

MONTHLY RECAP: MARCH

DPRK NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS

On March 1, U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill arrived in Beijing in order to hold a series of meetings with Chinese counterparts in hopes of reviving stalled six-party talks, while the U.S. State Department talked of a possible meeting with DPRK negotiator Kim Kye-gwan. After arriving, however, the meeting with Kim was not possible, according to Hill, because “we thought [the North] might be ready to discuss [Chinese proposals] with us, and clearly they are not.”

PRC Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei stated on March 6 that China was working with both the U.S. and the DPRK to restart six-party talks. According to Reuters, “Wu said North Korea and the other parties disagreed over what constituted “complete and accurate,” in reference to any declaration of its nuclear problems.”

Christopher Hill and Kim Kye-gwan met in Geneva on March 13 for two days of planned talks, but canceled the second day’s meetings after failing to reach any breakthrough on the first. While Hill and Kim returned to their capitals, lower-level counterparts continued with meetings in Geneva on the second day.

The Kremlin released a statement on March 27 announcing that Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov has been replaced by Alexei Borodavkin, Russia’s representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, as Moscow’s negotiator at six-party talks.

ROK UNIFICATION MINISTER

On March 2, Kim Ha-joong, South Korean ambassador to China since 2001, was sworn in as the new ROK unification minister. During confirmation hearings, Kim stated that the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments “did their utmost” to improve inter-Korean relations, and that he plans to “maintain the existing tone but change the means and speed” of ROK policy on the North. He also stated that humanitarian aid would not be linked to POW or kidnapping issues, but that movement on nuclear issues and the economic feasibility of projects would be taken into consideration. On March 19, Kim was more specific, stating, “It would be difficult to expand [the KIC] without resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.”

INTER-KOREAN MILITARY RELATIONS

On March 1, South Korea’s new defense minister paid respects to ROK sailors killed in a clash with the North Korean navy in 2002, reflecting the more stern policies of the new Lee Myung-bak administration.

On March 2, ROK forces and the USFK kicked off annual joint training maneuvers ‘Key Resolve’ and ‘Foal Eagle’, with North Korea answering with annual condemnation of the “reckless war maneuvers” and promises to “sternly take self-defensive steps to defend peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.”

South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Kim Tae-young stated on March 26 that the South had plans for striking suspected North Korean nuclear sites in the event the North attempted to

attack the South with atomic weapons. North Korea has called for an apology and threatened to cut off all dialog with the South. It threatened that if South Korea attacks, “Everything will be in ashes, not just a sea of fire.”

DPRK MISSILE LAUNCHES

On March 27, North Korea conducted a volley of test-firings of short-range ship-to-ship guided missiles in the West Sea. The Russian-designed Styx missiles have a range of 46 km. While Seoul and Washington called on Pyongyang not to carry out further tests, at the same time officials downplayed the threat of what appeared to be a political message delivered through a routine military exercise.

KAESONG EVICTION

In what many South Korean officials view as a response to toughing policies of the Ministry of Unification under the Lee administration, North Korea demanded on March 27 that the thirteen South Korean officials working in the Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Office in the KIC leave North Korea within 72 hours.

INTER-KOREAN TALKS

North and South Korean officials met in Panmunjom on March 27 to discuss technical issues related to providing the North with fuel and related facilities as part of the six-party agreement reached last year.

INTER-KOREAN ECONOMIC COOPERATION

On March 5, North Korea sent a fax to the South demanding that all ROK civilian aid workers “immediately but temporarily” halt visits to joint economic cooperative ventures at Kaesong and Mount Kumgang. North Korea is willing, however, to continue allowing in aid supplies.

An agreement was reached between DPRK officials and Hyundai Asan to allow tourists to cross the DMZ and visit Mount Kumgang in their private cars from March 17. The cars will enter and leave the tourist complex together and traverse through North Korea in guided caravans.

German auto parts manufacturer Prettl began construction of a plant in the Kaesong Industrial Complex on March 5, becoming the first non-South Korean firm in the KIC. It is scheduled to begin operations within the year, employing 550 North Koreans. Currently, there are 69 South Korean firms operating in the complex, employing 23,220 DPRK workers. Two Chinese companies have signed contracts but have not yet begun construction. As of the end of February, 309.7 million USD worth of goods have been produced in the complex since production began in 2005.

It was announced on March 16 that the South Korean government would provide special corporate tax benefits to companies that sign deals for original equipment manufacturer (OEM) products with firms in the KIC.

DPRK ECONOMY

The state-run (North) Korean Central News Agency reported on March 3 that the dry winter “has seriously affected the growth of autumn wheat and barley.” The UN World Food Program is predicting a 1.4 million ton-shortage of food in North Korea this year.

DPRK media reported on March 15 that Pyongyang has reached a deal with Moscow to renovate a 55km cross-border railway between Khasan and Rajin, and also to renovate Rajin’s port facilities and build a cargo terminal.

The ROK ship repair firm Acheon Global Corporation has obtained exclusive rights to the use of the DPRK Ryongnam Ship Repair Factory in Nampo. It was reported that Acheon also plans to push the DPRK government to create a special economic zone in the port area.

Air China launched flights to North Korea on March 31, becoming the first foreign airline to fly into the country regularly. The airline will offer round-trip service between Beijing and Pyongyang three times per week, making Pyongyang a Star Alliance destination.

Kim Yong-nam led a 24-member delegation on an 11-day tour through four African countries during March, signing several agreements for cooperation with Namibia, Angola, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Agreements were reached regarding fields ranging from herbal medicine to policing to shipbuilding, including personnel and technical exchanges and participation in trade fairs.

UN ON DPRK HUMAN RIGHTS

On March 3, Park In-kook, ROK deputy foreign minister for international organizations and global issues, stated in his keynote speech to the seventh session of the UN Human Rights Council, “The Government of the Republic of Korea, underscoring human rights as a universal value, calls upon the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to take appropriate measures to address the international community’s concern that the human rights situation in the DPRK has not improved.”

Special Rapporteur Vitit Muntarbhorn criticized the DPRK in his report to the UN Human Rights Council for “appalling” gulags, “rampant shortages of food,” a “great disparity” between elites and the general population regarding access to basic necessities, and the “extensive use of torture and public executions.” North Korea denied the accusations.

On March 27, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the resolution criticizing North Korean human rights and renewed a one-year mandate of its investigator for North Korea. The resolution was presented by Japan and the EU, and adopted with 22 votes in favor, including South Korea, 7 against, and 18 abstentions.