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US-KOREA RELATIONS

US-KOREA RELATIONS: PENINSULAR INERTIA

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The final four months of 2021 US-Korea relations played out largely as anticipated: the US deprioritized creative outreach to North Korea and generally subordinated the Korean Peninsula (both South and North) to the US-China rivalry. North Korea was considered likely to continue its self-imposed isolation while advancing its nuclear and missile arsenal. And it was expected that South Korea would doggedly pursue inter-Korean diplomacy while building up its military capabilities, optimizing a calibrated approach to the US and China, and bracing for a period of political opacity leading up to the March 2022 presidential election. Standard set-pieces were also evident during the September-December reporting period: US and South Korean officials did the yeoman's work of alliance management via frequent meetings and periodic performative statements of alliance cohesion. North Korea celebrated National Foundation Day and the anniversary of the Worker's Party of Korea, and held an end-of-year party plenum. South Korean President Moon Jae-in used his UN General Assembly speech to encourage international support for inter-Korean reconciliation.

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The third trimester of 2021 did have some surprises, however. The Moon administration's full-court press for a declaration of the end of Korean War was out of step with US and North Korean priorities. Announcement of the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) strategic pact caught all off-guard, including Seoul, which has jealously eyed Washington's decision to work with Canberra on a nuclear-propelled attack submarine. US insistence on ensuring that South Korea's technology industry comports with US geostrategic aims vis-à-vis China was more strongly visible—and friction-inducing—than expected. And *Squid Game* rocketed from obscurity to global sensation, proving that BTS does not have a monopoly on South Korea's cultural exports.

US-South Korea Relations: Meetings X (Readouts/Disagreements) = Progress?

One thread consistently wended its way through US-South Korea relations during the final trimester of 2021: President Moon's advocacy for [a declaration of the end of the Korean War](#). Although this diplomatic tool has been in the South Korean progressive toolbox for years, the Moon administration promoted the end of war declaration with frequency and fervor in the last four months of 2021. The big unveiling for this effort came at the UN General Assembly meeting in September, when Moon [used his speech](#) to call on the international community to support the two Koreas, the US, and (presumably) China in signing such a declaration.



Figure 1 South Korean President Moon Jae-in speaks at the 76th Session of the UN General Assembly on Sept. 21, 2021. Photo: Reuters / Eduardo Munoz / Pool

Following this keynote, the Moon administration rarely missed a chance to use a diplomatic forum to push for the end of war declaration. South Korean Special Envoy for North Korea Noh Kyu-

duk [brought it up](#) during meetings with US counterpart Sung Kim; Seoul's National Security Advisor Suh Hoon [discussed it in China](#); First Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Choi Jong-kun [evoked it](#) multiple times during his trip to Washington, [including with counterpart](#) Wendy Sherman and [at a heavily mediatized event](#) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On [multiple occasions](#) Unification Minister Lee In-young framed it as a [potential starting point](#) for inter-Korean peace and reconciliation. Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [evoked it](#) in his meetings with Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the sidelines of the G20, and repeatedly claimed that a final text was near completion. Moon closed the circle in December, during a speech in Australia, stating that the end of war declaration was [“agreed in principle”](#) among the US, China, South Korea, and North Korea.

It *should* go without saying, although apparently [it needs repeating](#): Moon saddled the horses before the posse was ready to ride. His claim of an end of war declaration “agreed in principle” is aspirational at best. As it is premature, it is also possibly reckless. China may be [on board](#), but the US [response](#) has been [extremely cautious](#). Even [the most positive](#) US statements—by Special Envoy for North Korea Sung Kim—have made serious efforts at an end of war declaration contingent on North Korea's return to denuclearization negotiations. US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan unequivocally put the brakes on the declaration by highlighting US-South Korea differences in [“sequencing or timing or conditions.”](#)

The reasons for US reticence have been [widely discussed](#): such an agreement would likely not succeed where past US-North Korea agreements failed, at least in terms of building trust between Pyongyang and Washington. It might, however, call into question US-led institutions on the peninsula, including the [UN Command](#). It could also be interpreted as a reduction in pressure on Pyongyang to reverse progress made on its nuclear program, effectively functioning as a step to [de facto recognition](#) of North Korea as a nuclear state. The US also worries a precipitous end of war declaration would increase pressure on Washington to withdraw troops from South Korea. The specter of troop withdrawal was among the reasons why 35 Republican members of the House of Representatives—including the GOP's two Korean-American members—[signed a letter](#) in early December stating their “grave concern” with the end of war discussions.

The letter acknowledged the Biden administration's "measured approach" to the discussions, one that is entirely consistent with the Biden's team approach to the Korean Peninsula in general. The administration is passive and risk-averse on North Korea diplomacy, in part because [Washington has deprioritized the issue](#) in favor of the US-China rivalry. This is also because the Biden administration sees little chance of progress—on peace and reconciliation or denuclearization—in the North Korea dossier, so spending energy and political capital on the issue is hard to justify. This is *a fortiori* true since Moon will leave office in March 2022—possibly to be replaced by conservative Yoon Seok-yeol—so neither Washington nor Pyongyang has an incentive to move on a declaration that could be quickly undone. Punting may, however, backfire for the US if progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung wins—[recent polls](#) have been inconclusive—as Lee has come out strongly [in favor](#) of the declaration and the US may have to address the matter more directly should he be the new partner in Seoul.

