TOPONYMIC FACTFILE

pcgn The Permanent Committee on Geographical Names

South Korea

Country name	South Korea
State title	Republic of Korea
Name of citizen	South Korean
Official language	Korean (*kor*[1])
Country name in official language	대한민국 (Daehan Minguk), or informally 한국 (Hanguk)
State title in official language	*As country name*
Script	Hangul (romanized *Hangeul* in South Korea)
Romanization System	South Korean national system, adopted for use by PCGN and BGN[2]
ISO-3166 code (alpha-2/alpha-3)	(KR/KOR)
Capital	Seoul[3]
Capital in official language	서울 (Seoul)
Population/Area	51million (UN data) / 100,363 km^2

Introduction

South Korea forms the southern part of the Korean peninsula and shares a land border only with North Korea. The *Goryeo*[4] dynasty, from where the country name Korea is drawn, was the second dynasty to unify the Korean peninsula, following Silla. The dynastic tradition continued until Japan annexed the peninsula in 1910, control which lasted until the conclusion of the Second World War when the Korean peninsula was divided into two occupation zones along the 38th parallel.

In 1950, North Korean forces invaded, starting the Korean War. The war did not conclude until 1953 at which time the gains and losses resulted in a dividing line between the two countries little different from the post WW2 division. At the resulting truce line, a demilitarized zone (commonly DMZ) of 248 km became the *de facto* boundary between the countries.

Since the Korean War, South Korea has seen a period of military dictatorship but is now a flourishing and wealthy democracy, albeit one with an ever-present threat from the north.

[1] ISO 639 codes are given for the languages mentioned in this Factfile.

[2] Sometimes described as the 'Revised Romanization of Korean'.

[3] Sejong was originally intended to be a new capital, replacing Seoul, and while some government offices have moved there, the intended status has been somewhat reduced by the constitutional court. Though the city continues to develop, PCGN currently continues to show Seoul as the only capital city.

[4] Romanized *Koryŏ* according to the McCune-Reischauer system and sometimes seen in this form.

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Geographical names policy

PCGN policy for geographical names in South Korea is to apply the approved romanization system (see detail below) to Korean names (written in Hangul) or to use official romanized sources which represent the native script according to the national romanization system. The South Korean national system was designed for use in romanizing the Korean language as a whole, though it should be noted that PCGN applies it only to geographical names (for instance using more widely known spellings for other Korean terms, such as *Hangul* and *Koryŏ* in this document).

Romanized names on South Korean sources (official mapping and other tourist mapping/road signs etc.) may be used with a high degree of confidence, and the US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Geographic Names Server: GNS Search & Download WebApp (nga.mil) is also a good source of names for South Korea.

Language

South Korea's official language is Korean (ISO 639 code *kor*). Korean is written in Hangul script, a script that was developed in the 15th century, and which has since largely replaced Sino-Japanese characters (called *Hanja* in Korean). *Hanja* are still used to a certain extent mainly for ceremonial or formal purposes (e.g. legal documents)[5].

The Korean language itself is composed of approximately half Chinese-derived vocabulary (Sino-Korean) and half 'pure' Korean words (the latter of which would not be written in *Hanja*). Most place names are of Sino-Korean origin, though an exception is Seoul (서울), a pure Korean word.

Hangul is alphabetic but letters are grouped together into syllables, as Chinese characters are (e.g. Daegu is written 대구 = 'Dae-gu' (i.e. consonant-vowel; consonant-vowel)).

There are a number of different romanization systems that are applied to Hangul and until 2011 PCGN used the McCune-Reischauer system (which is still the system PCGN recommends for application to names in North Korea). However, at that time BGN and PCGN judged that the South Korean national system of romanization, which had been developed some 10 years earlier, had a sufficiently high level of implementation within the country that Roman-script maps, documents and other materials were very widely produced using this system and that UK and US would also adopt this approach. The BGN/PCGN Romanization agreement for Korean in South Korea does not contain any letters or diacritical marks beyond those of the basic Roman script.

Different dialects exist across the country but the only one that differs significantly from standard Korean is that spoken on Jeju island. The Jeju dialect is sufficiently distinct to be considered by most as a separate language (ISO 639 *jje*), though knowledge of this language has dwindled to such a level that it is classified as 'critically endangered' by UNESCO.

[5] To romanize names written in hanja which are not available in hangul, it is necessary to find the hangul equivalents of the hanja characters in a hanja-to-hangul reference table, and then romanize the hangul by means of the hangul-to-Roman tables in the BGN/PCGN System.

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Administrative structure

South Korea is divided into 16 divisions at the first-order level (ADM1): 1 *teukbyeolsi* (special city); 1 *tonghapteukbyeolsi* (special metropolitan city); 5 *gwangyeoksi* (metropolitan city); 5 *do* (province); 3 *teukbyeoljachido* (special self-governing province) and 1 *teukbyeoljachisi* (special self-governing city). The former province Jeollanam-do merged with Gwangju metropolitan city to form Jeonnam-Gwangju-tonghapteukbyeolsi (special metropolitan city) in July 2026.

