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US-KOREA RELATIONS

PENINSULA TENSIONS SPIKE

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North Korea tested President Trump's new administration with a New Year promise of imminent ICBM capability and subsequent missile launches. Tensions rose to the highest level since 1993/1994 with missile launches, the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, and a possible ICBM on display at a military parade to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the DPRK's Korean People's Army. Washington offered Seoul assurances of support, sending Defense Secretary Mattis, Secretary of State Tillerson, and Vice President Pence in early 2017. Yet, Trump's comments about sending an "armada" with the dispatch of the *USS Carl Vinson* carrier strike group led South Koreans to fear blowback if the US conducted a preemptive or preventive strike against DPRK facilities. South Korea saw deployment of the first stages of THAAD, but the missile defense system and broader policy differences with May 9 ROK presidential victor Moon Jae-in will be challenges for US-South Korea relations.

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North Korea tested President Trump's new administration with a New Year promise of imminent ICBM capability and subsequent missile launches. Tensions rose to the highest level since 1993/1994 with missile launches, the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, and a possible ICBM on display at a military parade to celebrate the 85th anniversary of the DPRK's Korean People's Army. Washington offered Seoul assurances of support, sending Defense Secretary Mattis, Secretary of State Tillerson, and Vice President Pence in early 2017. Yet, Trump's comments about sending an "armada" with the dispatch of the *USS Carl Vinson* carrier strike group led South Koreans to fear blowback if the US conducted a preemptive or preventive strike against DPRK facilities. South Korea saw deployment of the first stages of THAAD, but the missile defense system and broader policy differences with May 9 ROK presidential victor Moon Jae-in will be challenges for US-South Korea relations.

Early challenges, Mattis success, and a February missile launch

The incoming Trump administration identified North Korea's missile and nuclear development as its top national security concern at the recommendation of the outgoing administration. Kim Jong Un's New Year declaration of an imminent intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability elevated US and South Korean worries, after a year that saw two nuclear tests and two dozen ballistic missile launches. An April 2016 liquid-fuel engine test signaled enhanced ICBM propulsion capability – the DPRK doubling it by reengineering the Soviet R-27 missile engine designs. Outgoing US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken suggested on Jan. 5 that North Korea had demonstrated a "qualitative" improvement in its nuclear and missile capabilities.

The US was quick to send its defense chief in early February to signal the new administration's resolve. In his first trip as defense secretary, James Mattis met South Korean Defense Minister Han Min-koo, who hailed the clear signal of US support saying that, "faced with the current severe security situation, Secretary Mattis' visit to Korea communicates the strongest warning to North Korea." Mattis condemned the North's missile launches, nuclear development, and "threatening rhetoric and behavior," promising an "overwhelming" response should North

Korea use nuclear weapons against the US or its allies. With a steady tone, Mattis offered Seoul and then Tokyo needed assurances, winning media acclaim in both countries – the administration's first foreign policy success. (See [PacNet #13](#) – Mattis' trip brings needed calm)

The US had signaled ally support in the president-elect's call with South Korea's president and meeting Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in November. In February, President Trump again met Abe, with the DPRK among the top issues. Then, in a counter to three days of Northeast Asia policy success for Washington – a presidential call with Chinese President Xi Jinping and two days of meetings with Abe at Mar-a-Lago – North Korea launched an intermediate range missile in its first test of the new Trump administration. The improved mid-range *Musudan*, with solid-fuel rockets and mobile launcher, drew rebuke from Abe and Trump, who promised to stand behind US ally Japan "100 percent." ROK Presidential Security Adviser Kim Kwan-jin called then-counterpart Michael Flynn as well. North Korea's KCNA meanwhile described the *Pukguksong-2* as a new strategic weapon, though it also noted that the test employed a heightened trajectory as an act of caution, with the missile attaining an altitude of 550 km and traveling only 500 km of its 2000-km range.

More worrying, South Korea's military described the North's advance in using a "cold-eject" system, whereby the missile initially lifted by use of compressed gas and then by rocket, a method previously employed for submarine-launched missiles. Jonathan McDowell of the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics described the DPRK pursuit of large, solid-fuel missiles as "a very concerning development," according to *Reuters*. Trump promised to deal "strongly" with North Korea, labeling it a "big, big problem" in a news conference alongside Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau the day after the launch.