But for the moment the noncommittal US approach to the declaration has received adversarial support, in that Pyongyang has been demonstrably negative about the idea. The North Korean Foreign Ministry [has qualified it](#) as a "premature" and meaningless "scrap of paper" with "no binding legal force." To the extent that North Korea has [shown any interest](#) in the declaration, it came from Kim Yo Jong, who called it "a good idea" yet conditioned it on the end of undefined "hostile relations" by Seoul and Washington against Pyongyang. This was followed by [setting the lifting of sanctions](#) as a condition for North Korea to enter "talks" on the end of the war declaration, a non-starter for the US.

The obvious question is, then: why has the Moon administration so stubbornly continued this quixotic quest? In part, this is simply who the Moon administration is: true believers in peninsular reconciliation hammering away at skeptical parties until they give in to the force of progressives' sheer willpower. More proximately, the Moon administration has few other options for engaging the Kim regime. Sanctions relief—what North Korea really wants—is off the table until the Western UN P-5 members (the US, the UK, and France) decide otherwise.

Diplomacy—shuttle, summit, or otherwise—is largely ruled out due to North Korea closing its border due to COVID-19. Pyongyang is likely [not to participate](#) in the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, which means little hope for diplomacy that might lead to breakthrough in February. And Pyongyang has shown no substantive interest in humanitarian relief linked to South Korea (or in general, for that matter). A long-shot end of war declaration was about the only option that South Korea had in the waning months of Moon's presidency. And as possibilities have dimmed, the Moon administration's hope was (and still is) that the seed would find purchase and sprout with a chance for survival in a successor administration. This is not per se crazy, but there are real risks that South Korea's desperation has hurt its diplomatic reputation and strained relations with the US.

US-South Korea: A Dynamic Balancing Act

In addition to standard alliance maintenance—with US and South Korean senior officials meeting to discuss issues including North Korea [denuclearization or potential humanitarian assistance](#), [regional cooperation](#), [climate policy](#), [COVID](#), or [economic relations](#)—there were several multilateral fora in which the US and South Korea interacted at the highest levels. Most prominently, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting there were multilateral discussions involving both the US and South Korea, [including a trilateral with Japan](#). The [November G20](#) was also a high-profile multilateral diplomatic event in which Seoul and Washington exchanged views on North Korea, climate, and supply chain resilience.

Single-issue multilaterals—[COP26](#) in Glasgow and a virtual [cybersecurity meeting](#) hosted by the US—were venues for South Korea and the US to coordinate on carbon emission reductions and cyber issues, international rules-based cooperation that both Seoul and Washington prioritize. In December, Moon also participated in a US-organized [summit on the state of democracy](#), underscoring South Korea's delicate balancing act vis-à-vis the US and China, the latter of which viewed the multilateral forum negatively.



Figure 2 Sung Kim, US Special Envoy for North Korea, speaks during trilateral meeting between Japan, the US, and South Korea, to discuss North Korea, in Tokyo on Sept. 14, 2021. Source: Pool via Reuters

Much of this diplomacy met the goals of alliance maintenance, but points of friction were visible. Most obvious was the continuation of the decrepit state of South Korea-Japan relations, the improvement of which is a US foreign policy desideratum. US-South Korea-Japan three-way talks among North Korea [envoys](#), senior intelligence [officials](#), and even [foreign ministers](#) were constructive, but difficult Seoul-Tokyo bilateral relations were a drag on substantive progress and led to a public [diplomatic breakdown](#) in November, when Japanese and South Korean officials refused to appear with one another at a joint news conference due to a territorial dispute. Nonetheless, the hope is that the leadership of new Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio will open pathways to better cooperation after the March presidential election in Seoul.

Another friction point was South Korea's *sotto voce* irritation with Washington's decision to cooperate with Canberra on the development of nuclear-powered attack submarines for the Australian navy, a privilege denied to South Korea on numerous occasions. The submarine deal is part of a larger Australia-UK-US strategic pact (AUKUS), so the US decision to work with Australia on naval nuclear propulsion is not strictly speaking analogous to anything in the US-South Korea alliance, but one can expect Seoul to [reiterate](#) requests to develop nuclear-powered submarines in cooperation with the US. As the US has signaled that the Australia submarine deal is unique, this is a potential point of disappointment for future Seoul-Washington relations.

The technology matters, of course, but what also bothers Seoul about the submarine deal is the thought that it is another in a series of decisions by Washington indicating that perhaps the US-South Korea alliance is declining in importance vis-à-vis US relations with Japan and Australia. The Biden administration says all the right things about the US-ROK alliance as a “lynchpin” of stability, peace, and prosperity in East Asia, but Seoul feels AUKUS and Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or “Quad”) members may be getting preferential treatment. This sentiment is underlined by the fact that Canberra and Tokyo have US ambassador nominations, while Seoul [awaits with frustration](#) even a rumor of who might be coming to South Korea.

It is increasingly hard to avoid the suspicion that the US-South Korea alliance is in a waning phase (in relation to other US Indo-Pacific partners, but not absolutely) because South Korea is simply not available for overt strategic countering of China in the way that Japan and Australia are. Japan and Australia are much farther along than South Korea in deciding to align with the US in pushing back against China's revisions to the international rules-based order. Simply put, in an era of China-US great power competition, South Korea's security alliance with the US is in tension with its economic dependence on China, which accounts for 25% of South Korea's exports, and is also a major import partner and a supplier of critical components for South Korean finished goods. Consequently, Seoul still hopes to hedge. The day when hard choices and painful tradeoffs must be made is rapidly approaching, but the Moon administration is still banking on a dynamic balancing act between Washington and Beijing.

