



**US-Korea Relations:
Strengthened Resolve as North Korea Rumbles**

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The first quadrimester of 2014 in US-Korea relations concluded with a visit by President Barack Obama. Making up for his 2013 miss of both the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders Meeting, Obama's visit came at an uncertain time in Korean developments: South Korea was in the troughs of a national tragedy with a ferry sinking claiming some 300 lives, North Korea threatened to steal the show with preparations for a fourth nuclear test, and regional tensions remained high amidst territorial and historical disputes. Though Obama sought to temper tensions between Korea and Japan in a late March meeting at The Hague, his hopes for progress in bringing together President Park and Prime Minister Abe saw little progress. During his fourth visit to Seoul (his most visited foreign capital), Obama offered sympathies to the families of the victims of the *Sewol* ferry disaster and assurances with Park on North Korean rumblings. He also visited with the US business community and US military forces.

North Korea's step-up in activity at the Punggye-ri site followed its warning a month prior to Obama's visit of a "new form of nuclear test," suggesting a uranium device, which heightened international concern. North Korea returned to a pattern of bellicose spring rhetoric for the second year under Kim Jong Un, ostensibly as a counter to US-ROK military exercises and continuing through April. The DPRK also fired some 90 rockets over a period of four weeks. This rapid escalation in belligerence seemingly negated earlier diplomatic overtures, with Kim's New Year address endorsing unification and closer cooperation with South Korea, and the reunion of divided families in late February held despite the beginning of the military exercises between South Korea and the US. Kim began the year at North Korea's new Masik Pass ski resort, perhaps a nod to the Sochi Games, from which the DPRK was absent, or as an odd counter to the Sochi closing ceremonies' focus on South Korea's Pyeongchang 2018. Kim's diplomatic run leveled off with the warmer months seeing tensions mount.

Ending the Cold War

Perhaps the most dramatic statement of the period, aside from those associated with President Obama's visit, was Park Geun-hye's March 28 Dresden address. The historic statement at the Dresden University of Technology – expected by some to echo Reagan's call to Gorbachev to "tear down this wall" and invoking the German experience – laid out a three-point proposal: regularize reunions and aid mothers and infants in the North; collaborate in development with China and Russia, invest in infrastructure, transportation, and telecommunications, and jointly develop natural resources; and establish an inter-Korean exchange and cooperation office and people-to-people exchanges.

Sadly the international media failed to give much coverage to the overture, largely as a result of global attention on Russia's annexation of Crimea and threat to Ukraine, which dominated the news cycle. The Park team sought to flush out its *trustpolitik* process regardless, especially with the absence of an overt DPRK rejection. South Korean officials emphasized the importance of Park's early January description of a "jackpot," or "bonanza," associated with unification – in essence a win-win with a united Korea emerging strong economically and politically.

Happy New Year, less one uncle

The year began relatively quietly when compared to 2013's close, as Kim Jung Un struck a somewhat benign tone in his New Year address, and Americans and South Koreans weighed the implications of the earlier arrest and execution of Kim's uncle and number-two, Jang Song Thaek. Reports between January and April indicated a subsequent purge of Jang associates with the arrest and execution of 200 of his closest supporters and imprisonment of 1,000 others. Analysts were split on whether the moves signaled a tightening of control under the young Kim or a power struggle unfolding beneath the surface. An early March US Defense Department report to Congress argued that "the sudden and brutal purge sends a strong message to regime elites that the formation of factions or potential challenges to Kim Jong Un will not be tolerated."

Arguably the oddest note of the New Year saw roving "ambassador" and ex-NBA star Dennis Rodman perform "happy birthday" for Kim on Jan. 8, backed by an awkward lineup of former NBA players there for an exhibition game with North Korean players. Several of the US participants apologized on their return to the US, where Rodman entered rehabilitation for alcoholism (the DPRK reportedly suggested he might not be allowed back until he'd addressed his troubles).

Signaling ROK-US cooperation

The day after President Park's Jan. 6 assertion of a win-win for unified Korea, Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se underscored the solidity of the US-Korea alliance and common cause in encouraging China to rein in North Korea (to the degree possible) on the nuclear front. They also underscored South Korean interest in the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership (TPP) and cooperation on global issues.

Following on the 2013 series of large-scale cyber-attacks on South Korean networks (commonly attributed to North Korea), the US and Korean defense ministries launched a Cyber Cooperation Working Group, with the first working-level meeting held on Feb. 7. ROK Defense Ministry policy director Jang Hyuk and US counterpart John Davis agreed to increase intelligence sharing on cyber threats and explore ways to advance cyber policy, joint warfare capabilities, and training programs. Korean and US officials held a table-top exercise with hypothetical attack scenarios identifying vulnerabilities in respective response systems and discussed detailed countermeasures.

