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US-KOREA RELATIONS

HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL

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In the first four months of 2021—the first three and a half of a Biden administration focused on domestic progress and COVID-19 vaccinations—US relations with the Korean Peninsula assumed familiar contours after four years of an unorthodox Trump administration. The US and South Korea quickly reached a military burden-sharing agreement and pledged cooperation in a variety of areas, although the regular differences of opinion lurk under the surface regarding how closely Seoul should work with both North Korea and Japan. The US-China rivalry remains a shadow over the Asia-Pacific security and political economy situation, complicating South Korea's regional hedging strategy. Finally, North Korea's nuclear program advanced apace, US and South Korean attempts to open dialogue were rebuffed, and the Biden team's North Korea policy review will not endear it to Pyongyang.

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The NK Policy Review: A Thousand Movements Scarce One Purpose Gain

The Biden administration piqued the interest of Korean Peninsula watchers early on by portending a policy review regarding North Korea. Secretary of State-nominee Antony Blinken [vowed](#) as much during his confirmation hearing in January, while hinting that the Biden approach to the peninsula would be paired with improved relations with allies. Along the way, State Department sources [said](#) the North Korean nuclear issue would be a priority for the new administration.



Figure 1 US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong in Seoul, South Korea on March 17, 2021. Photo: State Department/Ron Przysucha/Public Domain

Information about the review came in a trickle in subsequent months, with senior US officials [offering](#) occasional reminders that it was underway, but sharing vague details on when and offering even less about what it would contain. At the end of April, officials [said](#) the review's release was imminent, and though at the time of writing it has not been released, details [circulated](#) in the press on the last day of the reporting period.

If the April 30 *Washington Post* report is to be believed—and it probably can be, as the paper is hardly a fierce critic of the administration and the details look to have arrived in its possession on purpose—Biden's approach to the Korean Peninsula will attempt to split the difference between the “strategic patience” of the Obama years and the Trump administration approach of direct talks in the hopes of achieving a grand bargain. Officials *The Post* spoke to used the terms “calibrated” and “practical” and said that the plans had already been discussed with regional allies, as well as members of Congress.

On the one hand, long-time peninsula watchers can be heartened that the Biden administration will neither take the Obama team's passive approach—“strategic patience” as “doing the minimum and running out the clock”—nor will they set unrealistic goals such as a “grand bargain” within one term, as Biden's predecessor did (though they [say](#) denuclearization remains at the center of US policy). North Korea explicitly rejected CVID even before Kim Jong Un met Donald Trump, and details [revealed](#) since the failed Hanoi summit indicate that Kim felt confident he could get away with keeping much of his nuclear program and still get significant sanctions reduction. The Biden administration's emphasis on multilateralism will also be welcomed; it is [highlighting](#) US-South Korea-Japan cooperation to form a united front, rather than seeing rifts emerge due to contentious burden-sharing talks with Seoul or allowing the two allies to drift apart. Just before *The Post*'s revelations, Biden himself [said](#) that he would work with allies to address threats from North Korea through “diplomacy” and “stern deterrence.”

On the other hand, the opaque reveal of the policy review does not offer any hints to the two primary obstacles to dealing diplomatically with North Korea's nuclear weapons. First, North Korea's reaction has been predictably [hostile](#), and there is great skepticism that Pyongyang is interested in negotiations that implicate a roadmap even gesturing at denuclearization as a long-term goal, much less negotiations that place that objective front and center. Second, *The Post* reported that the “specifics of the proposal Washington will put forward remain unclear,” and by “specifics” one should understand the quid pro quo. There is no hint of what the US is willing to concede in terms of sanctions relief, and what it would expect in return. That may change by the time Biden's team goes public with details of the proposal, but it may not, reflecting just how few options Washington has for addressing the North Korean nuclear issue comprehensively. Attempting to pressure the regime into giving up (or even reducing) its nuclear and missile arsenal have foundered, and Trump's administration was not the first to fail at convincing them to trade it away. Efforts to persuade the North to even cap its program tend to fail or fall apart after the deal, and the administration [already admits](#) that the North

has responded to its initial overtures with the silent treatment.

Taking a multilateral approach to the North remains easier said than done. Long contentious relations between Japan and South Korea slipped to their worst point in decades under the Trump administration, a deterioration Biden's team seems determined to ameliorate through [direct intervention](#). Perhaps aware of the new administration's priorities, Seoul has [said—more than once](#)—that it stands ready to talk with Japan and support the trilateral partnership. All three parties seem to [agree](#) on the need to start work on resolving the problem.

