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Seoul Aims to Finalise U.S. Tariff Deal Before August Deadline

July 17, 2025

— Categories: *Economics*



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South Korea is seeking to secure a tariff agreement with the United States ahead of the looming August 1 deadline, with Foreign Minister nominee Cho Hyun expressing cautious optimism that a deal can be reached in time.

Speaking at his confirmation hearing before the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee, Cho emphasised the urgency and complexity of the ongoing

negotiations. He indicated that the United States appears to be giving priority to Korea in these talks, suggesting the potential for a timely resolution. “I believe it’s possible to conclude the talks within the deadline,” Cho stated, underscoring the importance of strategic diplomacy in overcoming current challenges.

The negotiations follow U.S. President Donald Trump’s notice to South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol that a 25 per cent reciprocal tariff on Korean imports may be imposed starting August 1. Cho described Trump’s negotiation style as unconventional but acknowledged that it reflects a new geopolitical reality Seoul must adapt to. He also hinted at the idea of linking economic and security concerns into a single negotiation framework, in line with a broader global shift toward economic security strategies.

If confirmed, Cho intends to travel to Washington as early as next week to support the final stages of the agreement. He said the delay in a presidential summit between the two countries was largely due to the tariff negotiations and scheduling issues.

Cho also addressed regional security matters, condemning China’s unauthorised construction in the Korea-China Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ), a contested area in the Yellow Sea where the exclusive economic zones of both countries overlap. He pledged firm diplomatic action and noted repeated refusals from Beijing to dismantle the illegal structures.

On North Korea, Cho called it an “urgent and existential threat” and reaffirmed the importance of continued joint military exercises with the United States as a key deterrent. However, he acknowledged that adjustments could be made by mutual agreement, referencing the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics as a successful precedent for such cooperation.

In domestic matters, Cho criticised a defamation lawsuit filed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2022 against the broadcaster Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). The case stemmed from a report on controversial remarks allegedly made by former President Yoon Suk Yeol. Cho admitted the lawsuit had been politically driven and said that if confirmed, he would seek to resolve the matter promptly, including a formal apology to the network.

Lastly, Cho criticised foreign commentators such as Liberty University Professor Morse Tan, who publicly raised concerns about electoral integrity in South Korea, although there is no credible evidence of widespread election fraud. He firmly rejected such claims, stating,

“Inciting the public with false information or fake news is unacceptable under any circumstances.”

With tensions escalating across trade, security, and public trust, Cho’s nomination signals a firm, pragmatic approach to foreign policy that emphasises national interest and diplomatic resolve.