



US-Korea Relations:

Witnessing Anniversaries and Crisis at the DMZ*

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The summer months of 2015 saw the US and ROK mark the 65th anniversary of the start of the Korean War while the region commemorated the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, which also marks Korean Liberation Day. The US and South Korea conducted annual military exercises mid-August amidst a flare up in inter-Korean tensions. North Korea backed down from a semi-war state and expressed regret over the landmine maiming of two ROK soldiers, as South Korea agreed to silence its speakers along the DMZ, and both agreed to talks aimed at family reunions.

US-ROK resolve and alliance management

The reporting period began with a visit to Washington by Hwang Joon-kook, the Republic of Korea's special representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs. Hwang met US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim to discuss denuclearization and the Six-Party Talks; he also met Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorist Financing Daniel Glaser to discuss DPRK sanctions. Two weeks later, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se met in Korea to discuss developments on the peninsula and ways to enhance cooperation on global issues. The tenth meeting between the two highlighted concern about perceived instability in the DPRK (given reports of senior-level purges), policy coordination on North Korea, and combined deterrence. Both noted the 70th anniversary of Korean independence following World War II as having special meaning. Kerry highlighted his view that the improvement of regional bilateral relationships is critical to the US rebalance. Kerry also hailed diplomatic efforts involved in bringing together the Korean, Japanese, and Chinese foreign ministers mid-spring. Yun and Kerry indicated that the forthcoming meeting between Presidents Park Geun-hye and Barack Obama (rescheduled to October 2015) would serve, in Yun's words, as an "important milestone, opening a new horizon" for the alliance. Kerry, who also met President Park, hailed Korea's leadership on global issues; he cited ROK humanitarian assistance to Syria, as well as to Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak, and the ROK contribution to the Green Climate Fund and on broader global climate change issues. He also noted "deepening cooperation" in science and technology, space and cyber issues – which Kerry later addressed at Korea University.

In mid-June, Foreign Minister Yun, in turn, visited Washington, DC, meeting National Security Advisor Susan Rice, Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken, Undersecretary of State for

* This article is extracted from [Comparative Connections](#): A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations, Vol. 17, No. 2, Sept. 2015. Preferred citation: Stephen Noerper, "US-Korea Relations: Witnessing Anniversaries and Crisis at the DMZ," *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Sept. 2015, pp. 43-52.

Political Affairs Wendy Sherman, Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel, Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim, Special Envoy for Six Party Talks Sydney Seiler, and National Security Council Director for Korea Allison Hooker.

On the military cooperation front, in early June at Uijeongbu the ROK and US announced the deployment of a Combined Division, consisting of a brigade from the US Second Infantry and one from the ROK Army. The unit marks the first of this type since the Combined Field Army command was disbanded in summer 1992. US Forces Korea (USFK) also published the *2015 Strategic Digest*, outlining principles of counter-missile operations to address the DPRK's asymmetric threat: acquiring, enhancing, implementing and executing counter missile operations. Also in early June, US Pacific Command Commander Adm. Harry Harris visited the ROK, meeting President Park, Minister of National Defense Han Min-koo, US Ambassador Mark Lippert, USFK Commander Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, and Deputy Commander Lt. Gen. Terrence O'Shaughnessy. He also visited the ROK Navy's Second Fleet Command in Pyeongtaek, commemorating the loss of those killed aboard the *Cheonan* in 2010.

In late June and early July, US Special Envoy for North Korean Policy Sung Kim visited Seoul for discussions with counterpart Hwang Joon-kook and Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun. Kim also attended the Ministry of Unification's and Institute for Far Eastern Studies' Korean Global Forum 2015.

July saw a Seoul visit by US Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Frank Rose for a discussion on nonproliferation, arms reductions, and space. Rose met ROK Foreign Ministry's Director General of North American Affairs Shin Jae-hyun and Director General of the International Organizations Department Yoo Dae-jong. Mid-month, Shin met USFK Deputy Commander O'Shaughnessy in a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) Joint Committee session to address the joint investigation into the April shipment of live anthrax spores to a USFK base. The ROK Defense Ministry's Director General for Policy Planning Maj. Gen. Chang Kyung-soo and US Marine Corps, Korea Commander Maj. Gen. Robert Hedelund also met on the anthrax incident as members of the Seoul-Washington Joint Working Group.