But despite initial niceties between Seoul and Tokyo, familiar fissures remain. Seemingly [annual flare-ups](#) between the two over small islets both countries claim as their own threaten to halt any momentum before it really begins. This reporting period also saw a new point of contention—Japan's decision to release water from Fukushima, site of the 2011 nuclear crisis, into the sea, prompting Seoul to [express](#) “grave concerns.” While Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide has thus far been on [the same page](#) as Biden and discussed ways Tokyo can assist in the process, North Korea has [slammed](#) these suggestions, issuing reminders of how Japan colonized the peninsula from 1910–1945. This is not mere rhetoric; the North is surely aware that Washington wants closer ties between Seoul and Tokyo and would therefore seek to remind the South Korean public of the historical reasons for their distrust of Tokyo.

Furthermore, the Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul appears committed to the approach it has maintained throughout its tenure: seeking to build deeper ties with the North and encourage the US to negotiate with the North directly. This can be seen in [statements](#) by Unification Minister Lee In-young that the peace process should resume in the first half of 2021, and in Moon's *New York Times* [interview](#) where he called for face-to-face talks at an early date. Probably aware that Biden and his supporters would appreciate the contrast, Moon criticized the Trump administration's tentative approach to reaching a deal (as opposed to hosting a summit), which failed at making any progress toward rolling back the North Korean nuclear program. He expressed wishes that Biden would “go down as a historic president that [sic] has achieved substantive and irreversible progress

for the complete denuclearization and peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula.”

For all his disappointment with Trump, Moon warned Biden not to veer wildly from the path that began in Singapore in 2018, when Trump and Kim agreed to broad principles for peace and denuclearization. “I believe that if we build on what President Trump has left, we will see this effort come to fruition under Biden's leadership,” Moon told the *NYT*. However, while Biden has not expressed outright opposition to direct talks with the Pyongyang regime, Washington's view of such talks has tended to place a higher priority than Moon's on not rewarding “bad behavior” such as missile tests (more on that in a later section). Tensions between Washington and Seoul seem more likely if it becomes clear that the North's bad behavior will not subside.

Finally, what was once considered an essential step in a multilateral approach to the North—engaging Beijing—is far less likely now than it was four years ago. While the US has long been frustrated with the PRC's tentative approach to encouraging denuclearization, the [bottoming out](#) of US-PRC ties in the Trump years, and the continuity (thus far) between Trump and Biden, puts the two sides further from cooperation on the subject than ever before. The US has made at least [perfunctory efforts](#) at getting Beijing to be more proactive at achieving denuclearization on the peninsula—the PRC's ostensible goal—and Chinese President Xi Jinping has [expressed](#) a theoretical interest in being part of the process—but this all looks a lot like rhetoric.

In short, a multilateral solution to North Korean proliferation is a sensible goal, but if it were an easy one, one of Biden's predecessors would have achieved it.

US-SK: The Strong Connections, Nice Dependencies

The January–April period in US–South Korea relations started with a bang, as South Korea (and everyone else) watched the US political system melt down in a [riotous insurrection](#) scarcely imaginable five years ago. [Koreans](#) are not the only ones wondering about the reliability of the US—many Americans are similarly troubled by the failure of the country's foundational institutions. The US domestic political paroxysm was, for South Korea, the denouement of a difficult four years of the Trump presidency. But the other side of the

Capitol crackup is that the election that precipitated it did produce a president who—although he may fail to unite the US in this regard—repudiates much of what Trump represents. This is true domestically and in foreign policy, as Biden’s administration has promised to make America’s alliances great again.

Thus the resolution to US political turmoil—President Joe Biden’s inauguration, Trump’s second impeachment—[offers a doorway](#) for a renewal of US-South Korea relations, both in spirit and policy. And make no mistake, even beyond the domestic situation in the US, there are problems in the relationship. But like a committed, mature couple having a rough patch in middle age, the US and South Korea are working to fix their issues.

Starting Off on the Right Foot

The effort began even during the Biden campaign, which frequently [invoked the value of working with US allies](#), in contrast to the Trump administration’s domineering, combative approach, which South Korea experienced on numerous occasions. In [January confirmation hearings](#), Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken repeated the positive message on alliances, with due attention paid to South Korea and its concerns. The same was the case for Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in [initial discussions](#) with their respective counterparts, Defense Minister Suh Wook and National Security Advisor Suh Hoon. The rest of Biden’s Asia and Korean Peninsula team at the [National Security Council](#), [State Department](#), and [Pentagon](#) is pro-alliance and pro-South Korea. Seoul added to the bonhomie with [rapid post-inauguration calls](#) for high-level US-South Korea meetings and a [new task force](#) to strengthen policy coordination and communication with the Biden administration.

