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US-KOREA RELATIONS

UNREST AND TESTS

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North Korea opened the final months of 2016 with a bang by conducting its fifth nuclear test on Sept. 9. It followed up with a series of rocket and missile tests, culminating the year with Kim Jong Un's claim of an imminent long-range ballistic missile capability. Yet, political transition in South Korea and the United States proved the hallmarks of late 2016, suggesting potential shifts in the approaches on the Peninsula, while underscoring the firm commitment of the US and ROK to their alliance. The Park-Choi scandal led to massive protests the final two months of the year and an impeachment vote on Dec. 9 by the National Assembly, confusing political observers about the implications for South Korean political stability. Donald Trump's surprise victory in the US raised questions among Koreans about US reliability as an alliance partner.

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More DPRK tests and new claims

In early September, North Korea took several actions that increased tensions in the region. First, it launched three missiles into Japanese territorial waters on Sept. 5. (The DPRK previously launched ballistic missiles on April 15, April 23, April 27, April 28, May 31, June 21, July 9, July 18, August 2, and August 23.) The US “strongly” [condemned](#) the action, which the State Department spokesman characterized as “far too common in the past several months.” On Sept. 9, North Korea upped the ante and conducted its fifth nuclear test, defying UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2270. The resultant 5.3 magnitude tremor indicated a significant test – similar to or exceeding January’s fourth test, which had a 10 kiloton yield. Its first test a decade prior was of barely a single kiloton yield. South Korea described the Sept. 9 test as the “largest” to date; some US experts suggested the possibility of a 20-30 kiloton yield, far in excess of the 15 ton yield at Hiroshima.

The international community expressed outrage. ROK President Park Geun-hye condemned the act as “self-destruction” and “maniacal recklessness,” and the US warned of “serious consequences.” The US, South Korea, and Japan, which have enhanced their trilateral coordination markedly over the year in response to rapid DPRK nuclear and missile developments, called an emergency closed-door session of the UN Security Council, which strongly condemned the test and called for significant measures. China expressed “resolute opposition” to the DPRK test, but demurred on further action. After nearly two months of negotiation to achieve a new resolution, the UNSC adopted [Resolution 2321](#), which addressed illicit use of diplomatic pouch services by North Korean diplomats, illegal labor-related remittances, increased inspections of DPRK-flagged aircraft, and limitations on coal exports, among other measures. North Korea brushed aside the criticism and continued its intermediate-range missile tests. However, its attempted *Musudan* launches on Oct. 14 and Oct. 20 failed.

At yearend, Kim Jong Un reminded the world in his annual [New Year](#) speech that North Korea is serious about becoming a global nuclear threat by claiming an imminent long-range ballistic missile capability. While experts acknowledged North Korean progress on developing its missile technology, there was also skepticism about its imminence. President-elect Trump managed to overstate Kim’s claim by tweeting “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of

developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won’t happen!”

In late 2016, US policy observers, scholars, and think tanks readied analyses on the DPRK challenge and suggested a range of responses with the new US administration in mind. Several analysts warned of a possible early nuclear or long-range missile test by North Korea to challenge the incoming US administration, while others cautioned (or hoped) that the DPRK might test dialogue before weapons and opt for a wait-and-see attitude.

Pondering political change

Anticipated changes in administrations in Washington and Seoul – both unexpected, but for different reasons – created concern in both capitals about the stability of the US-ROK relationship. In Washington, South Korean fears of Trump presidency became real on Nov. 8. In Seoul, the strength of the Park administration’s commitment to strengthening the alliance seemed less certain following the impeachment of Park on Dec. 9.

Throughout fall and early winter, ROK delegations – official and unofficial – visited the United States to ascertain the potential for US policy shifts toward the Peninsula in what most thought would be a new Clinton administration. A few high-level visits were postponed as attention shifted to Park’s predicament, but Korean policy makers and analysts continued to press their US counterparts on the implications of the Republican win in the November elections. Much of the concern was driven by Donald Trump’s comments during the presidential campaign challenging the value of the US alliances and demanding more compensation for stationing US military forces abroad – he even suggested that South Korea and Japan should develop their own nuclear weapons. Yet, after the election he moved quickly to mute concern over those comments and suggested a potential meeting with North Korea’s leader. In one of his first calls as president-elect, Trump assured President Park of the solidity of the US commitment to the alliance and shared concern over North Korea.

Americans in turn pondered events in Seoul – in the end largely viewing the [massive protests](#) as a sign of democratic resilience and the strength of civil society. Nevertheless, US observers wondered about the impact of the Dec. 9 impeachment vote by the National Assembly, and, if upheld by Korea’s Constitutional Court, who might emerge as president and what might be new policy directions. Wrapped up in the protests

against Park was the issue of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system deployment to South Korea. It appears uncertain whether the US system will be in place prior to the next presidency or factor in as an issue in campaign debates.

