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US-KOREA RELATIONS

MISSILES FIRE AND FURY

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Tensions rose to new levels on the Korean Peninsula as North Korea fired multiple missiles demonstrating markedly enhanced capabilities and crowned the Labor Day weekend with a sixth nuclear test with a significantly larger yield than previous tests. The United States tackled its most significant global security challenge by reinforcing its deterrent capabilities, tightening the financial noose on the North, President Trump tweeting stern warnings, and military and diplomatic leaders calling for dialogue. South Korea responded by reiterating its military readiness, expanding its own missile capabilities, and reeling from Trump's rhetoric that likened President Moon Jae-in's push for talks to "appeasement" and his threat to scrap the KORUS trade agreement. Despite joint military exercises, live fire drills, B-1 dispatches, and shared statements condemning Pyongyang to signal alliance strength, the relationship between the United States and South Korea appears frayed in dramatic new ways.

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No more maybes

In 11 years, North Korea has developed dangerous nuclear and delivery capabilities. The premier national security concern conveyed from the Obama to Trump administration has seen fruition with the July 4 and July 28 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) launches that directly challenge Washington, and the late August missile launch over Hokkaido an affront to Tokyo, and by extension the US as its treaty ally.

North Korea's contention after its fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6, 2016 that it had tested a hydrogen bomb was met with skepticism from analysts, who suggested that at best Pyongyang had employed boosted technology. Last year's spate of failed tests led some observers to doubt the pace and efficacy of North Korea's missile development program, though others noted that failed tests could be teachable moments.

The DPRK soundly removed doubts in summer 2017 with a barrage of missile tests that demonstrate enhanced thrust and trajectories with a range that included most of the United States. The latest nuclear test on Sept. 3 produced a quake estimated to be between 5.7 and 6.3 on the Richter scale (the seismic reads by South Korea and the US respectively), indicating yields in excess of 100 kilotons – at least 10 times the strength of the Sept. 9, 2016 fifth nuclear test, with a yield likened to that of Hiroshima.

The Trump administration has sought to signal certainty in its response to North Korea, reiterating repeatedly that “all options remain on the table.” Trump showed his growing impatience and preference for military solutions with tweets that elicited concern among Seoul and other allies: the United States was “locked and loaded,” (John Wayne, 1949), the US would meet North Korean provocations with “fire and fury,” and “talking is not the answer!” The latter came after the North's missile launch over Japan and muted his earlier assertion that North Korea was beginning to “respect” the US. Defense Secretary James Mattis sought to stem confusion by asserting that dialogue remained in the US response kit.

Facetime

President Trump's tweets and late summer musings about dumping the Korea-US (KORUS)

free trade agreement (FTA) were a slap in the face of the new Seoul administration. South Korean President Moon Jae-in met Trump on June 30, and the Washington summit seemed to go well. South Korea put great preparation into the meeting and looked to Trump's meetings with Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo and China's President Xi Jinping for lessons learned. Trump, who had earlier lambasted the trade agreement with Korea as a “disaster,” somewhat checked his concerns, and the two leaders projected themselves as being in lockstep over their concern about DPRK provocations. In the aftermath and given the North's missile launches in July and August, Moon deployed the remainder of the THAAD anti-missile system, which had drawn criticism from China and domestic opponents.



1South Korean President Moon Jae-in and US President Donald Trump shake hands after a joint press conference that followed their bilateral summit at the White House on June 30, 2017 (Yonhap)

Seoul, however, has looked at Washington with growing concern. US presidential missives appeared confusing to the Blue House and Seoul analysts. They and Korean editorial writers raised questions about US reliability, especially if the US mainland appeared to be a target, and whether the US was willing to trade Seoul for Los Angeles or Seattle in the event of a nuclear strike. The predominant concern expressed by Korean media was the danger of a US military strike against the DPRK leading to a conflagration in South Korea, given the likely artillery barrage to follow. Some senior analysts and more conservative elements among the general public raised the specter of a perceived need to grow more autonomous capabilities, to include a South Korean nuclear option, or

reintroduce US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.

Several factors signal growing fissures in ROK-US relations. Foremost is the mixed political messaging on North Korea, which appears to allow little room for Moon Jae-in's pursuit of a peace initiative. Second, and another issue about "face," is the proclivity of President Trump to call Japanese Prime Minister Abe on North Korean concerns more often and ahead of President Moon. South Korean sentiments range from irritation to insult, especially as South Korean relations with Japan are in flux and questions of history and popular memory linger. Trump's dismissiveness of the KORUS FTA was met with confusion from Seoul, which had not fully considered the possibility of it being scrapped and led the leading Washington-based trade group supportive of KORUS to urge members to contact lawmakers to support its retention. Whether the US president is revealing his true leanings or posturing is unknown, but the result is disquiet nonetheless.

