



US-Korea Relations:

Summitry, Strength, and a Fourth Nuclear Test

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The final months of 2015 saw hedging around South Korea's relationship with China, strong support for the US-ROK alliance in the face of DPRK threats, a US-ROK summit, and heightened concern as North Korea prepared for a fourth nuclear test, which came on Jan. 6. September began with an easing of inter-Korean tensions and President Park Geun-hye's visit to Beijing for a military parade marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. With the US and South Korea watching closely for signs of a missile or nuclear test, North Korea marked the 70th anniversary of its Workers Party on Oct. 10 without incident. The US-ROK presidential summit appeared solid, with a joint statement against the North Korean nuclear and missile threats and shared concern over DPRK human rights violations. The US again took up the issue of DPRK human rights violations at the UN Security Council in December as reports of possible purges in North Korea continued to attract US and ROK attention. The US was pleased in late December by an agreement between South Korea and Japan on "comfort women."

Exaggerating Park's Beijing visit

The press made much of President Park Geun-hye's Sept. 3 Beijing appearance at the 70th commemoration of liberation from Japanese rule. Park's critics warned of a potential drift away from the US, noting her placement next to President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. Though the photos of the three viewing the parade surprised some (with a second Korean, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, a few seats down), little was mentioned of Park's bilateral meeting with her Chinese host on Sept. 2. Rather reports centered on the perceived insult to the US-ROK alliance. Though some in the popular press and among Korean nationalists took exception, little concern actually was expressed in official US circles.

Korean sentiments varied. The Asan Forum's Sept. 17 South Korea country report cited a Sept. 1 *Kyunhyang Shinmun* piece suggesting that Park had boldly broken a diplomatic taboo while creating "diplomatic options" and "jolting" diplomacy. A Sept. 4 *Joongang Ilbo* feature acknowledged Park's visit as a way to overcome "sandwiched" geopolitical realities. Identifying the ROK-US alliance as the security base, it suggested that Seoul's diplomacy with Washington and Beijing not be seen as zero-sum (a position taken by the White House). Asan surmised that hyperbole over the visit came "at a time when Seoul's relationship with Washington is less certain than it has been in years," a notion that was surprising to some US security planners.

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The US was quick to dampen concern over President Park's Beijing trip, with Defense Secretary Ashton Carter lambasting the persistent threat posed by North Korea and offering reassurance on the high-level of allied readiness.

However, the issue of South Korea's (and United Korea's) potential drift toward China over time remains. Earlier in her administration, Park asked for diplomatic space for the ROK as it adjusted to new realities. Despite the paradox of leaning toward the US for security and China for economic needs, many in Washington and Seoul wish to check any perceived drift. Both the US and ROK see that Seoul's endgame is to draw the PRC away from its support for the DPRK. Yet, the US wants South Korea to take a stronger stance on issues like the South China Sea, and US and ROK senior officials do appear to diverge more often over steps or statements that might antagonize the PRC.

Tough talk

In early September, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter offered his strongest comments to date on the North Korean threat in a webcast for US forces stationed worldwide. He underscored US defense of the ROK in the event of a DPRK attack and suggested that "the North Koreans always understand that any provocation with them will be dealt with, and that they stand no chance of defeating us and our allies in South Korea." Likening Korea to a "tinder box," he cautioned that "it's probably the single place in the world where war could erupt at the snap of our fingers." Carter's comments were motivated by the August tensions at the DMZ and the DPRK deadline for ROK action on propaganda broadcasts; though the marathon inter-Korean negotiations resulted in the 8.25 agreement and tensions declined, the US defense secretary was sending a clear message to Pyongyang.

In mid-October, Carter welcomed President Park and Defense Minister Han Min-koo to the Pentagon with full military honors, the first of his tenure (a nod to the importance of the alliance). Carter visited the DMZ on Nov. 1 alongside Han, noting an "ever-present danger" and US support for a "negotiated outcome with North Korea ... they should be on the path of doing less – and ultimately zero – in the nuclear field." The next day, in the context of the 47th ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in Seoul, Carter referred to the ROK-US alliance as "iron clad" in the face of the "up close, dangerous" DPRK threat. The resulting communiqué addressed the comprehensive nature of the alliance bilaterally, regionally and globally, emphasized common values and trust, and cited the 2009 Joint Vision, the 2013 Joint Declaration commemorating the 60th anniversary of the alliance, and the 2015 Joint Fact sheet suggesting cooperation on "new frontiers."

