



**US-Korea Relations:
DPRK Nuclear and Missile Threat Looms**

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The early months of 2015 saw little change in US-DPRK relations while there were several positive developments in US-ROK relations. There were new US sanctions on North Korea over the Sony Pictures cyber-hacking incident and increased concern about North Korean advances in nuclear and missile technology as the US and others continued criticize the DPRK's human rights record. Meanwhile, South Korea and the US held their annual military exercises and concluded a new civilian nuclear agreement. Distractions from the positive trajectory in US-ROK relations included the debate over the value of deploying the THAAD system in South Korea and the unfortunate attack on US Ambassador Mark Lippert.

Answering the Sony attacks

In response to the cyberattack on Sony Pictures Entertainment, on Jan. 2, the White House announced an executive order calling for new sanctions on three North Korean companies and 10 individuals. These sanctions were not aimed specifically at DPRK cyber capabilities, but the individuals named are linked to DPRK financial interests in China, Russia, Iran, Namibia, and Syria, suggesting a targeting of officials engaged in nuclear proliferation, human rights, and cyber warfare. Inside the Beltway, there were calls for relisting the DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism, but these efforts were muted by counter-arguments that North Korea simply is not a state sponsor of terrorism. In mid-January, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs convened a briefing on *The North Korean Threat: Nuclear, Missiles and Cyber*, with Chair Ed Royce (R-CA) underscoring cyberattack and human rights concerns. Witness testimony addressed the Sony break-in and implications of the executive order on sanctions against the DPRK.

In a Feb. 7 address at the International Conference on Cyber Security in New York, FBI Director James Comey stated "very high confidence" in the DPRK's central role in the Sony attacks. He said the FBI's attribution stemmed from hackers failing to mask their locations with decoy servers and routing attacks and messages directly from known DPRK internet addresses. Hackers appeared quick to recognize their error in signing into Facebook accounts and Sony servers with North Korean addresses and then attempted to reroute using decoys. Comey's comments came three weeks after President Obama publicly named the North Koreans as being responsible. Preceding Comey's comments, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper suggested at the Fordham University event that "we have to push back ... if they get global recognition with no consequence they'll do it again and again."

On Jan. 18, *The New York Times* reported that the National Security Agency (NSA) had breached DPRK networks long before the Sony attack. Since 2010, US intelligence drilled into PRC networks connecting the DPRK, explored DPRK hacker connections in Malaysia, and

penetrated into DPRK systems with the assistance of the ROK and other allies. The *Times*' David Sanger and Martin Fackler concluded that the evidence provided by "early warning radar" of US monitoring software persuaded President Obama to make his Dec. 19 call on North Korean culpability with certainty.

North Korean human rights

Marking the one-year anniversary of the release of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on North Korean human rights, US and Korean experts gathered in Washington for two days of discussion in mid-February. The gathering co-hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), George W. Bush Institute, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), and Yonsei University's Center for Human Rights and Liberty featured the members of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, as well as ROK Ambassador for Human Rights Lee Jung-hoon. The event elicited strong condemnation from North Korea's Mission to the United Nations in New York, a denunciation widely covered in national media.

At the event, National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman focused on three of the report's recommendations: 1) to form a contact group of donors and other countries with ties to North Korea to raise human rights concerns in ongoing bilateral relations; 2) to have states in the region initiate something like a Helsinki Process for collective security; and 3) to establish a structure for accountability. Research fellow Han Dong-ho, writing in a Korea Institute for National Unification release, hailed the event for providing an "international setting for the actual improvement of North Korean human rights after the publication of the COI report."

On Feb. 22, *The Washington Post* Editorial Board, in the wake of the DC event, suggested that "rarely does a United Nations investigation produce such clarity and impact as did the Commission of Inquiry on human rights violations in North Korea" and asked, "But now what? What can be done to get concrete help for the victims? There is a danger that as pressing concerns about North Korea accumulate – nuclear weapons, missiles, cyberattacks – the world will lose interest in the human rights disaster. The United States must not let this happen." The editorial urged a UN Security Council referral of North Korea's leaders to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for investigation of crimes against humanity, and exposure of Russia and China as "protectors of leader Kim Jong Un and his circle of thugs" in the event of their veto at the Security Council. It also urged adequate financial resources for the UN Office of the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in North Korea.

