

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL
ON EAST ASIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

US-KOREA RELATIONS

TENSIONS, TESTS, AND DRIFT

STEPHEN NOERPER, KOREA SOCIETY AND COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

North Korea's sixth nuclear test on Sept. 3 and its Nov. 29 ICBM test launch were unfortunate bookends to increased tension between North Korea and the US in the closing months of 2017. The missile test, which Kim Jong Un hailed as "completing the state nuclear force," potentially placed the entire US within range, leading Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford to warn of the likelihood of conflict. Two new UN Security Council resolutions tightened economic sanctions against North Korea. There seemed little prospect for a resumption of negotiations, despite senior US officials urging diplomacy and a visit to Pyongyang by UN Under Secretary General for Policy Jeffrey Feltman. President Trump's September UN address and subsequent tweets challenged the DPRK leader personally and directly, renewing a war of words. Trump's November visit to the ROK struck a more restrained tone and saw a positive ROK response. The US conducted several military exercises with its allies. Meanwhile, Seoul-Washington fissures grew over Trump's criticism of the KORUS free trade agreement and President Moon's eagerness to engage the DPRK – a drift that may grow after Kim Jong Un's New Year's call for talks and possible DPRK participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 3, January 2018. pp 33-40

Sixth nuclear test and third ICBM launch

September began with North Korea's [sixth nuclear test](#). With a yield estimated by some to be 250 kilotons, or 17 times the size of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, the test revealed rapid advancement in the DPRK nuclear program and employment of a two-stage, fission-fusion device. Tremors from the explosion were felt 60 km inside China, and several aftershocks were detected by the US Geological Survey, suggesting the possibility of longer-term geological and environmental impact.



1North Korea conducts third ICBM launch. Photo: Breitbart

The test met international condemnation, with the US and ROK announcing a new round of joint military exercises to strengthen deterrence. Both countries also announced new unilateral sanctions against entities engaged in illicit transfers to North Korea. The UN Security Council passed [resolution 2375](#) on Sept. 11, stepping up sanctions. Measures against fuel imports and North Korean labor abroad were tightened further in the Dec. 22 UNSC [Resolution 2397](#), stemming imports of refined petroleum and crude oil and the repatriation of DPRK laborers abroad within 24 months.

This second round of enhanced sanctions came after the Nov. 29 launch of North Korea's third Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) of the year. The [Hwasong-15 capabilities](#) appeared to go far beyond those of the *Hwasong-14*, which was tested in July. The *Hwasong-15's* engine was twice as powerful, lifting the device more than 4,000 km and flying for over 50 minutes. The missile appeared to break into three parts before landing in Japanese exclusive economic zone waters, suggesting a problem with DPRK reentry technology.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un heralded the launch as "completing the state nuclear force," a capstone that some analysts suggest might signal renewed North Korean interest in "arms control" negotiations with the US. The DPRK may perceive itself as having achieved its stated goal of "strategic equilibrium." An ROK National Unification Ministry New Year projection released in late December suggested that the DPRK would engage the US in negotiations in 2018.

Meanwhile, Washington displayed either policy confusion or strategic ambiguity. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Special Representative for North Korea Policy Joseph Yun urged talks. Tillerson promised to push for negotiations "until the first bombs fall," and later suggested the US was prepared for talks without preconditions. President Trump tweeted that "only one thing works!" with North Korea, citing the failure of past US administrations' negotiations with the DPRK. Subsequently, Tillerson added that North Korea would have to stop its tests to demonstrate serious intent before coming to the table. Senior US military leaders, including Defense Secretary James Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dunford, emphasized readiness, but also urged diplomacy.

The UN sought to provide support to avoid conflict by offering the good offices of the secretary general, who cautioned against "sleepwalking into conflict" and called for statesmanship at the September opening of the UN General Assembly. In early December, Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman visited Pyongyang to underscore the need for de-escalation and urge resumption of talks.

At the opening of the UN General Assembly, President Trump delivered [an address](#) condemning "rocket man" Kim Jong Un for "suicidal" behavior and warning that if the US and its allies were threatened by a use of nuclear weapons, the US would "totally destroy" the DPRK regime. Trump's message, which raised eyebrows among many UN diplomats, met DPRK vitriol. US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley continued the hardline approach by condemning Pyongyang actions and urging sanctions compliance, which also drew a strong rebuke from Pyongyang.

