulaziz at the World Defense Show in Riyadh. During the meeting, relations between the two nations were discussed, with a focus on strategies to enhance collaboration in the military and defense sectors. Both witnessed the signing ceremony of a preliminary memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Defense in the Kingdom and the Defense

Acquisition Program Administration in the Republic of Korea within the defense industries sector.

- October 2023: President Yoon paid a state visit to Saudi Arabia from October 21 to 24, 2023, where he agreed with Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman to strengthen economic cooperation across all industries. President Yoon also welcomed Saudi Arabia’s bid to host the 2034 World Cup. On the occasion of their summit, the two governments and businesses from both countries signed more than 50 new memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and contracts worth \$15.6 billion.

South Korea – United Arab Emirates



- May 2024: South Korea and the UAE signed a bilateral comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA), as President Yoon and his UAE counterpart, HH Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, held a summit in Seoul to explore measures to expand bilateral trade and economic partnerships. The summit took place on the last day of Al Nahyan’s two-day state visit to Korea, the first by a UAE president. During the summit, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) signed letters of intent to commission two Korean shipbuilders to construct six large liquefied natural gas (LNG) carriers. The two sides also signed an MOU to expand their joint oil stockpiling project, which currently stands at 4 million barrels, to enhance their energy security cooperation. Additionally, they inked



an MOU on carbon capture and storage cooperation to produce clean hydrogen using LNG to establish a support basis for hydrogen cooperation projects.

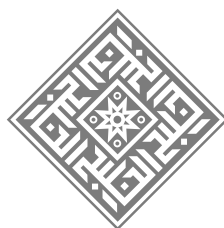
- March 2024: South Korea's Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Lee Young-su visited the UAE and held a meeting with UAE's Commander of the Air Force and Air Defense, Major General Nasser Mohammed Al Alawi, to promote the excellence of South Korean-made aircraft. During the meeting, they discussed ways of cooperation and strengthening of bilateral relations between the two friendly countries, especially in terms of airspace cooperation.
- February 2024: South Korea's Defence Minister Shin Won-sik visited the UAE and met with UAE Minister of State for Defense Affairs, HE Mohammed bin Mubarak Fadhel Al Mazrouei. The two sides reviewed 15 years of bilateral defense cooperation, pledging to strengthen it in line with their nations' status as special strategic partners.

Supporting Documents

GRC Publications and Workshops

- *GRC Publication:* Strategic Energy Partnerships: The GCC and South Korea's Path to Energy Security by Noriko Suzuki
- *GRC Publication:* South Korea-GCC Relations: Opportunities and Challenges by Abdelhadi El-Awady
- *GRM Workshop 2013:* The Changing Strategic Interests of the Gulf-South Korea Relationship: from Nuclear to Military Cooperation
- *GRM Workshop 2012:* South Korea's Interests in the Gulf: From Construction to Military Cooperation
- *GRM Workshop 2012:* Small is Beautiful: South Korean-Gulf Relations as an Example of Strategic Engagement by Players in Different Arenas





Gulf Research Center

Knowledge for All



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

www.grc.net

مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)**

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Riyadh**

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation**

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels**

4th Floor
Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
1000 Brussels
Belgium
grcb@grc.net
+32 2 251 41 64