US perceptions of North Korea

On Feb. 23, Gallup released its findings of Americans' ratings of North Korea, which remain "highly negative." North Korea was the least favorable country for Americans for a second year in a row. Fifteen percent of US respondents described the DPRK as the "greatest enemy," and most American perceive the DPRK military as a "critical threat." Eighty-seven percent of Americans view North Korea unfavorably and only nine percent favorably. When asked to name the country they perceive to be the greatest threat to the United States, 15 percent named North Korea, only slightly behind Russia at 18 percent.

Gallup conducted its World Affairs poll from Feb. 8-11 and described the strong US perceptions as influenced by reports of DPRK culpability in the high-profile attack on Sony Pictures Entertainment, as well as reports of the DPRK seizing wages of workers it sends abroad as a counter to the impact of economic sanctions. Gallup suggested that “this bad publicity has clearly reinforced 12 years of already negative attitudes toward North Korea rather than causing any major shift in opinions.”

Heightened concerns about DPRK nuclear and missile programs and THAAD

A February US-Korea Institute at SAIS report by Joel Wit and Sun Young Ahn – [*North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy*](#) – elicited significant press coverage as it posited three scenarios for DPRK nuclear development. The first, minimal growth and minimal modernization suggests a low of 10-20 weapons by 2020; the second, moderate growth and moderate improvement, sees levels at 50 weapons by 2020, with heightened yields; and the third, rapid growth and rapid improvement, suggests an alarming 100 weapons by 2020, with significant advances in design and yield. February also saw release of an update of the Arms Control Association's [*Chronology of US-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy*](#).

On March 4, the US described advances in the DPRK's nuclear program and the increased range and accuracy of its missiles to be “of great concern.” The US Mission to International Organizations in Vienna said a DPRK restart of a graphite-moderated reactor could enable the manufacture of additional weapons-grade plutonium, which the US deemed “clear violations of multiple resolutions.” Commander of the US Army in the Pacific Gen. Vincent Brooks warned in Washington of “increased militarization” of North Korea's nuclear program. Brooks added “it's a difficult time, it's a dangerous time, and the potential for miscalculation is high.” He emphasized the need for nations to cooperate on missile defense.

A day earlier, DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong told the UN Conference on Disarmament that the DPRK had the power to deter an “ever-increasing nuclear threat” by the US with a pre-emptive strike. On March 20, North Korea's Ambassador to the UK, Hyun Hak Bong, told *Sky News* that Pyongyang would use weapons in a response to a nuclear attack by the US, suggesting “it is not the United States that has a monopoly on nuclear weapons strikes.” In response to a question on whether North Korea has the capability to fire a nuclear missile now, he added “any time, anytime, yes.”

On April 7, Adm. William Gortney, commander of NORAD and US Northern Command, held a press briefing at the Pentagon on DPRK nuclear and missile progress. Gortney assessed that the DPRK has the ability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead for a *KN-08* ICBM, but has not tested this technology. The three-stage, liquid-fuel missile, first paraded in 2012, is believed to have a range capable of hitting the West Coast of the US. Gortney underscored that the US requires greater intelligence to deal with a DPRK mobile, re-locatable target.

As Seoul moved toward potential deployment of a Theater High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), several high-level Chinese officials took issue. Seoul cushioned its decision relative to the DPRK's continued enhancements in its ballistic missile capabilities. US observers pointed out that China risks backlash and a disintegration of trust in South Korea over its pressure.

Seoul's decision to join the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was aimed in part at placating China with an economic bow where it perceived a security loss relative to THAAD.

China's opposition eventually might be muted by reports that its senior nuclear experts have increased their estimates of DPRK nuclear weapons production well above US figures. An April 22 *Wall Street Journal* report revealed PRC estimates – offered at a February closed-door session with US nuclear specialists – that North Korea has 20 warheads and may have another 20 by next year, with an ability to produce another 8 to 10 annually.