Wars of words to stately state visit

President Trump exchanged barbs with DPRK leader Kim and offered criticism of others. He called Kim “Little Rocket Man,” complained about Chinese acquiescence and ROK President Moon Jae-in’s interest in “appeasement.” Mutual disdain between Trump and Kim is obvious, most personally directed in an exchange where Kim refers to Trump as “old” and a “dotard” and Trump calls Kim “short and fat.”

As worrying as the heated rhetoric was, Trump’s undercutting of Moon may have greater long-term impact. Trump’s dismissiveness of Seoul as appeasement-minded and the KORUS Free Trade Agreement (FTA) as a failure led many South Koreans to question Trump’s commitment to the alliance. Some also worried that the increased lethality and range associated with the rapid DPRK nuclear and missile developments might mean less US resolve, as Washington would choose Seattle over Seoul.

To the relief of many in South Korea, President Trump’s November trip to Korea appeared to have a moderating influence on him. Trump tweeted that Moon was a “fine gentleman” and that the US and ROK would find solutions as he departed Tokyo for Seoul. The [National Assembly address](#) in Seoul, carefully crafted by Trump advisors, was reassuring to most and hailed ROK political and economic advancements. By refraining from further criticism of the KORUS FTA while delivering sharp criticism of North Korea in the address, Trump was seen as more serious and able to work with Seoul. Trump had also been conciliatory the day prior following a meeting with Moon. Though he failed in his attempted surprise helicopter visit to the DMZ due to poor weather conditions, Trump’s visit to Camp Humphreys, where South Korean burden-sharing was on full display, also reassured many South Koreans. Nevertheless, by the end of December, fissures again widened.

Military response and drama in DMZ

There was an increase in military activity by the Combined Forces Command in response to North Korea’s nuclear and missile advances. The US and ROK conducted a steady stream of exercises to demonstrate strength and readiness including joint air and naval exercises. For the first time since 2011, [three US aircraft carriers](#)

assembled in the Western Pacific and engaged in three days of maneuvers off the Korean coast. In recognition of the recent improvements in DPRK ballistic missile capabilities, a trilateral exercise in the waters between Korea and Japan involving four *Aegis* combat system-equipped ships from the US, ROK, and Japan collaborated to jointly detect and track a computer-simulated missile launch and share information. In the largest exercise event, 230 aircraft, including *F-22* fighters and *B-1B* bombers, participated in joint maneuvers. There were also several separate *B-1B* bomber flyovers to hammer home a message to North Korea, which condemned the activity as an act of war, describing the exercises as simulated bombings. China and Russia joined in criticism of the increased military activity, condemning US and South Korean efforts as needlessly exacerbating tensions.

Tensions along the DMZ were underscored by the high-profile dash of a North Korean soldier by jeep and on foot across the border. Shot in the process, he was rescued by US and ROK forces and transported in critical condition for emergency medical care; he was later moved to a military hospital. He has recovered and received positive attention from South Korean media. A [UN Command video](#) revealed the high drama of his escape. The ROK delivered a strong warning to the DPRK on violations of the Armistice Agreement that occurred during his escape. In December, another North Korean soldier escaped across the DMZ. Trump noted the desertions in a tweet.

State sponsor of terrorism

The Trump administration re-designated North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism in late November. Rationale for the designation, which was lifted during the George W. Bush administration in 2008, was based on the DPRK’s recent cyber attacks, the prospects of proliferation of materials related to weapons of mass destruction, and the assassination earlier in the year of Kim Jong Nam, the DPRK’s leader’s half-brother, by VX chemical attack. The call for the re-designation gained traction following the death of US student Otto Warmbier, though human rights violations are not a basis for imposition of the designation, which states that a country must have “repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism.”

Trump heralded the move as something that “should have happened years ago,” calling the Pyongyang government a “murderous regime.” He also noted Warmbier’s passing, which struck a strong personal note with the president and public. Secretary of State Tillerson suggested the move sent a strong message to third parties that might otherwise interact with the DPRK regime. The re-designation was not without detractors though, as some analysts pointed to the difficulty it would create for efforts to bring North Korea to dialogue.

Wedges and drift

North Korea appears to be keenly aware of the growing split between a progressive-minded administration in Seoul and the more hardline inclination of the Trump administration. Despite the general goodwill during his November visit to South Korea, some South Koreans complained of Trump’s proclivity to engage Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo or Chinese President Xi Jinping before Moon, the so-called “Korea Passing” (or passing over Korea for Japan or China counsel on North Korea) that has entered the South Korean vernacular.