On July 19, US Pacific Fleet Commander Adm. Scott Swift began a three-day visit to the ROK for discussions with the Chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Choi Yoon-hee, Navy Chief of Staff Adm. Jung Ho-sup, and US Ambassador Mark Lippert. On July 27, US Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks Sydney Seiler visited Seoul counterparts and suggested that the US would demonstrate flexibility in nuclear dialogue with the North in line with the Iran nuclear deal. He joined the next day in a US-Korea-Japan trilateral meeting in Tokyo with Director General for North Korean Nuclear Affairs Kim Gunn and Japanese Deputy Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takizaki Shigeki.

The ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) conducted the annual *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* military exercises from Aug. 17-28. Described by USFK as "routine and defense-oriented," the joint maneuvers saw the participation of an additional seven UN Command Sending States – Australia, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, France, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. USFK suggested the exercises "highlight the longstanding partnership, commitment and enduring friendship between the US and ROK, and help ensure stability and security on the Peninsula." DPRK state media offered its standard denunciations of the exercises, but a *Rodong*

Sinmun editorial on Aug. 20 – titled *Preemptive Attack, Our Choice Now* – ratcheted up its rhetoric by suggesting that the DPRK should adopt a strategy that would involve “hitting the enemy beforehand [nuclear attack] and mercilessly.”

DPRK threat

The DPRK conducted a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test on May 9. Though its fleet of 70 Soviet-era submarines is aging, the DPRK activities raised concern. Jeffrey Lewis of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies [noted](#) that although DPRK submarines “are not especially effective, finding even a small number of specific submarines armed with missiles would be quite a challenge” for US and ROK planners. The successful test saw the missile travel only 150 meters, but probably indicates that the missile development program had progressed at a more rapid pace than analysts expected. The ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) estimates that a fully operational submarine equipped with ballistic missiles might be realized in a two-to-three-year time frame. A May 11 *Joongang Ilbo* article termed North Korea’s SLBM deployment a “game changer.”

However US analysts generally cautioned against overestimating DPRK submarine capabilities. Nevertheless, in mid-May, Colorado Sen. Cory Gardner, chair of the Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific and International Cybersecurity Policy, announced a resolution recognizing the DPRK as a serious US national security threat and calling for more targeted sanctions on Pyongyang. Gardner cautioned against the US resuming negotiations without preconditions entailing a halt in nuclear and missile development and human rights abuses.

On May 20, Pyongyang announced a capability to miniaturize nuclear warheads, which is consistent with earlier US Department of Defense and senior analyst comments that the DPRK might have or be near such capability. On the heels of Secretary Kerry’s Seoul visit and possibly in response to US analysts downplaying the SLBM test, North Korea’s statement stoked further concern. In early June, the US State Department released its [2015 Report on Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments](#). The report acknowledged the likelihood of the DPRK’s having additional unidentified nuclear facilities – a State Department first. In mid-June, the DPRK resumed missile tests, firing three short-range *KN-01s* (120 km) off Wonson into the East Sea. The next day DPRK leader Kim Jong Un was shown observing the test fire of anti-ship rockets, expressing “great satisfaction,” according to DPRK state media.

On July 22, the ROK press reported the DPRK’s completion of its Sohae Satellite Launching Station in Tongchangri, North Pyongan Province, bordering China. Johns Hopkins University’s *38 North* posted imagery showing a lengthening of the site launcher from 50 to 67 meters, which suggests an upgrade that will allow it to handle large rockets. Sohae reportedly serves as a long-range ballistic missile and space booster test facility. *38 North*’s imagery also showed a new support building and rail tunnel terminus.

The ROK and the US have responded to the DPRK nuclear and missile program activity with a variety of economic sanctions. On June 26, the ROK announced financial sanctions against half a dozen Syrian and Taiwanese individuals and entities engaged with the DPRK on weapons sales –

the first instance of the ROK imposing DPRK-related sanctions against non-North Koreans. In a June 23 letter to Congress, President Obama extended several executive orders that imposed sanctions on the DPRK between 2008 and 2015 (orders 13466, 13551, 13570, 13687). In early July, Senators Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) introduced Senate Resolution 1747 to improve the enforcement of sanctions against the government of North Korea. The bill calls for an enlargement of the administration's effort to sanction "property and seize funds of the people or organizations that provide support to the [DPRK] regime." The legislation also aims to increase humanitarian organization efforts "to provide life-saving assistance" to the peoples of the DPRK.

