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US relations with both South and North Korea were—with a few notable exceptions—uneventful during the May–August 2021 reporting period. If US–Korea relations displayed some excitement, it was largely along the Washington–Seoul axis. An inaugural leader summit between Presidents Joe Biden and Moon Jae-in took place in Washington, producing significant deliverables for the short, medium, and long term. Biden and Moon then participated in the June G7 summit in Great Britain. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August also provided South Korea with challenges and ponderables. Washington–Pyongyang communication was subdued, aside from standard North Korean criticism of US–South Korea joint military exercises. Even when the US and North Korea addressed each other with respect to dialogue, it was usually to underline for the other party how Washington or Pyongyang is willing to talk under the right circumstances, but capable of waiting out the other side. Late August added some spice, however, as the IAEA issued a credible report confirming what many had expected: North Korea has likely re-started fissile material production at the Yongbyon complex. Finally, outside the reporting period, Pyongyang tested a potentially nuclear-capable land-attack cruise missile on Sept. 11. Are these signs that sleeping dogs are stirring?

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US–South Korea Relations: Tending the Garden

Alliances are great—and in the contemporary world necessary—for major powers wishing to project power in the far abroad or shape the global system, as well as for middle powers seeking international influence disproportionate to their size. Alliances are also a lot of work, and one of the constants is that alliance partners have to communicate. Even when things are going well, alliance partners need to coordinate on issues, plan strategically for the future, exercise militaries jointly, and reassure each other that potential abandonment and/or entrapment has been banished.

If you talk to “alliance managers” in Washington, it’s quickly apparent that there is an infinite appetite—especially by “junior” partners in an alliance—for a phone call, quick chat, meeting, coffee, etc. with a counterpart, all in the name of reassurance. No alliance partner anywhere has ever said “yes, we are sated, no more reassurance is necessary.” This element of ally consultation has been the dominant feature of US–South Korea relations during the May–August reporting period. It is easy to criticize the many diplomatic meetings between US and South Korean officials as mere talk, but talk is the tool of alliance management.



Figure 1 US Secretary of State Anton Blinken talks to South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong during a meeting on the sidelines of the G7 in London. Photo: AP via Hindusan Times

The start of May was devoted to the oldest and most venerable of diplomatic discussions: sherpa talks to prepare the agenda for a leader-level meeting. The venue was interesting, however, as Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and Secretary of State Antony Blinken [met on the sidelines](#) of the G7 preparatory meeting hosted by Great Britain, which had invited South Korea as an observer. Global multilateral issues featured prominently—COVID vaccines, climate change, etc.—but Blinken found time to make [statements](#)

[calling](#) for North Korean denuclearization, and the ministers included North Korea on their agenda. Meanwhile Chung gave a media interview [advocating](#) for the US to name a North Korea special representative. Doubtless Blinken and Chung tinkered with the agenda for the Biden–Moon summit in Washington, the contours of which had been laid out during the US–South Korea “2+2” (foreign and defense ministers) meeting in Seoul in March.



Figure 2 US President Joe Biden meets with South Korean President Moon Jae-in at the White House, in Washington, DC Photo: Reuters/Jonathan Ernst

Biden and Moon [came together for an inaugural summit](#) on May 22. The agenda was full, including important dossiers on security and military cooperation, economics/trade, climate change, and, of course, public health (COVID-19) and North Korea. The latter [two issues headlined](#) the summit, as the Biden administration [pledged 550,000 doses](#) of Johnson and Johnson (Janssen) COVID-19 vaccines (later increased to more than 1 million, delivered in June), which were [quasi-earmarked](#) for the South Korean military. This was a welcome deliverable for Moon, as South Korea was slow in procuring vaccines. Samsung Biologics also [signed a deal](#) to produce Moderna’s vaccines in a local factory. The Biden administration used the summit with Moon to [discuss the thrust](#) of the Biden team’s approach to North Korean denuclearization and Korean Peninsula peace, the outlines of which were hinted at in Biden’s North Korea policy review. On the one hand, the policy review’s continued hard line on North Korea sanctions, coupled with a generally patient approach indicating how low North Korea was/is on the White House priority list, was likely a disappointment (although not a surprise) for Moon. On the other hand, Biden did [name Sung Kim](#) as North Korea Special Representative and reiterated an intention to honor the Moon–Kim Panmunjom Declaration

and the Singapore statement produced at the first Trump–Kim summit.