In military exercises, Combined Forces Command oversaw the *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle* exercises. Some 5,200 US forces, with 1,100 from off the Peninsula, and forces from major ROK military units representing all services participated in *Key Resolve*, the annual command-post

exercise that took place Feb. 24-March 6. The annual *Foal Eagle* took place Feb. 24-April 18 with a series of joint and combined field training exercises involving CFC and USFK components spanning ground, air, naval, expeditionary, and special operations. Some 7,500 US forces participated in *Foal Eagle*, with 5,100 coming from off-Peninsula, alongside forces from major ROK units representing all services. Some 200,000 South Korean troops participated with the 12,700 Americans over both exercises.

Despite assurances of the defense-related nature of the exercises, Pyongyang voiced its displeasure, albeit in a more reserved manner than the past. Despite concern that it might repeat its cancellation of the family reunions, those meetings – the first since 2010 – took place over six days, beginning Feb. 20 to widespread media interest. The 439 individuals who participated were a small fraction of the 129,200 who applied, but the Mount Kumgang-sited meetings appeared emotional and often heartbreaking, providing President Park with further impetus for her Dresden address late March.

In response to the joint exercises, Pyongyang conducted what the Pentagon described as “low-level” actions, from rocket launches to brief incursions of a patrol boat across the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL) maritime border. Early March saw *Scud C* firings, and late March a volley of artillery between North Korea, where 100 of 500 rounds launched by North Korea landed in South Korean waters. South Korea displayed its heightened proportional response, firing 300 rounds into North Korean waters.

Assessing developments

February saw the release of two helpful studies in Washington – an update of the Chronology of US-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy by the Arms Control Association, and the release of the comprehensive report titled *U.S.-South Korean Relations* by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), prepared by Mark Manyin (Asian Affairs), Emma Chanlett-Avery (Asian Affairs), Ian Rinehart (Asian Affairs), Mary Beth Nikitin (Nonproliferation), and William Cooper (International Trade and Finance). The report pointed to a “deepen[ing of] the reservoir of trust” between the Park and Obama administrations, with a fundamental question for Congress and the administration being “to what extent they will support – or not oppose – Park’s possible inter-Korean initiatives.”

On Feb. 17, the UN released a 39-page outline of its Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on North Korean human rights violations to massive media and public attention. Panel head Michael Kirby – one of three international jurists charged with the year-long study after United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay’s call for international attention – likened the DPRK atrocities to that of the Nazi era. The full 372-page report came a month later in Geneva at the 25th Session of the Human Rights Council; Kirby stated that “the gravity, scale, duration and nature of the unspeakable atrocities committed in the country reveal a totalitarian State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.” The US applauded the commission for holding public hearings in Seoul, Tokyo, London, and Washington and the subsequent report, which it deemed “clearly and unequivocally documents the brutal reality” of North Korean human rights abuses. The US was co-sponsor of the resolution that established the COI in March 2013, alongside South Korea, Japan, and the European Union. The Korea Society and Council on

Foreign Relations, both based in New York, held special sessions to broadcast the findings more widely for the media and general public.

A March 6 Experts Panel Report to the UN Security Council recommended that UN member states should significantly improve implementation of existing sanctions to delay DPRK nuclear development rather than passing new measures. The report noted “multiple and tiered circumvention techniques” by the DPRK. According to the panel, the July 2013 interdiction of a North Korean ship carrying Cuban weapons provided “unrivalled insight” into the manner in which Pyongyang circumvents sanctions.

Marking KORUS FTA at two years

In mid-March, the second anniversary of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, the Office of the US Trade Representative hailed the “strong results emerging, as the agreement delivers new opportunities for American businesses and workers.” It highlighted Korea’s growth since implementation as the sixth largest US trading partner and an increase in the export of manufactured goods to Korea, Korean purchases of more US services, and US exports of agricultural goods. Korea saw a shoring up of its investment climate given strong provisions on intellectual property rights, services, and investment. At an early March meeting of the Korea-US Economic Council in Seoul, Korea International Trade Association President Han Duck-soo argued that “exports to the United States have increased under difficult circumstances thanks to the KORUS FTA.” Opinions among business leaders were more divided, with some expressing a desire to see more rapid progress and questioning the agreement’s impact to date.

Healing rifts and shoring resolve

Given the deterioration of relations between allies Korea and Japan, President Obama used the Nuclear Security Summit at The Hague for a necessary sidebar. On March 25, he met President Park Geun-hye and Prime Minister Abe Shinzo for a US-ROK-Japan trilateral meeting, hailing this as the “first time for the three of us ... to meet together and discuss the serious challenges that we all face.” Describing Korea and Japan as two of the United States’ closest, significant and powerful allies, he reminded the two of the deep ties between their two peoples, extraordinary cross-trade, and shared concern about North Korea and its nuclear program. But in the weeks that followed, and with more controversial shrine visits by Japanese officials just before Obama’s visit, little progress was made.