Particularly galling to some South Koreans was Trump's scolding by tweet of Seoul's mistaken "appeasement" of the North. Though this message may have delighted conservatives in Tokyo and the president's base, many found the remark paternalistic and pejorative.

Reinforcements

The US and Korea joined in shoring up preparedness against North Korea and enhancing South Korea's military capabilities. After a summer of DPRK test launches, the US agreed in principle to increase the range of South Korea's missiles, and South Korea reportedly agreed to purchase new US weapons. The US also deployed B-1 bombers alongside ROK aircraft to signal resolve in the face of the North Korean launches.

More telling, the United States and South Korea conducted the scheduled *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* (UFG) exercises with an increase in media focus and live-fire drills in response to DPRK tests. The large-scale exercises reportedly employed 7,500 fewer US troops than in the past, a possible effort to give US diplomats leverage with the North at the negotiating table, although Defense Secretary Mattis dismissed such suggestions.

Consistent with past objections to the joint US-ROK exercises, North Korea responded with heated rhetoric – the latest acceleration in the war of words between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and President Trump. North Korea's Aug. 28 missile launch over Hokkaido was the most forthright of Pyongyang's objections to the exercises and came ahead of its Sept. 9 Foundation Day celebration. Another ICBM launch may be in the offing.



2US warns time of 'strategic patience' for North Korea is over, conducts joint military drills in South Korea

Though North Korea signaled its disdain for US-ROK exercises, it also aimed to drive a wedge between the United States and negotiation-minded South Korea, South Korea and Japan, and Japan and the US (over US diplomatic efforts). Some perceived benefit in the DPRK's launch away from Guam – where tensions flared after Kim Jong Un's reported consideration of a missile launch – but Japanese residents awoke to calls to take cover.

As Japanese had prepared its civil defense this summer, so too the threat by North Korea to land four missiles in its waters off Guam caused concern among that island's residents. For a first time, the US weighed the very real possibility of a North Korean provocation in US territorial waters. Along with concerns about North Korea's increasing use of mobile launches and nighttime testing, the threat to Guam also suggested the complexity of the US and ROK responding to multiple DPRK attacks against Guam, Japan, and South Korea.

Sad passing

While the July 4 and July 28 ICBM tests signaled new strides by the DPRK and directly challenged Washington, the death of US student Otto Warmbier, held by North Korea for more than 17 months, registered viscerally among US policy makers, legislators, and the public. At a meeting

between US Special Representative Joseph Yun and the North Koreans in Oslo and via the DPRK New York Mission on June 6, North Korea advised the US that Warmbier had been in a coma for over a year and was in rapidly declining health. Yun traveled to Pyongyang and returned with Warmbier, who died a week after arriving in the US in an unresponsive condition.

President Trump appeared angry and saddened, reached out to Warmbier's parents, and vowed accountability for DPRK actions. President Moon, a former human rights lawyer, expressed sorrow and extended sentiments from Seoul as well. Warmbier had been sentenced by the DPRK to 15 years for stealing a propaganda banner venerating late leader Kim Jong Il. Questions remain about the circumstances surrounding Warmbier detention.

As a sign of the profound miscommunication, DPRK representatives quietly questioned why the United States was not more appreciative of the return of Warmbier. For the US, securing the release of the three known US citizens in custody remains a priority. North Korea released detained Canadian pastor Hyeon Soo Lim in late July.

Travel ban and sanctions

The US State Department responded to Warmbier's passing with a show of strength and by imposing a travel ban on US citizens visiting North Korea. Proponents of the ban call it a visible signal to Pyongyang that denies the regime tourist revenues, however limited. Opponents of the ban, which was effective Sept. 1, argue that it denies people-to-people contact, eliminating the only exchanges most North Koreans have with Americans and thereby playing to Pyongyang's propaganda.