The Biden–Moon summit had plenty of other items on offer as well. There were announcements of substantial [Korean investment in US high-tech industry](#) (notably computer chip and electric vehicle battery manufacturing). This was both a substantive and symbolic down payment on closer US–South Korea ties on “supply chain resilience” (i.e., anti-China technology investment), a major desideratum for the US. On the military front, the US agreed to [abolish missile limitation guidelines](#) restricting South Korean ballistic missile range, a win for both sides. The Biden–Moon summit joint statement also mentioned cooperation, consultation, or joint initiatives on cybersecurity, outer space, climate change, and next-generation technology (e.g., 6G, semiconductors, etc.). Since most of these issues fit within the concept of (re)building a “rules based–international order,” it is hard not to see that they are meant to bind South Korea in a closer regional and global partnership with the US that will play a part in a larger strategy of countering China in the Indo-Pacific. This was already evident in the way that the US persuaded South Korea to endorse summit joint statement language on human rights in Myanmar, coordination of Washington’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and Seoul’s New Southern Policy, and (most provocatively) “preserving peace and stability” in the Taiwan Strait.

The G7 meeting in June, hosted by Great Britain, included South Korea as an [ad hoc guest invitee](#). Moon touted South Korea’s COVID-19 response and climate change efforts, and held the obligatory bilateral meetings. South Korea did not (as per protocol) sign on to the G7 joint communique, [which contained some blunt language](#) on countering China as well as a direct call for North Korean CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization/dismantlement) of its nuclear program. Moon did, however, [sign on to a softer statement](#) on democratic and human rights values, which was interpreted as also criticizing China.



Figure 3 South Korean President Moon Jae-in, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and US President Joe Biden at the G7 summit in Cornwall, England. Photo: Pool/via AFP-JJII

Otherwise, June was quiet for Washington–Seoul relations. Blinken [called on NATO](#) to work more closely with South Korea. In early June new USFK/CFC/UNC commander Gen. Paul Lacamera formally [assumed command](#), replacing Gen. Robert Abrams. In addition, South Korea’s Defense Minister Suh Wook [announced increased cooperation with the US on space-related defense issues](#). Meanwhile Foreign Minister Chung [met](#) with Indo-Pacific Commander John Aquilino and a [Congressional delegation](#) visiting Seoul. The COVID-19 vaccines the [US pledged to South Korea](#) at the Biden–Moon summit arrived, including a top-up that took the number of doses to more than 1 million. US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [made a visit to Seoul](#) to meet with his counterpart Noh Kyu-duk (and their Japanese counterpart) as well as President Moon. Moon scored a public diplomacy victory by being [featured on the cover](#) of *Time* magazine, fronting an interview in which he plugged the urgency of diplomatic negotiations and peace with North Korea.

The US–South Korea diplomacy festival continued in July. Special Representatives Noh and Kim [spoke by phone](#), and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [visited Seoul](#) for wide-ranging talks with counterparts regarding North Korean denuclearization negotiations as well as bilateral US–South Korea topics and trilateral US–South Korea–Japan cooperation on regional issues. There was more punch at the end of the month—a preview of a more piquant August, in fact—as Seoul and Pyongyang [announced an agreement](#) to restore moribund hotline communications in the DMZ. This positive, albeit minimal, step followed a [series of exchanged letters](#) between Moon and North Korean Worker’s Party Chairman Kim Jong

Un. The revelation of some of the letters' contents—both leaders agreeing to restart the hotline communications as a first step to recovering “lost mutual trust” and rebuilding strained South-North ties—stoked muted optimism that progress on Peninsula reconciliation might open the door for US–North Korea talks, including on denuclearization.



