



Consortium of Indo-Pacific
Researchers

Indo-Pacific Weekly Mail August 17-August 23, 2026

Greetings Colleagues,

The Consortium is pleased to share its latest newsletter for the Indo-Pacific.
Press the reply button for your feedback and comments.

U.S. Scale Back Military Exercise with South Korea



Figure 1: US and South Korea forces during Ulchi Freedom Shield 25: wet gap crossing /Image/
<https://www.army.mil/>

The joint military drill between US and South Korea has been cut short a week as President Trump's order to scale back it. The joint Ulchi Freedom Shield exercise began on Aug. 17 is ended on Friday, ahead of the original schedule through Aug. 27. U.S. President Donald Trump said in a [social media post](#) that "these exercises are not only costly... but send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile" to North Korea, which he said "has been unthreatening and respectful" during his time in the White House. The 11 days of exercises involving 18,000 South Korean soldiers were designed to beef up readiness against North Korean threats.

President Trump publicly backlashed South Korea for not assisting the United States in the Iran war, and he has additionally expressed his desire to convene a personal meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un later this year. South Korea's defense establishment has articulated grave and legitimate concern over the premature termination, given that the exercise boost readiness and to prepare combined forces for combat and to deter any unprecedented incident in the immediate vicinity of a nuclear-armed and unpredictable North Korea.

In a provocative response, North Korea launched ten ballistic missiles in direct retaliation against the joint US-ROK military drill. Furthermore, North Korea has been sending its troops to assist Russia in Ukraine War.

Curtailing the military drill is an unprecedented development, given that South Korea is one of America's most consequential and treaty allies in the

Indo-Pacific — and the abrupt curtailment of a foundational readiness exercise sends a destabilizing signal to every ally in the region watching Washington's alliance commitments with mounting pressure of regional unstable environment. [Read More](#)

US Envoy's Kashmir Remark and its Strategic Implications

During a visit to [Kashmir and Ladakh](#), US Ambassador to India and Special Envoy for South and Central Asian Affairs Sergio Gor said that Jammu and Kashmir is "an important part of India," which pleased Indian strategic thinkers and prompted a swift diplomatic protest from Pakistan. While this may be the ambassador's strategic observation, the formal policy of the US State Department has not yet changed.

The statement came against the backdrop of a US-India bilateral relationship that has been near low since the second Trump administration — strained by unresolved tariffs and contentious bargaining over a comprehensive bilateral trade deal that has tested the patience and goodwill of both capitals. Furthermore, the United States fundamentally equalized India and Pakistan in its public posture on Operation Sindoor in 2025 — following the devastating Pahalgam terror attack — a diplomatic equivalence that New Delhi regarded as a profound and deliberate misreading. Trump characteristically portrayed Kashmir as the central and intractable problem between two nuclear-armed

neighbors — omitting any reference to cross-border terrorism as the cause of the bilateral crisis.

The strategic importance of Kashmir and Ladakh lies in their position at the crossroads of Tibet Autonomous, China and Central Asia. If the United States increases its engagement in this Himalayan region through industry, education, energy, and tourism, it can leverage its interests to counter China's and Russia's influence. [Read More](#)

India and Japan Bolster Defense Cooperation

India's defense minister, Rajnath Singh, hosted his counterpart, Japan's defense minister, Shinjiro Koizumi, in New Delhi. Both leaders affirmed their commitment, under their leadership, to further deepen defense cooperation to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific. The two Ministers signed a Memorandum of Arrangement specifically on maritime cooperation to strengthen Maritime Security Cooperation. It includes strengthening cooperation between the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and the Indian Navy, including information sharing in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), as well as enhanced cooperation in areas such as Search and Rescue (SAR) and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). The two countries will leverage each other's strengths in shipbuilding, defense technology, and military exercises. Furthermore, in the forthcoming Japan-India Air Force exercise, Japan Air

Self-Defense Force fighter aircraft will, for the first time, visit India and participate.

Japan and India are substantively enhancing their combined defense capabilities at a moment when both nations confront acute and escalating tensions in their immediate neighborhoods. China and Russia are jointly and relentlessly forging an intensely hostile and destabilizing environment in Japan's strategic vicinity (Japan's defense White Paper 2026). Compounding Japan's strategic anxiety, its indispensable treaty ally, the United States, is simultaneously pressing Tokyo for greater defense burden-sharing, leaving Japan increasingly conscious that American security guarantees are no longer unconditional or costless. On India's front, the unresolved and persistently volatile border dispute with China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) continues to simmer. [Read More](#)

China Urges South Korea to pursue Strategic Autonomy

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Seoul is expected to set the agenda for initiating peace talks on the Korean Peninsula. He met Korean Prime Minister Lee and the National Security Advisor, along with other officials. The Chinese top diplomat's visit in five years indicates more about China's interest in mediating between the two Koreas and keeping the US out of the game. Wang advised Seoul not to take sides but to chart the path of autonomy.

US President Donald Trump is seeking to revive his personal diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, has announced plans to meet Kim later in 2026, and has ordered a reduction in US-South Korea joint military exercises, a move that could help create space for renewed engagement with Pyongyang.

Additionally, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has expressed interest in multilateral talks to end hostility and establish a peace regime. [Read More](#)

Indo-Pacific Quiz

Which country has the United States recently imposed a 50 percent tariff on?

- | | |
|-------------|--------------|
| a. Canada | c. Indonesia |
| b. Thailand | d. India |

In which Ocean Tatar Strait is located?

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| a. Pacific Ocean | c. Indian Ocean |
| b. Atlantic Ocean | d. Tasman Sea |
-

Consortium Highlights

- ❖ Commentary: [Beyond Bilateralism: How Reviving SAARC Can Reset Bangladesh-India Relations](#)
 - ❖ New Read: [Japan's Strategic Shift: From Pacifist to Provider](#)
 - ❖ [Podcast Recording](#): Saudi-Türkiye-Pakistan Defense Pact and regional Implications
-

Indo-Pacific Quiz Key

Here are the **Answers** for August 16, 2026, Newsletter Quiz

Q. Which Southeast Asian country was hit by earthquake this week?

c. Indonesia

Q. Which two countries are geographically connected and separated by the Kuril Islands chain?

c. Russia & Japan

Contributions: Indu Saxena