The DPRK signaled its displeasure at the trilateral meeting by launching *Scud C* missiles into the East Sea; it followed with a launch of *Nodong* mid-range missiles in its longest-range test since December 2012. The missiles traveled 650 km, about half their range, prompting Japan’s defense minister to order a shoot down of any missiles fired near Japan between April 3 and 25. South Korea responded to North Korea’s actions by testing its own new longer-range missile with a range of 500 km on April 5 and also committing to development of an 800 km missile. These moves provoked concern among some US analysts.

Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, USFK commander, testified on March 26 before the Senate Armed Service Committee that the dozens of missiles fired by the DPRK since late February indicated a

capability to launch “on short notice, with very little warning” and described Kim Jong Un as more dangerous and unpredictable than his father, Kim Jong Il. In addressing the consolidation of US troops south of Seoul, he noted that initial US troop relocation to Camp Humphreys (Pyeongtaek) should begin in 2014, with most forces moving in 2016, despite a timeline delay of three months. The relocations will realize hubs in Pyeongtaek and Daegu, with the Humphreys area increasing from 9,000 to 24,000. The project was delayed from 2008 to 2012 and now 2016.

Early April saw a Washington-based senior working-level follow-on meeting to the US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Meeting. Described as “productive, substantive,” the April 7 meeting included a restatement to the September 2005 Joint Statement of the Six Party talks, affirmation of the UNSC unanimous condemnation of recent DPRK ballistic missile launches (violating resolutions 1718, 1874, 2087 and 2094), and condemnation of DPRK human rights abuses.

A third trilateral meeting focused on security issues was held on April 17-18 in Washington among South Korea, the United States and Japan to explore ways to cooperate in addressing DPRK nuclear weapons threats and missile launches, especially given a firing of two medium-range ballistic missiles the day prior. The Pentagon meeting, led by Chief of Staff for the Secretary of Defense Mark Lippert, ROK Deputy Minister for Policy of the Ministry of National Defense Yoo Jeh Seung, and Director General of the Japanese Defense Ministry’s Defense Policy Bureau Hideshi Tokuchi saw a reaffirmation for a coordinated response and close cooperation on the DPRK nuclear, ballistic missile and proliferation programs, as well as in non-traditional security areas, such as disaster relief.

Providing support, condolences and assurances

The US Navy amphibious assault ship *USS Bonhomme Richard*, a Seventh Fleet ship that took part in *Foal Eagle*’s Ssang Yong amphibious landing, responded on April 16 to the sinking of the *Sewol*, a South Korean ferry carrying 475 passengers, many of school age. The US ship, which had been conducting routine maritime operations when the ferry sinking took place, dispatched *MH-60* helicopters for search-and-rescue operations (with its embarked Marine expeditionary unit, the ship is capable of both combat and humanitarian operations). Some 302 lives were lost in the ferry tragedy, which left Koreans expressing tremendous grief over the loss of life and anger at the crew, shipping company operators, and public officials.

On April 17 from Washington, President Obama expressed condolences to the families of the victims, describing the bonds of friendship between the US and Korean peoples as “strong and enduring.” Obama stated that, “our hearts ache to see our Korean friends going through such a terrible loss, especially the loss of so many young students.” He noted that during his Seoul visit, he would emphasize that “America’s commitment to our ally South Korea is unwavering – in good times and in bad. As the Korean people deal with this heartbreaking tragedy, they will have the unending support and friendship of the United States.”

South Korea’s state of national mourning provided for a somber arrival by President Obama on April 25. North Korea sought to divert attention by readying for a fourth nuclear test at Punggye-ri. Obama’s trip to Seoul also coincided with the DPRK’s public holiday marking the founding of its 1.2 million-strong army. But in what some analysts saw as a sign of an inter-Korean thaw,

North Korea did offer condolences through its hotline at Panmunjom (It also may have delayed the nuclear test for fear of offending South Korean sentiment). That in no way lessened concern regarding test preparations, which the *38 North* blog highlighted on April 23. The same day, Obama called Chinese President Xi Jinping, urging China to take “critically important” steps to curtail DPRK plans.