Figure 4 US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman meets South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong in Seoul. Photo: Pool/via Reuters

August proved that even muted optimism about diplomacy with North Korea is a risky bet. No sooner did the two sides begin literally to pick up the phone ([beginning Aug. 3](#)) than Pyongyang metaphorically slammed the receiver down, [launching several diatribes](#) about combined US–South Korea military exercises planned (as usual) for mid-August. This was not unpredicted, but statements by Kim Yo Jong, sister of Kim Jong Un, denouncing the exercises as a “[most intensive expression of Washington’s hostile policy](#)” toward Pyongyang not only previewed another breakdown of inter-Korean communication, but also highlighted a wedge in US–South Korea relations. Lee In-young, South Korea’s minister for unification, [had been already advocating](#) skeletally scaled-down exercises throughout summer; his reticence was shared by more than 60 Democratic (ruling) Party lawmakers, who on Aug. 5 [called for a delay or cancellation](#) of the drills. In the end, the US–South Korea joint exercises [were held as planned](#), with little novelty, aside from [unusual Chinese criticism](#) of the exercises by Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and a [curious North Korean declaration](#) on Aug. 19 of a “no-sail zone” for ships off its East Coast, often a sign that Pyongyang intends to carry out a missile test (which did not take place this time (see US–North Korea section below)).

Also in August, Blinken and Chung held [phone talks on North Korea issues](#); US Trade Representative Katherine Tai (virtually) [met](#) her counterpart Yeo Han-koo to discuss Biden administration trade priorities, climate change, and supply-chain resilience; and North Korea Special Representatives Sung Kim and Noh Kyu-duk met in person [both in Seoul and Washington](#). Beyond tending the diplomatic garden, the US delivered on a promise to send COVID-19 vaccines to South Korea, with [400,000 doses](#) of Johnson and Johnson (Janssen) arriving in mid-August (in addition to the million doses delivered in June). In the military sphere, Washington and Seoul also [advanced their cooperation on space issues](#), while the US agreed (subject to Congressional approval) to sell [more than \\$250 million](#) in advanced arms (notably precision-guided munitions) to South Korea, increasing its warfighting capability and helping to advance wartime OPCON transfer to South Korea.

The final days of the reporting period presented a notable development: Afghanistan. The US withdrawal from the country, after 20 years, preoccupied South Korea both practically and intellectually. South Korea, like many US allies, was forced to scramble to pull out its diplomatic corps, military service people, civilians, and NGO representatives as the Afghan government and military dramatically collapsed in front of the Taliban’s advance toward Kabul. South Korea [availed itself](#) of US military air transport to withdraw some of its personnel. Moreover, South Korea, like many allies, was caught off-guard by the chaotic withdrawal, which damaged the image of US operational competence, an unsettling proposition for countries (like South Korea) reliant on the US for deterrence of adversaries. Although few experts would argue that South Korea has much to worry about in terms of US credibility due to the Afghanistan issue (the US military was in Afghanistan for 20 years, and has been in South Korea since 1950), the State Department and [even President Biden](#) felt the need to reiterate the ironclad US–South Korea alliance. Garden-tending is never-ending.

US–North Korea Relations: Nothing Happens Until Something Moves

For US–North Korea relations, most of the May–August reporting period was marked by how little took place. Far from the serious provocations that greeted previous administrations and prompted early standoffs, North Korea launched nothing but [verbal volleys](#) (at least not until the

reporting period [was over](#)), especially against Washington and the US-South Korea alliance. And while the Biden administration raised hopes that it might bring a more substantive approach to North Korea, avoiding both the previous administration's emphasis on interpersonal relations and the inaction of the Obama administration, its spring policy review fizzled and there has been little since then to suggest that the administration has added substance to its approach. Instead officials are left to rote calls for [more dialogue](#), and, when such calls are ignored, statements that Washington remains committed to [denuclearization of the peninsula](#). Rep. Brad Sherman's (D-California) "[Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act](#)" bill, which calls for negotiations to officially end the Korean War, represents a more hands-on approach than is usually seen in Congress, but it is unlikely (to put it mildly) that the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives would permit legislation to go forward that pressures the Biden administration to commit to carrots when it is not yet ready to put down the stick.

The summer doldrums were enlivened a bit in August, however. Not only did Pyongyang lash out at US-South Korea combined military exercises, as mentioned above, but on Aug. 19 the Kim regime [issued a navigational warning](#) (a "no-sail zone") for ships off its East Coast at the beginning of US-South Korea exercises. The US duly dispatched surveillance aircraft (JSTARS E-8C) to monitor the situation, as historically these navigational warnings signal that Pyongyang intends to carry out a missile test. Yet this time the navigational warning passed with no launch, [leaving questions](#) about the nature of the warning. Was it a ruse to sow confusion and doubt in the US-South Korea alliance, as the ruling party in Seoul already has an uneasy relationship with US-South Korea military exercises? Was it bait to see what surveillance aircraft the US would scramble to observe the test? Was it a planned launch that North Korea scrubbed due to technical problems? Did adverse weather render the telemetry difficult, such that the launch was postponed? If an actual launch was in the offing, what system was to be tested?

