



**US-Korea Relations:
Fire, Ire, and Exercises**

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US and South Korean concerns spiked in early 2016 as North Korea demonstrated worrying advances in nuclear weapon and missile technology. Despite a rather placid New Year address, Kim Jong Un raised international alarm with the DPRK's fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6. A month and a day later, North Korea launched a three-stage rocket, a direct violation of a UN missile ban. In the US, Congress passed more rigorous sanctions legislation, seeking to stem financial flows and punish second-party facilitators. On March 3, UN Security Council Resolution 2270 calling for tougher sanctions passed unanimously. Seoul added its own unilateral sanctions on March 8. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un's display of a nuclear device and reentry technology, failed intermediate-range missile tests, and a successful submarine-launched ballistic missile test added to growing concerns. ROK President Park Geun-hye called for additional multilateral efforts, such as enhanced five-nation coordination. While North Korea is pushing back hard, some observers suggest its provocations and rhetoric may be as much for domestic as foreign consumption in the lead-up to the highly anticipated Party Congress in May, a first in 36 years.

Test, launches, and threats

Seismic activity signaled the DPRK's fourth nuclear test early on Jan. 6, a test the North's media deemed a "complete success" and labeled a "hydrogen bomb." International experts downplayed the likelihood of a true thermonuclear device based on the relatively low yield of the explosion. However the likelihood of elements of such a device, the stream of invectives, and ensuing displays signaled improvements in, or at the very least aspirations toward, miniaturization and delivery of a thermonuclear device. Analysts in the US and South Korea remain divided on the extent of North Korea's advances, with Monterey's Jeffrey Lewis asserting that its technological advances have been consistently underestimated. Detractors doubt the efficacy of reentry technology without an actual long-range missile test.

Tensions heightened as North Korea railed against the upcoming US and ROK military exercises. *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle* engaged more than 300,000 ROK troops and 17,000 US forces, the largest exercise between the two allies to date. The allies tested *Operations Concept 5015 (OPCON 5015)*, which was signed in June 2015 and included preemptive strikes on the DPRK. North Korea condemned the exercises as provocative and explicitly aimed at "decapitating" Pyongyang's leadership. Some US observers applauded the increased intensity given the expanding DPRK threat, while others expressed concern that the advance signaling

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about the expansion inflamed DPRK concern. The DPRK responded with a barrage of short-range missile tests alongside its heated rhetoric.

South Korea offered an assessment that North Korea had the ability to deliver up to a 1,000-pound nuclear warhead atop its *Rodong* missile, putting South Korea and most of Japan within range. Despite the public announcement, many US analysts felt that it signaled no real technological advance, although they expressed concern about the understandable fear registered among its allies. (At the Security Council and in private, Chinese and Russian analysts also expressed growing concerns about the DPRK *Rodong* delivery threat, as well as the proximity of the January nuclear test to the Chinese and Russian borders.)

On April 15, a road-mobile intermediate-range missile test dramatically failed – a setback for North Korea’s Kim Jong Un on the anniversary of his grandfather’s birth, the DPRK’s most important holiday. Seoul and Washington were quick to point out that the failed tests pose a threat by showing DPRK intentions and providing valuable lessons learned. They also warned that following this failure, Kim might be more determined to seek success by conducting a fifth nuclear test. A late April submarine-launched ballistic missile test by the DPRK was hailed as an “eye opening” success by Kim, raising international ire at the UN, despite the missile going a mere 30km. The display was reportedly one of “cold launch,” technology, signaling a vertical launch capability from a submarine. Amid the continued tests and launches, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong, in New York for the Paris climate accords signing in late April, offered a halt to DPRK nuclear testing in exchange for cessation of US-ROK military exercises. Though dismissed by President Obama and most US and ROK analysts, some suggested it represented a potential opening that might be considered.

