

# COMPARATIVE

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## C O N N E C T I O N S

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### US-KOREA RELATIONS

## FRICITION, IMPASSE, AND PROJECTILES

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Despite the renewal of limited US-ROK joint exercises on the Korean Peninsula, the United States and South Korea saw friction on other fronts. This includes the lack of progress in US-DPRK talks and by extension South Korea's engagement with the North, renewed focus on host-nation support during the new US defense secretary's visit, the suggestion that the US would place intermediate-range missiles in South Korea, Seoul's decision to withdraw from a defense intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, and President Trump's perceived lack of sensitivity toward South Korean interests. The ROK's economic slowdown complicated its growing strategic frustration, and the flareup in South Korea's relations with Japan left the US pondering its role as tensions worsened between its two Northeast Asia allies. North Korea condemned the US-ROK military exercises, tested multiple new short-range missiles, praised Trump while berating his subordinates, and stalled on working-level talks, despite Kim Jong Un's commitment to Trump in Panmunjom, following Trump's historic step across the military demarcation line.

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## Tense summer

US-DPRK tensions worsened as North Korea continued its post-Hanoi summit stall, perhaps to evaluate next-steps, perhaps to allow time for Kim Jong Un to regain face after the summit breakdown and Trump's walkaway. Either way, North Korea limited its diplomatic contacts with the US and provided a cold shoulder to Seoul, having failed to acknowledge the one-year anniversary of the historic Moon-Kim summit in late April, and more recently, dismissing any hope for progress in inter-Korean relations. The North Koreans marked the anniversary of the Singapore summit between Kim and Trump, but with a warning that the US needs to reevaluate its approach to realize talks on denuclearization.

Pyongyang added to its message with a series of missile tests, eight in total – one in May and seven more over the late summer. North Korea fired only short-range ballistic missiles, enough to allow Trump to continue hailing the long-range missile test moratorium as a foreign policy victory, but worrying Seoul (and Tokyo) with a display of enhanced short-range capabilities – *Iskander*-class models and at varying trajectories. Kim also showed off an enlarged submarine and a multiple rocket launcher, suggesting worrisome upticks in DPRK capabilities.



Figure 1 North Korea's short-range ballistic missile test on August 16, 2019. Photo: Korea Central News Agency

North Korea's sabre rattling aimed to show more than enhancements in hardware though; it sought to drive political wedges between Washington and Seoul (and again Tokyo) by way of their respective threat perceptions. The White House tried to mute concerns by repeatedly referring to the missiles as

“projectiles,” and Trump played down the missile tests in August.

To the delight of the White House and Blue House, Kim seized on Trump's tweet overture from the G20 Summit suggesting a meeting in Panmunjom. On June 30, Trump historically stepped across the military demarcation line alongside Kim – the first time a sitting US president “entered” the North. The move won applause worldwide, suggesting progress toward an end to hostilities at a time when the US-China trade dispute and South Korea-Japan discord highlighted growing regional tensions. Kim hailed the meeting as significant, and the post-stroll sit down reportedly led to a vocal commitment by Kim to working-level talks aimed at denuclearization.



Figure 2 Kim Jong Un shakes hands with President Trump at the DMZ. Photo: The National Interest

However, hopes that the meeting would yield results were dashed in subsequent weeks over North Korea's missile launches – pushback reportedly aimed at the resumption of US-ROK joint military exercises, despite their limited scope and duration. The US president and North Korean leader exchanged letters, described by Trump as “beautiful,” but with at least one expressing Kim's consternation over the resumption of drills.

## Dissecting divides

The summer saw new fissures at several levels. For the North Koreans, there appeared to be a recalibration of its negotiating team away from former intelligence head Kim Yong Chol and toward the Foreign Ministry. The presence of Party Vice Chair and head of the International Division Ri Su Yong, Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho, and Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui (newly) on the all-powerful State Affairs

Commission (SAC) seemed to indicate enhanced sway for the diplomats post-Hanoi. South Korea's *Chosun Ilbo* reported that Kim Jong Un had banished Kim Myong Chol to a reeducation camp and ordered the execution of negotiator Kim Hyok Chol, though those reports were later discounted when the former intelligence chief appeared at a performance alongside Kim Jong Un and his wife; the diplomat, Kim Hyok Chol, reportedly was in state detention and under investigation. Regardless, the reports hinted at fissures among North Korea's elites.