The most substantial piece of news in US-North Korea relations—and perhaps a hint as to what lies ahead—occurred near the end of the period. A [report](#) to the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Board of Governors said on Aug. 30 that there were indications that a key nuclear reactor at the Nyongbyon Nuclear Scientific

Research Center (also known as Yongbyon) had been activated in July. Yongbyon has long played a role in negotiations over the North's nuclear programs—in 1994 it was shut down as part of the Agreed Framework, then was restarted in 2003 when that deal collapsed. The Six-Party Talks (2003-09) netted another closure in 2007, and the cooling tower at the site was demolished in 2008 in exchange for North Korea's removal from the US' State Sponsors of Terrorism list. In 2009, North Korea restarted operations at the site in response to UN condemnation of a satellite launch, as part of a tit-for-tat that resulted in the Six-Party Talks' collapse and dashed hopes that the then-nascent Obama administration could break the deadlock in bilateral relations (see the reference above to "serious provocations and early standoffs").



Figure 5 GeoEye Satellite image of the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre in North Korea. Photo: AFP/GeoEye Satellite Image via SCMP

The closing/re-opening of Yongbyon has been a recurrent theme in discussions, formal or otherwise, ever since. Satellite imagery suggested that the 5 MWe reactor was operating at, at most, a low level in recent years, but the symbolism of the site was significant enough that, as recently as 2018 the North, during its then-honeymoon with South Korea's Moon administration, indicated that the site would be dismantled only in exchange for corresponding measures from the US. Those measures never came.

That the North's proliferation continues, even in the absence of a major provocation, has not been a mystery. On May 5 Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Global Security Jennifer Walsh [said](#), in a statement to the House Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations, that North Korea has not let up in its buildup of not only nuclear weapons, but chemical and biological

stockpiles as well. “Given the risk that Kim Jong Un could seek to employ [weapons of mass destruction] in the course of or to stave off a conflict on the Korean Peninsula, the Joint Force must be ready for any number of WMD-related contingencies that require operating in a CBRN contaminated environment,” Walsh commented.

On May 28 *38 North*, a source of North Korea analysis that frequently makes use of satellite imagery, noted ongoing activity at the site but “no clear evidence that spent fuel rods have been transferred from storage near the 5 MWe Reactor to produce plutonium.” The coal-fired thermal plant, the site noted, had been in operation since March, but the steam production witnessed there could “simply [be] related to the processing of radioactive waste from previous campaigns.”

Then came the report to the IAEA board on Aug. 30, which noted the discharge of cooling water “consistent with the operation of the reactor.” It added that the steam plant, the radiochemical laboratory at Yongbyon, had been in operation for the five-month period from mid-February to early July, a period “significantly longer than that observed in the past during possible waste treatment or maintenance activities,” and a time “consistent with the time required to reprocess a complete core of irradiated fuel from the 5MW(e) reactor.” *38 North* [chimed in](#) again soon after, noting the discharge of cooling water into an outflow channel, which it described as “one of the key indicators of reactor operations.”

On Aug. 30, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told a press briefing that the IAEA’s report and the signs of activity in the area underscored the “urgent” need for dialogue to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula. “We continue to seek dialogue with the DPRK so we can address this reported activity in the full range of issues related to denuclearization,” she added. That Psaki stressed the administration’s continued effort to “seek” dialogue may be telling; while the administration’s more dovish critics may fault it for not taking bolder steps to “[break the deadlock](#)” (a favorite term of those who favor engagement) there have been signs, including in the [previous reporting period](#), that North Korea is not especially interested in talking with Biden’s team for the moment.