Although South Koreans understand that Japan feels especially vulnerable to DPRK missile attack – all the recent missile tests have flown over Japanese airspace and several have landed in Japan’s exclusive economic zone waters – the Trump-Abe alignment, shoulder-to-shoulder and hardline in its stance, irritates some in South Korea. Trump’s urging “samurai” Japan to shoot down DPRK missiles led to quiet consternation just prior to Trump’s arrival. Trump’s lean toward Abe may prove more of an irritant over time. As the Moon administration has decided to revisit the 2015 “comfort women” agreement, Korea-Japan relations appear less steady even though North Korea’s increased threat augurs for tighter cooperation.

Although he quelled South Korean concerns during his visit, Trump appeared less in sync after leaving Seoul, heaping praise on Xi in China, which had beat up on South Korea’s economy, and standing alone against free trade in Southeast Asia. Trump’s heated rhetoric by tweet toward North Korea’s Kim also left some South Koreans uncomfortable, given its perceived crudeness. South Koreans may have become numb to the rhetoric of the DPRK

regime, but seeing it from a US president is still disconcerting.



2 President Trump tweets about Kim Jong Un. Photo: NBC

Over time, fissures in US-ROK relations may grow, despite mutual proclamations that they are “ironclad” or “watertight.” China and Russia have encouraged a de-escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and called for negotiations. With Beijing and Seoul agreeing to revisit and repair relations late autumn, President Moon may find Xi Jinping’s more moderate tone and emphasis on negotiation especially appealing. Russia too has been positioning itself for a greater role, offering to moderate US-DPRK talks, with Secretary Tillerson and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in seeming agreement in their interest to push diplomacy.

As the Moon administration has settled in, it now appears to be pursuing a more independent course, a reality that Kim Jong Un appears to recognize. In his New Year address, the North Korean leader warned Washington and the West of its nuclear capability, while adding that it is a responsible actor and would only launch a nuclear device if threatened. To South Korea, the appeal of renewed inter-Korean relations and participation at the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics is a tempting proposition. The Moon administration had been seeking a response to its overtures since summer, and the opening of a military hotline and talks scheduled for Jan. 9 could lead to DPRK participation in the ROK’s “peace games.”

The uptick in communications at the New Year received a cool reaction from the White House, a sign of its distance from the Blue House on engagement. Senior US officials papered over any perceived split. President Trump weighed in to support the Olympic Games and to take credit for any talks, attributing it to his firm North Korea policy. Earlier, Ambassador Nikki Haley at

the UN and the White House spokesperson raised questions about US participation at Pyeongchang, which elicited concern in South Korea and struck some analysts as not befitting support for a critical ally.

The agreement by Trump and Moon to halt all major joint US-ROK exercises until after the Olympics in February and Paralympics in March shows resilience in the alliance and demonstrates the need for flexibility as Korea and the US revisit and upgrade the bilateral relationship. Affording South Korea space to work to improve inter-Korean relations may prove a challenge for some in the US administration, but tact and an ability to work with Seoul are critical to avoiding drift.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2017

Sept. 1, 2017: President Donald Trump speaks with ROK President Moon Jae-in by phone.

Sept. 2, 2017: US and ROK agree to revise a missile treaty that will allow the ROK to develop missiles with longer ranges.

Sept. 3, 2017: DPRK conducts its sixth nuclear test, which is of exponentially higher yield than the September 2016 test.

Sept. 4, 2017: US and ROK announce exercises in response to DPRK nuclear test.

Sept. 5, 2017: North Korea warns of “gift packages” for the US.

Sept. 6, 2017: Trump suggests military force against the DPRK is not his “first choice,” although the US is “not putting up” with DPRK actions.

Sept. 8, 2017: Trump says he won’t rule out military action against the DPRK. North Korea dismisses US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley’s “hysterical fit.”

Sept. 10, 2017: DPRK leader Kim Jong Un praises nuclear scientists with celebration. DPRK warns that the US will pay a price for spearheading sanctions resolution in the UN.

Sept. 11, 2017: North Korea warns US of “greatest pain” in the event of new sanctions. UN Security Council passes UNSCR 2375, tightening existing sanctions.

Sept. 13, 2017: DPRK vows to accelerate nuclear program.

Sept. 14, 2017: DPRK threatens to “sink” Japan and reduce US to “ashes and darkness.” DPRK fires missile over Japan, the second in one month.