North Korea seems to have tried to sow division in its statements toward President Trump and his national security team. Although the North early on appeared positive on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo – especially relative to the harder line National Security Adviser John Bolton – since February, North Korea has suggested that he should be “replaced” and savaged Pompeo in August (and in early September), with the foreign minister calling him “impudent” and the vice foreign minister questioning his sophistication. Pompeo's late August address to the American Legion, in which he referred to North Korea's “rogue behavior,” drew North Korea's condemnation. In contrast, Pyongyang several times hailed Trump and the personal relationship with Kim Jong Un. By the end of April, however, North Korea was calling into question its patience in resuming talks with the United States.

Divisions abound within the US policy community. The Defense Intelligence Agency chief broke from President Trump in describing the intelligence community assessment that Kim Jong Un is not committed to denuclearization. A preponderance of analysts both inside and outside of government scratch their heads at Trump's praise for Kim Jong Un relative to his disregard of ally South Korea – at the G7 meeting in Osaka Trump complaining about a lack of ROK burden-sharing and at a late-summer Hamptons fundraiser privately mimicked South Korean President Moon (and Japanese Prime Minister Abe). Many analysts speculate that North Korea is calibrating against denuclearization, taking courage in Trump's laudatory comments and thinking it a time to go for full recognition as a nuclear-capable state.

North Korea sees benefits in the growing divisions between South Korea and Japan. Kim Jong Un invoked ethnic nationalism (*uri minjok*

*kkiri*, or “by our nation itself”) in his New Year address. South Korea-Japan discord over export control – and subsequent checks – plays to Pyongyang's grand strategy, as does friction between the US and South Korea.

### US-ROK cooperation and friction

The US and South Korea displayed their mutual and steadfast commitment at the operational level during the August military command post exercises. Despite DPRK objections, the US-ROK effort was limited to two weeks and a computer simulation, with an ensuing 10-day effort aimed at progress on South Korea's assuming wartime operational control (OPCON). However, friction emerged over both White House pressure for South Korea to increase burden-sharing at a time of increasing economic difficulty for Seoul, as well as the suggestion that the US wants to place intermediate-range missiles in South Korea.

South Korean sentiments remain raw after last year's bruising leadup to the agreement to increase host-nation support to just under \$1 billion annually. Renegotiation this year presents a new challenge. Trump made it clear in tweets and aside comments that he expects more from South Korea, which he regards as having become wealthy on the back of the US security guarantee. Trump surprised South Korean planners in early August by announcing via tweet that negotiations were already underway.



Figure 3 US Defense Secretary Mark Esper and South Korean Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo during their meeting in Seoul on August 9, 2019. Photo: Reuters

New US Defense Secretary Mike Esper made an inaugural trip to South Korea to affirm the alliance the second week of August. Despite his message of solidarity in the face of North

Korea's threats, his visit came amid concern over the burden-sharing issue and discord between South Korea and Japan. His suggestion that the United States – free of obligations with the cancellation of its INF treaty with Russia – sees an advantage to placing intermediate-range missiles in South Korea rubbed many in Seoul the wrong way. South Korean planners quietly but firmly looked askance at the suggestion, save for a nationalist lobby on the right. ROK analysts feel any such disposition would make South Korea more vulnerable to North Korean attacks. The suggestion met immediate retort from Pyongyang, which rebuked it as “reckless.”

More worrying in the long-term, any such move would stoke Chinese and Russian ire. South Korea suffered through a year-and-a-half of harsh Chinese economic punishment aimed at South Korea after the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) deployment, and Seoul does not relish a new fight with Beijing over US intermediate-range missiles.

Capping the growing friction between the US and South Korea, Seoul's move to abandon the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) with Japan – implemented in 2016 – prompted a public split with Washington. Seoul defended the steps to curtail the agreement as appropriate after Japan's new export controls and (mutual) preferential trade de-listings. Seoul argued that the pact saw a limited exchange of information. US analysts cautioned that the DPRK's recent increase in missile tests makes it all the more necessary.

On Aug. 28, ROK First Vice Foreign Minister Cho Sei-young requested to US Ambassador Harry Harris that the US curtail its public statements of concern. A South Korean veterans group then canceled an appearance by the US ambassador, citing “rapidly changing security circumstances” and reflecting a concerning drift in public perceptions.