One suspects that will change: Kim embarked on a charm offensive in 2018 once his country appeared to have obtained thermonuclear capability as well as an ICBM capable of reaching

the entire continental US. North Korea prefers to enter negotiation phases from a position of perceived leverage. But what would they be waiting for this time? Kim has discussed [development](#) of any number of new weapons systems, from “electronic warfare equipment” to nuclear submarines to tactical nuclear weapons. The latter of those technologies has now been demonstrated, as Pyongyang [reportedly carried out](#) tests of a possibly nuclear-capable land-attack cruise missile on Sept. 11 and 12. Could that demonstrated new capability unlock a willingness to talk to Washington? Perhaps, but Kim is probably also waiting for the resolution to his country’s COVID woes (an especially difficult target, considering his [refusal](#) to accept foreign vaccines), along with his own possible personal [health issues](#). Seoul was, as the previous section mentions, reminded of how capricious Pyongyang’s communications can be; in the end, nothing we have seen in the last four months suggests they are about to start taking Washington’s calls.

Conclusion: Take Heed of Still Waters

On the one hand, the Biden administration has made good on its promise to prioritize alliances, and signs suggest that it and the Moon administration get along, even if Washington cannot embrace negotiations with Pyongyang as enthusiastically as Seoul would like. With burden-sharing no longer looming over US-ROK ties, the allies have avoided tensions of the sort that marked the last year of the Trump administration, and reports suggest that publics in the two countries remain supportive of the alliance. The Biden team’s lifting of missile restrictions on the South has allowed Seoul to move forward with [missile technology](#) that, while not fitted with a nuclear warhead, is nevertheless very powerful and capable of serving as a serious conventional deterrent to North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Washington is also probably heartened that Seoul is proceeding with defense spending increases, to the tune of 5.8% a year for three years.

Finally, just because there was not much excitement in this reporting period does not mean that the reporting period was unimportant—absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The relative quiet—still waters, if you will—is seemingly indicative of something consequential deep below the placid surface: a “new normal” might be consolidating in terms of the US vision of the Korean Peninsula,

as Washington increasingly sees its relations with both Koreas as subordinated to great power competition with China. If true, this would place new pressure on South Korea to view the alliance with the US in a more comprehensive perspective, while incentivizing the US to middle-/long-term de-prioritization of diplomacy with Pyongyang, provided the latter does not come to the negotiating table with a credible offer on denuclearization. De facto this would mean increasing the role of nuclear deterrence in the region, a potential Pandora's box.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2021

May 1, 2021: South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [says](#) that it will continue to coordinate with the US to encourage Washington to resume long-stalled denuclearization talks with North Korea.

May 3, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and his US counterpart, Antony Blinken, [hold](#) bilateral talks on the margins of a Group of Seven (G7) meeting in London.

May 4, 2021: Secretary Blinken [calls](#) for coordinated efforts to denuclearize North Korea at the G7.

May 5, 2021: Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Global Security Jennifer Walsh [says](#) that North Korea continues to build up its chemical and biological weapons in addition to its nuclear weapons.

May 7, 2021: South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [says](#) it is “desirable” for the US administration to appoint special representative for North Korea.

May 8, 2021: Former South Korean Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn [says](#) that the US and South Korea must remain firm and flexible in their commitment to denuclearize North Korea.

May 10, 2021: Department of Defense spokesman John Kirby [says](#) that the source and destination of illicit weapons seized over the weekend in Arabian waters are still under investigation, adding that the US does not exclude North Korea from its list of potential destinations.

May 12, 2021: Head of South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) Park Jie-won [meets](#) the intelligence chiefs of Japan and the United States in Tokyo and exchanges views on North Korea and other relevant issues.

May 13, 2021: US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines [visits](#) the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas as Washington seeks to round out its policy on North Korea.

May 14, 2021: Secretary Blinken [reaffirms](#) his country's commitment to UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea, amid US outreach for engagement with the reclusive North,

May 16, 2021: North Korean propaganda outlets [criticizes](#) South Korea's biennial integrated defense exercise with the United States, warning that it will only “stab itself in the eyes” by confronting the North.

May 18, 2021: President Joe Biden [says](#) that the United States will provide up to 80 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to other countries by the end of next month, reiterating his pledge to turn the US into an “arsenal” of vaccines for the entire world.

May 19, 2021: South Korean President Moon Jae-in [heads](#) to the US for summit talks with President Biden on COVID-19 vaccine cooperation, North Korea, alliance issues and bilateral economic partnership.

