



**US-Korea Relations:
The Demise of Jang Song Thaek**

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The best news in the final months of the year was South Korea's announcement of its interest in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Beyond that, we saw bad, ugly, and unpredictable developments. North Korea startled the world by purging and executing Jang Song Thaek, only to be followed by the indefatigable Dennis Rodman's visit to the country. China's declaration of its new East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) caused a momentary lapse in Seoul's good alliance management. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's Yasukuni Shrine visit poured cold water on any hope for near-term improvements in Seoul-Tokyo relations. The year ended with no progress on outstanding bilateral negotiations between the US and ROK on a range of issues, leaving 2014 with a great deal of unfinished business.

Jang Song Thaek's unceremonious fall

The biggest surprise in US-ROK relations in the last months of 2013 was the purge and execution of Jang Song Thaek. Uncle of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and brother-in-law of late leader Kim Jong Il, Jang was widely regarded as the second most powerful figure in North Korea. Media reports of Jang's sudden purge broke in early December following South Korea's National Intelligence Service's briefing to National Assembly sessions that Jang had been removed from all of his positions and his two closest aides had been executed. Amid frenzied press speculation about Jang's whereabouts, North Korea broke its silence a week later on Dec. 9 and officially confirmed that Jang had been purged. Political purges are nothing new in North Korea, but the succession and pace of high-level ones taking place under Kim Jong Un are unusual, even by DPRK standards. Prior to Jang, the most well-known case was Vice Marshal Ri Yong Ho who disappeared in July 2012. Indeed the senior figures who stood with Kim during his father's funeral (except two) are now gone. Nevertheless, what was stunning about Jang's purge was the manner in which the regime handled his case. Not only did it publicly announce a list of his criminal acts, but it also broadcast footage of Jang being dragged out from his seat by uniformed officers during a Korean Workers' Party meeting. Three days later, on Dec. 13, North Korean state media, *Korea Central News Agency (KCNA)*, released another photo of Jang handcuffed in the courtroom and announced his execution right after a special military trial. Calling Jang a "traitor for all ages," *KCNA* reported that Jang had been found guilty of treason and his involvement in economic corruption.

ROK President Park Geun-hye characterized the execution as a "reign of terror." Even the White House criticized Jang's execution as "another example of extreme brutality of North Korean regime." Beijing officials remained somewhat speechless in the aftermath of losing the

individual in the DPRK leadership seen as closest to China and a promoter economic reform in the country.

Why was Jang purged? No one knows for certain. The *KCNA* statement indicates Jang was a threat to Kim's power and was therefore disloyal to the state. This is an extraordinary admission by a government that prides itself on maintaining absolute unity as a source of strength. Rumors are that Jang also maintained separate channels of communication with several countries in the region, which undeniably must have been seen as threatening by Kim. Factional struggles within the Party also played a role, presumably as Kim's efforts to shift some of the power and business ventures from the military to the Party led to a scramble within the latter for control of the newly acquired political and material assets.

Kim is clearly trying to consolidate his power and this latest act is an important reflection of that process. However, it is far from an indicator of stability in the system. On the contrary, Jang's execution points to significant churn still brewing inside the opaque regime for two reasons. First, Kim clearly trusts no one within the system, even his closest associates. This is hardly a condition for stability. Second, between the purges of high-level military generals and senior party officials, the young Kim is attacking the Party and the military at the same time to consolidate his position. This is historically unusual. Kim Il Sung for example, favored the Party as the primary ally as he built his leadership. Kim Jong Il favored the military over the Party as part of his "military-first" policy. Yet the young Kim seems to be either ignorant of the risks, or brash enough to discount them. Meanwhile, he builds ski resorts and amusement parks....

For US-ROK relations, the key manifestation of these internal dynamics is the likelihood of a North Korean provocation in the early months of 2014. Brittle dictatorships that experience internal factionalization or recovery from such factionalization do not usually experience bouts of conciliatory or cooperative external behavior. On the contrary, shows of force become important demonstrations of who holds power and how to rally a domestic constituency. If such provocations come, they are likely to do so before US-ROK annual military exercises in the spring as the DPRK is not prone to undertake such activities while US and ROK forces are mobilized and exercising. Then again, one cannot really be sure of any pattern of behavior with this leader.