Park’s about face

South Korean President Park Geun-hye was quick to denounce the January test with several statements. On Jan. 13, she addressed the nation, noting the serious nature of the fourth nuclear test and calling for a strengthening of ROK-US combined defense capabilities to include enhanced missile deterrence against the DPRK. At a Jan. 19 Cabinet meeting and a meeting of her national security team on Jan. 22, Park demanded a tightening of sanctions and five-party talks. The ROK military resumed loudspeaker broadcasts (silent since the August 2015 flare-up at the DMZ) and leaflet drops across the zone. Deeply angered, President Park delivered a stern address on the floor of the ROK National Assembly on Feb. 16. She explained her break from the prior policy of engaging North Korea and the decision to shut-down the Kaesong Industrial Complex. By late spring, most US and South Korean analysts saw *trustpolitik* as dead, with little likelihood of a reboot without serious gestures by the North.

Another result of the February satellite launch, which saw first-stage debris fall off South Korea and second-stage debris off the Philippines, was a shift forward by Park on South Korea’s acceptance of the deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the peninsula. With Park first broaching the subject in her national address, ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo described THAAD as militarily necessary in late January. At the recommendation of UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, the US and ROK

issued an announcement calling for a joint evaluation of a THAAD deployment and stating that the focus would be the DPRK, not China.

Despite China's ambassador to the ROK warning of dire consequences and a delay for UN sanctions negotiations, a senior military working group met in early March to outline system deployment considerations. In addition to Chinese opposition, US and ROK officials would face an array of challenges in deploying the system, including cost and domestic opposition. *Defense News* reports a single THAAD unit of six mobile launchers, 49 interceptors, fire control and communications, and the AN/TPY-2 radar runs \$1.6 billion, making the division of costs between the allies a question. *Yonhap* notes that several Korean cities oppose being deployment sites.

Park's move on THAAD is significant. She had courted Beijing, meeting frequently with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and attending the early September Beijing commemoration of the end of World War II. The South Korean establishment hedged accordingly on THAAD, claiming a squeeze between the US and China. Rising anxiety about the North changed that equation fundamentally, leading Park to disregard Xi's concerns. Adding fuel to the fire, Xi reportedly waited a month after the DPRK nuclear test to take Park's call, unusual given the perception of a warm relationship between the two, who had met numerous times since assuming their respective presidencies in 2012.

All options on the table

Washington also condemned the latest DPRK action. Congress underscored its displeasure with the Senate voting 96-0 in support of [House Resolution 757](#), the *North Korea Sanctions Policy and Enhancement Act of 2016*. The measures provided for a tightening of the financial noose and secondary sanctions, with an eye to nuclear, missile, human rights, and cyber security threats. President Obama signed the bill into law mid-February, and on March 18 issued [Executive Order 13722](#), *Blocking Property of the Government of North Korea and the Workers Party of Korea, and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to North Korea*.

US military leaders underscored their resolve. US Pacific Command's Adm. Harry Harris, alongside UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Scaparrotti, testified in late February before the Senate and House Armed Services Committees that all options were on the table, including, in direct response to a Senate query, striking DPRK nuclear facilities. They noted support for THAAD deployment and other increases in capabilities. Their testimony, alongside US-ROK exercises, reflected an uptick in threat assessment, driven home in April by the Hill testimony of the incoming US commander in Korea, Gen. Vincent Brooks. He condemned the DPRK threat as real, immediate and advancing, with a focus on DPRK technological enhancements.

Electoral sway

Domestic politics in both South Korea and the US took their own turns, raising some questions about national security positions. In South Korea, President Park and the ruling Saenuri party were dealt a serious blow in the April National Assembly elections, which left the conservative party without a parliamentary majority for the first time since 2000. Saenuri secured only 122 seats in contrast to the opposition Minjoo Party's 123 seats and the opposition breakaway

People's Party, led by tech titan Ahn Cheol-soo, a surprising 38 seats. Though voter concerns appeared to be primarily economic, focusing on jobs, household debt, and an economic morass associated with China's slowdown, observers suggested that some voters were signaling concern that the shift away from engagement with the North, especially with the shuttering of Kaesong, was too much.

