

ROK-US Relations

On Jan 31, The US Secretary of Defense (SecDef) James Mattis spoke with ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo on the phone and shared their assessments about security in Northeast Asia. They also committed to strengthening the two countries' response capabilities against North Korea's nuclear threat.¹ A few days later, SecDef Mattis flew to Seoul to meet with Defense Minister Han, Prime Minister (PM) and Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn, Foreign Affairs Minister Yun Byung-se, and Blue House National Security Chief Kim Kwan-jin².

There was significant media coverage in Korea on the Secretary's visit since this was the first regional visit by a high-ranking cabinet member of the Trump administration. Many Koreans, including government officials, saw it as a symbolic gesture by the US³ to reaffirm the importance of the alliance while sending a strong message to North Korea and China.

In his meetings, SecDef Mattis assured Koreans that the ROK-US alliance and North Korea's nuclear threat remain top priorities for President Trump.⁴ He also confirmed that THAAD deployment was on schedule.⁵ At the same time, he stated that the North Korean threat was the only reason for deploying this system to the peninsula.⁶ He also warned that any attack on the US or its allies would be met with an "effective and overwhelming" response.⁷

In his meeting with Foreign Affairs Minister Yun, SecDef Mattis stated that the US and its allies must convince China that North Korea is a "liability, not an asset." Furthermore, he asked Minister Yun to identify areas in which the US could sanction China.⁸

DPRK's First Test Against Trump

North Korea fired a ballistic missile into the East Sea on Feb 12.⁹ This is the first test of this kind since the inauguration of the Trump administration. The missile is considered to be a mid-range Musudan-type. But North Korea calls it the Pukguksung-2, which is reportedly capable of delivering a nuclear

warhead¹⁰. Blue House National Security Chief Kim and the US National Security Advisor Michael Flynn immediately exchanged a phone call in which both sides agreed to explore all deterrence options against North Korea's nuclear capabilities.¹¹ The Blue House also condemned the missile test and warned North Korea that it will "cease to exist if it does not abandon its missile program."¹²

2017 Presidential Election

Former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, one of the favorites in the upcoming president election, withdrew his candidacy on Feb 1. During the press conference, he pointed to the scathing attacks on his personal character and his family among his reasons for the withdrawal.¹³ Until this announcement, Mr. Ban was widely considered to be the leading candidate from the conservative side, only second in public support behind Mr. Moon Jae-in. Ban's withdrawal leaves the conservative side without a clear leading candidate.

Presidential Candidates So Far

Party	Candidate
Together Democratic Party (TDP)	Moon Jae-in
	Ahn Hee-jung
	Lee Jae-myung
Freedom Korea Party (FKP) [Formerly Saenuri or New Frontier Party]	Hwang Kyo-ahn
	Lee In-jae
	Won Yoo-chul ¹⁴
Righteous Party (RP)	Ahn Sang-soo ¹⁵
	Yoo Seong-min
People's Party (PP)	Nam Kyung-pil
	Ahn Cheol-soo
	Sohn Hak-kyu ¹⁶
Justice Party (JP)	Chang Sung-min
	Shim Sang-jung
Unaffiliated	Kang Sangku
	Chung Un-chan

Many observers point out that the Freedom Korea Party (formerly Saenuri or the New Frontier Party) may have as many as nine candidates.¹⁷ The candidate that appears to have benefited the most

from Ban's withdrawal is PM Hwang Kyo-ahn, who now leads the conservative candidates in public opinion polls and ranks third overall behind Moon Jae-in and Ahn Hee-jung.¹⁸ However, PM Hwang has yet to make a formal announcement and has received some criticism for not making his intentions clear.¹⁹

Performance as Acting President²⁰

Performing well	40%
Not performing well	49%
Neither	5%
Don't know/refused	6%

Yoo Seong-min, the former anti-Park member of the Saenuri Party and candidate from the Righteous Party, is also being discussed as a leading conservative candidate. However, he is rather unpopular among older voters, who are extremely conservative and pro-Park.

Moon Jae-in continues to lead the progressive side, although Ahn Hee-jung is catching up very quickly. Ahn is now the second overall favorite according to the most recent poll. The Together Democratic Party is expected to have narrowed down the field by the time the Constitutional Court is expected to issue a ruling on President Park's impeachment.²¹

There are two dark horses on the progressive side, with Kim Jong-in waiting in the wings²² and Sohn Hak-kyu joining the People's Party to compete with Ahn Cheol-soo.²³

Presidential Candidate Approval Ratings

Candidate	Party	Feb. 1-2 ²⁴	Feb. 7-9 ²⁵
Moon Jae-in	TDP	32%	29%
Ahn Hee-jung	TDP	10%	19%
Hwang Kyo-ahn	FKP	9%	11%
Lee Jae-myung	TDP	7%	8%
Ahn Cheol-soo	PP	7%	7%
Yoo Seong-min	RP	3%	3%
Sohn Hak-kyu	PP	1%	1%
Other	-	9%	2%
Don't know/refused	-	22%	19%

President Park Geun-hye's Impeachment²⁶

Date	Dec. 6-8, 2016	Feb. 7-9, 2017
Approve	81%	79%
Disapprove	14%	15%
Don't know/refused	5%	5%

Party Approval Ratings

Date	Feb 1-2 ²⁷	Feb 7-9 ²⁸
TDP	41%	40%
FKP	11%	13%
PP	10%	12%
RP	8%	7%
JP	3%	4%
Don't know/refused	28%	23%

Constitutional Court and Special Prosecutors

The Constitutional Court (CC) asked the National Assembly and President Park Geun-hye's attorneys to submit the final statement by Feb 23, a day after the final deposition.²⁹ This suggests a strong likelihood that the court will reach a decision before Mar 13. President Park may possibly appear before the CC to defend herself.³⁰ If so, the National Assembly impeachment committee has asked the court to have Madam Park express her intent to do so by Feb 14.³¹

The Special Prosecutors (SP) indicted Kim Gi-chun (former presidential advisor) and Cho Yun-sun (Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism) but fell short of interviewing Park and searching the Blue House. The interview was scheduled for Feb 9, but Park cancelled the meeting.³² It is not clear whether Madam Park will agree to another interview. Meanwhile Choi Soon-sil voluntarily appeared before the SP to address the bribery charge. Many observers accused Choi of collecting information for Madam Park since she was largely silent for the duration of the interview.³³ Meanwhile, Lee Jae-yong (Samsung Electronics) was summoned by the SP on Feb 13. Reports suggest that the SP has a critical witness to prove its allegation and will request for another arrest warrant for Mr. Lee on Feb 15.³⁴

The SP is considering whether to extend the investigation, which is set to expire on Feb 28.³⁵ If the SP chooses to do so, the extension request must be filed before Feb 25 to the PM Hwang's office. The three opposing parties agreed to revise the current SP

Act to extend the period from 70 days to 120 days in case Hwang disapproves the SP's extension motion.³⁶

The Federation of Korean Industries

Samsung officially withdrew its membership from the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI).³⁷ As of today, LG is no longer a member and SK has stopped

all fee payments. Hyundai Motors is also expected to follow suit. The four largest corporations accounted for approximately 77% of the annual membership revenue. The FKI is said to be having difficulties finding the next president. Without its largest paying members, the FKI is facing an existential crisis.³⁸

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