May 21, 2021: During a tour of the US, President Moon [meets](#) House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other congressional leaders to discuss the alliance, North Korea and COVID-19 vaccines.

May 22, 2021: President Moon and President Biden [hold](#) 171 minutes of one-on-one, small group, and expanded summit meetings, about 20 minutes longer than meetings between the US president and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. Moon and Biden [reaffirm](#) their security alliance and committed to a string of partnerships in vaccine collaboration and North Korea. Moon also [announces](#) a joint decision with the US to end guidelines that restricted Seoul's development of missiles, and [an agreement](#) to work together to build stable supply chains for semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries and medical supplies.

May 22, 2021: Biden [pledges](#) to provide full vaccinations for all 550,000 South Korean troops, agreeing to pursue a global COVID-19 vaccine partnership

May 22, 2021: South Korean biopharmaceutical firm Samsung Biologics [signs](#) a deal to manufacture Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine at its local factory.

May 24, 2021: ROK Unification Minister Lee In-young [says](#) the summit between Presidents Moon and Biden created "sufficient" conditions need to resume the long-stalled dialogue with North Korea.

May 26, 2021: US Ambassador to Indonesia Sung Kim [begins](#) his work as a special representative for North Korea, speaking with his Japanese counterpart, Takehiro Funakoshi.

May 28, 2021: South Korea's Unification Ministry [says](#) it will seek to restore communication lines and dialogue with North Korea based on "sufficient conditions" for engagement created by the summit between Presidents Moon and Biden.

May 28, 2021: 38 North [says](#) that North Korea appears to be continuing activities at its Yongbyon nuclear complex but no clear evidence has been detected to determine if spent fuel rods have been transferred from the storage facility to produce plutonium.

May 31, 2021: North Korea [slams](#) the US lifting of missile restrictions on South Korea as a "stark reminder" of Washington's hostile approach to Pyongyang, saying the recently unveiled US policy on North Korea is "just trickery."

June 1, 2021: ROK intelligence chief Park Jie-won [is](#) expected to return home after a weeklong trip to the US that apparently focused on discussions with his counterparts on North Korea.

June 2, 2021: Secretary Blinken [has](#) called on NATO members to deepen their cooperation with South Korea amid US efforts to reinforce cooperation between US allies.

June 3, 2021: ROK FM Chung [holds](#) a breakfast meeting with US Indo-Pacific Command chief Adm. John C. Aquilino in Seoul to discuss their countries' alliance and peace on the Korean Peninsula and beyond.

June 4, 2021: ROK FM Chung [meets](#) three visiting US senators (Tammy Duckworth (D-Illinois), Chris Coons (D-Delaware), and Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska)) and discusses bilateral and alliance issues.

June 5, 2021: US Sen. Duckworth [says](#) that the recent lifting of US curbs on South Korea's missile development would be "complementary" to America's regional deterrence efforts.

June 6, 2021: South Korea [plans](#) to accelerate its space development program including boosting cooperation with the US in a move that may help the Biden administration's Asia strategy to check China's growing global clout.

June 6, 2021: ROK Unification Minister Lee [calls](#) for "maximum flexibility" in deciding what to do with joint military exercise with the US set for August, saying such drills should never serve as a chance to cause additional tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

June 7, 2021: South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun [plans](#) to visit Washington later this week for talks with US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to discuss bilateral, regional and global issues between the two countries.

June 8, 2021: Secretary Blinken [pledges](#) to work with the two Koreas to help realize long-awaited reunions of Korean-Americans with families in the North, calling it a "heart-wrenching" issue.

June 9, 2021: President Moon [will visit](#) Britain for G7 summit followed by state visits to Austria and Spain for talks on bilateral ties.

June 10, 2021: State Department spokesman Ned Price [says](#) the US seeks to engage with North Korea diplomatically to make progress toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

June 10, 2021: Cheong Wa Dae (the Blue House) [says](#) that South Korea and the US have established a senior-level expert group to follow up on their summit deal on their "vaccine partnership."

June 12, 2021: Secretary Blinken [stresses](#) the need to work with China to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula in a phone call conversation with his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi.

June 13, 2021: G7 nations [issue](#) a joint statement calling for the complete denuclearization of North Korea, welcoming the commitment of Washington to engage with Pyongyang through diplomacy.