Although the Biden campaign unsettled the Moon Jae-in government by occasionally omitting North Korea from its top foreign policy priorities, in early February Secretary Blinken shed some light on [potential US policy](#) on North Korean denuclearization, and discussed the launch of a comprehensive North Korea policy review. The word denuclearization—as opposed to, say, engagement or peace—may not have been music to Moon’s ears, but it indicated that Biden’s team was puzzling through how to approach Pyongyang. Doubtless this was also a

major topic of discussion during a [constructive Feb. 4 Biden telephone call with Moon](#), one of the first world leaders to have the honor, underscoring the importance of Asia, and especially Korea, to the US.

February was a month for the laying of groundwork for US-South Korea alliance policy in a number of areas. The overarching mission was [preparing a visit](#) to South Korea—part of a swing through Asia—by a US delegation including Secretaries Blinken and Austin, slated to meet their counterparts in mid-March. Within that 2+2 meeting framework, North Korea policy was a preparatory agenda item, with Seoul [desiring](#) to keep it on the front burner even as the US was working through its policy review. Both sides made the [expected rhetorical](#) gestures, with South Korean and US diplomats and security officials pledging coordination on issues related to Pyongyang. This was on display in a first [phone call](#) between Blinken and his new foreign minister counterpart, Chung Eui-yong, who replaced Kang Kyung-hwa. To be sure, Washington and Seoul accented different areas of interest, with the US emphasizing [denuclearization](#) and US-South Korea-Japan [trilateral cooperation](#), neither of which are at the top of Seoul’s wish-list for dealing with North Korea. The Moon administration made more mention of [South-North confidence-building](#) and the desire to return as quickly as practicable to [economic cooperation](#) with North Korea, which requires [sanctions relief](#) the US finds premature.

[Finishing negotiations](#) on a long-simmering troop burden-sharing agreement—the Special Measures Agreement (SMA)—was a second key preparatory task in February for the March Blinken-Austin visit to South Korea. Numerous discussions throughout the month put the US in position to [announce in early March](#) that the SMA agreement—with a modest but meaningful increase in South Korea’s payments—was [nearly ready](#) to be officially signed. Also on the list of items to discuss in February was a green light from Washington to allow Seoul to release \$8 million in [frozen Iranian funds](#) to get Tehran to free a seized South Korean tanker. This issue was [less successfully concluded](#), as discussions continued through the 2+2 meetings in March (the ship was [released](#) in April).

The leadup to the March 2+2 coincided with US-South Korea combined military exercises, which were [again downscaled](#) due to COVID-19

concerns. This state of affairs accords with the perceived interests of the Moon administration. On the one hand, it [argues](#) that less robust exercises creates more room for diplomacy with North Korea, even if there is [some risk](#) to alliance joint military readiness. On the other, Seoul recognizes that downscaled combined military exercises delay wartime OPCON transfer, a desideratum for the Blue House.

Down to Business

Aside from the bilateral subjects, a number of other regional and global issues were on the table in early March, prior to the Blinken–Austin visit. They included advance coordination on positions at a [Biden-hosted climate summit](#) for world leaders in April and multilateral efforts to fight COVID-19 and produce/distribute vaccines. Other areas of Washington–Seoul coordination were tenuous—such as finding common ground on China policy and, a subset of that, South Korea’s intentions toward the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry at the virtual Leaders Summit on Climate. Photo: White House/Adam Schultz/Public Domain

The Quad held a leader-level meeting on March 12, shortly before the US–South Korea 2+2, with a [consensus emerging](#) that the Quad is (a) directed toward countering China, and (b) desirous of opening up to ad hoc cooperation with nonpermanent members (a format referred to as Quad Plus). This puts Seoul [ill-at-ease](#), as it has assiduously worked to remain strategically hedged as concerns US–China rivalry, especially considering economic fallout from the 2017 THAAD dispute with Beijing. To make matters more piquant, North Korean denuclearization made it into the Quad summit [joint statement](#), which likely concerned the Moon administration. Blinken and Sullivan were

also scheduled to have ([what turned out to be combative](#)) meetings in Alaska with their Chinese counterparts after Blinken’s departure from Seoul. Beforehand Blinken and his team would have been interested in getting on the same page with Foreign Minister Chung and the Blue House, a strain on relations insofar as the US approach is in tension with the Moon administration’s strategy of trying to remain relatively [ambiguous and noncommittal](#) with respect to confronting China.

The US 2+2 delegation, led by Blinken and Austin, arrived in mid-March. The first US–South Korea 2+2 since 2016 was [apparently a qualified success](#), but [stiff body language and differing viewpoints](#) contrasted with the fluid US–Japan 2+2 held just prior in Tokyo. The US and South Korean delegations made progress on numerous issues, and [undergirded](#) alliance cooperation. Importantly they [initialed](#) the SMA, and the US made good on its promise to consult with South Korean leaders about North Korea policy, including the policy review (ongoing at the time). Moon even made [promising statements](#) on trilateral US–South Korea–Japan cooperation (and later [dispatched NSA Suh](#) to Washington for trilateral NSA meetings with US and Japanese counterparts). But the talks showed both countries [still apart](#) on approaches to North Korea, the wartime OPCON transfer schedule, China policy, and the Quad.