Six party what?

Despite continued shuttle diplomacy to move the diplomatic ball forward with Pyongyang, efforts to resume the Six-Party Talks remained stalled. In September, signs of resumed operation at the Yongbyon nuclear facility in North Korea raised concern about the country's continued nuclear weapons development. In parallel to this development, North Korea engaged in a series of track two dialogues, trying to push the burden of responsibility to resume negotiations onto the Obama administration. After track two dialogues in Europe with the North Koreans, former negotiators Stephen Bosworth and Robert Gallucci called for the administration to stem the tide of the North's nuclear breakout by resuming some form of talks and abandoning the "strategic patience" approach. At issue is whether the US is willing to relax some of the preconditions it has for a return to talks. This is often described as "seriousness of purpose" demonstrated by the North through a freeze of its programs, a recommitment to the February 2012 agreement, and

full disclosure of the uranium-based nuclear program. The Park government is against any relaxation of the terms, and in late October, Kim Jang-soo, chief of Blue House National Security Office, traveled to the US and met senior officials in Washington on these questions.

In late November, news reports emerged that North Korea was detaining an 85-year-old US citizen, Merrill Newman. Secretary of State John Kerry said North Korea was taking “dangerous steps” in holding a US citizen. The State Department issued an advisory against travel to North Korea, warning against arbitrary arrest of US tourists by North Korea. The fact that Merrill is a Korean War veteran seems to be the main reason for his detainment, but he was eventually released after a coerced apology. However, Kenneth Bae remains in the North. Despite a similar videotaped apology, Bae has remained imprisoned for over one year. Efforts at getting the Christian missionary released have been unsuccessful, making Bae the first American since the Korean War to have been imprisoned and sentenced to a labor camp for an extended period.

To make the strange even more bizarre, former NBA star and *avant-garde* celebrity Dennis Rodman made his third visit to the country in late December to train North Korean basketball players in preparation for an exhibition game with retired NBA players, scheduled for January 2014 in time for Kim Jong Un’s birthday. The media heaped pressure on Rodman to use his so-called friendship with the North Korean leader to obtain Bae’s release. The fact that such a question was even raised in public as a serious proposition speaks to the utter failure in official efforts to secure the American’s release. While the US government distanced itself from Rodman’s activities in the North, it would not surprise us if it had hoped secretly that Kim would do Rodman a “solid” and release Bae (he did not).

ADIZ ripples

China’s Ministry of National Defense’s November announcement of a new air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea sparked new levels of tensions with Japan, the United States, and Korea. The Chinese ADIZ significantly overlaps with Japanese and Korean zones. Washington and Tokyo protested vigorously but what was missed by most reports was the ripple this caused in US-ROK relations. Seoul eventually sided with its two allies on opposing China’s actions, but not until it tried unsuccessfully to cut a separate deal with Beijing.

The Chinese zone was very problematic for Koreans. It created a list of new identification rules – a flight plan, radio correspondence, and more – that governs any foreign aircraft, military or civilian, flying within the zone. The planes must identify themselves to Beijing, either to the Chinese military or the civil aviation administration. China insisted that the new zone is in accordance with the common international practices of establishing such zones. The United States and Japan issued clear rejections of the zones.

For Korea, the issue was that China’s new zone overlapped with Korea’s own ADIZ off the southern island of Jeju, where China’s claim to the 20-by-115 km (12-by-71 miles) of airspace encroaches on an area already patrolled by the Korean Air Force. Included within the Chinese zone is a Korea-controlled submerged rock, known as Ieodo in Korean. This rock, known in Chinese as Suyan Rock and internationally as Socotra Rock, has been historically disputed between Korea and China, and consequently whether it belongs in Korea or China’s exclusive

economic zone. Korea built the Jeodo Ocean Research Center, an unmanned scientific station on the rock in 2003, which lies 149 km south of the Mara Island near Jeju to great objections from the Chinese. The Korean Navy includes Jeodo within its area of operations, further increasing the possibility of conflict on the sea between Korea and China.

China's actions undeniably put a damper on the growing positive relations between China and Korea under President Park Geun-hye. Just a couple of weeks before the ADIZ announcement China's State Councilor Yang Jiechi paid a well-received three-day visit to Seoul, where he met with Park and other high-ranking Korean officials, including Kim Jang-soo, the national security chief, and Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se, to discuss progress made in the ROK-China Strategic Cooperation Partnership. Before that, there was the successful Park-Xi Summit in June, where both leaders agreed to take the relationship to the next level in their joint communique.