Political assassination

Concerns over North Korea heightened and took an odd twist with the assassination of Kim Jong Un's elder half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, at Kuala Lumpur airport on Feb. 13. Worldwide attention to the incident lasted several weeks. Details emerged of a complex scheme in which North Korean agents employed two women who

distracted the elder Kim in the airport prior to his return to Macau and applied a lethal VX chemical agent to his face. Mistaking Kim Jong Nam for a South Korean, Malaysian police initially contacted the ROK embassy. South Korea's media first reported the attack. In the weeks after the attack, Malaysia and North Korea engaged in a diplomatic row that at one point saw the ejection of the DPRK ambassador and a refusal by both countries to allow the departure of the other's citizens.

In the end, Malaysia backed down, releasing the body of Kim to North Korea, along with three men wanted for questioning; four others had made their way to Pyongyang following the assassination, leaving only the two women, neither North Korean, to stand trial and face execution if convicted. In the process North Korea gambled away its good relations with Malaysia, however, losing visa-free access to Malaysia for its citizens, and inviting international scrutiny of North Korean business operations in Malaysia that had provided hard currency to Pyongyang. Reporting on illicit operations offered evidence of DPRK front companies in Malaysia to skirt the impact of sanctions.

South Korea and US media accounts focused on the depravity of the act in a third, sovereign state, and the use of VX, which raises questions as to North Korea's chemical and biological weapons capabilities. The assassination, coupled with the February missile test, led the US administration on Feb. 24 to scuttle unofficial talks between North Korean representatives and US analysts and former officials that had been scheduled for March 1 in New York. Washington refused the visas, killing the likelihood of talks at even the unofficial level in the US for now. The US also seized on the growing concern among ASEAN nations in appeals in late April from President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to several for cooperation on North Korea.

March on and more missiles

On March 1, the United States and South Korea started the *Foal Eagle* joint military exercises, aimed at the North Korea threat. South Korea described the two-month effort as similar to 2016's "largest-ever" maneuvers that engaged 17,000 US and 300,000 South Korean troops. That same day, according to Seoul's Finance Ministry, South Korea and the United States

vowed stronger cooperation on financial sanctions against the DPRK. Finance Minister Yoo Il-ho and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin expressed "great concern" over the Feb. 12 missile launch and committed to reinforcing UN, US, and ROK sanctions.

On March 4, *The New York Times* reported an alleged secret US cyberwar against North Korea's missile systems, initiated under President Obama and with the suggestion that the 88 percent failure rate of launches might signal US success. That contention is uncertain though, with on-line sources 38 North and Nautilus suggesting it unlikely.

North Korea's response to the US-ROK joint exercise came on March 5, when it fired four missiles (a fifth failed) that landed in waters off northwest Japan; missiles launched last fall similarly had landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone. The missiles, likely extended-range *Scuds*, landed as close as 300 km from Japan, eliciting strong reaction among Japan's leadership and public. Talk of preemptive strike increased in official circles, and the public in northern Japan practiced emergency drills at the government's urging. The spike in fears was mirrored by concerns at the UN Security Council, which roundly condemned the tests.

The launch moved ROK Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn to call for early deployment of the THAAD missile defense system during a meeting of South Korea's National Security Council. Hwang also encouraged the ROK government to aggressively enhance the United States' extended deterrent. The test raised concerns about the challenge of multiple missile launches, central to the North's provocation. Signaling US frustration, the State Department spokesperson noted that "all of the efforts we have taken thus far to attempt to persuade North Korea to engage in meaningful negotiations have fallen short."

Tillerson and Pence trips, House moves, and anniversary concerns

In his trip to South Korea, Secretary of State Tillerson signaled in Seoul an end of US patience with North Korea and underscored that all options are on the table, adding "let me be very clear: the policy of strategic patience has ended." After underscoring resolve in Seoul and Tokyo, Tillerson moved on to Beijing, anticipating Chinese ire over US actions as the

cause for tensions with North Korea. Instead, Tillerson called for a “fresh start” in the “complex” relationship with China, affording some latitude and laying the ground for a round of US statements that signaled a desire for China to do more to rein in North Korea.