The United States has warned South Korea of the move's potential damage to trilateral cooperation and coordination, especially in the face of North Korea's nuclear and missile development. US analysts contend that the move benefits North Korea along with China and Russia. Russian fighter jets violated South Korea airspace in late July, drawing warning shots. Russian and Chinese joint maneuvers

appeared to be aimed at testing trilateral response and readiness – at the same time that Kim displayed a new, enlarged submarine. For the United States and South Korea, muting friction and establishing more common understanding upgrades, refines, and strengthens relations and stability on and around the Korean Peninsula.

# CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

## MAY – AUGUST 2019

**May 4, 2019:** North Korea tests new missile similar to Russia's SS-26 *Iskander* from a mobile transporter erector launcher.

**May 7-10, 2019:** US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun [visits](#) Tokyo and Seoul to meet South Korean and Japanese officials.

**May 8, 2019:** Pentagon suspends efforts to recover POW/MIA remains as DPRK talks stall.

**May 9, 2019:** DPRK conducts second missile test of the month from a tracked vehicle.

**May 9, 2019:** US [seizes](#) the *Wise Honest*, North Korea's second largest cargo ship accused of violating international sanctions by transporting coal and heavy machinery back to North Korea.

**May 9, 2019:** The 11<sup>th</sup> round of US, Japan, South Korea Defense Trilateral Talks (DTT) [is held](#) in Seoul to discuss regional security issues.

**May 14, 2019:** DPRK demands the return of the seized tanker *Wise Honest*.

**May 22, 2019:** DPRK suggests "biggest issue" in relations with the US is the impounded ship.

**May 24, 2019:** DPRK warns that talks with the US will not resume without a "new calculation."

**June 2, 2019:** Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan suggests it is not necessary to resume major joint exercises with South Korea, allowing room for diplomacy with the North.

**June 3, 2019:** DPRK lead envoy Kim Yong Chol is seen with Kim Jong Un, despite reports of his demise.

**June 4, 2019:** Reports indicate diplomat Kim Hyok Chol is in detention and under investigation, but was not executed by firing squad as earlier reported.

**June 6, 2019:** US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [urges](#) South Korean companies to avoid using Huawei equipment.

**June 10, 2019:** DPRK marks the one-year anniversary of the Singapore talks with a call for the US to change its "hostile policy."

**June 11, 2019:** National Security Adviser John Bolton suggests a third summit is possible and up to Kim Jong Un. Trump publicly opposes using CIA informants against Kim, and says he received a "beautiful letter" from Kim.

**June 12, 2019:** US [submits](#) report to the UN Security Council's North Korea Sanctions Committee blaming North Korea for breaching a UN-imposed cap on fuel imports through illicit ship-to-ship transfers.

**June 19, 2019:** South Korea's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon [meets](#) US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun in Washington DC to discuss ways to facilitate the resumption of US-North Korea dialogue.

**June 19, 2019:** Kim Jong Un, alongside Chinese President Xi, calls for a US response to stalled nuclear talks.

**June 22, 2019:** Kim Jong Un receives letter from Trump with "excellent content."

**June 24, 2019:** US DIA Director Lt. Gen. Ashley states that the intelligence community assesses that Kim Jong Un "is not ready to denuclearize."

**June 26, 2019:** President Moon Jae-in says the US and DPRK are in talks over a third summit.

**June 28, 2019:** US Special Representative for North Korea Biegun [meets](#) South Korea's Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs Lee Do-hoon in Seoul ahead of President Trump's visit to discuss resuming talks with Pyongyang.

**June 29, 2019:** DPRK's Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui states that a Trump-Kim meeting at the DMZ "would serve as another meaningful occasion in further deepening the personal relations between the two leaders and advancing bilateral relations."

**June 29–30, 2019:** President Trump [visits](#) South Korea. He and President Moon “reaffirm” the US–ROK alliance, describing it as “the linchpin of peace and security in the Indo–Pacific.” Trump [shakes](#) hands with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un in Panmunjom and agrees to continue negotiations with North Korea.

**July 10, 2019:** ROK Foreign Minister Kang tells Secretary of State Pompeo that Japan’s export curbs are “undesirable.”

**July 12, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs David Stilwell states that the US won’t seek to mediate the South Korea–Japan dispute, encouraging both to focus on key regional issues, including North Korea.