New York Times Seoul bureau chief Choe Sang-hun suggested in the election aftermath that President Park might turn now toward primarily foreign and security policy areas, given likely gridlock on economic reform with a split Parliament. He pointed to her interest in President Obama's legacy strides with Myanmar and Cuba. However, most US analysts feel the personal, degrading diatribe against Park by the DPRK during her tenure and the National Assembly floor speech effectively closes off any political space for a meeting with Kim Jong Un. Talk of an inter-Korean leaders meeting has been a flirtation popular with South Korea's presidents concerned with a late-term legacy. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in Seoul in April, invoked Iran, Myanmar, and Cuba when addressing the benefits of negotiation over conflict in dealing with North Korea. The battle over the 2017 ROK presidential elections meanwhile is accelerating. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and People's Party head Ahn Cheol-soo appear to be possible candidates in the wake of the April National Assembly elections.

By way of US electoral politics and national security concerns, South Korean and US media reacted with puzzlement and alarm over leading Republican contender Donald Trump's comments on April 2 that Seoul (alongside Tokyo and Berlin) would need to increase burden-sharing for US forces. Implying a free ride for South Korea – quickly disputed publicly by US Ambassador to Korea Mark Lippert – Trump also suggested that South Korea and Japan should pursue their own nuclear weapons development as a counter to the threat from North Korea, raising the dangerous specter of an arms race in East Asia. The topsy-turvy nature of the US presidential primary campaign season is unsettling to many South Korean observers of the US political process, fueling quiet thoughts of developing more autonomous capabilities and questions about US long-term commitment.

Chronology of US-Korea Relations

January – April 2016

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 conducts a fourth nuclear test of what it claims is a hydrogen bomb. Analysts dismiss the likelihood of a thermonuclear device.

Jan 13, 2016: ROK President Park Geun-hye addresses the public on the North Korean threat after the nuclear test and calls for enhancements in ROK-US defense readiness, to include consideration of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system.

Jan. 15, 2016: The US Congressional Research Service releases its report, *North Korea-US Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy and the Internal Situation*.

Jan. 16, 2016: US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets ROK Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Lim Sung-nam and Japanese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Saiki Akitaka in Tokyo to discuss trilateral cooperation in response to the DPRK nuclear test and other issues.

Jan. 18-19, 2016: ROK Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Shin Dong-ik meets UN ambassadors from the US, China, Japan, UK, and other permanent and nonpermanent UNSC member nations.

Jan. 19-20, 2016: Deputy Secretary of State Blinken meets ROK Foreign Affairs Minister Yun Byung-se and ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo in Seoul, calling on China to play an “active leadership” role on DPRK nuclear concerns.

Jan. 25, 2016: Defense Minister Han Min-koo describes THAAD deployment as a military necessity, a shift forward from the ROK’s prior wavering.

Jan. 26-27, 2016: US Secretary of State John Kerry meets Chinese President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss the North Korean nuclear test and a UN Security Council sanctions resolution.

Jan. 27-28, 2016: US Undersecretary for Political Affairs-designate Thomas Shannon visits the DMZ and holds bilateral discussions on the ROK-US alliance, global cooperation, and North Korea policy.

Feb. 7, 2016: North Korea launches a satellite, the *Kwangmyongsong-4*, in violation of UN missile bans.

Feb. 8, 2016: UN Security Council meets and strongly condemns DPRK launch.

Feb. 9, 2016: Presidents Park Geun-hye and Barack Obama and then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo discuss the DPRK’s satellite launch by phone.

Feb. 9, 2016: US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper confirms the DPRK has facilities capable of uranium enrichment and a plutonium production facility at Yongbyon, which was shuttered in 2007. He cautions that plutonium could be reprocessed in weeks to months.

Feb. 9, 2016: Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se meets in New York with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Secretary of State Kerry on a stricter UN resolution against the DPRK.

Feb. 10, 2016: US Senate passes HR 757 (North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016) with a 96-0 vote, aimed at the DPRK’s nuclear development, human rights violations, and cyber threat.

Feb. 10, 2016: President Park announces the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Feb. 11, 2016: Gen. Joseph Dunford, Gen. Lee Sun-jin (remote) and Adm. Kawano Katsutoshi address measures to counter the DPRK threat, such as trilateral intelligence sharing.