Sept. 15, 2017: US National Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster warns that “we’re out of time” with North Korea.

Sept. 16, 2017: DPRK states it is seeking military “equilibrium” with US.

Sept. 17, 2017: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson vows “peaceful pressure campaign” and suggests that “if our diplomatic efforts fall through, our military option will be the only one left.” US Ambassador Haley states that the UN has exhausted options on the DPRK.

Sept. 18, 2017: Two *B-1B* bombers and four *F-35* fighters join ROK and Japanese jets in air maneuvers. Defense Secretary Mattis hints at military options against the DPRK.

Sept. 19, 2017: UN Secretary General Guterres appeals for statesmanship to avoid war in Korea. Trump warns UN General Assembly that US may have to “totally destroy” the DPRK if threatened, and that “Rocket Man” Kim Jong Un is on a “suicide mission.”

Sept. 20, 2017: DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho dismisses Trump’s UN address as the “sound of a dog barking.”

Sept. 21, 2017: Foreign Minister Ri warns of a potential DPRK nuclear test over the Pacific. Kim Jong Un labels Trump a “mentally deranged US dotard.”

Sept. 22, 2017: Trump labels Kim Jong Un a “madman.”

Sept. 23, 2017: DPRK envoy warns attack on US is becoming “inevitable.”

Sept. 24, 2017: US sends bombers on flyover near the Korean coastline.

Sept. 25, 2017: North Korea says US “declared war” and threatens to shoot down US bombers.

Sept. 26, 2017: Trump states US is prepared to use “devastating” force on DPRK.

Sept. 30, 2017: Secretary Tillerson visits Beijing to press China on DPRK sanctions. He says US is “probing” to see if DPRK interested in dialogue. Trump tweets that North Korea talks are a “waste of time.”

Oct. 2, 2017: White House rejects talks with DPRK on nuclear issue.

Oct. 4, 2017: DPRK's *Rodong Sinnum* reports Trump's "intention is to completely destroy the DPRK and exterminate the whole Korean nation."

Oct. 4, 2017: ROK and US announce agreement to amend the KORUS FTA.

Oct. 7, 2017: Trump tweets criticism of past US approaches and that "only one thing will work!" in dealing with North Korea.

Oct. 10, 2017: US bans four ships for transporting DPRK coal.

Oct. 11, 2017: US flies bombers over Korea as Trump discusses options with military leaders.

Oct. 15, 2017: DPRK labels Trump a "strangler of peace." Secretary Tillerson promises US diplomacy until "first bomb drops."

Oct. 15-20, 2017: US Navy Strike Group 5, led by *USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76)*, participates in a combined [exercise](#) with South Korea's Navy near the Korean Peninsula.

Oct. 17, 2017: US Pacific Command's Adm. Harry Harris warns that the DPRK situation is a "recipe for disaster," urging China to do more.

Oct. 18, 2017: South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Lim Sung-nam and US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan meet in Seoul. Lim also meets Sullivan and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Shinsuke Sugiyama to coordinate policies on North Korea.

Oct. 19, 2017: North Korea warns that US threats are a "big miscalculation." CIA Director Mike Pompeo says DPRK "months away" from ability to strike the US.

Oct. 20, 2017: DPRK cautions international community and says "you're safe" if you don't join the US in its efforts against the DPRK. North Korean diplomat says nuclear weapons are a "matter of life and death" for the DPRK.

Oct. 23-31, 2017: US and ROK conduct a joint naval exercise near South Korea.

Oct. 26, 2017: Defense Secretary Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford arrive in Seoul for consultations.

Oct. 27, 2017: Secretary Mattis warns that Kim Jong Un is threatening "catastrophe."

Oct. 31, 2017: President Moon says the ROK cannot recognize the DPRK as a nuclear state.

Nov. 3, 2017: DPRK calls for halt to "brutal" sanctions.

Nov. 5, 2017: Trump suggests "samurai" Japan should shoot DPRK missiles "out of the sky." ROK imposes sanctions on 18 North Koreans.

Nov. 6, 2017: On departure for Seoul, Trump tweets that President Moon is "a fine gentleman" and that "we will figure it all out!"

Nov. 7, 2017: Following talks with Moon, Trump pledges cooperation and suggests "we cannot allow North Korea to threaten all that we have built."

Nov. 8, 2017: Trump addresses ROK National Assembly.