A tad early

Relations saw some complications given talk over the introduction of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea that preceded the early November SCM. THAAD deployment is sensitive for Seoul vis-à-vis its relations with Washington and Beijing; one observer likened Seoul's "dilemma" to a "tripwire." Just prior to the SCM, on Oct. 29, senior Lockheed official Mike Trotsky described THAAD at a National Press Club news conference as a "subject of a policy discussion" between Seoul and Washington, adding "those

policy discussions are ongoing now.” The Lockheed comments prompted speculation that THAAD might be part of the Carter-Han dialogue. The US and ROK denied the claim, with Han stating at the National Assembly the next day that “no decision regarding THAAD has been made inside the US government. There has been no request for any discussion either.”

October 10 anniversary

US and ROK analysts watched carefully for signs of the DPRK readying for a long-range ballistic missile test or a fourth nuclear test in advance of its 70th anniversary of the Korean Workers Party on Oct. 10. For whatever reason – hoped for progress in inter-Korean talks, concern about empowering the ROK and US pre-presidential summit, deference to China (which sent its fifth-ranked member of its Politburo Standing Committee to the commemoration) or some other consideration – North Korea refrained from testing.

The anniversary celebration in Kim Il Sung Square featured a massive military parade with thousands of troops and pieces of equipment, including an intercontinental ballistic missile battery. Leader Kim Jong Un announced that “we are ready to fight any kind of war waged by the US imperialists.” Significantly, however, he made no mention of the DPRK’s nuclear program, possibly as a conciliatory gesture to China’s Liu Yunshan, who accompanied Kim. Presidents Obama and Xi had met in Washington in late September, with cooperation on North Korea on the agenda. DPRK “restraint” around the party anniversary may have been a result.

Park-Obama summit

A missile or nuclear test would have raised public attention prior to the Oct. 16 meeting between Presidents Park Geun-hye and Barack Obama in Washington. Short of that crisis, the two offered a unity statement against the DPRK threat and commitment to cooperation on “new frontier” issues – space, public health, cyber security, and development. Although the summit did not enjoy the attention of Park’s first visit as president in 2013, when she addressed a joint session of Congress, the two presidents did use the opportunity to stand firm on nukes and human rights. Park suggested a Korean bid for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Obama used the summit press conference to dismiss lingering concerns over Korea’s ties with China, noting shared interest in good relations with the PRC.

The Oct. 16 US-ROK Joint Statement on North Korea underscored a “robust deterrence posture” and commitment to “continue to modernize our alliance and enhance close collaboration to better respond to all forms of North Korean provocations.” While committing to denuclearization and opposing DPRK actions “that raise tensions or violate UN Security Council resolutions,” the two underscored “no hostile policy towards North Korea and [that they] remain open to dialogue with North Korea to achieve our shared goal of denuclearization.”

The Joint Statement included an affirmation not to accept the DPRK as a nuclear-weapon state, which some critics saw as inconsistent with current realities and distracting from a more realistic goal of nonproliferation. Reflective of the Park administration’s continued emphasis on unification, the statement expressed strong US support for her vision for peaceful unification offered at Dresden. It also condemned DPRK human rights violations outlined in the 2014 UN

Commission of Inquiry (COI) report and support for the new office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Seoul. (The US again took up the issue of DPRK human rights violations at the UNSC in mid-December, as then-council president US Ambassador Samantha Power urged DPRK referral to the International Criminal Court.)

Prior to the summit, President Park appeared at Washington's CSIS, describing the alliance as a "steadfast buttress" in the ROK's defense of democracy, free markets, and human rights. She also hailed seven decades of Korea-US cooperation as a "great journey." Park offered support for the delay of transferring wartime operational control (OPCON), successful revision of the Korea-US Civil Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, the KORUS FTA, shared development goals, and the US rebalance toward Asia. She expressed hope for the Korea-Japan China Trilateral Summit and improvement in Korea-Japan relations.

Breaking the deadlock

Improvement in Korea-Japan relations appeared to come in late December and none-too-soon for a concerned United States. An Oct. 8 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on *US-South Korea Relations* noted that "notwithstanding the overall positive state of the relationship, US-South Korea ties have been tested by developments in areas where the two countries occasionally disagree, most prominently on how to handle South Korea-Japan relations."

On Dec. 28, South Korea's Foreign Minister Yun Byung-Se and Japan's Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida announced an agreement on "comfort women." Prime Minister Abe followed the announcement with a call to President Park expressing his "sincere apologies" and desire for a new era in bilateral relations. The apology was underscored by ¥1 billion in funds from the official budget for a foundation established by the ROK to provide assistance to the victims.