On July 21 the US Congressional Research Service released its report *North Korea: US Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy and Internal Situation*, stating North Korea "presents one of the most vexing and persistent problems in US foreign policy in the post-Cold War period." The report describes Kim Jong Un's two-track policy of *byungjin* – simultaneously pursuing economic development and nuclear weapons his harsh control tactics that include "brutally, carrying out large-scale purges of senior officials," and raises "critical questions" for the Obama administration given North Korea's "intransigence and stalled negotiations." The authors underscore, in addition to concerns over nuclear weapons development, the "host of other issues," including "Pyongyang's missile programs, conventional military forces, illicit activities and [the DPRK's] abysmal human rights record."

DMZ tensions

Escalation of the military confrontation along Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was the focus of considerable attention in August. The problem began when two ROK soldiers on patrol in the DMZ were maimed by landmines that were determined to be from the DPRK and freshly laid. South Korea responded to what it considered a provocation by condemning the action and resuming loudspeaker broadcasts across the DMZ, for the first time in 11 years. North Korea responded by threatening to strike South Korea if an Aug. 22 deadline to stop the broadcasts was not met. On Aug. 20, North Korea reportedly fired four rockets toward ROK loudspeakers located in Yeoncheon, Gyeonggi Province. The ROK returned some nineteen shells in response, although the exchange apparently hit no known targets on either side.

The two sides entered into intensive high-level negotiations the evening of Aug. 22 shortly after the DPRK deadline had passed, with the ROK sending National Security Advisor Kim Kwan-jin and Minister of Unification Hong Yong-pyo and DPRK sending Vice Marshal Hwang Pyong So and longtime orchestrator of cross-border issues Kim Yang Gon. The marathon 43-hours of senior-level talks resulted in an agreement early (1 AM) on Aug. 25, with a commitment to continue the high-level dialogue channel, an expression of DPRK "regret" over the landmine injuries and a downgrading of its semi-war state, the silencing of ROK loudspeakers unless further provoked, and a September resumption of Red Cross talks aimed at *Chuseok* (harvest festival) family reunions, as well as civil society exchanges. The DPRK notably referred to the Republic of Korea (ROK) by name. Washington welcomed the inter-Korean agreement, with US State Department spokesman John Kirby stating that the US will "judge the North by its actions. It was a very tense several days."

MERS outbreak

An outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in South Korea impacted Korea-US relations most notably in the postponement of President Park Geun-hye's scheduled June visit to the US. The ROK identified its first case of MERS on May 20. On June 6, Seoul released the names of facilities where MERS patients visited or had been treated, earning criticism for the perceived delay in the public health response. The outbreak led to widespread public concern and some panic, the closing of schools, and an economic blow given a steep decline in consumer spending and tourism cancellations – reportedly some 100,000 visitors opted to stay away. Two days after the ROK's June 10 announcement of the postponement of President Park's visit to the US, President Obama offered condolences to MERS victims and families by telephone. On July 28, South Korea declared an end to the outbreak after 69 days, with 186 victims and three dozen recorded deaths.

Balancing China

Over the summer months, Korean analysts wrote increasingly about the positioning of Korea and US-Korea relations relative to developments with China. The Asan Forum's July 2015 South Korea Country Report provides a timely summary of strategic writings. Noting the Chinese Defense White Paper's strategy of "proactive defense" and US maritime exercises with the Philippines, a May 28 *Donga Ilbo* article urged more attention to the regional order rather than the DPRK threat. A *Hangyoreh* columnist on June 9 took a different approach, urging caution given Chinese aims at a strategic counterbalance to US military presence, including the US-ROK alliance, a potential showdown over Terminal/Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and US Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel's suggestion that Seoul "speak out" on South China Sea maritime issues. The author urged Seoul to refrain from choosing sides and to create a cooperative ambience between China and the US. A May 26 *Donga Ilbo* article argued that Seoul should forge a "bridge" between Washington and Beijing, rather than choosing "China on economy, [and the] US on security," checking its "diplomatic dilemma." *Joongang Ilbo* offered a June 1 piece on the "China paradox," referring to its neighbor's initiative to expand cooperation while increasing its threat; the author urged Seoul to join efforts like AIIB proactively and persuade the US to take a selective engagement approach.