ROK Defense White Paper and US-ROK exercises

South Korea picked up on the cyber threat as well as proliferation and other concerns as it issued its Ministry of National Defense 2014 White Paper – the first published by the Park Geun-hye administration. South Korea formally acknowledged North Korea as possessing nuclear weapons, referencing the “nuclear weapons of North Korea,” Pyongyang's highly enriched uranium program, and the DPRK's “considerable” technical enhancements in mounting warheads. The MND White Paper described the DPRK as crossing a threshold with warhead miniaturization, as well as the possibility of long range-missiles threatening the US and advancing sea-launched ballistic missile capability. The White Paper also suggested that the DPRK employs 6,000 hackers under the command of its Reconnaissance General Bureau – a figure far greater than that in any earlier estimates.

In mid-January, the US and ROK held two days of joint naval drills, with two US *Aegis* destroyers and several ROK vessels operating off Korea's eastern coast. The two navies shared in communication drills, antisubmarine warfare exercises, ship maneuvers, and liaison-officer exchanges. Two DPRK missile launches followed soon after, on Feb. 6 and 8. The latter event involved North Korea launching five missiles into the East Sea off Wonsan in a northeasterly direction for some 50 minutes and with a range of 200km. DPRK official media described the missile-type as an “ultra-precision anti-ship rocket,” appearing to be of Russian origin. Whether supplied by Russia or reverse engineered, integration would mark an upgrade in the threat to US and ROK vessels.

On March 2, South Korea and the US began eight weeks of joint military drills. *Key Resolve*, a computer simulated command exercise, ran March 2-13. *Foal Eagle* continued until April 24 and included ground, air, naval, and special operations field exercises. A day earlier, North Korea fired two short-range missiles into the East Sea to register its opposition to the joint exercises. The DPRK Workers' Party newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, lambasted the US and ROK, stating “the whole course of *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle* is aimed to occupy the DPRK through preemptive strikes.” The US-ROK Combined Forces Command underscored that it had informed the North Korean Army of the dates and “non-provocative nature” of the exercises.

North Korea's Army vowed “merciless strikes,” and North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong described the US-ROK exercises as “unprecedentedly provocative in nature and having an extremely high possibility of sparking war.” A DPRK editorial said dialogue and diplomatic solutions were “scuppered” and urged a bolster of “war deterrence to the maximum,” yet the much anticipated spike in rhetoric was in the end somewhat muted, at least relative to its 2013

war of words and declaration of the armistice as “invalid.” The US responded then with over flights of B-2 bombers to underscore its long range, precision strike capabilities. On the final day of the first exercise, March 13, North Korea fired seven ground-to-air missiles into the sea. The SA-2 or SA-3s, with a range dozens of kilometers, and the SA-5, with a range of 200km, were launched off the eastern coast, with DPRK leader Kim Jong Un reportedly present.

Washington and Seoul agree to a new 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement

On April 22, the US and ROK announced a new 123 agreement on the decades-long civil nuclear relationship allowing positive cooperation on nuclear energy going forward. Replacing a 1972 agreement, the new deal is valid for two decades. The two nations underscored the agreement as unique and mutually beneficial and ensuring a supply of enriched fuel to ROK nuclear power reactors. The agreement, signed by US Ambassador to Korea Mark Lippert and ROK Ambassador for Nuclear Energy Cooperation Park Ro-byug, allows South Korea to permit removal of spent nuclear fuel to third countries. The ROK estimates its capacity for spent fuel will be full within a decade. The agreement also tackled the acrimony over advanced consent for reprocessing or enrichment by mandating future discussion by a senior bilateral management mechanism. Accordingly, the new US-ROK 123 agreement addresses nonproliferation risks without specifically requiring South Korea to always forgo a sovereign right to certain technical capabilities. A senior ROK Foreign Ministry official suggested the agreement is “meaningful (as) we have opened the pathway for uranium enrichment, albeit not in the foreseeable future.”

Negotiations ran a half decade given ROK insistence on US approval to make its own fuel for its 23 civilian nuclear reactors. The US had resisted given concerns over Northeast Asia nuclear proliferation.

Attack on US Ambassador Lippert

On March 5, Ambassador Lippert was attacked in Seoul by a knife-wielding assailant at a public event. Lippert sustained wounds to the face and hand. Officials and the public offered an outpouring of support in the aftermath of the attack. Koreans rallied outside the hospital where Lippert was treated, and polling continued to show strong support for the US among the citizenry. The attack prompted a review of US Embassy security procedures around the ambassador in public venues, and Lippert and his family are receiving increased protection. Lippert returned to his office and resumed a full schedule with jocularly and enjoying widespread popularity in Korea for his handling of the situation, as well as frequent Tweets, walkabouts with his dog in central Seoul, and attempts with the Korean language.