South Korea's interest in maintaining its maneuvering space between the US and China was the context for several important Seoul-Beijing diplomatic discussions. The headline was a [senior-level strategic dialogue](#) in December, the first such meeting in four years. Discussions touched on sensitive issues such as China-US relations (including US strategy in the Indo-Pacific), North Korea, South Korea-China economic relations, and developments in and around Taiwan. The strategic dialogue was prepared in [September by Wang Yi's visit to Seoul](#), which was in part also devoted to exchange of views on North Korea's advancing missile program and the regional arms race in which the Korean peninsula is increasingly

involved. The year in South Korea-China relations also ended with another issue tangential to US-South Korea relations, as the Moon administration [refused](#) (so far) to join the Biden administration in an [official-level](#) diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing.



Figure 3 Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and South Korean Minister of Defense Suh Wook answer questions during a press conference after the 53rd US-Republic of Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) at the Defense Ministry in Seoul, Republic of Korea, Dec. 2, 2021. Photo: US Indo-Pacific Command / Chad McNeeley / Public Domain

The last trimester of 2021 also featured advances in defense cooperation. The biggest headlines came from US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's visit to Seoul in December. The 53rd US-South Korea Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) included announcement of an [upcoming new Strategic Planning Guidance](#) that will [overhaul US-South Korea operational plans](#) for countering North Korea's growing capabilities. The last time the SCM made such an announcement was in 2010, before North Korea's successful development of nuclear weapons.

South Korea continued advancing its defense capabilities in the last part of 2021, including launches of a [submarine-launched ballistic missile](#) (SLBM) and a supersonic cruise missile, as well as a new [SLBM submarine](#) (making South Korea the only non-nuclear weapons power to have such a platform). [Space cooperation](#) with the US was also on the agenda for US-South Korea defense, as was the perennial issue of transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korea. During the SCM, Defense Secretary Austin and counterpart Suh Wook [discussed advancing](#) wartime OPCON assessment to a date (Fall 2022) earlier than currently envisioned.

US-South Korea economic relations also figured more prominently on the agenda during the final trimester of 2021, although South Korea may find this a mixed blessing, as increased US interest in South Korean business is shaped by the way that US-China rivalry is driving the US to pressure countries to buy into [global supply-chain diversification](#) while reducing exposure to China's economy. This is a problem for South Korea, given its dependence on China (see above) as an export market and supplier of critical manufacturing components. In September, the US Commerce Department made a [strong request](#) that global chipmakers—including Samsung—provide confidential proprietary information on sales figures, inventories, clients lists, etc. as a part of an ostensible effort to identify supply-chain bottlenecks, but which felt like a fishing expedition to find where Chinese companies were located in the semiconductor supply chain. Cooperation was officially voluntary, but companies with major US exposure—like Samsung—felt pressured given the prospect of the Biden administration invoking the Defense Production Act to compel compliance. The US also flexed its muscles in [blocking SK Hynix from upgrading](#) a factory in China with an EUV fabrication machine manufactured by Dutch tech-giant AMSL. In happier news, [Samsung announced](#) a \$17 billion investment in a chip foundry in Taylor, TX.

The September-December period of US-South Korea relations also had notable soft power elements. South Korea's first democratically elected president, [Roh Tae-woo](#), died, as did his immediate predecessor dictator [Chun Doo-hwan](#), which prompted reflection on the democratization of South Korea (and thus how that affected the alliance) and the sometimes ambiguous role played by the US in this regard, as Cold War Washington was both a democratic governance model and a military ally that sought good relations with South Korea's unsavory leaders. In a more contemporary vein, Korean pop group BTS [won major accolades](#) at the American Music Awards and [performed at the UN headquarters](#), while South Korean television series *Squid Game* became an overnight global sensation for Netflix.

All told, the US-South Korea alliance is occasionally strained but fundamentally strong, which is important as South Korea enters the 2022 presidential election. Politicians on both sides support the alliance rhetorically and in practice, and Korean and US publics are also

highly supportive. This is unlikely to change much, and one can expect the candidates—Lee Jae-myung and Yoon Seok-yeol—to continue speaking positively of the alliance in spring 2022 prior to the March presidential election. Diplomatic and defense interests and efforts remain broadly aligned and based on consultation, and economic relations are robust. Cultural influence is increasingly reciprocal, as South Korea has become a world-class popular culture content provider.

US-North Korea: Fighting Over Optics

Meanwhile, US-North Korea ties remained effectively nonexistent during the last part of 2021, even though both sides sent signals that the other is not forgotten. Washington continues to call for the North to join it in dialogue, even as it condemned the regime's arms programs and human rights abuses. The North, as in previous periods, sharply disputes those criticisms—and has used the sad fate of Afghanistan to push back against the latter. The North continued to show no interest in negotiating away its strategic weapons programs—quite the opposite, in fact, considering its testing activity.

In August and September, the United States faced a foreign policy reckoning. The withdrawals of US troops from Afghanistan ahead of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks resulted in what many had feared: a new Taliban takeover, much more swiftly than many had anticipated, which solidified the conclusion that the two-decade effort to build a new Afghanistan had been for naught.