Chronology of US-Korea Relations

May – August 2015

May 5, 2015: Special Representatives Hwang Joon-kook and Sung Kim discuss the Six-Party Talks and denuclearization in Washington.

May 8, 2015: Google opens a start-up and entrepreneurs campus in Seoul. President Park Geun-hye expresses gratitude to Google for selecting Seoul for its first Asian campus.

May 11, 2015: ROK Defense Ministry identifies photographs of a May 9 DPRK missile launch from the sea as authentic and describes the DPRK's developing submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) as "very serious and concerning."

May 15, 2015: Arbitration begins between the Korean government and US-based private equity fund Lone Star at the International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes in Washington, DC – the first investor-state dispute filed under the KORUS Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

May 17-18, 2015: US Secretary of State John Kerry meets ROK President Park Geun-hye and Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se in advance of the US-ROK presidential summit, which was subsequently rescheduled to Oct. 2015.

May 18, 2015: United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon begins a five-day visit to Korea, participating in the World Education Forum and meeting President Park, Foreign Minister Yun and National Assembly Speaker Chung Eui-hwa. North Korea rejects Ban's proposed visit to the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

May 19, 2015: US Senate Subcommittee Chairman on East Asia, Pacific and International Cybersecurity Policy Cory Gardner (R-CO) introduces a resolution recognizing the DPRK as a serious threat to US national security.

May 20, 2015: Pyongyang declares miniaturization capability, advancing US and ROK concerns about missile and nuclear development.

May 21-22, 2015: The New York City-based Korea Society hosts an expert session on *Unification and Alliance Support*, providing an update on Seoul's unification policy and encouraging greater US and Japanese cooperation.

May 27, 2015: Blue House announces June 14-17 visit by Park Geun-hye to Washington, DC and Houston. The Obama-Park meeting since has been rescheduled to mid-October 2015.

June 1, 2015: South Korean Trade Minister Yoon Sang-jick and Chinese Trade Minister Gao Hucheng sign a bilateral FTA, eliminating tariffs on more than 90 percent of traded goods over two decades and increasing bilateral trade to over \$300 billion per annum. Some US analysts see the move as an affront to the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership initiative.

June 1, 2015: US notifies the ROK of the extension of the US Visa Waiver Program until March 2017, allowing Korean citizens to visit the US without obtaining a visa for 90 days.

June 5, 2015: US State Department releases report acknowledging possible unidentified nuclear facilities in the DPRK.

June 9-10, 2015: US Pacific Command Commander Adm. Harry Harris visits Seoul and meets President Park and other senior officials; he also visits the *Cheonan* memorial at Pyeongtaek.

June 10, 2015: President Park announces postponement of her June 14-17 visit to the US given the MERS outbreak. President Obama offers condolences in a phone conversation two days later.

June 14, 2015: DPRK launches three *KN-01* short-range (120 km) missiles in the East Sea off Wonson.

June 15, 2015: North Korea test fires anti-ship rockets, with leader Kim Jong Un in attendance.

June 15, 2015: Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se and US Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz formally sign the revision of the 1974 Civil Nuclear Energy Cooperation Agreement, agreed to April 22

June 16, 2015: President Obama sends the new US-ROK Agreement for Civil Nuclear Cooperation to Congress for review for 90 days of the Hill session.

June 17, 2015: South Korea's Fair Trade Commission (FTC) announces investigation of Citi, JP Morgan, Bank of America and three UK lenders on possible collusion to manipulate foreign exchange rates. US and UK fined six banks \$5.6 billion in May for exchange rate manipulation.

June 21-24, 2015: US Strategic Command Commander Adm. Cecil Haney visits Seoul and meets ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo and Joint Chiefs of Staff Choi Yun-hee.

June 23, 2015: President Obama sends a letter to Capitol Hill extending executive orders imposing sanctions on the DPRK.

June 23, 2015: UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, alongside Foreign Minister Yun, formally opens Seoul office to monitor and document North Korean human rights abuses.

June 25, 2015: US and ROK mark the 65th anniversary of the start of the Korean War.

June 26, 2015: ROK Foreign Ministry announces sanctions against half a dozen Taiwanese and Syrian individuals and entities engaged in the DPRK weapons trade.