**July 16, 2019:** Secretary Pompeo expresses hope that the US and North Korea can be “more creative” in nuclear talks. DPRK says nuclear talks are at risk if US–ROK exercises take place.

**July 17, 2019:** Assistant Secretary of State Stilwell visits Seoul as the Korea–Japan dispute worsens. Trump bemoans the request by the two US allies to “get involved.”

**July 19, 2019:** Secretary Pompeo rejects North Korean charges that US–ROK exercises breach any Trump–Kim agreement.

**July 23, 2019:** Kim Jong Un inspects a newly built submarine with enhanced tactical abilities and weapons systems.

**July 24, 2019:** National Security Adviser Bolton meets ROK officials to discuss North Korea and the alliance.

**July 25, 2019:** DPRK launches two short-range missiles, traveling 690 km and 430 km, and describe its missile launches as a warning to ROK “warmongers.” Pompeo says he expects working-level talks with North Korea within weeks.

**July 31, 2019:** North Korea launches two missiles from the Wonsan area. ROK Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo says the missiles, which flew 250 km and reached a height of 30 km.

**Aug. 1, 2019:** DPRK launches short-range missiles.

**Aug. 2, 2019:** Trump plays down the series of short-range missile launches. North Korean Foreign Minister Ri skips the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting.

**Aug. 5–20, 2019:** US and South Korea [hold](#) joint-military exercises *Dong Maeng 19-2*, a “scaled-back combined command post exercise” that is executed primarily through computer simulations.

**Aug. 6, 2019:** South Korea’s military [reports](#) that two “short-range ballistic missiles” were launched by North Korea into the Sea of Japan.

**Aug. 6, 2019:** National Security Adviser Bolton reminds Kim of his missile pledge following the DPRK warning that it may pursue a “new road.”

**Aug. 7, 2019:** Secretary Pompeo expresses hope that talks will resume within weeks.

**Aug. 7, 2019:** UN Sanctions Committee on North Korea [releases](#) a report showing DPRK-directed cyberattacks have raised to date \$2 billion in funds to support its WMD programs.

**Aug. 8, 2019:** Trump tweets that “talks have begun” on US–ROK defense burden-sharing.

**Aug. 9, 2019:** Lee Soo-hyuk is named new ROK ambassador to the US. Defense Secretary Mark Esper meets ROK leaders amid Korea–Japan dispute and burden sharing debate. Trump notes a letter from Kim Jong Un complaining of military exercises.

**Aug. 10, 2019:** North Korea [launches](#) “the fifth round of launches by Pyongyang in just over two week,” sending two short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan.

**Aug. 10, 2019:** Trump says Kim is open to more talks following US–ROK exercises.

**Aug. 14, 2019:** North Korea says any deployment of US intermediate-range missiles in the ROK would be a “reckless act.”

**Aug. 16, 2019:** North Korea [test-fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan, “the sixth launch of projectiles by the country since July 25.”

**Aug. 17, 2019:** KCNA reports Kim Jong Un oversaw the latest firing of missiles.

**Aug. 21, 2019:** North Korea describes a US mid-range cruise missile test and plans to deploy F-35 jets to South Korea as “dangerous” and possibly “triggering a new cold war.”

**Aug. 22, 2019:** South Korea scraps intelligence-sharing pact with Japan. North Korea Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho describes Secretary Pompeo as a “diehard toxin” and “impudent” and says North Korea is ready for dialogue or a standoff.

**Aug. 24, 2019:** North Korea [launches](#) its seventh projectile test since July 25. *Korean Central News Agency* reports the successful test of a “super-large multiple rocket launcher.”

**Aug. 26, 2019:** US says the ROK decision to withdraw from intelligence-sharing pact endangers US troops.

**Aug. 27, 2019:** Secretary Pompeo says in an American Legion speech that “we recognized that North Korea’s rogue behavior could not be ignored.”

**Aug. 28, 2019:** ROK Vice Foreign Minister Cho cautions Ambassador Harris on US statements criticizing South Korea’s decision to withdraw from its intelligence-sharing pact with Japan.

**Aug. 31, 2019:** North Korea condemns Secretary Pompeo’s recent remarks and suggests that DPRK expectations for more US dialogue are “gradually disappearing.”