At pre-scheduled bilateral talks that took place shortly after the ADIZ announcement, press reports indicated that the Korean side offered a proposal for China to redraw the zone to avoid the overlap with Jeodo rock. China rejected this proposal. But what was worrying about this little-reported incident was Korea's willingness to "de-link" its problems with China from the rest of the region. What would have happened if Beijing accepted Korea's proposal? Would Seoul have accepted China's zone as long as it had no overlap with the ROK's, while the US and Japan would have continued to protest it? This may have seemed like a clever policy in the short term to avoid a crisis with China. But in the long term, this is detrimental to Korea's interests.

In international relations theory, the way a rising great power establishes an empire in its region is by "picking off" its smaller neighbors with individual deals so that the region does not balance against it. It is a "divide and conquer" strategy. South Korea's proposal on China's new zone was exactly the type of policy choice that would allow China to assert greater influence in the region.

After Beijing rejected Seoul's proposal, the Park government did not have much of a choice but to stand with the United States, Australia, and Japan in staunch opposition to China's new zone. This apparently was not Seoul's first choice.

Abe's Christmas surprise

Despite Seoul's initial unsuccessful play on the ADIZ, the overall effect of the ADIZ controversy was to give momentum to slow but steady closed-door, working-level efforts to get Japan-ROK relations back on track. Senior Foreign Ministry officials on both sides worked hard to develop "building blocks" that would climax in a long-postponed summit between Park Geun-hye and Abe Shinzo, who have not held a summit in their first year in office.

Abe's surprise visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in late December threw cold water on this effort. The bureaucrats have to start all over again now in terms of rebuilding relations, but the future may not be as dim as people think. Seoul, though disappointed by Abe's action, did not sign on to Chinese proposals for a joint statement condemning Japan, and unlike Beijing, has avoided the histrionics criticizing Abe. While a summit may be out of the question for the near future, there is conviction on both sides to restart Japan-ROK and Japan-ROK-US trilateral cooperation, particularly in the defense areas given the uncertainties surrounding North Korea.

OPCON Transfer, SMA, TPP

The Obama and Park administrations ended this year without any progress in their negotiations on the delay of wartime operational control (OPCON), Special Measures Agreement (SMA or host nation support), the Trans-Pacific Partnership, or the civil nuclear negotiations (123 agreement). In late September, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel traveled to South Korea to participate in the annual Security Consultative Meeting. While defense ministers of the two countries signed a “bilateral strategy for tailored deterrence” to more effectively deal with North Korea’s nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, they punted on consultations about South Korea’s request for a further delay of wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer beyond the current 2015 schedule. Meanwhile, Seoul and Washington failed to break deadlocks on the 123 civil nuclear negotiations or on SMA. In the latter case, six rounds of SMA negotiations were held from September till December to strike a deal before the current agreement expires at the end of 2013. In light of defense budget cuts imposed by sequester at home, the US pushed South Korea to raise the host nation’s contribution up to, reportedly, 1 trillion won. Yet, negotiators were unable to narrow their differences and only agreed to extend the negotiations into 2014. [Ed. note: a new five-year SMA was announced Jan. 12 under which the ROK will provide 920 billion won (\$866.6 million) in 2014 with annual adjustment for inflation in subsequent years]

On the civil nuclear agreement, a two-year extension bill, which was reached between Presidents Obama and Park in April, has yet to pass the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. To take effect, this extension bill must be passed before March 2014. In defense of the Obama administration, all of these negotiations are difficult ones that will likely require higher-level political intervention to reach a deal. Then again, it still leaves a good deal of unfinished business for the alliance in 2014.

The best news of the quadrimester was South Korea’s official announcement in late-November of its interest in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). How did the Koreans end up being willing but late to the party? Part of the reason stems from protracted internal debates in Seoul about the merits of joining TPP versus the China-backed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). This delayed a decision well into the fall. Another reason is the Park government’s devolving of trade authority from the Foreign Ministry to the newly created Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Energy at the beginning of her presidency. The former organization carried the ball on trade since 1998, and was well-known for a strategic, savvy, and omniscient posture in making trade policy compared with the more functional and narrowly focused bureau in which the negotiating authority now sits.