The day following Tillerson’s meeting in Beijing, Kim Jong Un announced a “new birth” of its rocket industry with a test of a new high-thrust engine at Tongchang-ri. South Korea described the test as showing ‘meaningful’ progress. The North conducted a second rocket test, possibly for ICBM use, again in late March. Also late in the month, US reports indicated that North Korea might be preparing for a sixth nuclear test.

On Capitol Hill, House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) introduced House Resolution 1644, The Korea Interdiction and Modernization of Sanctions Act, aimed at expanding sanctions to deter DPRK nuclear weapons development; targeting those employing North Korean slave labor, a source of regime revenue; cracking down on DPRK shipping and international port use; and requiring the administration to determine whether the DPRK is a state sponsor of terrorism. The DPRK quickly rebuffed the effort to enhance sanctions. Interestingly, the US moved the day after by linking North Korea to a theft at the New York Fed, a move beyond the cutoff of North Korea from SWIFT transactions.

In early April, the Trump administration reportedly completed its North Korea policy review, pushing back military options in favor of heightened sanctions, financial cutoffs, and strengthened deterrence. However, talk in the media of a preemptive strike grew, as the US and South Korea watched warily for a sixth nuclear test in advance of the April 15 anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung.

The 18 hours that Presidents Trump and Xi shared at Mar-a-Lago April 6-7 produced some like-mindedness about DPRK advances in missile and nuclear development. Trump reportedly received a lesson from Xi on the nature of China’s dealings with North Korea, and the limits therein, but the Trump administration felt it made progress in securing tacit Chinese agreement. Though exact gains and commitments, if any, were debated among analysts in ensuing weeks, China’s refusal of coal shipments and comments against North

Korean provocations in state-influenced media were read as a possible lean against the North. It appears unlikely though that China made a commitment, as much as reached a general understanding. The strike on Syria that came as the two leaders dined may have displayed US resolve, and drew the rebuke of North Korea, which signaled resolve with Assad.

Following the summit, Secretary of State Tillerson suggested that the Syria action was meant to convey a message to others, including North Korea, a position reinforced by National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster’s suggestion that the movement of the *USS Carl Vinson* strike group was a reaction to North Korea. Trump’s suggestion of sending an “armada,” however, stoked fears of a unilateral strike, raising concerns in South Korea. McMaster played down the military options publicly, though confusion in media reporting over the strike group’s location in ensuing weeks led some in the US and Korea to criticize the administration for mixed messages and a lack of clarity, which was dismissed by the administration as inaccurate.

US misreporting also stoked concerns in South Korea in advance of the North’s April 15 events. *NBC News* reported that the US was considering a preemptive strike, according to unnamed intelligence officials, with the White House strongly playing down the report. In the end, North Korea refrained from any nuclear test, though it did garner attention for the range of missiles on display in its military parade, including an ICMB tube that may or may not have contained a missile. A missile test the following day failed.



The third in the triumvirate of senior US officials to travel to Seoul this period was Vice President Mike Pence, who delivered a hardline message against the North – warning it not to test

President Trump. Pence also traveled to Australia, addressing the North Korea issue there and expressing hope for a peaceful outcome with China's assistance.

North Korea further fueled US concern with the April 22 arrest of a US citizen, Tony Kim, who taught at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) – bringing to three the number of Americans detained in North Korea. [Editor's note: a fourth American, also affiliated with PUST, was detained on May 7.] University of Virginia undergraduate Otto Warmbier and Korean-American businessman Kim Dong-chul are serving sentences of 15 and 10 years, respectively. *Korean Central News Agency* reported that Tony Kim is under investigation for "hostility aimed to overturn" the government.

Vice President Pence joined Tillerson, Mattis, and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats at the White House in late April to brief US senators on the North Korean challenges, as US Pacific Command's Adm. Harry Harris testified before the House of Representatives. Tillerson then traveled to chair a UN Security Council session in New York on North Korea's nuclear development, urging more strident coordination and tougher sanctions. He floated the idea of negotiations with North Korea and the idea of shunning regime change. At the same time, Trump cautioned that a "major, major" conflict is possible. Following Tillerson's UN effort, North Korea failed in firing a missile. Trump tweeted that the act was disrespectful toward China and described the action as "bad!"