For North Korea, this was no occasion for taking the high road. “The international society has already come to know better through the crisis in Afghanistan that the US is the destroyer of ‘human rights’ and ‘democracy,’” its Foreign Ministry [declared](#) on Sept. 7. “The US should wake up to the reality that there is no more country which would lend an ear to its hypocritical chanting of ‘human rights,’ and put an immediate end to its act of interfering in others’ internal affairs.” On the 12th it continued, [denouncing](#) the 20-year Afghanistan effort as a “human rights crime” and accusing Washington of committing “atrocities of mass destruction,” a reminder of the emphasis on “weapons of mass destruction” following the 9/11 attacks that presaged not only the invasion of Iraq, but the collapse of Washington’s Agreed Framework with Pyongyang. For good measure, the North

Korean Foreign Ministry cited international reporting on civilian casualties in Afghanistan, declaring that the world demanded US troops be “brought to justice.”

For North Korea, US foreign interventionism such as in Afghanistan is a recurring theme in state media and other public statements, not only to illustrate the danger that the US military poses for smaller nations such as itself, but also to rebut criticism of its own human rights record. On Nov. 18, the US [designated](#) North Korea as a state violator of religious freedom, along with nine other countries, which Secretary of State Blinken called part of an effort to end “structural, systematic and deeply entrenched” obstacles to religious freedom—and North Korea would certainly [fit the bill](#). On Dec. 10, Human Rights Day, the US [designated](#) North Korean Defense Minister Ri Yong Gil and the Central Public Prosecutors Office for human rights violations—Ri, in his previous role, headed the Ministry of Social Security, and as such oversaw use of its fundamentally unfair [justice system](#). On the same day, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry [doubled down](#) on criticism of the US and the coalition it led, over Afghanistan, which suffered the “bombardment of ‘protection of human rights’ and ‘counter-terrorism’ by the US and the West.”

For Pyongyang, “human rights” translates, first and foremost, into [sovereignty](#) and non-interference in its affairs. It has practical and reputational interest in highlighting US actions abroad contrary to such principles. While its recent actions are seen as [mostly symbolic](#), the incumbent liberal internationalist administration in Washington has signaled that it has a deeper interest in the subject than its predecessor, which may have consequences for—but [not only for](#)—North Korean officials and institutions in the future. North Korea’s barbs over US military actions will likely continue, unless a rapprochement takes place that the US wishes not to jeopardize.

The sort of rapprochement necessary to halt such recriminations—a deal capping North Korea’s missile or nuclear programs in exchange for sanctions relief, for instance—appears nowhere on the horizon. On several occasions—Special Representative Sung Kim [said](#) as much in June, and other officials echoed the pessimism on [Oct. 15](#) and [Dec. 13](#)—State Department officials have declared that they would meet with North Korea without preconditions, adding that they have

offered (publicly unknown) specific proposals to the North. Sung Kim [added](#) on Oct. 24 that the US is willing to help the North address its humanitarian concerns (which are considered [dire](#)).

We have [described](#) the North Korea-US diplomatic dance as “talking about talks.” This time around things might not even have risen to that paltry level: US entreaties generally sank like an early [Hwasong-12](#), with Pyongyang not deigning them worthy of a reaction. One exception came on Sept. 30: Kim Jong Un, even as he promised restoration of inter-Korean hotlines, [dismissed](#) US calls for talks as a “petty trick.”



Figure 4 Image of a new anti-aircraft missile released by KCNA on Oct. 1, 2021. Photo: Rodong Sinmun via NK News

The North certainly had messages to send, though, even if they were not delivered in person. On Sept. 13 Pyongyang announced the successful [test-firing](#) of a new long-range cruise missile, which some analysis [said](#) may complicate US and allied air and missile defenses. Two days later it reportedly fired short-range ballistic missiles, which would have been unremarkable had they not been [launched](#) from a train, which might be aimed at making its ICBM launching systems more survivable in the event of attack. On the 28th it [fired](#) one unidentified projectile—a likely hypersonic glide vehicle—into the East Sea, which it followed with the Oct. 1 [announcement](#) that it had test-fired a new type of anti-aircraft missile. On Oct. 10 Kim Jong Un [stressed](#) the need for an increased deterrent, due to the “hostile” US, a call their UN ambassador [echoed](#) shortly after, claiming US-South Korea military activities were “growing unrestricted to a dangerous level.” Thereafter, testing largely quieted down—until early January, just before this issue went to press, when [North Korea](#)

[launched two](#) smaller projectiles (apparently carrying maneuverable re-entry vehicles with 500–700km range) into the East Sea.

Although it is continuing to [grow its nuclear program](#), Pyongyang has, since the end of 2017, eschewed tests of nuclear weapons and ICBM technology capable of targeting the US mainland. At a time when the North has been overshadowed by both US domestic issues and its broader competition with China, such tests could get Washington’s attention in a hurry, causing a much-more-than symbolic sanctions update. In addition, Pyongyang has, since 2018, grown noticeably closer to Beijing, which is also not a fan of North Korean nuclear tests. Consequently, recent activity and statements indicate that the North is focused on building its deterrent in more subtle ways: the Congressional Research Service in December [said](#) that they appear focused on degrading or outright eliminating the efficacy of US regional missile defense systems.