Seoul joins the AIIB

On March 26, despite US pressure, South Korea announced it would join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In joining the bank as a founding member prior to the end-of-March deadline, the ROK publicly recognized that it could generate construction projects conducive to its own economic interests and placate China – concerned on the aforementioned THAAD front. Britain and other European nations had already joined, making the decision easier. Despite pressuring Seoul against the decision, Washington seemed to come round to the

argument about Korea in the end, urging coordination with like-minded nations to negotiate transparency, good governance and best practices in the Bank's articles and operations.

Chronology of US-Korea Relations

January – April 2015

Jan. 1, 2015: DPRK leader Kim Jong Un suggests resumption of “highest-level” inter-Korean dialogue in his New Year address, receiving a positive, though cautious, response in the ROK.

Jan. 2, 2015: White House announces a new executive order imposing sanctions on 10 individuals and three companies engaged in DPRK financial activity.

Jan. 6, 2015: Seoul issues its 2014 Defense White Paper, warning of the “nuclear weapons of North Korea” – a first-time description – and “considerable” advances in warhead technology.

Jan. 7, 2015: US FBI Director James Comey confirms DPRK was responsible for the attacks on Sony Pictures, with hackers “sloppy” in covering their tracks.

Jan. 9, 2015: North Korea offers to suspend future nuclear tests temporarily if Washington suspends all upcoming military exercises in South Korea and its vicinity.

Jan. 10, 2015: US State Department spokesperson calls North Korea's offer to suspend nuclear tests as an “implicit threat,” saying it “inappropriately” links routine military exercises between Washington and Seoul to the possibility of a nuclear test.

Jan. 12, 2015: ROK President Park Geun-hye's New Year press conference emphasizes labor, free trade agreement (FTA) benefits, and economic innovation to grow employment and per capita income. On North Korea, Park calls for family reunions and expressed openness to an inter-Korean summit.

Jan. 13, 2015: US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs hosts a briefing on DPRK nuclear, missile, and cyber threats.

Jan. 13, 2015: North Korea offers to hold direct talks with the United States on its proposal to suspend nuclear tests, and says dialogue could pave the way to changes on the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 14, 2015: US State Department spokesperson reiterates US rejection of North Korea's offer to suspend nuclear tests in exchange for scrapping joint military exercises with South Korea.

Jan. 13-14, 2015: *USS Martin* and *USS John McCain* join *Gwanggaeto the Great* and several ROK vessels in joint naval exercises.

Jan. 16, 2015: US and ROK officials launch a new division under Eighth US Army composed of the 2nd Infantry Division and a ROK mechanized infantry brigade. The combined division is under the command of US Maj. Gen. Thomas Vandal and ROK Brig. Gen. Ahn Sung-hwan.

Jan. 18, 2015: Ri Yong-ho, North Korea's chief negotiator for the Six-Party Talks meets former US special envoy for North Korea policy Stephen Bosworth and other US experts in Singapore.

Jan. 21, 2015: US Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues Robert King addresses the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights in Brussels, noting that the DPRK "has few supporters left," that the UN Commission of Inquiry report was a "critical step," not an end, and that increasing the flow of information in and out of North Korea is of great importance.

Jan. 27-28, 2015: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim visits Tokyo and Seoul and meets counterparts Junichi Ihara and Hwang Joon-kook to discuss North Korea policy. Sydney Seiler, special envoy for the Six-Party Talks, and National Security Council Director for Korea Allison Hooker joined the Tokyo discussions.

Jan. 29, 2015: US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Wendy Sherman meets ROK Foreign Affairs Minister Yun Byung-se in Seoul to discuss bilateral cooperation on regional and global security.

Jan. 30, 2015: ROK Deputy Minister for Multilateral and Global Affairs Shin Dong-ik and US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller lead the 2015 ROK-US Disarmament and Nonproliferation Consultation in Seoul.

Feb. 3, 2015: UN Food and Agriculture Organization releases its assessment of North Korea, showing that DPRK food production remained steady in 2014, contrary to the hopes of some US experts that sanctions might check economic progress and force denuclearization.