June 18, 2021: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [says](#) the North should be ready for both dialogue and, more importantly, confrontation with the United States, while calling for efforts to stably control the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

June 19, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [arrives](#) in Seoul for talks with his South Korean and Japan counterparts to resume nuclear diplomacy with Pyongyang.

June 21, 2021: Sung Kim [says](#) he looks forward to Pyongyang giving a "positive response soon" to Washington's dialogue offer, referring to Kim Jong-un's recent remarks that Pyongyang should be ready for both dialogue and confrontation.

June 22, 2021: State Department spokesman Ned Price [says](#) the United States is willing to hold dialogue with North Korea at any time and any place.

June 22, 2021: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to consider terminating their "working group" forum on North Korea policy.

June 23, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [wraps](#) up his five-day trip to Seoul after redoubling Washington's calls for dialogue with a recalcitrant Pyongyang.

June 24, 2021: President Moon [reaffirms](#) his commitment to doing his best to reinvigorate the Korea peace process in a *Time* magazine interview.

June 25, 2021: Moon Chung-in, former adviser to the South Korean president, [says](#) ending the bilateral "working group" forum on North Korea policy between South Korea and the United States cannot be an incentive for Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table.

June 29, 2021: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to speed up cooperation in supply chains such as memory chip and battery sectors, in the follow-up to the outcome of their leaders' summit.

July 2, 2021: US [shortlists](#) North Korea as a nation complicit in human trafficking and forced labor again.

July 3, 2021: Pentagon spokesman John Kirby [says](#) that the US remains committed to the joint defense of South Korea and that includes maintaining an appropriate level of US forces on the Korean Peninsula.

July 5, 2021: South Korea's Navy [joins](#) a US-led multinational maritime exercise *Vanguard* in Australian waters to enhance cooperative operation abilities.

July 7, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [has](#) phone talks with Chinese counterpart after he sought to reach out to North Korea during his trip to the South.

July 8, 2021: ROK chief nuclear negotiator Noh Kyu-duk [speaks](#) by phone with US counterpart Sung Kim and discussed efforts to advance the peace process on the Korean Peninsula.

July 12, 2021: North Korea's foreign ministry [accuses](#) the United States of using humanitarian aid as a political tool to interfere with North Korea's internal affairs.

July 20, 2021: Pentagon spokesman John Kirby [says](#) that the United States maintains and continues to advance its capabilities to counter any cyber-attacks from China and North Korea.

July 21, 2021: Deputy Secretary of State Sherman [stresses](#) the importance of cooperation between the US, South Korea, and Japan in addressing regional issues such as the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

July 23, 2021: South Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and US Deputy Secretary of State Sherman [have](#) talks in Seoul over stalled nuclear diplomacy with North Korea and other bilateral and global issues.

July 26, 2021: Deputy Secretary Sherman [highlights](#) need for the US and China to work together in dealing with regional and global issues such as nuclear-armed North Korea during her visit to China.

July 28, 2021: ROK FM Chung [calls](#) inter-Korean hotline restoration to restore trust and improve ties between the South and North.

July 31, 2021: Congressman Brad Sherman (D-California) [proposes](#) the "Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act," which more than a dozen US lawmakers sign on to, seeking to formally end the Korean War and establish liaison offices between the United States and North Korea.

Aug. 1, 2021: Kim Yo Jong, sister of the North Korean leader, [warns](#) that annual military drills between South Korea and the United States will cloud the future of inter-Korean relations.

Aug. 2, 2021: ROK Unification Ministry [says](#) that South Korea will deal with the issue of joint military drills with the United States in a "wise" and "flexible" manner so as to not heighten tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Aug. 4, 2021: US national intelligence officer for North Korea at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence Sydney Seiler [says](#) that the US will never accept a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Aug. 6, 2021: Director-general and deputy-level officials of the United States and South Korea [meet](#) to coordinate efforts to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Aug. 6, 2021: ROK FM Chung and Secretary Blinken [agree](#) to make continued efforts to engage with North Korea and foster lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula during their phone talks.

Aug. 8, 2021: South Korea [decides](#) to conduct upcoming military exercise with the United States as planned despite North Korea's warning.