Administrative division (romanization)[6]	Administrative division (Korean)	ISO 3166-2 code	Administrative centre (romanization)	Administrative centre (Korean)	Administrative centre location
Busan-gwangyeoksi	부산광역시	KR-26	Busan	부산	35°06'10"N 129°02'25"E
Chungcheongbuk-do	충청북도	KR-43	Cheongju	청주	36°38'07"N 127°28'04"E
Chungcheongnam-do	충청남도	KR-44	Hongseong	홍성	36°36'03"N 126°39'54"E
Daegu-gwangyeoksi	대구광역시	KR-27	Daegu	대구	35°52'13"N 128°35'28"E
Daejeon-gwangyeoksi	대전광역시	KR-30	Daejeon	대전	36°20'57"N 127°23'06"E
Gangwon-teukbyeoljachido[7]	강원특별자치도	KR-42	Chuncheon	춘천	37°52'29"N 127°44'03"E
Gyeonggi-do	경기도	KR-41	Suwon	수원	37°17'28"N 127°00'32"E
Gyeongsangbuk-do	경상북도	KR-47	Andong	안동	36°33'59"N 128°43'22"E

[6] The names of South Korean divisions containing *buk* or *nam* (north or south) are often contracted as follows: Chungcheongbuk-do to Chungbuk; Chungcheongnam-do to Chungnam; Gyeongsangbuk-do to Gyeongbuk; Gyeongsangnam-do to Gyeongnam. These are in common use, but PCGN recommends reflecting the full form. The contracted form for the former province Jeollanam-do (Jeonnam) has, however, now become the official name in the newly created special city, Jeonnam-Gwangju.

[7] Gangwon became a 'special self-governing province' in June 2023.

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Administrative division (romanization)[6]	Administrative division (Korean)	ISO 3166-2 code	Administrative centre (romanization)	Administrative centre (Korean)	Administrative centre location
Gyeongsangnam-do	경상남도	KR-48	Changwon	창원	35°13'41"N 128°40'52"E
Incheon-gwangyeoksi	인천광역시	KR-28	Incheon	인천	37°27'13"N 126°43'54"E
Jeju-teukbyeoljachido	제주특별자치도	KR-49	Jeju	제주	33°30'35"N 126°31'19"E
Jeonbuk-teukbyeoljachido[8]	전북특별자치도	KR-45	Jeonju	전주	35°49'19"N 127°08'56"E
Jeonnam-Gwangju-tonghapteukbyeolsi	전남광주통합특별시	-	Gwangju	광주	35°09'17"N 126°54'56"E
Sejong-teukbyeoljachisi	세종특별자치시	KR-50	Sejong	세종	36°36'33"N 127°17'31"E
Seoul-teukbyeolsi	서울특별시	KR-11	Seoul	서울	37°35'55"N 126°58'42"E
Ulsan-gwangyeoksi	울산광역시	KR-31	Ulsan	울산	35°32'14"N 129°19'00"E

[8] This province was also upgraded to become a ‘special self-governing province’ (formerly ‘do’ (province)) in January 2024. Additionally, its name has been adopted in the formerly contracted form (Jeonbuk rather than the fuller Jeollabuk).

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Other Significant Locations

PCGN Approved Name	Name in Korean	Conventional Name	Location	Feature Type
Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)	한반도 비무장 지대 (Hanbando Bimujang Jidae)	Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)	38°19′44″N 127°15′00″E	Border/buffer zone
Hallasan	한라산 (Hallasan)	-	33°21′42″N 126°31′45″E	Mountain
Hangang	한강 (Hangang)	Han River	37°45′N 126°11′E	River
Korea Strait	대한해협 (Daehan Haehyeop)	Korea Strait	34°40'00"N 129°00'00"E	Strait between South Korea and Japan
Liancourt Rocks*	독도 (Dokdo)	Liancourt Rocks	37°14′30″N 131°52′00″E	Rocks
Sea of Japan†	동해 (Donghae, meaning ‘east sea’)	Sea of Japan	43°30'00"N 135°45'00"E	Sea, littoral states: North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia
Ulleungdo	울릉도 (Ulleungdo)	-	37°30′04″N 130°51′23″E	Island
Yellow Sea	서해 (Sohae, meaning ‘west sea’)	Yellow Sea	36°00'00"N 124°00'00"E	Sea, littoral states: North Korea, South Korea, China

*A disputed feature, Liancourt Rocks is the English-language name for these rocks in the Sea of Japan. Claimed by Japan (with the name Take Shima), they are administered by South Korea. PCGN advises use of the English name so as not to attribute sovereignty.

†The subject of a significant diplomatic issue between Japan, North Korea and South Korea since all have been members of the United Nations (1991), South Korea desires that a translation of the Korean name (so ‘East Sea’ in English) be used for this sea in English-language contexts. PCGN policy is to use the established English conventional name for this body of water, which is Sea of Japan. More information can be supplied on request.

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Useful references

- BBC country profile (no longer updated): https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15289563
- BGN/PCGN Romanization Agreement for Korean in South Korea: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693724/ROMANIZATION_OF_KOREAN-__MOCT_for_ROK.pdf
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Travel Advice https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice
- FCDO Geographical Names & Information: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/geographical-names-and-information
- ISO Online Browsing Platform (OBP): https://www.iso.org/obp/ui
- PCGN Country Names list: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/country-names
- South Korea National Geographic Information Institute: https://www.ngii.go.kr/eng/main.do
- South Korea Toponymic Guidelines: https://www.ngii.go.kr/other/file_down.do?sq=77254
- Unicode www.unicode.org
- US Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Geographic Names Server: GNS Search & Download WebApp (nga.mil)

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