Public diplomacy issues also overshadowed the event. On the day of arrival of the US delegation, Seoul City caused a diplomatic kerfuffle by [launching](#) an ill-conceived, xenophobic mandatory COVID-19 testing policy for all foreign workers, which was retracted in humiliating fashion after vociferous and public protest by embassies and foreign chambers of commerce, including those of the US. More tragically, during the Blinken–Austin visit in Seoul, a [mass shooting](#) in Atlanta, Georgia claimed the lives of several Asian-Americans, including ethnic Koreans, which led to a somber statement by Secretary Blinken.

Déjà Vu, All Over Again...

Predictably, North Korea did not let US–South Korea discussions go unobserved, duly firing [short-range ballistic missiles](#) and [cruise missiles](#) into the sea in late March. These launches do not change anything on the peninsula, but they create headaches for Seoul and Washington, both severally and as alliance partners. They definitely do not make diplomacy

easier. Correlation is not causation, but Seoul surely noticed that Washington's Pyongyang rhetoric increased a notch in the aftermath of the launches, as the Biden administration publicly [condemned](#) the short-range projectiles as UNSCR violations (which President Trump conspicuously failed to do), [reiterated](#) denuclearization as the US' overriding North Korea policy objective (telegraphing conclusions from the policy review), and [returned to criticizing](#) North Korea's awful human rights record (which Trump also largely failed to do). The cherry on the sundae was a Biden-Suga statement that even used the dreaded term "[CVID](#)" (complete, verifiable, irreversible, dismantlement/denuclearization) to describe shared US and Japanese objectives for nuclear negotiations with North Korea. This formulation is not the preferred nomenclature for the Moon administration, and the fact that it was employed at a Biden-Suga in-person bilateral summit surely produced an amalgam of envy and irritation in the Blue House (as an addendum, the Blue House is probably far from thrilled that the G7 foreign ministers meeting has recently [called for](#) the North to abandon its WMD and ballistic missile programs in a "complete, verifiable and irreversible" manner).



Figure 3 G7 foreign ministers pose for a photo in London before their meeting. Photo: Ben Stansall/Pool via Reuters

Also predictably, the Moon administration went into overdrive to [schedule an in-person bilateral summit](#) with Biden, which has now been set for May 21. There will be plenty to discuss, notably the North Korea policy review and its implications for US-South Korea diplomacy with Pyongyang. Some new topics—the possibility of a [COVID-19 vaccine swap](#), [preparations for the G7](#) (which Moon will attend as a guest), [US Congressional hearings](#) on South Korea's anti-North Korea leaflet law, [climate change](#)—will accompany recurring issues related to China,

the Quad, and US-South Korea-Japan trilateral cooperation.

US-NK: Aspiring to be Angels, Men Rebel

Before the North Korea policy review rollout there was little reason for optimism about the positive development of ties between Washington and Pyongyang. Due apparently to COVID-19 worries, North Korea was still officially in a self-imposed quarantine with the rest of the world, even China. This isolation has caused major economic setbacks for an already spectacularly mismanaged country. In any event, the North remained silent in the face of external [outreach](#), and to the extent that it sent messages to the outside world, it was usually (as [it did](#) at its January Party Congress) to inform them that its self-reliant quest to strengthen its defenses would continue. Later that month, the North [held](#) a military parade in Pyongyang, displaying its new submarine-launched ballistic missile, and its ambassador to Geneva Han Tae Song [said](#) Pyongyang would continue building up its war deterrent capabilities to defend itself and open a "genuine era of peace with eternally no wars."

The North indicated that it considered measures to strengthen its defenses more fruitful than direct talks with the US. As noted above, in March White House officials said the North had been unresponsive to requests for dialogue, a situation [reiterated](#) by Press Secretary Jen Psaki soon after. Right on cue, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong spoke up, [lambasting](#) South Korea for military exercises with the United States, and suggesting that such actions would keep Biden's administration "from getting a good night's sleep" for the next four years (soon after, she would [criticize](#) Moon as a "parrot" that repeats the US' "gangster-like logic"). Two days later, First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui [said](#) North Korea would ignore any contact from the United States unless the US withdraws its "hostile policies"—a common refrain by the North toward Washington, over the [protestations](#) of US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, that US outreach is aimed at "solutions," not hostility.

