The Korea Chair team takes a biweekly look at events of interest in Washington, Seoul, and the region.

U.S.-ROK RELATIONS

United States and ROK Discuss THAAD

Following the recent nuclear test and rocket launch, the United States and ROK have taken up the recommendation by UNC/CFC/USFK General Curtis M. Scaparrotti to begin consultations on improving the alliance defense posture through the possible deployment of a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the peninsula. The ROK-U.S. Joint Announcement underscored the security commitment to the ROK and noted that North Korea’s provocations compel the ROK and United States to consider these measures. THAAD would only be focused on North Korea. Lt. Gen. Thomas Vandal, chief of staff for U.S. Forces Korea, confirmed these statements in comments with ROK deputy minister of defense Yoo Jeh Seung.

Clapper Confirms Restart of DPRK Plutonium Reactor

On February 9, James R. Clapper, director of national intelligence, testified at the “Worldwide Threats” hearing at the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, alongside the director of the CIA, director of the DIA, director of the FBI, and director of the NSA. Clapper confirmed that North Korea has followed through on its 2013 announcement to “refurbish and restart” nuclear facilities with the capacity for uranium enrichment and the graphite-moderated plutonium production reactor at Yongbyon, which had been closed in 2007. He also added that North Korea has operated the reactor long enough to recover plutonium from the spent fuel within a matter of weeks to months.

GLOBAL RELATIONS

ROK Visits UN and Attends Munich Security Conference 2016

From February 9 to 14, ROK foreign minister Yun Byung-se will visit UN Headquarters in New York and attend the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in order to advocate for a comprehensive, international-level sanction against North Korea. On February 9, during his meeting with UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, Minister Yun emphasized the immediacy of “terminating resolution.” At the MSC, Minister Yun will deliver a keynote speech on ROK-NATO cooperation on a global level and meet with Secretary of State John Kerry on the sidelines.

ECONOMICS AND TRADE

South Koreans Elected to Global Financial Institutions

On February 3, Choi Heenam, the former ROK deputy finance minister of international affairs, was elected as an executive director of the World Bank Group until October 2016, filling in for Eun Sung-soo, who stepped down to serve as CEO of Korea Investment Cooperation in January 2016. On February 5, Hong Ki-taek, former chairman and CEO of KDB Financial Group, was appointed as one of the five vice presidents and the chief risk officer of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

U.S. Senate Passes North Korea Sanctions Bill

On February 10, the U.S. Senate passed H.R. 757, the “North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act of 2016,” with a 96-0 (4 abstentions) vote. The bill is currently awaiting approval of Senate revisions by the House of Representatives which passed an earlier version of the bill on January 12. If signed into law, this bill will differ from earlier discretionary sanctions by imposing mandatory sanctions on individuals who contribute to North Korea’s nuclear program, cyberattacks, censorship, and human rights abuses. It would be the first legislation by the U.S. Congress to enact mandatory sanctions against cybercriminals.

Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement Signed

On February 4, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement was signed by 12 Pacific nations in Auckland, New Zealand, after seven years of negotiations. The member countries include the United States, Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. TPP will undergo a two-year ratification period during which at least 6 out of 12 countries must approve before going into effect.

Photo credit: New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, SmugMug Photostream.
REGIONAL RELATIONS

China’s Reaction to North Korea’s Missile Launch
On February 7, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China expressed regrets for North Korea’s missile launch. China continued to emphasize “dialogue and consultation,” stating that “all parties should resume contacts and talks as soon as possible and avoid further worsening the situation on the Peninsula.” On the same day, China’s vice foreign minister, Liu Zhenmin, met North Korea’s ambassador to China, Ji Jae-ryong, and conveyed its “principled position” on North Korea’s use of ballistic missile technology.

U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Coordination against North Korean Long-Range Rocket Launch
On February 9, ROK president Park Geun-hye spoke on the phone with U.S. president Barack Obama, followed by another call with Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, and discussed the North Korean long-range launch using ballistic missile technology. On February 11, ROK general Lee Sun-jin, U.S. general Joseph Dunford, and Japanese admiral Katsutoshi Kawano will hold consultations in Hawaii to discuss trilateral intelligence sharing and coordination measures to North Korean threats. General Lee will participate via video from the ROK.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

National Assembly Continues Discussions over Pending Bills
The National Assembly has continued discussions on a number of pending bills. Although no agreement came from a meeting held by the Speaker Chung Ui Hwa and the chairmen of opposing parties on February 2, the Special Act on Corporate Revitalization, or so-called One-Shot Bill, was passed on February 4. While a February 10 plenary session did not result in the passage of pending bills, the next plenary session is scheduled for February 19. Pending bills include the North Korea Human Rights Bill and the Labor Reform Bill.

NORTH KOREA

North Korea Launches Long-Range Rocket
On February 7, North Korea launched a long-range rocket to successfully put the Kwangmyŏngsŏng-4 satellite into orbit. A day after the launch, an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council was convened and released a press statement strongly condemning North Korea.

Looking Ahead
Our Friday morning preview of events to watch in the weeks ahead.

- **February 12–14** | The ROK will attend the 52nd Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany.

- **February 14–19** | The ROK will attend the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Plenary and Working Group meetings in Paris, France. ROK holds the presidency at FATF during this plenary year, from July 2015 to June 2016.

- **February 16** | North Korea to celebrate Kim Jong-il’s birthday, “a Day of Shining Star,” which is one of the major North Korean holidays.


- **February 22** | 11th Joint Economic Committee meeting between ROK and Iran; the first meeting since 2006, will be held in Tehran, Iran.
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