The ban was accompanied by a greater US push to hurt the DPRK regime financially. In early May, the US House of Representatives passed legislation aimed at tightened sanctions targeting shipping and companies doing business with Pyongyang. In August, the US Treasury announced measures aimed at Russian and Chinese facilitating DPRK weapons development. UN Security Council Resolution 2371 passed with unanimous support, signaling international condemnation of North Korea's July ICBM tests. The measures aim to curtail one-third of North Korea's \$3 billion export economy, by banning imports of North Korean

coal, iron, lead, iron and lead ore, and seafood. Following North Korea's Sept. 3 nuclear test, suggestions arose of a cut-off in petroleum as well, a measure China and Russia have rebuffed.

Wedges and realignments

Russia and China have urged the US to open a dialogue with North Korea, seemingly in line with Moon's proclivities. But Russia has couched its suggestion in terms of great power conflict, and in an unusual display of force sent *Tu-95s* into Korean airspace. South Korean and Japanese fighters escorted the Russian aircraft away, but Putin sent a political message that the US should de-escalate the crisis or see the Peninsula through the lens of greater rivalries.

China continued to push for North Korea and the US to enter negotiations and reiterated its suggestion of a trade of US-ROK exercises for a moratorium on DPRK missile tests. Beijing, which holds its 19th Party Congress beginning Oct. 18, does not want a foreign policy crisis on its doorstep at a sensitive time for domestic politics. Though displeased with DPRK missile and nuclear developments (shock waves from the latest nuclear test could be felt by Chinese across the border), Beijing values stability on the Peninsula above all else. Some see a potential shift in Seoul's policy to one more in line with Beijing. Both Seoul and Beijing seem more intent on talks than either Washington or Tokyo. Growing South Korean concerns over Trump's tweets, his North Korea policy, and the threats to terminate the KORUS FTA could accelerate that drift. By driving wedges into the US-Korea alliance, North Korea appears to be advancing its cause.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2017

May 1, 2017: US deploys drone to Japan for possible surveillance of the DPRK.

May 1, 2017: President Donald Trump says he would be “honored” to meet DPRK leader Kim Jong Un “under the right circumstances.”

May 1, 2017: US announces THAAD missile defense system in ROK as initially capable.

May 3, 2017: DPRK announces April 22 detention of US citizen Kim Sang-dok, who taught accounting at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), for “attempting to subvert the country.”

May 3, 2017: DPRK protests flyover of US bombers.

May 5, 2017: DPRK accuses the CIA of an assassination plot against Kim Jong Un. The next day it describes the plot as a “biochemical” attack.

May 6, 2017: US House of Representatives approves tighter North Korea sanctions 419-1.

May 7, 2017: North Korea detains US citizen Kim Hak-song of PUST on suspicion of “hostile acts” against the DPRK.

May 8, 2017: US Pacific Fleet Commander Adm. Scott Swift reassures allies in Asia of US commitment.

May 9, 2017: Moon Jae-in elected president of the Republic of Korea.

May 10, 2017: Moon Jae-in inaugurated as president and vows to seek peace with the DPRK.

May 10, 2017: Department of Defense suggests DPRK Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) have “important shortfalls.”

May 12, 2017: DPRK sends a letter of protest to the US House of Representatives over new US sanctions.

May 12, 2017: President Trump advises President Moon that conditions must be right for dialogue with the DPRK before entering into talks.

May 13, 2017: *Yonhap* reports that the DPRK would dialogue with the US under the right terms.

May 14, 2017: DPRK tests missile in the 4,500 km range. The missile travels 700 km for 30 minutes and lands in waters between Korea and Japan.

May 15, 2017: China signals it may back new sanctions after the DPRK missile test.

May 16, 2017: Prominent nuclear specialist Siegfried Hecker suggests US send special nuclear envoy to North Korea.

May 17, 2017: ROK suggests reopening communications with the DPRK after its missile launch.

May 18, 2017: US Navy moves second carrier near the DPRK.

May 19, 2017: China and South Korea urge an easing of tensions between US and North Korea.

May 21, 2017: DPRK launches a missile from Pukchang. The missile flies 500 km, according to the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff. DPRK asserts that the test confirmed its warhead guidance system is ready for deployment.

May 21, 2017: US, ROK, and Japan call for an emergency session of the UN Security Council to discuss the latest missile launch by North Korea.

May 22, 2017: UNSC condemns North Korea’s latest missile test and directs its sanctions committee to redouble its efforts to implement existing sanctions.

May 22, 2017: ROK announces US investments in advance of Washington summit.

May 24, 2017: Rep. John Conyers and 63 other Democrats sign a letter urging a diplomatic approach to the DPRK and arguing against any US preventive attack.