March also saw the unwelcome return of a familiar development on the Korean Peninsula: missile tests and the resulting condemnation and backlash. It began on March 23, when North Korea [fired](#) multiple short-range missiles after denouncing Washington for its joint military exercises with South Korea, its first missile tests

in about a year. On the 25th, it [launched](#) at least one unidentified projectile into the East Sea, according to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff. Washington [condemned](#) these actions on March 26 as “destabilizing” actions violating UNSCRs, to which North Korea responded by [accusing](#) Biden of a “provocation” and warned that the US will face “something not good” if such “thoughtless remarks” continue. For good measure, North Korea appeared undeterred by the invocation of the UNSC, which it [accused](#) of violating its sovereignty and applying a “double standard” for the recent missile test. On March 27 Seoul and Washington appeared in agreement, as director of North Korea policy at the South Korean Defense Ministry Cho Yong-geun and US Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs David Helvey [expressed](#) deep concerns over North Korea’s missile launches.



Figure 4 Image of one of the reportedly launched ballistic missiles, released by North Korea’s Korean Central News Agency. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

The impasse over proliferation continued through the early months of Biden’s presidency, and it looks as though there is little prospect of it ending. Secretary of Defense [Lloyd Austin](#) and a [Defense Department](#) spokesperson, as well as the US [Indo-Pacific Command](#) ([more than once](#)), highlighted the threat that North Korea’s proliferation poses to the US and its allies. And there were signs that North Korea’s program continues to evolve in both familiar and unforeseen ways: in March, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi [said](#) North Korea has been showing signs of operating a steam plant at a plutonium reprocessing facility, a “deeply regrettable” development in violation of UNSC resolutions. In April, the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis said that North Korea [is likely to](#) conduct more test launches of its Iskander-variant ballistic missiles to replace old Scud missiles with advanced solid-fuel designs,

which experts say would make them more difficult to detect. A Congressional report released in April said the North [seeks](#) to develop capabilities to degrade US missile defense systems deployed in the region, not long after the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington said that North Korea [continues](#) working on the submersible missile test barge at its Nampo shipyard, suggesting that it could be preparing for a subsurface ballistic missile test launch.

Other developments in this tense bilateral relationship during this reporting period included:

- The January [approval](#), by outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, of a new cyber-security and emerging technologies bureau to fight cyber-security threats, citing those from North Korea. The Bureau of Cyberspace Security and Emerging Technologies was prompted by “the challenges to US national security presented by China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other cyber and emerging technology competitors and adversaries,” the State Department said.
- A US federal district court [ordering](#), in February, North Korea to pay over \$2.3 billion in damages to the crew and family of the USS *Pueblo*, a US naval vessel captured in 1968. All but one of the 83 crew members captured by the North (one died) were imprisoned and tortured for 11 months before being released. The suit was brought by the surviving 49 crew members and their families.
- A rather unprecedented incident in March, in which Malaysia agreed to the extradition of a North Korean national to the US to face money laundering charges. Mun Chol Myong, 55, became the first North Korean national extradited to the US, where he will face charges of defrauding US banks and laundering more than \$1.5 million to evade US and UN sanctions. The North responded by [saying](#) on March 19 that it would sever diplomatic relations with Kuala Lumpur, and [pulled](#) its diplomats from their embassy two days later. The North had maintained ties with Malaysia since 1973, but relations were

strained from 2017 when Kim Jong Nam, half-brother to Kim Jong Un, was assassinated in a Kuala Lumpur airport.

Conclusion: Heav'n from All Creatures Hides the Book of Fate

The January–April period in US–Korea relations was action-packed but inconclusive. The rest of the year will provide more clarity on the direction taken. As for US–South Korea relations, the May summit with Biden is Moon's first, best chance to convince the new administration in Washington to move on Seoul's priorities, including building on the path that started in Singapore. Moon needs to get this opportunity right, as there will not be many more—indeed the whole enterprise is trickier than usual simply because Moon and Biden are operating with different time horizons. Moon, with less than a year left in office and already a quasi-lame duck after his party's crushing losses in major by-elections in April, is under pressure to deliver in a hurry on key agenda items, while Biden is at the beginning of his term. We will see if Moon has better things to say about Biden than [he does about Trump](#).

The US–North Korea dossier is more opaque. No one outside of a small circle in Pyongyang really knows what North Korea's leadership wants from relations with the US, while Washington's slow-moving North Korea policy review rollout sounds fine in theory (Pragmatism! Phased engagement!), but provides no practical substance on how Pyongyang can be enticed to the negotiating table, much less what serious (read: painful) offer of sanctions relief the US would be willing to make to get North Korea to engage in some as of now unclear form of denuclearization. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the Biden administration will fail to square the circle, just like its predecessors.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 7, 2021: Spokesman for the South Korean Foreign Ministry [congratulates](#) US President-elect Joe Biden after the Congress's certification of election victory.

Jan. 8, 2021: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [approves](#) creation of a new cyber-security and emerging technologies bureau to fight cyber-security threats, citing threats from North Korea.

Jan. 10, 2021: North Korea [revises](#) party rules at the 8th Party Congress in Pyongyang to clarify its aim to strengthen national defense capabilities.