Washington and Seoul have developed a consultation mechanism to facilitate Korea’s joining the TPP. The most likely scenario is that Korea will be one of the first nations to “dock” onto TPP after an agreement among the original members is reached in 2014. Seoul’s trade adjustment costs in joining the trade pact are manageable given the measures already granted to domestic producers under KORUS. Most important, Koreans are motivated by Japan’s commitment to negotiate the elimination of non-tariff barriers in the context of TPP – something that has impeded the now-dormant bilateral FTA talks between Seoul and Tokyo.

Chronology of US-South Korea Relations*

September – December 2013

Sept. 3, 2013: ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin asserts that the December 2015 deadline is not appropriate for Seoul to regain the wartime operational control at the National Assembly's National Defense Committee meeting.

Sept. 3, 2013: US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel reports to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that North Korea's chemical weapons are a threat to the ROK Air Force and USFK.

Sept. 10, 2013: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Glyn Davies meets South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Cho Tae-yong in Seoul. Davies states that North Korea's lack of a "positive attitude" toward denuclearization will hamper the Six-Party Talks process.

Sept. 12, 2013: US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins' SAIS reports a resumption of activity at North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear reactor.

Sept. 17, 2013: Operations resume at the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Sept. 18, 2013: China holds an unofficial seminar in Beijing to mark the 10th anniversary of the Six-Party Talks. The US and ROK decline to send official government representatives.

Sept. 24, 2013: ROK Defense Acquisition Program Executive Committee restarts high-profile fighter acquisition project and rejects Boeing's *F-15 Silent Eagle* as the winner of the project.

Sept. 26, 2013: Former US envoy on North Korea Stephen Bosworth meets North Korean chief negotiator Ri Yong Ho in Berlin to discuss denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Sept. 27, 2013: Fourth round of negotiations on Special Measures Agreement (SMA) is held in Washington.

Sept. 29-Oct. 2, 2013: Secretary of Defense Hagel visits Korea. He visits the Demilitarized Zone, celebrates the 60th anniversary of the US-ROK alliance, attends the US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting, and signs with Korean counterpart Kim Kwan-jin a joint military strategy that reaffirms South Korea's position under the US nuclear umbrella and outlines contingency plans for dealing with the North Korean threat.

Oct. 2, 2013: US experts, including former nuclear negotiator Stephen Bosworth, informally meet North Korean officials in London to discuss a revival of the Six-Party Talks.

* Chronology compiled by Dana D' Amelio.

Oct. 3, 2013: Blue House Foreign Affairs Secretary Ji Chul-ki says that South Korea is “greatly interested” in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership and may bring up the possibility of entering negotiations at the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Forum in Bali, Indonesia.

Oct. 4, 2013: Seoul remains silent following Japan’s controversial announcement of pursuing collective self-defense with US support.

Oct. 8, 2013: ROK National Intelligence Service director Nam Jae-joon tells Parliament that the Yongbyon reactor has been up and running since August. Nam also confirms that North Korea is strengthening its military targeting Seoul and border islands in the West Sea.

Oct. 8, 2013: North Korea condemns the US and South Korea for “military provocations” ahead of planned US-ROK-Japan joint naval drills to be held off the coast of South Korea.

Oct. 10-11, 2013: South Korea, Japan, and the US conduct naval drills off the Korean coast.

Oct. 16, 2013: Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin denies the ROK will join the US defense missile program.

Oct. 18, 2013: South Korea and US sign agreement to set up system for monitoring bioterrorism.

Oct. 18, 2013: US Army Pacific Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks says the current timeline for transfer of operational wartime control (OPCON) to the ROK is realistic.

Oct 24-25, 2013: ROK Chief of the Presidential National Security Office Kim Jang-soo visits the US, meets National Security Advisor Susan Rice, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Secretary of Defense Hagel in Washington.

Oct. 25, 2013: US-Korea Institute reports on its blog *38 North* that North Korea appears to be digging two new tunnels near the Pyunggye-ri nuclear test site, prompting speculation that Pyongyang is preparing for another nuclear test.