May 26, 2017: ROK approves civilian contact with DPRK as a goodwill gesture.

May 28, 2017: Kim Jong Un observes anti-aircraft weapon and new guidance tests. DPRK launches a missile that lands in waters between Korea and Japan.

May 29, 2017: DPRK claims its new missile can land within seven meters of target.

May 30, 2017: President Moon orders probe after claims that ROK military was hiding information on US THAAD deployment.

May 30, 2017: Department of Defense tests a new anti-missile system over the Pacific.

May 31, 2017: Blue House announces ROK Defense Ministry “intentionally dropped” THAAD units in report.

June 1, 2017: President Moon raises concern with visiting Sen. Richard Durbin over US military budget and missile defense.

June 2, 2017: UNSC unanimously adopts resolution 2356 extending the number of DPRK individuals and entities under sanction, to include freezing assets and a travel ban.

June 2-3, 2017: Defense Secretary James Mattis calls on China to do more on the DPRK situation and reassures Asian allies of US commitment.

June 4, 2017: DPRK rejects new UN sanctions.

June 7, 2017: ROK suspends THAAD deployment. Head of US missile defense describes DPRK advances in missile development as being of “great concern.”

June 7, 2017: DPRK fires several ground-to-ship missiles, saying the test launch verifies “combat application efficiency.” Kim Jong Un reportedly supervised the launch.

June 11, 2017: DPRK says it is “not far away” from an ICBM test.

June 12, 2017: Defense Secretary Mattis describes the DPRK as the “most urgent” threat to security. Detained US student Otto Warmbier returns to the US in an unresponsive state.

June 13, 2017: Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Tom Shannon says DPRK poses a global threat over time. US blames DPRK for hacking spree and warns against more attacks.

June 19, 2017: Otto Warmbier dies days after release from the DPRK.

June 20, 2017: US B-1 bombers fly over the Korean Peninsula. US asks China to do more to rein in North Korea. China presses US to swap exercises for a DPRK freeze.

June 22, 2017: President Moon calls Chinese President Xi Jinping to encourage more action on DPRK. Student Otto Warmbier laid to rest in Wyoming, Ohio.

June 22, 2017: DPRK tests rocket engine for possible ICBM launch. Japan and US fail to shoot down mock missile in-flight.

June 25, 2017: ROK tests missile capable of striking all the DPRK. President Moon states that he and Trump share a “common goal.”

June 28, 2017: Samsung announces investment in a South Carolina factory ahead of presidential summit in Washington.

June 29, 2017: Former Defense Secretary Perry and former senior officials urge Trump to begin dialogue with North Korea.

June 29, 2017: White House announces Trump will press Moon at summit on trade deficits in steel and automobiles. US announces sanction of Chinese bank and individuals over DPRK financing.

June 30, 2017: Presidents Trump and Moon meet. Trump calls for firm response on North Korea and targets ROK on trade. The two presidents assert unity against DPRK provocations.

July 1, 2017: US head of missile defense states, “I would not say we are comfortably ahead of the threat” from the DPRK.

July 3, 2017: President Trump calls Prime Minister Abe and President Xi over DPRK threat.

July 4, 2017: North Korea tests an ICBM using a PRC truck as a launch base and claims the ICBM can carry a large nuclear warhead. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson calls for global action.

July 5, 2017: US and South Korea conduct military exercise that is described as a response to the North Korean missile launch on July 4.

July 5, 2017: US tells North Korea it is prepared to go to war. UNSC holds emergency session.

July 6, 2017: China urges calm, while President Trump considers “severe things” over DPRK threat. Russia objects to UN condemnation and suggests the missile test was not of an ICBM.

July 7, 2017: US seeks funds connected to DPRK from eight large banks. President Moon delivers historic Berlin address on unification at the Korber Foundation.

July 7-8, 2017: US bombers conduct drill in South Korea. A North Korean ship raises weapons at a Japanese patrol boat.

July 11, 2017: ROK contends that DPRK does not have ICBM reentry technology.

July 13, 2017: ROK prefers slow approach to KORUS FTA revisions. US prepares new sanctions on Chinese firms over DPRK ties.

July 14, 2017: DPRK vows “corresponding measures” if UN adopts new sanctions.

July 17, 2017: ROK proposes military talks, family visits, and opening of hotlines with DPRK.

July 19, 2017: Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Paul Selva suggests DPRK lacks accuracy to hit US. DPRK dismisses ROK call for better ties as “nonsense.” US Navy chief asks PRC counterpart for help on DPRK.