Jan. 12, 2021: Kurt Campbell, former state department official for Asia during the Obama administration, [is appointed](#) Joe Biden's "Asia czar"—coordinator for the administration's overall Indo-Pacific policy.

Jan. 13, 2021: US Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris [announces](#) his pending departure from his post, officially leaving the post on Jan. 20.

Jan. 15, 2021: North Korea [holds](#) a military parade in Pyongyang, displaying its new submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

Jan. 19, 2021: South Korean Defense Ministry [says](#) South Korea is ready to talk about any issues with North Korea via military channels to ease tensions.

Jan. 19, 2021: During US Senate confirmation hearings Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken [vows](#) to improve its relationship with allies, saying Biden administration will review the entire approach to North Korea.

Jan. 21, 2021: Biden [becomes](#) the 46th president of the United States, underlining the importance of its relationship with allies.

Jan. 23, 2021: South Korea's top national security officer Suh Hoon [discusses](#) bilateral cooperation in advancing the Korean peace process and global issues with his new US counterpart, Jake Sullivan.

Jan. 24, 2021: South Korea's Defense Minister Suh Wook and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [reaffirm](#) the importance of their alliance, promising to cooperate on improving the relationship.

Jan. 25, 2021: South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young [hopes](#) for a "wise" and "flexible" solution to joint military drills with the US to prevent serious tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Jan. 26, 2021: South Korea [pushes](#) for high-level meetings with the administration of US President Joe Biden at an early date.

Jan. 27, 2021: Chinese President Xi Jinping [expresses](#) active support for Korean denuclearization in phone talks with Moon.

Jan. 28, 2021: South Korea's Foreign Ministry [launches](#) a task force to strengthen policy-related communication with the new Biden administration.

Jan. 29, 2021: North Korea's Ambassador to Geneva Han Tae-song [says](#) Pyongyang is building up its war deterrent capabilities to defend itself and open a "genuine era of peace with eternally no wars."

Jan. 31, 2021: Gyeonggi Province Gov. Lee Jae-myung [sends](#) letter to the US Congress calling for support for an ROK law enacted to ban the sending of propaganda leaflets into North Korea.

Feb. 2, 2021: Secretary Blinken [says](#) the US looks for optimal ways to advance the denuclearization process in North Korea.

Feb. 3, 2021: South Korean Unification Minister Lee In-young [says](#) South Korea has been sufficiently communicating with the US on anti-leaflet law.

Feb. 3, 2021: President Moon [pledges](#) to upgrade the alliance with the US in a phone call with President Biden.

Feb. 5, 2021: National Security Adviser Sullivan [says](#) the US will closely consult with South Korea on North Korea issues.

Feb. 6, 2021: Department of State [says](#) the US is committed to quickly reaching a “mutually acceptable” defense cost-sharing agreement with South Korea.

Feb. 8, 2021: Acting US Ambassador to South Korea Rob Rapson [highlights](#) the strong bilateral partnership between the two countries in the first tweet he posted.

Feb. 9, 2021: South Korea’s Unification Ministry [expresses](#) hopes for the early resumption of the Kaesong complex as it marks the fifth anniversary of its closure.

Feb. 10, 2021: South Korea’s top nuclear envoy, Noh Kyu-duk, and a senior US diplomat [agree](#) to close consultations on North Korea policy during their phone talks.

Feb. 11, 2021: Biden [says](#) the US will not hesitate to use force to protect its people and allies.

Feb. 12, 2021: New ROK Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Secretary Blinken [stress](#) close cooperation for complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula during their first phone talks.

Feb. 13, 2021: US State Department [says](#) the North Korean nuclear issue is a top priority for the Biden administration despite the lack of direct engagement with the country.

Feb. 18, 2021: South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young [says](#) that North Korea faces a food shortage of over 1.2 million to 1.3 million tons this year due to damage from heavy downpours that happened last year.

Feb. 20, 2021: Ned Price, press spokesperson at the State Department, [highlights](#) the importance of South Korea and Japan working together, saying “any US effort to denuclearize North Korea will not be as effective without the support and close cooperation of South Korea and Japan.”

Feb. 22, 2021: Minister of Unification Lee [calls](#) for efforts to restart a long-suspended project to compile a unified Korean-language dictionary project with North Korea.

Feb. 23, 2021: Minister of Unification Lee [renews](#) calls for building a joint response system with North Korea against infectious diseases.

Feb. 24, 2021: State Department spokesman [says](#) the US and South Korea may discuss Iran sanctions but that there has not yet been a release of Iranian funds held in the US.

Feb. 26, 2021: US federal district court [orders](#) North Korea to pay over \$2.3 billion in damages to the crew and family of a US naval vessel captured in 1986.