Conclusion: Searching for a Quantum of Solace

The US appears content to run out the clock on the Moon administration, humoring its calls for an end of war declaration even as it suggests that it does not prioritize it. In March, after South Koreans have chosen their next president the US may have a conservative administration whose view aligns more closely to its own, but it may also have a progressive team that continues Moon’s balancing act of bolstering defenses even as it sometimes contradicts Washington’s messaging on North Korea and China. Either South Korean presidential candidate could reinject energy into the stagnant situation. Yoon has voiced interest in increased coordination with the US, and even Japan, on denuclearizing the North. Lee has suggested that direct talks with Pyongyang need to continue, but has promised a more incremental approach—as well as continuing to pressure the US on extending nuclear submarine technology to South Korea.

Yoon’s election might be a wake-up call for Pyongyang, suggesting South Koreans are so disillusioned with North Korea negotiations that they will embrace Washington more closely and even turn to Tokyo. Lee’s victory could be a sharp reminder to Washington that South Koreans are not so disenchanted with the progressives as to depart from Moon’s foreign policy path. But both Lee and Yoon are, relative to their progressive and conservative predecessors, [unpopular](#), with their race looking to be close and neither with

much chance of cracking 50% of the vote. In other words, an electoral mandate may be brief, and along with it any change in the US-SK-NK diplomatic dance brought about by the election.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

Sept. 1, 2021: US Department of State [announces](#) the extension of its travel ban on North Korea for one year due to serious risk to US citizens and nationals of arrest and long-term detention constituting imminent danger to their physical safety.

Sept. 2, 2021: According to the Defense Ministry's 2022-2026 defense plan, the ROK military will [begin](#) to deploy new weapons systems and significantly upgrade its technological capabilities in response to South Korea's shrinking population and the North's development of nuclear weapons.

Sept. 3, 2021: Commander of US Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) [says](#) United States stands ready to respond to any missile launch by North Korea should the North decide to stage such a provocation.

Sept. 5, 2021: US reconnaissance aircraft [monitors](#) the Korean Peninsula amid speculation that North Korea might be preparing for a military parade to mark major national anniversaries.

Sept. 6, 2021: North Korea's Foreign Ministry [criticizes](#) the US pullout from Afghanistan, calling the American government a "destroyer of human rights and democracy."

Sept. 12, 2021: ESTsecurity, a cybersecurity firm, [says](#) a hacker group believed to be linked to North Korea, has attempted to steal data from South Korean experts working as members of an advisory panel for the defense ministry.

Sept. 12, 2021: North Korea [denounces](#) the US-led war in Afghanistan as a "human rights crime," accusing Washington of committing "atrocities of mass destruction."

Sept. 13, 2021: North Korea successfully [test-fires](#) a new type of long-range cruise missile, a low-level provocation amid stalled talks with the United States.

Sept. 14, 2021: South Korea's Unification Ministry [says](#) it will continue efforts to resume operations of the inter-Korean liaison office as it marked the third anniversary of the office.

Sept. 14, 2021: Ambassador Sung Kim [says](#) the US "is prepared to work with North Korea to address its humanitarian concerns regardless of progress on denuclearization" after holding three-way talks with South Korean and Japanese counterparts in Tokyo to discuss humanitarian aid and other incentives to resume dialogue with the North.

Sept. 15, 2021: North Korean state media [denounces](#) the United States for meddling in Taiwan issues and voices support for Beijing's "One-China" principle.

Sept. 15, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) two short-range ballistic missiles into the East Sea, says South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).

Sept. 15, 2021: South Korea [unveils](#) development of a supersonic cruise missile to improve maritime defense capabilities just days after the North fired a new long-range cruise missile in a sign of accelerating military competition between the two Koreas.

Sept. 15, 2021: State Department [condemns](#) North Korea's ballistic missile launches, calling the act a violation of US Security Council resolutions that poses a threat to its neighbors and the international community. A department official adds that US remains committed to dialogue with the North.

Sept. 16, 2021: Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [holds](#) phone call with US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and discusses efforts to bolster climate action, including achieving carbon neutrality.

Sept. 16, 2021: North Korea [is expanding](#) a uranium enrichment plant within the Yongbyon nuclear complex, reports the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. Activities at the plant likely reflect plans to increase nuclear weapons production, says the report.

Sept. 21, 2021: US President Joe Biden [says](#) his country seeks to completely denuclearize the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy at UN General Assembly in New York.

Sept. 21, 2021: South Korean President Moon Jae-in [suggests](#) in his UN speech that the two Koreas and the US, probably joined by China, declare a formal end to the 1950–53 Korean War.

Sept. 22, 2021: Top diplomats of South Korea, Japan, and the United States [meet](#) in New York to discuss North Korea and other issues.

Sept. 22, 2021: President Moon [reaffirms](#) his country's commitment to playing a leading role in the fight against COVID-19, while attending a virtual summit hosted by US President Joe Biden.

Sept. 22, 2021: Yoon Seok-yeol, leading opposition presidential contender, [says](#) he will demand the US redeploy its tactical nuclear weapons to the rok and have nuclear sharing with Seoul if national security is threatened by North Korea's nukes and missiles.

Sept. 22, 2021: US is open to discussing a possible end of war declaration with North Korea as it seeks to engage in dialogue over a number of other issues, [says](#) a Pentagon spokesman.

Sept. 24, 2021: During trip to the US, Moon [stops](#) in Hawaii to receive the remains of 68 Korean service members from US accounting agency for prisoners of war and those missing in action.

Sept. 24, 2021: North Korea [rejects](#) Moon's proposal to declare a formal end to the Korean war as something premature," arguing that such a declaration would be meaningless as long as US "hostile policy" remains unchanged. Vice Foreign Minister Ri Thae Song says an end-of-war declaration has "no legal binding force" and will "become a mere scrap of paper in a moment upon changes in situations.