South Koreans remain cautious, despite senior US reassurances, given three main issues: 1) fears of North Korean retaliation in the event of US unilateral action and unclear US messaging; 2) suggestions by Trump in a *Reuters* interview that South Korea was expected to cover the cost of the THAAD deployment, something "they understand;" and 3) that the US would terminate or renegotiate the KORUS FTA, which Trump termed a "horrible deal." South Koreans are used to a hard verbal line from Pyongyang, but less so from Washington.

Park ouster and new political realities

Park Geun-hye's impeachment may have long-term implications for Korea-US relations. On March 9, South Korea's Constitutional Court upheld her impeachment by the National

Assembly over a bribery and influence scandal involving intimate Choi Soon-sil and possibly heads of South Korea's powerful *chaebol*. Her immediate removal from office and arrest in late March underscored for some analysts the rule of law and power of civil society in South Korea. Others worried about damage to the US relationship as she was seen as strongly supportive. Likely successor, former opposition leader Moon Jae-in, who lost to Park in 2012, has espoused alternative approaches to South Korea's relationship with China and North Korea. Although shifting support toward THAAD and cautioning against damaging relations with the United States, Moon regards the anti-missile system as unnecessary should China rein in North Korean missile and nuclear development – a position at odds with current US policy. Moon also advocates Sunshine 2.0, implying extensive aid and economic interaction for and with North Korea, though with a guarantee of actions in kind by North Korea, which was always problematic for the earlier Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun; Moon was Roh's chief-of-staff.

With Moon victorious over leading challengers Ahn Cheol-soo and Hong Jun-pyo, both more hawkish on the North, South Korea may lean in a direction that differs from that of the United States. Seoul will have to find ways to navigate sanctions put in place the past year and a half, should Moon elect to reopen or broaden the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Moon might also decide to jettison the THAAD anti-missile system, revisit the KORUS FTA, or lean toward China in new ways to lessen the latter's economic punishment for THAAD or ensure a perceived tradeoff for North Korea. These possible changes portend a new era in US-Korea relations that will require deft coordination and a step-up in alliance management that includes but extends beyond the current approach to rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2017

Jan. 1, 2017: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un threatens imminent inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability in New Year address.

Jan. 2, 2017: President-elect Donald Trump tweets of North Korea's imminent ICBM capability that "it won't happen" and chastises China for not doing more to rein in North Korea.

Jan. 5, 2017: Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken cautions that "with every passing day, the threat does get more acute" and that "we exercise sustained, comprehensive pressure on North Korea to get it to stop these programs, to come back to the negotiating table, and to engage in good faith on denuclearization."

Jan. 6, 2017: Former Defense Secretary William Perry acknowledges "it is a matter of when, not if, North Korea will have an operational ICBM" and suggests dialogue over military options.

Jan. 12, 2017: US Defense Secretary-designate James Mattis vows to embrace allies and diplomacy in Senate confirmation hearings.

Jan. 12, 2017: China and Russia reportedly agree to "countermeasures" against US THAAD system in South Korea.

Feb. 3, 2017: Defense Secretary Mattis meets ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo and promises an "effective and overwhelming" response to any North Korean use of nuclear weapons against the US or its allies.

Feb. 3, 2017: South Korea Unification Ministry reports North Korea's Minister of State Security Kim Won Hong has been purged in a further sign of a "crack in the elite."

Feb. 12, 2017: North Korea launches an improved *Musudan* intermediate-range missile; it flies 500 km, landing in the East Sea (Sea of Japan).

Feb. 13, 2017: UN Security Council (UNSC) holds an emergency meeting over the DPRK missile launch; US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley states, "it is time to hold North Korea accountable – not with our words, but with our actions."

Feb. 13, 2017: Kim Jong Nam, elder half-brother of Kim Jong Un, is assassinated at the Kuala Lumpur airport.

Feb. 24, 2017: US withholds visas for North Korean representatives due to attend talks hosted by the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) on March 1 in New York.

March 1-April 30, 2017: US and South Korea conduct *Foal Eagle* joint military exercises.

March 4, 2017: US announces visit by Secretary of State Tillerson to Korea, Japan, and China.

March 5, 2017: ROK vows to protect firms against China pressure over THAAD.

March 5, 2017: DPRK launches four missiles into the sea off Japan's northwest coast. The missiles averaged a distance of 1000 km and altitude of 260 km.