July 21, 2017: US State Department announces a ban on US travel to the DPRK.

July 22, 2017: US legislators strike deal on sanctions bill for Russia, Iran, and North Korea.

July 26, 2017: US intelligence agencies report that within one year the DPRK could have a missile that can reach US.

July 28, 2017: DPRK tests a second ICBM, the *Hwasong 14*, off its east coast. ROK pushes to build up its own missile defenses. Trump tweets disappointment in China.

July 30, 2017: US flies bombers over Korean Peninsula. DPRK claims the entire US is within strike range of the *Hwasong 14*. Trump says China has done “nothing.”

Aug. 1, 2017: Secretary of State Tillerson says to North Korea, “we are not your enemy,” expresses hope for dialogue “at some point,” and plays down talk of regime change.

Aug. 2, 2017: Vice President Mike Pence says US won’t hold talks with North Korea. US bans travel to North Korea from Sept. 1, and advises all US citizens to leave the DPRK.

Aug. 3, 2017: National security advisers from the US, South Korea, and Japan hold a video conference to coordinate their response to North Korea’s missile and nuclear threats.

Aug. 4, 2017: DPRK condemns US travel ban as a “sordid” limit on exchanges.

Aug. 5, 2017: UN bans key DPRK exports over missile tests with 15-0 passage of UNSC resolution 2371. Chinese media stresses limits and condemns US “arrogance.”

Aug. 7, 2017: ROK and US agree to increase pressure on the DPRK. North Korea says it would use nuclear weapons only against the US. DPRK rejects nuclear talks and says US will “pay dearly.” China urges restraint.

Aug. 8-9, 2017: DPRK states it is now making missile-ready nuclear weapons. Trump says US will meet DPRK threat with “fire and fury.” DPRK announces consideration of a plan to strike Guam. Former Defense Secretary Perry tweets that “nuclear deterrence is only effective if threats are deemed credible; bluster hurts our national security posture.”

Aug. 9, 2017: Secretary Tillerson states, “I do not believe there is any imminent threat,” from the DPRK, and that “Americans should sleep well at night.”

Aug. 10, 2017: DPRK suggests it might fire missile into waters off Guam. Trump says his earlier comments might not have been “tough enough” and warns North Korea to get its “act together.”

Aug. 11, 2017: Trump tweets that military solutions are “locked and loaded.”

Aug. 13, 2017: CIA Director Pompeo suggests DPRK likely to continue tests. US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford arrives in Asia and pushes diplomacy.

Aug. 14-15, 2017: DPRK delays Guam firing and US says that dialogue is up to Kim Jong Un. Defense Secretary Mattis says that if DPRK fires at the US, it could “escalate into war.”

Aug. 15, 2017: President Moon warns the US against unilateral military action.

Aug. 16, 2017: President Trump praises Kim Jong Un for a “wise’ decision on Guam.

Aug. 21-30, 2017: ROK and US Combined Forces Command conduct the annual *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* military exercise. In addition, UN Command forces from seven countries, including Australia, Canada, Columbia, Denmark, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, participate.

Aug. 22, 2017: North Korea threatens “absolute force” in response to *UFG* exercises. US Treasury targets Chinese and Russian entities for helping DPRK weapons development.

Aug. 23, 2017: President Trump suggests Kim Jong Un is “starting to respect” the US.

Aug. 24, 2017: Russia sends nuclear-capable bombers near South Korea and Japan. DPRK photos suggest a more powerful ICBM under development.

Aug. 25, 2017: DPRK fires three short-range missiles from its east coast; one fails.

Aug. 28, 2017: DPRK fires *Hwasong-12* missile over Japan. Trump warns again that “all options are on the table,” and that the DPRK message is “loud and clear.”

Aug. 29, 2017: DPRK accuses the US of driving the Korean Peninsula to “explosion.” US proposes a UNSC statement condemning the latest DPRK launch and that all states “strictly, fully and expeditiously implement” sanctions. Kim Jong Un says missile test was for Guam.

Aug. 30, 2017: President Trump tweets “talking is not the answer!,” although Defense Secretary Mattis cautions afterward that “we are never out of diplomatic solutions.”

Aug. 30, 2017: *The Wall Street Journal* reports that “Korea passing” has entered South Korea’s public and leadership lexicon, as Seoul appears bypassed in the standoff with North Korea.

Sept. 3, 2017: North Korea conducts its sixth nuclear weapon test.