Sept. 24, 2021: US military in South Korea [conducts](#) a surgical strike drill simulating attacks on major North Korean facilities, amid tensions on the Korean Peninsula over the North's missiles launches. Meanwhile, the North has shown signs of restarting a plutonium-producing reactor and expanding uranium enrichment facilities at its mainstay Yongbyon nuclear complex.

Sept. 24, 2021: Leaders of the US, Australia, Japan, and India (the "Quad") [call](#) on North Korea to engage in dialogue and abide by UNSC resolutions that prohibit its ballistic missile tests.

Sept. 25, 2021: North Korea could declare a formal end to the Korean War as suggested by South Korea and even discuss holding an inter-Korean summit if the South treats the North with "impartiality" and mutual respect, [says](#) Kim Yo Jong, sister of North Korea's leader.

Sept. 27, 2021: Department of Commerce [makes](#) a request to major chipmakers, including Samsung Electronics, Intel, and TSMC, for sales figures, inventory totals, the names of largest clients and the share of sales to these clients. Although the survey is voluntary, chipmakers perceive it to be obligatory given that the Biden administration indicated that it could leverage the Defense Production Act to penalize the companies that fail to comply.

Sept. 27, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) unidentified projectile into the East Sea, days after Pyongyang held out the prospect of an inter-Korean summit if the South drops "double standards."

Sept. 28, 2021: South Korea [launches](#) indigenously developed 3,000-ton-class submarine, *Shin Chae-ho*, equipped to fire ballistic missiles. The *Shin Chae-ho* is the third and final submarine in the *Jangbogo-III* Batch-I vessel class that the ROK has developed using domestic technology.

Sept. 30, 2021: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un [says](#) he will restore inter-Korean hotlines early next month, calling Washington's outreach to Pyongyang for dialogue "a petty trick."

Oct. 1, 2021: North Korea [announces](#) it testfired a new type of anti-aircraft missile. The latest launch marks North Korea's seventh major weapons test this year.

Oct. 6, 2021: According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, South Korea [will](#) strengthen its "tailored" deterrence, along with the US, against North Korea's nuclear and missiles threats while enhancing its attack and missile defense capabilities.

Oct. 11, 2021: North Korean leader Kim [claims](#) need for boosting the country's military capabilities to counter "hostile forces" against Pyongyang but said the move is not aimed at a war against South Korea or the United States.

Oct. 12, 2021: North Korea will continue to strengthen its "self-defensive: deterrent, [says](#) North Korean ambassador to the UN Kim Song, claiming military activities between South Korea and the United States are reaching a "dangerous level."

Oct. 13, 2021: South Korea and the United States [agree](#) to consider a new bilateral working-level defense dialogue aimed at promoting cooperation between their regional policy initiatives.

Oct. 13, 2021: US official [says](#) officials from more than 30 countries, including South Korea, will discuss ways to counter ransomware attacks from countries, including Russia and North Korea, in a two-day US-led virtual "counter ransomware initiative."

Oct. 14, 2021: US remains prepared to meet with North Korea without preconditions as it awaits the North's response to its "specific proposals," [says](#) State Department spokesperson Ned Price.

Oct. 16, 2021: South Korea's chief nuclear envoy [says](#) that a formal declaration of an end to the Korean War could pave the way for resuming stalled denuclearization talks with North Korea.

Oct. 18, 2021: US Defense Intelligence Agency [projects](#) that North Korea may resume underground nuclear tests if it does not agree to complete denuclearization.

Oct. 18, 2021: Gen. Jay Raymond, chief of Space Operations at the US Space Force [calls](#) for strong space cooperation with South Korea, stressing credible deterrence in the "contested" security domain comes from a robust partnership based on "mutual trust and shared values."

Oct. 19, 2021: North Korea [fires](#) what appears to be a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) toward the East Sea, as top nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US, and Japan meet in Washington to discuss efforts to bring the North back to dialogue through humanitarian aid and other incentives.

Oct. 20, 2021: North Korea's recent missile test underscores need for engaging it and sanctions relief can be considered part of incentives to bring it back to negotiations, [says](#) FM Chung.

Oct. 21, 2021: President Moon [says](#) South Korea's first domestically built space rocket completed all flight sequences as scheduled but fell short of putting a dummy satellite into orbit.

Oct. 24, 2021: US Special Representative for North Korea Sung Kim [says](#) he looks forward to exploring options with South Korea to resume dialogue with North Korea, including the proposed declaration of a formal end to the 1950-53 Korean War. He also mentioned US willingness to help address the North's humanitarian concerns, while urging Pyongyang to stop missile launches, which he cast as "concerning and counterproductive."

Oct. 25, 2021: President Moon and US President Joe Biden [will](#) hold a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Italy or US climate summit in Britain.

Oct. 26, 2021: South Korea and the United States decided to set up a director-level dialogue channel for regular discussions on semiconductor issues, [says](#) Seoul's industry ministry.

Oct. 26, 2021: US and South Korea are aligned on the need to engage with North Korea diplomatically, but may differ when it comes to when and what steps should be taken to bring the recalcitrant North back to the dialogue table, [says](#) US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Oct. 27, 2021: Senate Foreign Relations Committee [passes](#) Otto Warmbier North Korea Censorship and Surveillance Act, aimed at countering North Korea's repressive censorship and providing outside information to the people of the reclusive North.