Feb. 26, 2021: Minister of Unification Lee [urges](#) that international sanctions on North Korea do not result in unintended negative effects on ordinary North Korean people.

Feb. 27, 2021: US Defense Department spokesman [says](#) North Korea’s continued development of weapons poses a threat to the United States and its allies.

March 1, 2021: Moon [says](#) South Korea is ready to talk with Japan anytime, stating that it would also be helpful to the trilateral partnership with the United States.

March 2, 2021: Chief of the UN nuclear watchdog [says](#) North Korea has been showing signs of operating a steam plant at a plutonium reprocessing facility.

March 3, 2021: South Korea’s presidential office [says](#) Moon is likely to talk with Biden in April during a global climate summit.

March 4, 2021: State Department spokesperson [says](#) South Korea and the US are “very close” to an agreement to set Seoul’s share of the cost for US troops on the Korean Peninsula.

March 4, 2021: Secretary Blinken [lays out](#) the “most urgent” priorities for American diplomacy, skirting the issue of how to deal with nuclear-armed North Korea.

March 4, 2021: US Indo-Pacific Command [says](#) North Korea poses the “most immediate threat” to the United States until they agree to full denuclearization.

March 5, 2021: Secretary Austin [includes](#) North Korea on the list of threats to the US and its allies.

March 6, 2021: Pentagon spokesman John Kirby [says](#) the US takes its commitment to the security of South Korea very seriously, “making sure there are ready military capabilities should they be needed.”

March 7, 2021: South Korea and the US [kick off](#) scaled-back combined military exercise.

March 8, 2021: South Korea and the US [reach](#) a defense cost-sharing agreement in maintaining US troops on the Korean Peninsula.

March 9, 2021: Seoul’s Defense Ministry [says](#) South Korea and the United States are to stage joint outdoor drills throughout the year, not during specific periods of time.

March 10, 2021: US Indo-Pacific Commander Adm. Phil Davidson [says](#) that North Korea poses a serious and most imminent threat to the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region, including South Korea.

March 11, 2021: Washington [says](#) it will not ease its sanctions on Iran, including Iranian funds in South Korea, until Iran returns to compliance with the JCPOA.

March 12, 2021: Former US nuclear negotiator Robert Gallucci [urges](#) South Korea and the US to refrain from large-scale combined military exercises and for North Korea to avoid nuclear tests.

March 13, 2021: Administration official [says](#) North Korea has not responded to the behind-the-scenes Biden administration’s diplomatic outreach since mid-February.

March 14, 2021: Blinken [embarks](#) on a trip to Asia to discuss major challenges in the region, including North Korea and [China](#), with Japan and South Korea.

March 15, 2021: South Korea and the United States [plan](#) to initial a defense cost-sharing deal after a 2+2 meeting of their top foreign and defense officials.

March 16, 2021: White House spokesperson Jen Psaki [says](#) that North Korea continues to be unresponsive to US calls for dialogue.

March 16, 2021: Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong [condemns](#) South Korea for military exercises with the United States.

March 17, 2021: Four people of Korean descent [are killed](#) in deadly shootings in Atlanta.

March 17, 2021: Foreign workers in Seoul [complain](#) of being singled out as Seoul mandates all foreigners working at for-profit organizations be tested for coronavirus by the end of the month.

March 18, 2021: North Korean First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui [says](#) North Korea will continue to ignore any contact from the US unless the US withdraws its “hostile policies” toward North Korea.

March 18, 2021: South Korea and the US [hold](#) “2+2” talks of their foreign and defense officials in Seoul to discuss a coordinated strategy on North Korea and efforts to reinforce the alliance.

March 18, 2021: South Korea and the United States announce [plan](#) to launch a new working-level policy dialogue to reinforce their bilateral alliance.

March 18, 2021: President Moon [says](#) South Korea will improve strained ties with Japan to bolster trilateral security cooperation involving the US during talks with Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defense Austin.

March 19, 2021: North Korea [says](#) that it will sever diplomatic relations with Malaysia for extraditing its businessman living in Malaysia to the United States.

March 20, 2021: Blinken [says](#) that the US and China had a candid conversation on North Korea during a ministerial meeting in Alaska.

March 21, 2021: North Korean diplomats [leave](#) their embassy in Malaysia after Pyongyang said it would cut diplomatic ties with Malaysia over its citizen's US extradition.

March 22, 2021: 55-year-old businessman Mun Chol Myong, who faces money laundering charges, [becomes](#) the first North Korean citizen ever extradited to the United States.

March 24, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) two cruise missiles off the west coast, Pyongyang's first missile test in about a year.

March 25, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) at least one unidentified projectile into the East Sea, according to the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.

March 25, 2021: South Korea [convenes](#) emergency National Security Council (NSC) meeting on North Korea's latest projectile launch.