Path to impeachment

Accusations against President Park Geun-hye and her intimate friend Choi Soon-sil of influence peddling – with almost \$70 million raised among Korea’s top conglomerates, or *chaebol*, for two foundations being the centerpiece – and Choi’s access to classified information led South Korea’s National Assembly to its Dec. 9 impeachment vote. Public protests grew over the final two months of the year, with several Saturday night gatherings topping 2 million people. The Seoul protests drew US media interest with some observers suggesting the outcry matched or exceeded the size of the protests that followed Park Chung-hee’s coup in 1961 and the Kwangju massacre in 1980, and were as significant as those of the 1987 democratic movement.

Concern over access to President Park’s speeches and decisions by Choi, a friend and spiritual advisor befriended after the assassination of Park’s mother in 1974, led to accusations of undue influence and strong-arm tactics designed to enrich Choi and possibly Park herself. Though ostensibly for sport and culture, the foundations that benefited were possible slush funds for Choi and, some suggested, for Park for life after her presidential tenure. Meetings between the president and 17 – and then seven – of the largest *chaebol* leaders to solicit pledges raised eyebrows, as did a litany of subsequent accounts of business support for Choi’s daughter’s equestrian training, Choi’s business interests in Germany, a male host’s dispute with Choi, a video of presidential clothing purchased at significant discount, and a Blue House stash of Viagra, ostensibly to negate altitude sickness for a presidential delegation visiting Africa, but never used.

Questions were also raised over the timeline of President Park’s activities during the tragic sinking of the *Sewol*, the 2014 ferry disaster that claimed some 300 lives, mostly school children. Beyond conjecture and public dismay, Park faced rapidly diminishing public approval ratings, which at year’s end were less than 5 percent among the general population, 1 percent for Koreans under age 40, and 0 percent for Koreans under age 30, according to Gallup. The fate of Park’s impeachment now lays with the ROK’s Constitutional Court, which has 180 days in which to act. Some analysts predicted a decision by early/mid-March. If

upheld, a presidential election must be held within 60 days.

A THAAD negative

The impact of the impeachment debacle for the US lies with the dwindling prospects for a president who had been seen as a strong supporter of the United States, and most importantly for the prospects of the THAAD deployment. By autumn of 2016, many opposition lawmakers had grudgingly accepted THAAD, especially after Chinese heavy handedness earlier in the year led Koreans to view the issue as one of national defense. Sovereignty and security concerns led several progressive National Assembly members who had originally opposed THAAD to agree with the deployment, unless China was willing to trade its support of North Korea as a security guarantee in return. On Nov. 5, US Forces Korea Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks [stated](#) that the THAAD system would be deployed to Korea within 8-10 months.

The buildup in public protests over THAAD in November and December, however, led to conjecture that Choi may have influenced President Park on the THAAD decision and opposition lawmakers suggested that the deployment could be a significant issue in a presidential campaign. This makes timing of the presidential election critically important. A delayed decision by the Constitutional Court or a decision rejecting impeachment, leaving Park in office, would mean a greater likelihood of deployment. A presidential campaign that led to a victory by former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, a centrist and US supporter, would also likely ensure THAAD deployment. Leading opposition candidate Moon Jae-in, former head of the opposition Minjoo party, suggested in mid-December that “it is inappropriate for the THAAD deployment process to go on under the current political circumstances,” although he [suggested](#) a renegotiation that would not damage relations with the United States. Nevertheless, an opposition victory in the next election might not prove a death knell for THAAD given the scramble for solutions to North Korea’s rapidly evolving capabilities and in keeping with Korean history on such issues – President Roh Moo-hyun reversed his 2002 campaign pledges deemed anti-American once in office and became a strong supporter of the alliance.

Alliance management

The most significant meeting between South Korean and US officials in the closing months of 2016 took place on Oct. 19 in Washington when Secretary of State John

Kerry and Defense Secretary Ash Carter met ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se and Defense Minister Han Min-koo for a 2+2 meeting, marking the fourth such meeting since 2010. The defense chiefs met separately at the Pentagon the following day as well. Underscoring shared values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, the 2+2 [joint statement](#) described the alliance as a “linchpin” of peace and security for the Peninsula and region. Kerry and Carter spoke of the “ironclad and unwavering US commitment to draw on the full range of its military capabilities, including the US nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense capabilities, to provide extended deterrence for the ROK.” A new development in that direction was establishment of a senior-level Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) comprised of relevant foreign and defense officials. The secretaries and ministers expressed support for a conditions-based operational control transition plan (COT-P) and the THAAD deployment, which they underscored as being aimed solely at the DPRK missile threat and not impacting the “strategic deterrent of other nations in the region,” read China.

The EDSCG met on Dec. 20 in Washington as a follow-on to the October meeting and in support of extended deterrence, noting 2016 efforts such as the *B-52* strategic bomber flights, ROK observation of a *Minuteman III* launch, and a Nov. 1 visit by ROK officials aboard a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) during its port visit to Guam. The [joint statement](#) issued at the close of the meeting stated that the EDSCG aims to increase alliance discussions on how to “best tailor our response to the evolving threat” from the DPRK.