On his arrival in the ROK, President Obama laid a wreath at the National War Memorial, visited Gyeongbok Palace, and met President Park at the Blue House. In the joint press conference that followed, Park described US-Korea defense capabilities in the face of the DRPK threat as “solid and [they] will be further cemented.” The two agreed to a delay of the transfer of Operational Control (OPCON), which Seoul had been pressing. She described North Korea’s weapons development and desire for economic development as “incompatible.” In turn, Obama described South Korea and the United States as standing “shoulder-to-shoulder” in the face of DPRK provocation after first expressing US sorrow over the ferry tragedy, offering a US flag that had flown over the White House the day of the disaster and a magnolia tree from the South Lawn for Danwon High School, which many of the victims attended. Obama also invoked Park’s Dresden address, applauding her description of a unified Korea “free from the fear of war and nuclear weapons.” As he had stated in Tokyo, Obama asserted in Seoul that China, given its economic leverage, has a “leading role” in curtailing North Korea’s test threat. The following day, the US president concluded the Korea portion of his Asia trip by participating in a morning trade roundtable with business leaders and offering remarks after a Combined Forces Command briefing at Yongsan Garrison.

Chronology of US-South Korea Relations January-April 2014

Jan. 6, 2014: In her first press conference of the year, President Park Geun-hye states that “in a nutshell, I think unification would be the jackpot.”

Jan. 6-8, 2014: South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se visits Washington and meets Secretary of Defense Hagel and Secretary of State John Kerry.

Jan. 7, 2014: US [announces](#) the deployment of an additional mechanized infantry battalion equipped with tanks and armored infantry fighting vehicles to Korea.

Jan. 7-8, 2014: US and South Korea hold ninth round of talks on replace of the 1974 treaty on civil nuclear cooperation.

Jan. 13, 2014: South Korea and US hold preliminary bilateral discussions in Washington on possibility of South Korea participating in Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Jan. 15, 2014: North Korea’s Committee for Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland [says](#) that USFK joint military exercises *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle* drills are tantamount to a declaration of “full-scale nuclear war” and “if carried out, will fatally destroy the inter-Korean relations and trigger unimaginable calamities and disasters.”

Jan. 19-24, 2014: US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns visits South Korea, China, and Japan to discuss, bilateral, regional, and global issues.

Jan. 22, 2014: The World Trade Organization (WTO) Dispute Settlement Body establishes a panel on US anti-dumping and countervailing measure on Korean washers.

Jan. 26-31, 2014: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Glyn Davies visits China, South Korea, and Japan to discuss North Korea policy.

Feb. 7, 2014: South Korea and the US hold their first working-level meeting on cyber security to discuss ways to develop joint cyber warfare capabilities and an emergency response system.

Feb. 2014: Arms Control Association releases detailed update of the *Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy*, tracing developments from 1985-2013.

Feb. 12, 2014: Congressional Research Service (CRS) releases *U.S.-South Korean Relations* report.

Feb. 13-17, 2014: Secretary of State John Kerry visits Asia with stops in Seoul, Beijing, and Jakarta to meet senior government officials to discuss bilateral, regional, and global issues.

Feb. 17, 2014: UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) releases report outline on DPRK human rights violations.

Feb. 20-25, 2014: Inter-Korean reunions held at Kumgang-san.

Feb. 24-March 6: *Key Resolve* exercises aimed at strengthening ROK-US readiness are held.

Feb. 24-April 18: *Foal Eagle* joint and combined field exercises take place. The DPRK begins a series of missile launches.

March 3, 2014: US Seventh Fleet's flagship *USS Blue Ridge* arrives as part of *Key Resolve*, and *Yonhap* reports nuclear submarine *USS Columbus* arriving in Busan, which USFK did not acknowledge.

March 5, 2014: US Department of Defense releases a report to Congress arguing that the execution of Jang Song Thaek will have little impact on Kim Jung Un's rule or defense policy.

March 5, 2014: Korea-US Economic Council holds Board of Directors and Regular Meeting crediting the KORUS FTA for expanding exports.

March 6, 2014: UN Panel Report to the UN Security Council on North Korea Sanctions is released.

March 17, 2014: UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) releases full report on DPRK human rights violations.

March 25, 2014: President Obama hosts President Park and Prime Minister Abe for a trilateral meeting at The Hague, on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit. North Korea launches more short range and mid-range missiles in show of displeasure.

March 26, 2014: Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, USFK Commander, testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

March 31, 2014: North Korea fires more than 100 artillery rounds into South Korean waters. South Korea responds with more than 300 rounds into North Korean waters.

April 5, 2014: South Korea tests 500 km range missile and promises an 800 km range option.

April 7, 2014: Washington hosts the US-Japan-Republic of Korea Trilateral Meeting among senior working level representatives.

April 9, 2014: Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues Robert King addresses Ewha Womans University students.

April 16, 2014: *USS Bonhomme Richard* responds to the sinking of the ferry *Sewol* near Jindo Island off Korea's southwest coast.

April 17-18, 2014: Washington hosts the US-Japan-Republic of Korea Defense Trilateral Talks.

April 17, 2014: President Obama extends condolences to the families of the victims of the sinking of the ferry *Sewol*.

April 17, 2014: UN Security Council meets to discuss human rights violations outlined in the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea. Russia and China do not attend.

April 25-26: President Obama visits the Republic of Korea.