Oct. 28, 2021: Mark Lambert, deputy assistant secretary of State for Korea and Japan, [says](#) the US is reviewing possibility of declaring a formal end to the Korean War, during a meeting with Lee Seok-hyun, vice chairman of South Korea's National Unification Advisory Council.

Oct. 29, 2021: Report from the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence [recommends](#) an expansion of the “Five Eyes” intelligence sharing alliance to include South Korea, Japan, India, Germany, and France.

Oct. 29, 2021: State Department [seeks](#) to provide up to \$12 million in grants to entities working to implement US sanctions on North Korea and prevent its weapons proliferation.

Oct. 31, 2021: North Korea [demands](#) sanctions to be lifted as a condition for negotiations to discuss a formal declaration to end the Korean War.

Nov. 1, 2021: FM Chung [pushes](#) for a formal declaration to end the Korean War during meeting with Secretary Blinken on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rome. National Security Adviser Sullivan admits that Korea and the US “may have somewhat different perspectives on the precise sequence or timing or conditions for different steps” when it comes to Seoul’s proposal for an end-of-war declaration as a catalyst to restart nuclear talks.

Nov. 2, 2021: Senior officials from South Korea and the US [hold](#) talks in Washington on ways to restart dialogue with North Korea. They discussed the situation on the Korean Peninsula, prospects for humanitarian cooperation, and the potential for dialogue with the DPRK.

Nov. 4, 2021: US remains committed to implementing UNSC sanctions on North Korea, [says](#) State Department spokesperson. He said the US urges all other UN members to do the same to prevent North Korea from advancing nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities.

Nov. 9, 2021: Group of 23 US lawmakers [sends](#) letter to Biden urging him to “prioritize: engagement with North Korea and support a formal declaration to end the Korean War.

Nov. 8, 2021: US and South Korea fully agree on the need to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula through diplomacy, State Department spokesperson [says](#). He declined to comment on whether the US agrees with a Seoul-proposed declaration of an end to the Korean War.

Nov. 8, 2021: China has the ability to help steer North Korea toward a diplomatic solution of its nuclear standoff, [says](#) Pentagon Press Secretary. He insisted one way for China to do so would be to faithfully implement UN Security Council sanctions on the North.

Nov. 10, 2021: US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and South Korean counterpart, Moon Sung-wook, [agree](#) to cooperate on enhancing supply chain resiliency. They also agreed to expand their commercial forum to tackle other issues, such as setting global standards for key industrial sectors.

Nov. 11, 2021: Agreement to launch of the Energy Policy Dialogue [is made](#) between South Korea’s Industry Minister Moon Sung-wook and US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm in Washington. It aims to promote collaboration across policy, technology, and commercialization, and support decarbonization efforts, by sharing experiences and strategies and conducting joint research in such fields as hydrogen storage, next generation batteries and lithium-ion battery recycling.

Nov. 17, 2021: ROK First Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman [holds](#) talks to discuss ways to bring North Korea back to dialogue, including the declaration of a formal end to the Korean War. They also discussed the alliance and other issues of common interest, including COVID-19 vaccines and the global supply chain crisis.

Nov. 17, 2021: US [designates](#) North Korea as a state violator of religious freedom.

Nov. 17, 2021: US plan to host a joint news conference [backfires](#) after Japanese and South Korean officials opt out of the event because of a dispute over an islet that both claim.

Nov. 18, 2021: South Korea, the US, and Japan [agree](#) during vice foreign ministerial talks to keep working together for regional peace and response to such global issues as climate change, supply chain resilience and COVID-19.

Nov. 19, 2021: Korean Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai [meet](#) to discuss supply chains and steel tariffs. They agreed to strengthen the bilateral strategic partnership on rising trade issues like those regarding the supply chain, technology, digital and climate change, in light of recent changes in the global trade order.

Nov. 23, 2021: South Korean government [says](#) it will join US-led plan to release strategic crude reserves along with other major oil-consuming nations to help bring down soaring energy prices.

Nov. 24, 2021: Samsung Electronics Co. [says](#) it has selected Taylor, TX as the site of its new \$17 billion chip fabrication plant, a move to boost production amid a global chip shortage.

Nov. 29, 2021: US defense official [reiterates](#) the US steady commitment to offering “extended deterrence” to South Korea, voicing concerns over North Korea's "problematic and irresponsible" behavior.

Nov. 29, 2021: Biden's administration [commits](#) to achieving peace with North Korea through dialogue as the US and South Korea discuss an end of war declaration.

Nov. 30, 2021: Department of Defense [concludes](#) review of the global defense posture, calling for cooperation with allies and partner countries to deter North Korean threats and potential Chinese aggression.

Dec. 1, 2021: South Korean National Assembly's committee on foreign affairs in South Korea [approves](#) the bill to ratify the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Dec. 1, 2021: Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [stresses](#) the importance of unity in the South Korea-US alliance to confront the “challenges of tomorrow” amid intensifying Sino-US rivalry.

Dec. 2, 2021: South Korea and the US [agree](#) to update joint wartime contingency plans to deter North Korea's evolving nuclear and missile threats during the Security Consultative Meeting.

Dec. 3, 2021: UN [excludes](#) North Korea from its global humanitarian assistance plan for 2022. The decision comes as North Korea maintains a strict border lockdown to stave off the coronavirus, prompting international organization staff members necessary for on-site monitoring and assessment to leave the country.