The 2+2 meeting in October also underscored cooperation on cyber issues, space, and health, the so-called “new frontier” issues. It offered positive support for a first meeting next summer by the Defense Technology Strategy and Cooperation Group (DTSCG) and economic and trade cooperation through the KORUS FTA at a time when both US presidential campaigns were calling into question the efficacy of trade pacts. At the center of discussions, however, was the unprecedented level of missile and nuclear tests by North Korea in recent months and a desire to together take “concrete measures” to counter those threats.

In its [Oct. 20 report](#) on US-South Korea Relations, the Congressional Research Service noted that “North Korea’s nuclear weapons tests and missile launches in 2016 ... appear to have eased differences between

Seoul’s and Washington’s approaches to North Korea and many of their differences on China.” The CRS report and other analyses, one most notably by the Council on Foreign Relations’ Scott Snyder and Pacific Forum’s Brad Glosserman, on “[a return to normal](#)” between US allies Korea and Japan, underscored the improvement in trilateral relations since 2015. The growing threat posed by DPRK nuclear and missile tests has served the purpose of mitigating or erasing disputes or ruptures. In effect, the DPRK tests unite the United States, Korea, and Japan – and to some degree through two UNSC resolutions, bring even China and Russia to the table to oppose such development.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2016

Sept. 5, 2016: DPRK launches three ballistic missiles into Japanese territorial waters.

Sept. 6, 2016: UNSC condemns DPRK missile launches.

Sept. 9, 2016: DPRK conducts its fifth nuclear test.

Sept. 13, 2016: US House Speaker Paul Ryan [tells](#) visiting ROK National Assembly members that “strong US-Korea economic and defense ties are critical to the safety and prosperity of both nations.”

Sept. 14, 2016: US Secretary of State John Kerry extends *Chuseok* (Thanksgiving) greetings to South Korea, noting the strength of the alliance and shared common vision between the peoples of the US and Korea.

Sept. 18, 2016: US Secretary of State John Kerry, Japanese Foreign Minister Kishida Fumio, and South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se meet in New York to discuss responses to North Korea’s latest nuclear test.

Sept. 19, 2016: Vice President Joseph Biden convenes a trilateral meeting of US, ROK, and Japan health experts to discuss trilateral collaboration on the Cancer Moonshot Initiative, aimed at enhancing research and data sharing on finding a cure for cancer.

Sept. 26, 2016: US and South Korean navies conducted a joint exercise near the North Korean maritime border. The exercise marks the first time joint forces conducted naval training in an area closest to North Korea’s maritime border in the East Sea or Sea of Japan.

Oct. 6-11, 2016: US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power travels to Japan and South Korea to discuss DPRK nuclear and missile programs and meet North Korean defectors on DPRK to discuss human rights abuses.

Oct. 10-15, 2016: US and ROK conduct [Invincible Spirit](#) naval exercises to “strengthen maritime interoperability and tactics, techniques and procedures,” in South Korean waters.

Oct. 11, 2016: President Park Geun-hye tells ROK government to prepare for large-scale defections from DPRK, days after a direct appeal to its citizens to flee their country.

Oct. 14, 2016: DPRK conducts a failed intermediate-range missile test.

Oct. 17, 2016: UN press statement condemns DPRK failed missile test.

Oct. 18, 2016: US State Department releases *US Relations with North Korea* [Fact Sheet](#).

Oct. 19, 2016: South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se and Defense Minister Han visit Washington and meet Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter for the fourth US-ROK 2+2 meeting. They agree to establish an “Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group,” which is described as a US commitment “to defend South Korea through a robust combined defense posture and through extended deterrence, including the US nuclear umbrella, conventional strike and missile defense capabilities.”

Oct. 20, 2016: North Korea fails again to launch an intermediate range *Musudan* missile.

Oct. 21, 2016: DPRK sends a letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon condemning the “forced adoption of anti-DPRK” sanctions.

Oct. 26-27, 2016: US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken visits Japan for fifth round of deputy-level US-Japan-South Korea trilateral consultations.

Oct. 28-29, 2016: Deputy Secretary Blinken visits South Korea to discuss strategies to deal with North Korea.

Nov. 5, 2016: United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/US Forces Korea Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks announces THAAD deployment within 8-10 months.

Nov. 30, 2016: UN Security Council Resolution 2321 is adopted. It aims at tougher sanctions to punish North Korea for its September nuclear test.

Dec. 1, 2016: North Korea “categorically rejects” heightened sanctions and the latest UNSC resolution.

Dec. 9, 2016: UN Security Council holds a session on DPRK human rights abuses, which is dismissed by China as not a “forum for discussing human rights issues, still less for the politicization of such issues.”

Dec. 9, 2016: South Korea’s National Assembly votes to impeach President Park Geun-hye.

Dec. 19, 2016: US hosts US-ROK-Japan Experts meeting on Cybersecurity of Critical Infrastructure addressing malicious cyber activity and coordinated responses.

Dec. 20, 2016: US-ROK Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group meets, underscoring America’s “ironclad an unwavering commitment” to ROK defense.