

Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



US-Korea Relations: Waltzing Dragon, UFG Drills, DPRK Chills

Stephen Noerper, The Korea Society

The summer months saw steady progress in Republic of Korea-US relations, following President Obama's visit to Seoul where he sought to offer reassurances on US commitments and condolences on the tragic loss of life after the sinking of the ferry *Sewol*. The reporting period ended with the *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* exercises, involving tens of thousands of South Korean and US soldiers. Pyongyang grumbled about the exercises as well as the visit by Pope Francis to Seoul in August, but contained its anger to diatribes and short-range missile launches, perhaps in anticipation of North Korean athletes attending the upcoming Incheon Asian Games. The biggest development for the ROK-US relationship came with the July 3-4 visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Seoul for what some viewed as an overly warm summit with President Park Geun-hye. Xi brought with him a large business delegation proffering a host of new economic opportunities, from film distribution to new flight routes. The two presidents called again for denuclearization on the peninsula and new cooperation. The media emphasized the significance of Xi's visit to Seoul coming before either Pyongyang or Tokyo. Chinese strategists quietly acknowledged Beijing's charm offensive coming directly after Obama's reassurances in Seoul on the US pivot, or rebalance, toward Asia.

Multilateral and bilateral cooperation

With the start of May, South Korea continued to increase its leadership in the multilateral arena with a second presidency of the United Nations Security Council in its two-year, rotating term. Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se presided over UNSC debate on May 7, a day after addressing the Korea Society on the *U.S.-Korea Alliance: Toward the Next Sixty Years*, with the US Special Representative for North Korea Policy attending. US Ambassador to Korea Sung Kim and Korean Ambassador to the US Ahn Ho-young traveled to New York, Detroit, and Atlanta in mid-May as part of the Korea Economic Institute's *Ambassadors' Dialogue*, affording the two ambassadors exposure to leaders in business and academe keen on hearing the latest on bilateral relations. The ambassadors trumpeted gains for US agriculture under the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), in line with *Wall Street Journal* and East-West Center pieces in June and July on the boom in Korean demand for American orange juice and Maine lobster.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel offered a comprehensive overview of US-ROK cooperation in a June 18 Woodrow Wilson Center address. Citing Obama's fourth visit to the ROK, President Park's Dresden speech on unification, and her July meeting with Xi, Russel suggested "these events show the strength of our alliance, the threat it faces, the Republic of Korea's growing confidence, and the changes taking place in the region – all highlighting South Korea's prospects for an even brighter future and the potential stumbling blocks along the way." Noting the military, diplomatic, and economic tools employed by the US

and ROK in dealing with the DPRK, Russel suggested that “the strategy is to sharpen the DPRK’s choice: to raise the cost of continued defiance, and effectively leave the DPRK no viable alternative but to honor its commitments and come into compliance.” Russel applauded the “increasingly comprehensive global partnership” of South Korea and the US, while acknowledging challenges such as tensions between Korea and Japan, as well as opportunities like the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), in a “very complicated neighborhood.”

The Congressional Research Service issued its comprehensive report on US-South Korea relations on June 24, praising South Korea as “one of the United States’ most important strategic and economic partners in Asia,” with relations “at their best state in decades.” Hailing the alliance and describing the challenges of North Korea as the “dominant strategic element” in the relationship, the CRS specialists also acknowledged “areas of significant differences” on some broad strategic matters in the region, namely that “South Korea often hesitates to take steps that antagonize China and has shown mistrust of Japan’s efforts to expand its military capabilities,” realities complicating US efforts at alliance management. Noting the extension of the bilateral civilian nuclear agreement to 2016, the researchers pointed to ROK requests for – and Obama administration resistance to – future uranium enrichment and reprocessing in South Korea.

Xi-Park summit

Xi Jinping’s July 3-4 state visit followed Park Geun-hye’s June 2013 Beijing trip – a fifth meeting since the two were inaugurated. Xi and his wife, seven senior officials, and 200 Chinese business leaders joined in official meetings, a business forum, and a presidential address at Seoul National University. Park and Xi issued statements calling for denuclearization and a renewal of dialogue. One strategist from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences suggested that by way of strategic partnerships, “China has tipped the scales toward South Korea.”

Some analysts see the strengthening of Sino-Korean ties as in the near- and medium-term spiking mutual distrust of Japan – further complicating US relations with its allies. Others argue that China’s shift is tactical and not yet strategic, and that any shift toward Seoul will aid ROK management of integration and eventual Korean unification. The personal rapport between the two leaders was pronounced, and in the words of one senior US analyst, “South Koreans sense some space in Sino-North Korean ties, and they are trying to exploit the opportunity to move the needle on China.” Assistant Secretary of State Russel described the meeting as an “extraordinary milestone ... helpful in promoting needed cooperation on North Korea.”

