



**Statement Before the
Senate Armed Services Committee**

***“U.S. Policy and Strategy in the
Asia-Pacific Region”***

A Testimony by:

Victor Cha, Ph.D.

Professor of Government, Georgetown University
Senior Adviser and Korea Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies
Fellow in Human Freedom, George W. Bush Institute

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G-50 Dirksen Senate Office Building

Chairman McCain, Ranking Member Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, it is a distinct honor to appear before this committee to discuss policy and strategy in the Asia-Pacific.

More Provocations to Come

The failed missile launch by North Korea on April 16 promises more provocations in the coming weeks targeted on South Korean elections. To study the relationship between North Korean provocations and the May 9 presidential election, CSIS created a new database of events incorporating both presidential and national assembly elections from the Republic of Korea (ROK) over the last six decades.¹ The event set was cross-tabulated with CSIS Beyond Parallel's original dataset on North Korean provocations.² Based on this cross-comparison, the correlation between North Korean provocations and South Korean elections was calculated in terms of a "provocation window." The provocation window is defined as the number of days or weeks between a North Korean provocation and an ROK election event (either before or after it occurred).

This new study is one of the first to examine the relationship between ROK elections and North Korean provocations with these key findings³:

First, the provocation window between South Korean elections and North Korean provocations has become more narrow over time. A previous Beyond Parallel study also found that North Korean kinetic provocations, including missile and nuclear tests, have clustered increasingly closer to U.S. elections, with the window under Kim Jong-un to be 24 days (about 3 ½ weeks).⁴

Second, under Kim Jong-un, the average window for a North Korean provocation bracketed around all ROK elections is **6.5 days** (about 1 week). The average for presidential elections is **15 days** or about **two weeks**.

Third, this represents a significant change from previous periods: Under the leadership of both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, the window was an average of about **10 and 11 weeks** respectively.

¹ "ROK Elections and DPRK Provocations," *CSIS Beyond Parallel Databases*, April 20, 2017, <http://beyondparallel.csis.org/database-rok-elections-and-dprk-provocations/>

² "North Korean Provocations and US-ROK Military Exercises," *CSIS Beyond Parallel Databases*, April 3, 2017, <http://beyondparallel.csis.org/north-korean-provocations-us-rok-military-exercises/>

³ Victor Cha, "DPRK Provocations Possible Around South Korean Elections," *CSIS Beyond Parallel*, April 18, 2017, <http://beyondparallel.csis.org/rok-elections-and-dprk-provocations/>

⁴ Victor Cha, "DPRK Provocations Likely Around U.S. Presidential Election," *CSIS Beyond Parallel*, October 7, 2016, <http://beyondparallel.csis.org/dprk-provocations-likely-around-u-s-presidential-election/>

Fourth, there has been a transformation in the types of kinetic provocations that North Korea has carried out over the last 20 years. The provocations are now overwhelmingly comprised of missile and nuclear tests rather than other types of conventional kinetic military actions.⁵

Fifth, this pattern suggests a provocation as early as two weeks before the South Korean elections on May 9th. The start of the provocation window falls on Military Foundation Day (April 25), a holiday in North Korea, and 10 days after the 105th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birthday on April 15th (KST).

The implications for the United States are clear. The United States must coordinate policies immediately and intensively with the new South Korean government that comes into office on May 10. Unlike past governments, this one will have no transition period to speak of. Moreover, if our study is correct, the North Korean provocations that will accompany this election will make it difficult for the new government to seek immediate engagement with the North (if this were its true inclinations). Instead, engagement must be carefully timed and coordinated with the overall policy situation if: 1) engagement is to be effective; and 2) if South Korea is to avoid marginalizing itself further after its six-month impeachment crisis.

A Strategic Shift?

South Korea's next president will have to contend with the most challenging strategic and foreign policy environment in the nation's history.