Feb. 12, 2016: US State Department Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs releases a [*Fact Sheet on US Relations with North Korea*](#).

Feb. 16, 2016: President Park addresses the National Assembly on the shift to a hardline policy against North Korea, including the Kaesong shutdown.

Feb. 18, 2016: President Obama signs HR 757, the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act, into law.

Feb. 18, 2016: Deputy Secretary of State Blinken and ROK Deputy National Security Advisor Cho Tae-yong meet in Washington to discuss North Korea provocations.

Feb 19, 2016: US Naval Forces Korea opens new headquarters in Busan, following relocation from Yongsan.

Feb. 23-24, 2016: Commander, US Pacific Command Adm. Harry Harris and UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Scaparrotti provide Congressional testimony on DPRK provocations.

Feb. 26, 2016: Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel meets Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se and Deputy Minister Kim Hong-kyun in Seoul to discuss DPRK provocations and bilateral and regional issues.

March 2, 2016: Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se delivers a keynote address to the UN Human Rights Council, underscoring cooperation against DPRK human rights abuses.

March 2, 2016: UNSC unanimously adopts Resolution 2270, the strongest sanctions yet imposed on the DPRK.

March 3, 2016: US and ROK launch a High-Level Bilateral Commission on Nuclear Energy in Washington to better coordinate nuclear cooperation as part of the new 123 Agreement.

March 4, 2016: US and ROK agree to create a joint working group on THAAD deployment.

March 7-April 7, 2016: US and ROK Marine Corps share in the enlarged *Ssang Yong 2016* military exercises, a biennial amphibious landing drill.

March 7-April 30, 2016: US and ROK conduct the *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle* combined exercises. Command post exercise *Key Resolve* runs March 7-18.

March 11, 2016: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Sung Kim and ROK Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Kim Hong-kyun meet in Washington to discuss DPRK nuclear issues.

March 16, 2016: The White House issues Presidential Executive Order 13722, leveling new sanctions against the DPRK.

March 21, 2016: Defense Secretary Carter announces the nomination of US Army Pacific Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks to replace Gen. Scaparrotti as UNC/CFC/USFK commander.

March 21, 2016: Special Representative Sung Kim and Sanctions Policy Coordinator Daniel Fried meet Special Representative Kim Hong-kyun in Seoul to address UNSCR 2270, unilateral sanctions, and international coordination on DPRK provocations.

March 23, 2016: UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopts a resolution on DPRK human rights, renewing the mandate of the special rapporteur and calling for a panel of independent experts to recommend mechanisms of accountability for the victims and ICC.

March 24, 2016: The Blue House holds an ad-hoc emergency National Security Council session to address inter-Korean tensions resulting from photos in the DPRK's *Rodong Sinmun* of bombing drills targeting key Seoul facilities.

March 25, 2016: State Department releases a fact sheet offering US support and co-sponsorship of the UNHRC resolution on DPRK human rights.

March 31-April 1, 2016: President Obama and President Park attend the fourth and final Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in Washington. They meet Prime Minister Abe on the sidelines.

April 2-6, 2016: US Ambassador for North Korean Human Rights Robert King visits Korea, urging consideration of all human rights violators in the DPRK regime.

April 13, 2016: President Park and ruling Saenuri party lose seats in the National Assembly elections. The opposition parties gain seats and mandates.

April 14, 2016: US and ROK hold a first meeting of the High-Level Bilateral Commission on Nuclear Energy, chaired by ROK Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Cho Tae-yul and Deputy Secretary of Energy Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall.

April 15, 2016: DPRK intermediate-range missile launch fails on the anniversary of Kim Il Sung's birth.

April 19, 2016: Incoming UNC/CFC/USFK Commander Gen. Brooks defends the cost effectiveness of stationing troops in Korea in Congressional testimony.

April 23, 2016: DPRK conducts a submarine-launched ballistic missile launch off its east coast.

April 23, 2016: DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong proposes in an interview a halt to DPRK testing in exchange for a curtailment of US-ROK military exercises.