March 7, 2017: South Korea receives initial parts of the US THAAD missile defense system.

March 7, 2017: SWIFT banking system blocks DPRK banks.

March 8, 2017: China proposes that the US and ROK halt joint exercises in exchange for a North Korean freeze on its nuclear program. Foreign Minister Wang Yi warns of "accelerating trains coming toward each other."

March 8, 2017: US Ambassador to the UN Haley dismisses China's suggestion of a dual suspension, decries Kim Jong Un as not "rationale" and displaying "unbelievable, irresponsible arrogance," and emphasizing that "all options are on the table."

March 9, 2017: ROK Supreme Court votes to uphold the impeachment of Park Geun-hye.

March 17, 2017: US Secretary of State Tillerson visits Seoul, suggesting an end to strategic patience and negotiations, and that military options remain on the table. President Trump tweets that North Korea "is behaving very badly," and that China "has done little to help!"

March 18–19, 2017: US and China pledge to get the DPRK on a “different course.” The DPRK responds the next day with a test of a new high-thrust rocket engine. Trump tells reporters at Mar a Lago that Kim Jong Un is “acting very, very badly.”

March 21, 2017: IAEA warns that North Korea has doubled the size of its uranium enrichment facility. US House Resolution 1644 is introduced to expand US sanctions to target front companies and enablers funding the DPRK nuclear program.

March 24, 2017: UN broadens its inquiry into DPRK crimes against humanity. North Korea conducts another rocket engine test for possible ICBM use.

March 30, 2017: Former President Park Geun-hye is arrested.

April 5, 2017: DPRK fires a missile into the East Sea in advance of the Trump–Xi summit.

April 7, 2017: Presidents Trump and Xi discuss North Korea and trade, with the US signaling China’s concern about North Korea’s passing a threshold in nuclear and missile development.

April 9, 2017: Secretary of State Tillerson and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster describe the Syria strikes as a warning and the movement of the *USS Carl Vinson* carrier strike group as motivated by DPRK actions.

April 11, 2017: President Trump signals that China will get a better trade deal with the US if it cooperates on North Korea.

April 12, 2017: President Xi Jinping urges President Trump in a call to move to a peaceful resolution over North Korea. Foreign journalists visiting Pyongyang for the 105th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung are told to prepare for a “big” event – an unveiling of a street.

April 13, 2017: Trump suggests the US is prepared to deal with North Korea without China. US reports indicate that the DPRK has readied a nuclear test site. Japan’s Prime Minister Abe Shinzo tells legislators that DPRK missiles could carry sarin gas. China warns against the use of force.

April 15, 2017: Day of the Sun parade in Kim Il Sung Square displays an array of missiles, including a possible ICBM.

April 16, 2017: North Korea missile launch fails as Vice President Mike Pence arrives in Seoul.

April 18, 2017: Vice President Pence signals strong US resolve in Seoul and warns North Korea against further provocations.

April 21, 2017: Media reports Chinese and Russian troop movements toward their borders with North Korea. Both Beijing and Moscow deny the reports.

April 22, 2017: Vice President Pence suggests in Sydney that Chinese pressure might provide a chance for peace on the Korean Peninsula. *USS Carl Vinson* begins exercises with Japanese ships in the western Pacific.

April 22, 2017: North Korea arrests US citizen Tony Kim (Kim Sang Dok) of the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology at Pyongyang’s international airport.

April 23, 2017: North Korea says it is prepared to strike a US aircraft carrier.

April 24, 2017: President Trump hosts UNSC diplomats at the White House, urging stronger sanctions and suggesting ‘it’s time to solve the problem.’ *USS Michigan* pays a port call in South Korea in a show of support.

April 25, 2017: North Korea conducts live fire exercise to mark the 85th anniversary of the Korean People’s Army.

April 26, 2017: White House hosts US senators for top-level briefing on North Korea. US Pacific Command’s Adm. Harry Harris provides House Armed Services Committee testimony.

April 27, 2017: Secretary of State Tillerson floats North Korea dialogue idea and suggests regime change is not a US goal.

April 28, 2017: Secretary Tillerson addresses the UNSC on North Korean developments. North Korea responds with a failed missile launch.