Feb. 4, 2015: In confirmation hearings, Defense Secretary-designate Ashton Carter describes the DPRK as "one of the most intractable security problems for the United States and our allies."

Feb. 5, 2015: US State Department issues its latest fact sheet on US-South Korea relations, which are described as a "deep, comprehensive global partnership."

Feb. 7, 2015: US Secretary of State John Kerry and ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se meet on the sidelines of the 51st Munich Security Conference to discuss the US-ROK Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, North Korea, Northeast Asia tensions, and global issues.

Feb. 8, 2015: North Korea launches five missiles with a range of 200km into the East Sea.

Feb. 8-10, 2015: US Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken visits South Korea, meeting First Vice Minister Cho Tae-yong and Defense Minister Han Min-koo.

Feb. 11-13, 2015: Korea Institute for Defense Analysis hosts fourth annual US-ROK tabletop exercise, with US Deputy Assistant Secretaries of Defense Elaine Bunn and David Helvey and ROK Deputy Minister for National Defense Policy Ryu Je-seung leading the delegations.

Feb. 17, 2015: A conference co-hosted by CSIS marks the one year anniversary of the UN Commission of Inquiry Report on North Korean human rights violations, eliciting strong condemnation from the DPRK Mission to the United Nations.

March 2, 2015: North Korea fires two *Scud-C* or *Scud-D*-type missiles from Nampo some three hundred miles over the peninsula and into the East Sea.

March 2-13, 2015: Annual US-ROK military exercise *Key Resolve* takes place in South Korea.

March 2-April 24, 2015: Annual US-ROK military exercise *Foal Eagle* takes place in the ROK.

March 2-27, 2015: UN Human Rights Council convenes its 28th regular session in Geneva. ROK Vice Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul delivers a March 3 keynote at the high-level segment.

March 3, 2015: DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong warns in Geneva that North Korea has the power to deter an “ever-increasing nuclear threat” by the US with a preemptive strike.

March 5, 2015: US Ambassador to the ROK Mark Lippert is attacked by a knife-wielding extremist in Seoul. As Lippert recovers, Koreans demonstrate strong support for him.

March 12, 2015: DPRK launches seven ground-to-air missiles into the sea off its eastern coast.

March 15, 2015: ROK and US mark the third anniversary of implementation of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA). Trade continues to grow, with total volume at an all-time high of \$145.2 billion, up from \$126.5 billion in 2011.

March 15-17, 2015: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel visits Seoul and meets Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Kyung-soo, Vice Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yong, and senior Blue House officials to discuss a summer Obama-Park summit.

March 16, 2015: US Department of Treasury Financial Crimes Enforcement Network issues an update of nations, including North Korea, that fail to comply with the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorist Financing standards, mandating that US financial systems respond.

March 20, 2015: DPRK Ambassador to the UK Hyun Hak Bong warns of DPRK capabilities to respond with nuclear missiles “any time,” if attacked by nuclear weapons.

March 27, 2015: South Korea announces its intention to join the PRC-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), despite US concerns.

March 26-28, 2015: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey visits Korea.

April 2-3, 2015: US House of Representatives delegation visits the ROK. The group meets the ROK president, deputy prime minister, minister of strategy and finance, foreign minister and National Assembly speaker.

April 2-3, 2015: North Korea fires five short-range *KN-02* missiles with a range of 140 km.

April 6, 2015: DPRK declares a no-sail, no fly zone in the East Sea, but fails to notify the International Maritime Organization (IMO), as it has in the past.

April 7, 2015: NORAD and US Northern Command Commander Adm. William Gortney raises concerns about DPRK nuclear and missile advances.

April 9-11, 2015: US Secretary of Defense Carter visits South Korea and meets Minister of National Defense Han Min-koo and visits the ROK Navy's 2nd Fleet Command to honor those lost in the 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan*.

April 14-15, 2015: Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD) is held in Washington.

April 16-17, 2015: US, ROK and Japan hold Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) in Washington.

April 22, 2015: US and ROK announce a new agreement on the civil nuclear relationship.

April 22, 2015: *The Wall Street Journal* reports top Chinese nuclear experts estimate that the DPRK may have 20 warheads and may double that by 2016, with an ability to produce as many as 10 more annually. This exceeds most US estimates.