Aug. 9, 2021: Secretary Blinken [expresses](#) a willingness to consider different "options" and "possibilities" with North Korea in a renewed call for its return to dialogue at a regional forum.

Aug. 9, 2021: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [says](#) the upcoming US-ROK military exercise is not “constructive,” calling for Washington to avoid any action that would cause tension with North Korea.

Aug. 10, 2021: Kim Yo Jong, sister of Kim Jong Un, [slams](#) South Korea and the United States for going ahead with joint military exercises, denouncing the drills as the “most intensive expression” of Washington’s hostile policy toward Pyongyang.

Aug. 11, 2021: Cheong Wa Dae [dismisses](#) an allegation that it might have had a secret deal with North Korea for the reconnection of direct communication channels earlier this month.

Aug. 12, 2021: United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai virtually [meets](#) with South Korea’s Trade Minister Yeo Han-Koo to discuss the Biden-Harris administration’s trade priorities and opportunities in supply chain resilience, tackling climate change and WTO reform.

Aug. 12, 2021: North Korean Ambassador to Moscow Sin Hong-chol [calls](#) for US troop withdrawal from South Korea and called the US-ROK joint military exercise a “war rehearsal.”

Aug. 13, 2021: North Korea [denounces](#) the expiration of a pandemic-related US government ban on residential evictions, saying Washington should address its own human rights issues before “poking its nose” into other countries’ affairs.

Aug. 15, 2021: 400,000 doses of Johnson & Johnson’s Janssen COVID-19 vaccine that the US agreed to provide [arrive](#) in South Korea on Sunday, according to the US Embassy in Seoul.

Aug. 16, 2021: US [aids](#) the evacuation of South Korean Embassy staff in Afghanistan under a memorandum of understanding that the two countries signed earlier this year in the event of a contingency.

Aug. 16, 2021: South Korea and the United States [start](#) their annual joint military training Monday amid North Korea’s strong protest and threats of a serious security crisis.

Aug. 18, 2021: ROK Unification Minister Lee [urges](#) North Korea to come back to the negotiating table within this year, expressing concerns that upcoming political events in the region could slow down the peace process with Pyongyang.

Aug. 19, 2021: North Korea reportedly [declares](#) a no-sail zone for ships off the east coast, indicating that it had plans to launch missiles amid a military exercise between South Korea and the United States.

Aug. 20, 2021: State Department spokesperson Ned Price [says](#) that the Biden administration prioritizes alliances with NATO, South Korea, and Taiwan as a “profound source of strength” for the United States.

Aug. 21, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [arrives](#) in Seoul for talks with his South Korean and Russian counterparts to resume dialogue amid renewed tensions over the ongoing military exercise between Seoul and Washington.

Aug. 23, 2021: US special representative for North Korea Sung Kim and South Korean counterpart Noh Kyu-duk [discuss](#) humanitarian aid to North Korea. The next day, ROK Unification Minister Lee [meets](#) with the US envoy and discusses a coordinated approach to jump-start stalled talks with the North.

Aug. 25, 2021: ROK Unification Minister Lee [calls](#) on Russia to play a “constructive role” in advancing the peace process on the Korean Peninsula during talks with Moscow’s nuclear envoy.

Aug. 29, 2021: South Korean Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Park In-ho [signs](#) a deal with the chief of the US space operations and agrees to form a joint consultative body on space policy to strengthen cooperation.

Aug. 30, 2021: UN nuclear watchdog [says](#) it has detected “deeply troubling” indications of Yongbyon nuclear reactor operating since July, including the release of cooling water.

Aug. 30, 2021: White House press secretary Jen Psaki [stresses](#) the “urgent need” for dialogue and diplomacy with North Korea following news that the North had restarted activity at its primary nuclear reactor for the first time in three years.

Aug. 30, 2021: 38 North [publishes](#) additional evidence of the Yongbyon 5 MWe reactor’s activation, namely “a discharge of cooling water into a new outflow channel.”

Aug. 31, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [expresses](#) hope for North Korea’s return to dialogue, saying the US remains committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and diplomacy.

Aug. 31, 2021: ROK Unification Minister Lee [calls](#) for the early resumption of talks with North Korea, saying dialogue is the only way toward achieving objectives that everyone wants.

*Chronology compiled by Pacific Forum Research
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