March 26, 2021: Washington [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launches as "destabilizing" actions violating UN Security Council resolutions.

March 27, 2021: North Korea [accuses](#) Biden of a "provocation" for criticizing its missile launches, warning that the US will face "something not good" if such "thoughtless remarks" continue.

March 27, 2021: Director of North Korea policy at the South Korean Defense Ministry Cho Yong-geun and US Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs David Helvey [express](#) deep concerns over North Korea's recent missile launches.

March 29, 2021: North Korea [accuses](#) the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) of violating its sovereignty and applying a "double standard" for the recent missile test.

March 30, 2021: Kim Yo Jong [criticizes](#) Moon for his speech, mocking him as a "parrot" that repeats the US' "gangster-like logic."

March 31, 2021: US Acting Assistant Secretary of State Lisa Peterson [says](#) the US will hold North Korea accountable for its "egregious" human rights violations.

April 1, 2021: Korea Institute for Defense Analyses [says](#) North Korea likely to conduct more test launches of its *Iskander*-variant ballistic missiles to replace *Scud* missiles with advanced solid-fuel ones.

April 2, 2021: State Department spokesman Ned Price [says](#) that denuclearization will be at the center of any new US policy toward North Korea.

April 3, 2021: South Korea, Japan, and the US [agree](#) on the need to quickly resume dialogue with North Korea to peacefully resolve the nuclear issue.

April 5, 2021: South Korea's Defense Ministry [rejects](#) Japan's renewed territorial claims over the country's easternmost islets of Dokdo, saying Seoul does not even have to repeat explanations on the matter.

April 6, 2021: North Korea [decides](#) that it will not participate in the upcoming Tokyo Summer Olympics to protect its athletes from the coronavirus pandemic.

April 7, 2021: South Korea's Unification Ministry [vows](#) efforts to resume inter-Korean talks despite North Korea's decision not to participate in the Tokyo Olympics.

April 8, 2021: White House spokeswoman Psaki [says](#) that the United States is prepared to engage in diplomacy with North Korea if it leads to denuclearization on the peninsula.

April 9, 2021: US House of Representatives [says](#) it will hold a public hearing on South Korea's ban on anti-Pyongyang leaflets into North Korea.

April 10, 2021: White House spokeswoman Psaki [says](#) that North Korea's difficult conditions are caused by the actions of its own leadership, arguing that no US actions or sanctions are targeted at the North Korean people.

April 11, 2021: Biden [hails](#) settlement of an electric vehicle battery dispute between LG and SK as a "win for American workers and the American auto industry."

April 12, 2021: South Korea's Foreign Ministry [expresses](#) "grave concerns" over Japan's decision to release Fukushima water into the sea.

April 15, 2021: South Korean Unification Ministry official [says](#) the upcoming US congressional hearing on South Korea's ban on sending anti-Pyongyang leaflets into North Korea will not affect South Korea-US alliance.

April 16, 2021: South Korean Unification Ministry [expresses](#) that an upcoming summit between South Korean and US presidents will help build consensus on denuclearization, improving inter-Korean relations.

April 17, 2021: President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide [commit](#) to the complete, irreversible, and verifiable dismantlement (CVID) of all weapons of mass destruction in North Korea.

April 20, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [says](#) that South Korea is "earnestly discussing" the COVID-19 vaccine swap deal with the United States.

April 21, 2021: North Korea [continues](#) working on submersible missile test barge at its Nampo shipyard, a US think tank says, suggesting that it could be preparations for a ballistic missile test.

April 21, 2021: President Moon [urges](#) the US to restart dialogue with North Korea at an early date during an interview with *The New York Times*, criticizing Donald Trump for failing to "pull it through" and reach a deal.

April 22, 2021: A Congressional Research Service reports [says](#) North Korea seeks to develop capabilities to degrade US missile defense systems deployed in the region.

April 23, 2021: Chief of US Strategic Command Adm. Charles Richard [says](#) that the United States is ready and able to deter any aggression from North Korea.

April 28, 2021: South Korean defense ministry [says](#) that it is trying to secure new "large-scale" firing ranges for the US Forces Korea (USFK) as the US military has complained about limited access to existing ones due to protests from residents.

April 29, 2021: Biden [says](#) that he will work with allies to address threats from North Korea through "diplomacy" and "stern deterrence."

April 29, 2021: South Korean Unification Minister Lee In-young [says](#) that South Korea will strive to restart the stalled peace process on the Korean Peninsula, and urges the US to engage North Korea at the earliest possible date.

April 30, 2021: *Washington Post* [reveals](#) details of Biden administration's completed policy review, indicating that the administration seeks to strike a balance between the Trump administration's leader-to-leader diplomacy and the Obama presidency's arm's-length approach to the crisis.

Chronology compiled by Pacific Forum Research Intern Hanmin Kim.