In contrast, there was little improvement in relations between South Korea and Japan. The strongest US effort was on the sidelines of the August ASEAN-related meetings in Myanmar, where Secretary of State John Kerry encouraged ROK Foreign Minister Yun and Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida to consider the “great deal to talk about with respect to the DPRK and security issues in the region.”

DPRK protests

August began with DPRK Deputy UN Ambassador Ri Tong Il conducting a news conference in which he asked for an emergency meeting of the UNSC to protest US-South Korea military

drills. The August UNSC president, the UK's Mark Lyall Grant, refused the request given the obvious lack of support among the 15 members to take up the complaint.

In anticipation of *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* (formerly *Ulchi Focus Lens*), North Korea threatened to “mercilessly open the strongest preemptive strike.” As it did before the Xi-Park summit, the DPRK fired three short-range rockets into the East Sea as Pope Francis prepared to visit South Korea – the last rocket fired just a half-hour prior to the Pope's arrival. The DPRK justified the launches as a response to the impending US and ROK military exercises. The State Department response was measured as it called on North Korea to refrain from such provocative actions.

Papal blessings

Pope Francis conducted a five-day visit to South Korea from Aug. 14-18, appealing for renewed dialogue and a spirit of forgiveness among Koreans. He saw large crowds at a Daejeon youth rally and called for peace and reconciliation on the peninsula. At Seoul's historic Myeondong Cathedral – the onetime seat of the democratic movement – and with President Park attending, Pope Francis prayed for “the emergence of new opportunities for dialogue, encounter and the resolution of differences, for continued generosity in providing humanitarian assistance to those in need, and for even greater recognition that all Koreans are brothers and sisters, members in one family, one people.” Seoul followed with an appeal to Pyongyang, suggesting a resumption of high-level dialogue and willingness to “discuss any subject.”

Hawaii calls

The highest-level US administration statement on the region during this time period came in an Aug. 13 address by Secretary of State Kerry at the East-West Center on *U.S. Visions for the Asia Pacific*. Kerry spoke to a redoubling of his efforts on Asia over the next two and a half years, of “revitalizing security partnerships” with South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, and of “increased” dialogue with China on the DPRK. Kerry suggested a coupling of US concerns over denuclearization and North Korean human rights abuses following the release of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry report on DPRK human rights abuses:

North Korea's proliferation activities pose a very serious threat to the United States, the region and the world. And we are taking steps to deter and defend against North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear-armed ballistic missile capability. But make no mistake: We are also speaking about the horrific human rights situation. We strongly supported the extraordinary United Nations investigation this year that revealed the utter, grotesques cruelty of North Korea's system of labor camps and executions. Such deprivation of human dignity just has no place in the 21st century. North Korea's gulags should be shut down—not tomorrow, not next week, but now. And we will continue to speak out on this topic.

Ulchi Freedom Guardian

The latter part of August saw 50,000 ROK and 30,000 US troops (3,000 from outside the peninsula) participate in *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* (UFG), though the drills took place with what *Stars and Stripes* termed “little fanfare,” to avoid provoking the DPRK. The US described the

computer-simulation exercise as “routine and defense-oriented” and based on “realistic scenarios.” Official confirmation of *UFG* came only on the day it began, Aug. 18. The drills allowed the ROK and US militaries to evaluate capabilities in the areas of military intelligence, logistics, joint air procedures, and plans and systems, including combined space operations. *UFG* came at a sensitive time, as the US and ROK negotiate the transfer of wartime control of allied forces to Seoul in December 2015. The US led *UFG* in 2014, perhaps suggesting a delay in transfer according to some observers.

Despite missile firings, condemnation of the drills as “gangster-like,” and its UN envoy Ri Tong Il warning of military “counteractions,” the DPRK in the end did little. The response likely was conditioned by the upcoming Asian Games in South Korea. North Korea aims to send more than 150 athletes to the Incheon Games, with South Korea paying the cost and approving travel routes for its athletes.

Steel resolve

Late August saw a major challenge in bilateral US-ROK economic relations, with the US approving anti-dumping duties against the ROK and other steel pipe producers – a victory for US producers seeking to gain from the boom in shale oil and gas extraction in the US. Subject to appeal, the decision allows the US Commerce Department to levy tariffs as high as 118 percent on tubular goods. The ROK’s exports to the US are valued at \$818 million in 2013 – more than all other national producers combined.

The summer started with a positive development on the energy cooperation front, however, with the US joining host South Korea and other nations in Seoul in mid-May for the Clean Energy Ministerial, under the theme “Act Together, Think Creative.” Energy leaders from some 20 nations gathered to consider new approaches to accelerate the deployment of clean and efficient energy. Korea’s next effort at global green leadership comes with President Park’s visit to New York for the Sept. 23 UN Climate Summit 2014 and UN General Assembly opening (China’s Xi and India’s Narendra Modi have advised UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon that they’ll not be attending the Summit, which may undercut efforts).