Full acceptance of this agreement may be some time off for those who suffered and for nationalist voices in the ROK and Japan, yet the political will required to arrive at the agreement was tremendous. The meeting between Park and Abe in early November at the Blue House provided the necessary foundation for the foreign policy establishments of both countries to move the agenda forward. Had they not, the steady decline in political and economic contacts and popular opinion would have continued at the expense of both nations and the US. Given heightened concerns about North Korea's nuclear weapon programs and China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, the ever-deepening fault line between Seoul and Tokyo was exacerbating regional tensions. In Tom Plate's 2012 *Conversations with Ban Ki Moon*, the UN secretary general cautioned that for the region to develop properly, Korea and Japan had to move beyond historical issues and lean forward for greater regional cooperation.

Forward movement could not have come too soon for the political cycles in Korea and the United States. For Park, who had seen Japan send the largest foreign delegation to her inaugural, stalled relations took both an economic and political toll. With only two years remaining in her presidency and parliamentary elections in April, Park gained an important foreign policy victory that rectified the downturn in relations which began under her predecessor. A return to dialogue over intelligence sharing between Korea and Japan is but one area that might hopefully see fruition if relations continue to improve.

For the United States, the Obama administration has held out an enhanced Asia focus as central to its foreign policy. The breaking of the political impasse between its two allies is of critical importance. US National Security Advisor Susan Rice applauded Korea and Japan for – in their words – “finally and irreversibly” addressing the historical burden on their relations and offered US support for implementing the agreement. Washington needs not only a détente between Seoul and Tokyo but constructive cooperation to see its regional aspirations reach full potential.

Political instability in Pyongyang?

Questions over DPRK regime consolidation grew for US and ROK observers. Senior official Kim Yang Gon, secretary of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party and director of the United Front Department, reportedly was killed late December in an early morning traffic accident. Kim had served as a spy chief and the DPRK’s senior-most official for inter-Korean relations. Though official laudatory comments on his passing signaled that he was in favor, the legacy of purges under Kim Jong Un raised speculation that the death might not be accidental given competition within senior circles.

In October, Choe Ryong Hae, considered a trusted lieutenant to Kim Jong Un, was reportedly purged and sent for re-education. Interestingly, Choe appeared on the funeral committee list for Kim Yang Gon, possibly suggesting a return to favor. South Korea offered condolences on the passing of interlocutor Kim, but North Korea watchers in the ROK and US continued to weigh questions about stability within the Pyongyang regime.

To that end, a December Council on Foreign Relations Discussion Paper by Sue Mi Terry on *Unified Korea and the Future of the US-South Korea Alliance* posits that “within the next five-to-ten years, a cascading series of events could conceivably end with regime collapse in the North, leading to the unification of the two Koreas.” Terry urges that with the inevitability of unification, Washington should take measures now to enhance the likelihood that the US-Korea alliance would survive the disappearance of the DPRK and mitigate any drift of the ROK toward the PRC or an independent foreign policy equidistant to the PRC and US.

Lead-up to a fourth nuclear test

When Kim Jong Un bragged of North Korea’s having “a self-reliant A-bomb and H-bomb” in early December, most US analysts dismissed the claim of a hydrogen bomb as hyperbole. On Dec. 21, the DPRK tested a submarine-based ballistic missile, only weeks after a failed attempt. In his New Year address Kim railed against “invasive outsiders and provocateurs” and promised a “holy war of justice” and new “diversified attack means.” He did not mention nuclear development and underscored “reconciliation and peace” and the need to “aggressively” work with the ROK to improve relations. His 2015 New Year message emphasized enhanced inter-Korean contacts, only to see the August flare-up in tensions. In South Korea, President Park Geun-hye at the New Year vowed a “stern response” against provocations and a “watertight defense posture,” while keeping a “door for dialogue open.”

On Jan. 6, the DPRK tested what it claimed was a hydrogen bomb, with a 5.1 seismic event detected along the northeast coast, some 30 miles from the site of earlier nuclear tests. Of course, Pyongyang boasted of the test's "complete" success in advance of Kim Jong Un's Jan. 8 birthday and ahead of the May party congress, the first in 36 years. The US and South Korea were quick to condemn the test, and South Korea cautioned that the yields appeared to be similar in size to the 2013 test, suggesting a boosted-fission bomb rather than a full-fledged thermonuclear device. The ROK National Intelligence Service estimated in a message delivered by a National Assembly member that the yield was 6 kilotons of TNT, not the hundreds that a fusion device successfully tested would deliver or even the tens had it failed. The White House was guarded in its comments, and US and ROK analysts remained cautious, not wanting to underestimate the event while awaiting data that might take several weeks to obtain. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon condemned the underground test as "deeply troubling" and an act that is "profoundly destabilizing."