Nov. 11, 2017: DPRK says Trump begged for war during his Asia trip. Trump tweets "why would Kim Jong Un insult me by calling me "old," when I would never call him "short and fat?"

Nov. 11-14, 2017: US conducts military exercises in the Sea of Japan (East Sea) involving three US carrier strike groups.

Nov. 14, 2017: DPRK soldier is shot while attempting to cross the military demarcation line in the Joint Security Area in Panmunjom.

Nov. 17, 2017: US Special Representative for North Korea Policy Joseph Yun says there has been "no signal" from DPRK for negotiations. DPRK UN Geneva Ambassador Han Tae Song rules out negotiations with the US as long as US-ROK military exercises continue.

Nov. 20, 2017: US re-designates the DPRK as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Nov. 21, 2017: US Treasury imposes sanctions on 13 PRC and DPRK organizations accused of helping Pyongyang evade nuclear restrictions and supporting trade in commodities.

Nov. 29, 2017: DPRK tests *Hwasong-15* ICBM. ROK stages “precision strike” drill within minutes of the DPRK launch. Trump tells reporters “we will take care of that situation.” Ambassador Haley warns that in the event of war, the DPRK regime will be “utterly destroyed.” Kim Jong Un declares the DPRK has “finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force.”

Nov. 30, 2017: Trump tweets that North Korean leader Kim, whom he refers to as Little Rocket Man, is a “sick puppy.”

Dec. 3, 2017: Sen. Lindsey Graham suggests Pentagon should move US military dependents from ROK. North Korea says trump is “begging” for nuclear war.

Dec. 4-8, 2017: US and ROK conduct *Vigilant Ace* military exercise.

Dec. 5-8, 2017: UN Under Secretary General for Political Affairs Jeffrey Feltman visits North Korea in highest-level UN effort to encourage negotiation since 2011.

Dec. 6, 2017: Ambassador Haley suggests US participation in Pyeongchang Winter Olympics is an “open question.”

Dec. 6-7, 2017: US *B-1B* bomber joins joint US-ROK military exercises.

Dec. 8, 2017: DPRK labels joint ROK-US drills as “confrontational warmongering” and poses the question “when will war break out?”

Dec. 11, 2017: ROK announces sanctions against 20 DPRK groups and 12 individuals. Seoul asks US to delay spring military exercises until after Pyeongchang Olympics.

Dec. 11-12, 2017: US, ROK, and Japan conduct computer-simulated training to track DPRK missile launches.

Dec. 12, 2017: Secretary Tillerson says US is ready for negotiations with the DPRK without preconditions.

Dec. 13, 2017: White House says time is not right for talks with the DPRK.

Dec. 14, 2017: UN Secretary General Guterres warns against “sleepwalking” into conflict with the DPRK. A group of 58 retired US military leaders urge Trump to take a diplomatic approach with North Korea over military action.

Dec. 15, 2017: Secretary Mattis says DPRK ICBM is not yet a “capable threat” against the US. UN Secretary General Guterres urges communication with the DPRK to avoid escalation.

Dec. 16, 2017: Secretary Tillerson says DPRK must halt missile and nuclear tests prior to any resumption of dialogue.

Dec. 19, 2017: US states DPRK is responsible for WannaCry cyber attack. ROK President Moon proposes curtailing military exercises to ease pressure around the Olympic Games.

Dec. 20, 2017: A DPRK soldier escapes across the DMZ.

Dec. 22, 2017: UN Security Council unanimously passes UNSCR 2397 imposing more sanctions on the DPRK.

Dec. 24, 2017: DPRK condemns the new UNSC sanctions resolution as an act of war.

Dec. 26, 2017: ROK Unification Ministry predicts DPRK will look to open talks with the US in 2018 in optimistic New Year forecast.

Dec. 27, 2017: US Treasury announces sanctions against two DPRK officials behind ballistic missile program. China is reported to have broken sanctions on the sale of petroleum products to the DPRK with ship transfers.

Dec. 28, 2017: Trump tweets that China was “caught RED HANDED” allowing oil into the DPRK and preventing “a friendly solution” to the conflict with the DPRK. China blocks US effort to blacklist six foreign-flagged ships believed involved in illicit trade. ROK claims ship seizure over illicit petroleum trade with the DPRK.

Dec. 30, 2017: *Reuters* reports that Russian tankers have illicitly supplied fuel to the DPRK via transfers at sea.

Dec. 31, 2017: ROK reports the seizure of a second ship suspected of oil transfers.