The most obvious challenge is the nuclear and missile threat posed by North Korea, which is likely only to get worse with a new administration in Seoul. Indeed, our CSIS research has compiled a correlational database of North Korean provocations and South Korean elections. We have found that under Kim Jong-un, the North carries out provocations within an average "provocation window" of seven days of South Korean elections (that is, plus or minus seven days around the South Korean election date). By comparison, under Kim Jong-il, the average provocation window was eleven weeks. So whoever is elected on May 9, it will probably be in the context of more North Korean belligerence.

The next administration will face this North Korean threat, moreover, in the context of a relationship with the United States that has decayed over the previous six months. The Trump administration has sent a steady stream of high-level officials to South Korea, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and most recently Vice President Mike Pence last week, in order to signal the continued strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance in a period of political turmoil in the South. However, the fact is that turmoil has hindered any forward progress

⁵ "North Korea Missile Launches: 1984 – Present," CSIS Missile Defense Project, April 20, 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>

in the alliance's ability to deter the North Korean threat because current U.S. interlocutors in Seoul will no longer be in position in a few more weeks. And then the Trump administration will need to become acquainted with a whole new team of people with whom they have not discussed strategy or policy regarding the current crisis.

This stasis in U.S.-ROK relations is compounded by the downturn in ROK relations with Japan. The erection of a new statue in Busan led to the recalling of the Japanese ambassador in early January and claims in the Abe government that South Korea was violating the spirit of the just-inked comfort women pact.

And if the burgeoning North Korea threat, the stalled U.S.-ROK alliance, and the crippled ROK-Japan relationship was not enough, the next South Korean president will face all of these challenges at the same time that China is stepping on the nation's neck with unprecedented economic pressure over the deployment of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea, and with no signs of letting up.

Four Silver Linings

All of this translates to the most challenging strategic environment for any South Korean president in history. Moreover, he or she will face this without a proper period of planning and transition, instead taking office the day after the election. So how does the U.S.-ROK alliance circumnavigate all of these concerns? There are four "silver linings" in this apparent dark strategic cloud.

First, the North Korean threat provides opportunities for closer coordination of policy between the next (progressive) South Korean president and Washington. In short, a new government in Seoul cannot afford ideological indulgences in a renewed sunshine policy. It would be unwise, for example, for a new South Korean president on May 10 – presumably in the aftermath of more North Korean provocations and possibly a sixth nuclear test – to declare that he or she is reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mount Kumgang tourism sites. This would only serve to further marginalize South Korea's strategic position as the new government would lose step with the United States, Japan, and even China. The U.S. is not averse to inter-Korean engagement. However, for it to be effective, such engagement must be used strategically and coordinated with an overall U.S.-ROK strategy for negotiations and denuclearization.

The second silver lining relates to trilateral coordination. The United States should welcome an early meeting with the U.S. president, ideally before President Trump's scheduled trip to the region in the fall. Washington and Seoul might also consider a trilateral summit with the Japanese prime minister to shore up relations either in Washington, DC or a trilateral round of golf at the weekend White House, Mar-A-Lago. The goal of alliance consolidation should be a collective security statement among the three allies that an attack on one is an attack against all.

The third silver lining relates to China. Beijing is unlikely to let off on the economic pressure on South Korea over THAAD for another one or two financial quarters. This will hurt South Korean businesses and tourism even more, but it should also spark serious strategic thinking in the United States and South Korea about reducing ROK's economic dependence on China. Given the energy revolution in the United States and the removal of export restrictions, the two allies should think seriously about new bilateral energy partnerships that reduce South Korean energy dependence on China and the Middle East. Washington and Seoul's policy planning offices can work together to map out a South Korea "pivot" strategy for engaging India, as well as ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries. These new engagements should not be a temporary measure, but should be a serious effort at creating new markets for South Korean products, production chains, and investment. The Chinese have proven with their coercion over the THAAD issue that South Korea's future welfare cannot be left in Chinese hands.

Finally, the United States can encourage a new South Korean government to take a stronger stand in supporting public goods off the Korean peninsula in neighboring waters. In particular, as part of a new engagement "pivot" with ASEAN, Seoul could show stronger will to discourage further militarization of the South China Sea. This would win partners among ASEAN countries and be a distinctly different policy from the previous administration in South Korea.