DPRK relations with the PRC, which had warmed slightly in recent months, may have been the greatest casualty of the test. China too stated that it "strongly opposes this act" and will "firmly push" for Korean denuclearization – the test took place only 50 miles from the Chinese border, and Chinese residents expressed concern over the possibility of fallout. In the end, Kim Jong Un may have pushed Xi Jinping closer to Park Geun-hye and Barack Obama, reaffirming Park's rationale for visiting Beijing in early September.

Chronology of US-Korea Relations September – December 2015

Sept. 1, 2015: Defense Secretary Ashton Carter cautions that "Korea is the single place in the world where war could erupt at the snap of our fingers" and strongly warns North Korea against provocations.

Sept. 2-3, 2015: ROK President Park Geun-hye attends a bilateral meeting in Beijing and is featured alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a military parade marking the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II.

Sept. 7-26, 2015: US and ROK Marines conduct combined exercises in northern Gyeonggi Province.

Sept. 22, 2015: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim visits South Korea.

Sept. 23, 2015: *CNN* interviews DPRK scientists at Pyongyang's General Satellite Control Center.

Sept. 23-24, 2015: US and ROK conduct ninth Korea-US Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD) in Seoul.

Sept. 25-28, 2015: President Park visits New York to deliver four addresses at the UN, including a keynote on the 70th anniversary of the UN General Assembly and speeches on health and rural

development. Park meets with Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on the sidelines and hosts a dinner for individuals from New York-based nongovernmental organizations.

Sept. 27, 2015: DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong attends the 70th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

Sept. 29, 2015: US Secretary of State John Kerry, ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, and Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio meet on the sidelines of the UNGA.

Oct. 1, 2015: Harvard's Korea Institute hosts former US ambassadors to Korea Stephen Bosworth, Kathleen Stephens, and Sung Kim at the 10th Kim Koo Foundation Forum.

Oct. 7, 2015: US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific and International Cyber security hosts testimony on *Assessing the North Korea Threat and US Policy: Strategic Patience for Effective Deterrence?*

Oct. 8, 2015: Congressional Research Service (CRS) issues report on *US-South Korea Relations*.

Oct. 10, 2015: DPRK marks the 70th anniversary of the Korean Workers Party.

Oct. 15-18, 2015: President Park visits Washington for a summit with President Barack Obama. A Joint Statement condemns North Korea's nuclear development and human rights abuses.

Oct. 19, 2015: President Park names Kim Kyou-hyun senior secretary to the president for foreign affairs and security and Cho Tae-yong first deputy director of national security.

Oct. 23, 2015: ROK Navy holds a fleet review in Busan, with participation by the US aircraft carrier the *USS Ronald Reagan*.

Nov. 1, 2015: Defense Secretary Carter and ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo visit the DMZ. US and ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairs Gen. Joseph Dunford and Gen. Lee Sun-jin hold the annual ROK-US Military Committee Meeting (MCM).

Nov. 1, 2015: South Korea-Japan-China Trilateral Summit is held at the Blue House.

Nov. 2, 2015: President Park and PM Abe meet at the Blue House.

Nov. 2, 2015: US and ROK hold the 47th Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) in Seoul.

Nov. 30, 2015: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim hosts a trilateral meeting in Washington with ROK Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Hwang Joon-kook and Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director-General for Asian and Oceanian Affairs Ishikane Kimihiro.

Dec. 10, 2015: UN Security Council addresses DPRK human rights abuses, with December president US Ambassador Samantha Power urging referral of the DPRK to the International Criminal Court.

Dec. 14 2015: Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) releases a discussion paper on *Unified Korea and the Future of the US-South Korea Alliance*.

Dec. 15, 2015: ROK and Japan hold a second round of working-level talks in as many months aimed at resolving the “comfort women” issue.

Dec. 17, 2015: US and ROK hold the fifth high-level Disarmament and Nonproliferation Consultation meeting in Washington, DC.

Dec. 28, 2015: South Korea and Japan announce a surprise agreement on “comfort women,” to include an apology and official fund for victims. PM Abe calls President Park with a “sincere apology.” National Security Advisor Susan Rice offers strong US support.

Jan. 1, 2016: DPRK leader Kim Jong Un offers a New Year address promising war against “invasive” outsiders, but withholding mention of DPRK nuclear development.

Jan. 6, 2016: North Korea claims to have successfully tested a hydrogen bomb.