June 29, 2015: ROK signs Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank articles, becoming the fifth largest shareholder with a 3.81 percent stake and 3.5 percent voting bloc. Media reports US opposition to Korea's opting for the AIIB, but US officials voice support suggesting Korea will promote good governance and best practices.

June 29-July 1, 2015: US Special Envoy for North Korean Policy Sung Kim visits Korea, meeting Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun and Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Hwang Joon-kook.

June 30, 2015: Citing an increasing DPRK threat and budgetary constraints, the ROK Defense Ministry announces a delay in the reduction of active-duty personnel, reducing troop levels from 630,000 to 526,200 by 2030, rather than 2022.

July 9, 2015: Senators Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ) introduce Senate Resolution 1747 to increase sanctions enforcement on and humanitarian organization efforts toward the DPRK.

July 9-10, 2015: US Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control, Verification and Compliance Frank Rose meets the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs North American Affairs head Shin Jae-hyun and International Organizations Department head Yoo Dae-jong for discussion on arms reduction, nonproliferation, and space.

July 27-28, 2015: US Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks Sydney Seiler meets in Seoul with ROK counterparts on North Korean denuclearization, as well as Director General for North Korean Nuclear Affairs Kim Gunn and Japanese Deputy Director General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Takizaki Shigeki in a US-Korea-Japan trilateral session.

July 14-15, 2015: Seoul hosts a two-day meeting for officials and experts from the US, ROK, and Asia Pacific engaged in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which aims to curtail the illicit transfer of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related materials.

July 15, 2015: ROK Foreign Ministry's Director General of the North American Affairs Division Shin Jae-hyun and USFK Deputy Commander Lt. Gen. O'Shaughnessy address the delivery of live anthrax spores to a USFK base in April in a SOFA Joint Committee session. The Seoul-Washington Joint Working Group also discusses the joint investigation into the incident.

July 19-21, 2015: US Pacific Fleet Commander Adm. Scott Swift visits the ROK for meetings with ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Choi Yoon-hee, ROK Navy Chief of Staff Adm. Jung Ho-sup, and US Ambassador Mark Lippert.

July 21, 2015: US Congressional Research Service (CRS) releases its report on *North Korea: US Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy and the Internal Situation*.

July 22, 2015: ROK media reports DPRK completion of its Sohae Satellite Launch Facility, designed as a long-range ballistic missile and space booster test facility, near the Chinese border.

July 29, 2015: US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) introduces Senate Joint Resolution 20 in support of the US-ROK Agreement for Civil Nuclear Cooperation.

Aug. 2, 2015: US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) and Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY) introduce House Joint Resolution 63 in support of the US-ROK Agreement for Civil Nuclear Cooperation.

Aug. 4, 2015: Two ROK soldiers maimed by DPRK landmines in the southern part of the DMZ.

Aug. 4, 2015: ROK Defense Agency for Technology and Quality announces deployment of the Chunmoo multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) near the DMZ, doubling the range of the Kooryong MLRS antecedents.

Aug. 5, 2015: North Korea announces it will set its clocks back one half hour beginning Aug. 15 as a marker of Liberation Day.

Aug. 5-8, 2015: Kim Dae Jung's widow, Lee Hee-ho, visits a DPRK hospital, orphanage and maternity clinic, but does not meet neither Kim Jong Un or senior DPRK officials.

Aug. 11, 2015: The ROK resumes loudspeaker broadcasts along the DMZ after an 11-year hiatus following the Aug. 4 maiming of two soldiers by DPRK landmines.

Aug. 12, 2015: US and ROK begin large-scale joint exercises at the ROK Army training camp at Pocheon, Gyeonggi Province. The live-fire exercises display combat readiness against DPRK provocations and last the month.

Aug. 15, 2015: South Korea marks 70th Anniversary of Korean Liberation Day following the end of World War II.

Aug. 17-28, 2015: US and ROK engage in annual *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* military exercises.

Aug. 20, 2015: DPRK and ROK exchange live-fire, with the KPA firing rockets in the direction of ROK loudspeakers, and the ROK responding with 155mm shells. The DPRK sets a 4PM Aug. 22 deadline for the ROK to silence the speakers.

Aug. 22, 2015: The ROK and DPRK begin negotiations to resolve tensions in the DMZ at 6PM, past the DPRK threatened deadline.

Aug. 25, 2015: ROK and DPRK reach a six-point agreement after an intense several days of negotiation. Washington describes the situation as a "very tense several days."