Dec. 3, 2021: US [says](#) it is keeping South Korea on its list of countries to be monitored for currency practices.

Dec. 6, 2021: US [completes](#) construction of a new long-range radar in Alaska designed to give early warnings for incoming ballistic missiles from rogue nations, such as North Korea.

Dec. 6, 2021: US [announces](#) diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics over China's human rights abuses.

Dec. 6, 2021: US officials [have](#) started calling the end-of-war declaration, a signature diplomatic goal of the Moon Jae-in administration, an end-of-war statement.

Dec. 7, 2021: South Korean government [reiterates](#) principled support for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics following US announcement of its decision to boycott the event diplomatically, expressing hope again that it will contribute to peace and inter-Korean relations.

Dec. 7, 2021: South Korea's tightened vaccine pass regime [sparks](#) discrimination complaints by foreign residents unable to have their overseas vaccination status officially recognized here and subsequently denied access to cafes, restaurants, and other multiuse facilities.

Dec. 8, 2021: US missile defense system capabilities, including those in South Korea, are constantly reviewed and upgraded to meet evolving threats [says](#), Pentagon press secretary.

Dec. 9, 2021: South Korea and the US [launch](#) a bilateral dialogue platform to discuss ways to boost cooperation on the semiconductor sector.

Dec. 9, 2021: Thirty-five Republican House members, including the party's two Korean-American representatives, [sign](#) letter voicing "grave concern" with discussions of an end of war declaration with North Korea, stating there is "no historical precedent" for the regime abiding by such an agreement and warning of premature US troop withdrawal from the peninsula.

Dec. 10, 2021: On Human Rights Day, US [designates](#) North Korea's Defense Minister Ri Yong Gil and a number of other entities in North Korea, China, and Russia for human rights violations.

Dec. 10, 2021: North Korean state media [uses](#) Human Rights Day to lambaste the US-led mission in Afghanistan, which suffered "the bombardment of 'protection of human rights' and 'counter-terrorism' by the US and the West."

Dec. 10, 2021: US [designates](#) a number of entities in China and Russia for violating UNSC resolutions that prohibit UN member states from employing or hosting North Korean workers.

Dec. 13, 2021: Seoul-hosted virtual conference of Asia-Pacific parliamentarians [opens](#) to discuss inclusion and solidarity amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The forum has 27 member states, including South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, Vietnam and the United States.

Dec. 13, 2021: President Moon [says](#) that the US, China, and North Korea agree "in principle" on declaring a formal end to the Korean War and Seoul will push to make it happen.

Dec. 13, 2021: South Korea's intelligence chief [says](#) US possible proposal to provide COVID-19 vaccines to Pyongyang could create momentum to bring it back to long-stalled nuclear negotiations.

Dec. 13, 2021: US has no hostile policy toward North Korea while it continues to wait for a positive response to its outreach, [says](#) Jalina Porter, principal deputy spokesperson for the State Department. He reiterated the US remains ready to meet North Korea any time without any preconditions.

Dec. 13, 2021: North Korea [appears](#) to be aiming to counter or cripple US missile defense programs in Northeast Asia, says a US Congressional Research Service report.

Dec. 16, 2021: UNSC should address human rights issues of North Korea in an open session, [says](#) US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield, with representatives of the UK, Estonia, France, Ireland, Japan, and Norway in a joint statement following a closed-door meeting.

Dec. 16, 2021: First Vice Industry Minister Park Jin-kyu [holds](#) talks with Jose Fernandez, US undersecretary of state for economic growth, energy and the environment, to deepen the allies' economic ties.

Dec. 16, 2021: It is reported during the fifth ROK-US Joint Public-Private Economic Forum in Seoul that South Korea and the US [plan](#) to discuss cooperation on "trusted" 5G networks, global supply chains, and other key issues in upcoming talks amid intensifying US-China rivalry.

Dec. 22, 2021: President Biden [has](#) banned provision of nonhumanitarian aid to North Korea for fiscal year 2022, accusing the state of human trafficking, according to the White House.

Dec. 23, 2021: South Korea will expand "future-oriented" cooperation with the US on supply chains, technologies, and other areas next year while reinforcing "conflict prevention" efforts with China, [says](#) the foreign ministry. The ministry delineated the plans in a written policy report for 2022 to President Moon as Seoul seeks to craft an optimal diplomatic strategy amid a hardening China-US rivalry on technological primacy, security, trade, and other fronts.

Dec. 24, 2021: Seoul's Vice Foreign Minister Choi Jong-kun and Chinese counterpart, Le Yucheng, [hold](#) first "Strategic Dialogue," which touched on geopolitical issues related to China-US relations and the Taiwan Strait. China provided explanations in broad terms rather than specifically when talking about how it looks at the global situation, while South Korea hoped to play a role promoting cooperation between the two major powers.

Dec. 27, 2021: President Biden [signs](#) US defense budget bill that calls on his administration to maintain the troop level of US Forces Korea (USFK) at the current level.

Dec. 29, 2021: South Korea and the US have “effectively” agreed on draft text of the proposed declaration of a formal end to the Korean War, [says](#) Seoul's top diplomat amid their continued push to resume dialogue with North Korea. The US [declines](#) to directly comment on any progress, only stating that the US remains committed to dialogue with North Korea.

*Chronology by Pacific Forum’s Korea Foundation
Fellow Su Hyun Lee.*