Detained Americans

Capitalizing the Labor Day news cycle, North Korea sought to shift international attention back to itself by parading out US detainees Kenneth Bae, Matthew Todd Miller, and Jeffrey Edward Fowle before a *CNN* crew, already in Pyongyang for a Japanese-sponsored wrestling friendship tour. Bae faces a 15-year sentence for having had church materials on a hard drive. Miller ripped up a visa and requested asylum, and Fowle left a Bible in his hotel room; both face trial early autumn. The detainees’ dilemma took on new intensity in the public arena, especially after Islamic State detentions and killings of US journalists. The DPRK insists on a visit by a senior-level emissary in line with former Presidents Clinton or Carter to win the captive Americans’ release and elevate Kim Jong Un’s standing. Analysts remain divided over calls for US efforts and caution against rewarding bad behavior.

Chronology of US – Korea Relations

May – August 2014

May 1, 2014: Republic of Korea assumes its second turn at the presidency of the United Nations Security Council in its 24-month term.

May 7, 2014: ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se addresses UNSC as rotating president. Yun lays the foundation for President Park’s September visit and speaks to the Korea Society on the *Korean-U.S. Alliance: Toward the Next Sixty Years*.

May 12-13, 2014: The Fifth Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM5) is held in Seoul with officials from Korea, the US, and some 20 states participating or observing to strategize next steps to accelerate deployment of clean and efficient energy.

May 13, 2014: US Ambassador Sung Kim and ROK Ambassador Ahn Ho-young address the Korea Society in New York City on opportunities and challenges in the US-ROK relationship. They underscore economic benefits since implementation of the KORUS FTA.

June 16, 2014: South Korea and the US hold the first in a planned series talks to discuss the transfer of wartime operational command of South Korean troops.

May 23, 2014: National Committee on American Foreign Policy hosts a dialogue with Korean, US, Chinese, and Japanese representatives aimed at solution-building on the Korean Peninsula.

June 18, 2014: Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel speaks to the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington on *Assessing Threats Facing the U.S.-Korean Alliance*, underscoring the US-ROK “global partnership.”

June 23-26, 2014: South Korean First Vice Minister Cho Tae-Yong visits the US to meet Deputy Secretary of State William Burns and other officials to discuss opportunities to further solidify bilateral policy coordination.

June 24, 2014: Following on President Obama’s April visit to South Korea, the Congressional Research Service issues a detailed 36-page report on *U.S.-South Korean Relations*.

July 26, 2014: Korean War Veterans Association of America and the Embassy of the Republic of Korea share in the 61st National Korean War Veterans Armistice Day ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery.

July 3-4, 2014: Chinese President Xi Jinping visits “old friend” President Park Geun-hye, senior officials, the business community, and Seoul National University students in Seoul.

July 12, 2014: North Korea condemns the docking of the *USS George Washington* in the South Korean port of Busan.

July 16-21, 2014: US and South Korea conduct annual naval exercises off the east coast of South Korea. The exercise includes a trilateral search and rescue exercise involving US, South Korean, and Japanese maritime forces.

July 31, 2014: US Ambassador to Korea Sung Kim receives Seoul Honorary Citizenship.

Aug. 1, 2014: DPRK Deputy UN Ambassador Ri Tong Il addresses a news conference at UN headquarters asking for an emergency meeting of the UNSC to protest ROK-US military exercises. The Security Council rejects the request.

Aug. 10, 2014: US Secretary of State John Kerry, ROK Foreign Minister Yun, and Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio meet on the sidelines of ASEAN-related meetings in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar.

Aug. 13, 2014: Secretary of State Kerry delivers an address on the *U.S. Vision for the Asia Pacific* at the East-West Center in Honolulu.

Aug. 14-18, 2014: Pope Francis visits South Korea, calling for peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

Aug. 18-29, 2014: 50,000 South Korean and 30,000 US troops take part in *Ulchi Freedom Guardian*, a computer simulation exercise aimed at evaluating and exercising capabilities in military intelligence, logistics, joint air procedures, and plans and systems, including combined space operations.

Aug. 22, 2014: US approves anti-dumping duties against the ROK and other steel pipe producers; South Korea's exports to the US exceed all other nations combined.

Aug. 25, 2014: North Korea warns of "military countermeasures" in the face of joint drills between the US and ROK through Deputy Ambassador to the UN Ri Tong Il.

Aug. 31, 2014: Voice of America (VOA) reports an acceleration of the process of identifying US remains from the Korean War, with 49 of 208 boxes containing some 600 remains identified in just the last three years.

Sept. 1, 2015: US detainees in North Korea provide brief news conferences appealing for increased US government efforts to win their freedom. The family of US missionary Kenneth Bae expresses increased concern over his health.