Oct. 28, 2013: Allegations surface that South Korea was targeted for wiretapping by the US National Security Agency (NSA). South Korea seeks clarification from the US.

Oct. 30-31, 2013: Sixth round of negotiations for the SMA are held in Seoul.

Nov. 1, 2013: Special Representative for North Korea Policy Davies meets South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Cho Tae-yong in Washington.

Nov. 5, 2013: South Korea again asks the US to explain allegations that the NSA targeted the Korean embassy following fresh reports that the NSA labeled South Korea a “focus area.”

Nov. 6, 2013: Special Representative for North Korea Policy Davies meets South Korean Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Cho and Japan’s Director General for

Oceanian Affairs Bureau in Washington to discuss North Korea's denuclearization and conditions for re-entering the Six-Party Talks.

Nov. 11, 2013: Following the rejection of Boeing *F-15 Silent Eagle*, Lockheed Martin's *F-35* emerges as the only qualified contender for Seoul's newly-restarted fighter jet project.

Nov. 17, 2013: US Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues Robert King arrives in Seoul for talks with South Korean officials.

Nov. 18, 2013: Seventh round of SMA negotiations kicks off in Washington.

Nov. 19, 2013: State Department issues a heightened travel advisory against North Korea.

Nov. 20, 2013: National Security Advisor Rice says in a speech at Georgetown University that the US should not seek to resume negotiations with North Korea as long as parts of Pyongyang's nuclear program are still in operation.

Nov. 20, 2013: Reports surface that North Korea is detaining a US citizen, 85-year-old Korean War veteran Merrill Newman.

Nov. 21, 2013: Special Representative for North Korea Policy Davies reaffirms the US position that negotiations with Pyongyang cannot take place unless it suspends its nuclear program.

Nov. 22, 2013: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff approve the purchase of 40 *F-35A* stealth fighters with the option to later purchase 20 more over the course of four years beginning in 2018.

Nov. 23, 2013: China's Ministry of National Defense announces East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ).

Nov. 29, 2013: ROK Deputy Prime Minister Hyun Oh Seok expresses South Korea's interest in holding talks to explore possibility of joining TPP.

Dec. 2, 2013: ROK National Intelligence Service announces that Jang Song Thaek has likely been removed from power following the execution of his two closest associates in November.

Dec. 6, 2013: Vice President Joe Biden and President Park Geun-hye meet in Seoul and agree to cooperate on the row created by China's newly declared ADIZ.

Dec. 7, 2013: North Korea releases Merrill Newman.

Dec. 8, 2013: South Korea announces expanded ADIZ that includes Jeodo and overlaps with both Japan's ADIZ and China's recently declared ADIZ.

Dec. 9, 2013: North Korea confirms via the *Korean Central News Agency* that Jang Song Thaek has been purged and releases a list of accusations against him.

Dec. 10-12, 2013: Ninth round of SMA negotiations are held in Seoul.

Dec. 11-14, 2013: South Korea's head of the Defense Ministry's Policy Planning office Lt. Gen. Ryu Je-sung visits Washington and meets Under Secretary of Defense for Policy James Miller, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State of East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Zumwalt, National Security Staff Korea Director Sydney Seiler.

Dec. 12-13, 2013: US and South Korea hold working-level talks on the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON).

Dec.13, 2013: *Korean Central News Agency* announces that Jang Song Thaek was tried before a military tribunal for attempting to overthrow the state and summarily executed on Dec. 12.

Dec. 14, 2013: North Korea denounces Vice President Biden's recent trip to Asia saying the trip was meant to militarily contain North Korea.

Dec. 15, 2013: South Korea's expanded ADIZ goes into effect.

Dec. 17, 2013: ROK Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kyou-hyun meets Deputy US Secretary of State William Burns to discuss the evolving security situation with North Korea, China's expanded ADIZ, and Japan's pursuit of the right of collective self-defense.

Dec. 19-23, 2013: Dennis Rodman visits North Korea to train basketball players.

Dec. 24, 2013: South Korea approves private humanitarian aid to North Korea.

Dec. 26, 2013: Japanese Prime Minister Abe visits the Yasukuni Shrine.

Dec. 30, 2013: ROK Foreign Ministry announces that negotiations with the US over the so-called 123 agreement on civilian nuclear energy will resume on Jan. 7, 2014.