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Regional Overview: At a Time of Uncertainty, Count on North Korea by Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman

There was a brief period when a breakthrough seemed possible in the stalemate with North Korea when it pledged to freeze all nuclear and missile tests; then Pyongyang announced a planned satellite launch, pulling the rug out from under Washington (and itself) and business as usual returned to the Peninsula. While hopes for a new round of Six-Party Talks were seemingly dashed, other multilateral initiatives seem alive and well. The BRICS met, mostly to complain, while ASEAN's leaders gathered in Phnom Penh, mostly to pat themselves on the back. The Plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea) took a step forward by reaching agreement on a trilateral investment treaty. In elections around the region, continuity prevailed in Taiwan, as it did in Korea (to the surprise of most pundits) and Russia (to no one's surprise). Meanwhile, Beijing seems to have taken a few steps back as a result of the Bo Xilai and Chen Guancheng affairs.

US-Japan Relations: Back to Normal?

by Michael J. Green and Nicholas Szechenyi

After three tumultuous and frustrating years as the DPJ tried to find its legs, Prime Minister Noda finally visited Washington. Noda has been busy pursuing an increase in the consumption tax, trying to gain support for some continuation of nuclear power, cobbling together domestic support for Japanese participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, and facing the perennial struggle on relocating Marine Corps Air Station Futenma on Okinawa. By the time of his visit, Noda had started to line up support for the consumption tax, backed off temporarily on TPP, and waited on restarting nuclear plants. However, he did manage to complete an agreement to de-link the move of about 9,000 US Marines to Guam and other locations in the Pacific from the Futenma relocation issue. That announcement was a rare victory and set a positive tone for the summit and the joint statement pledged to revitalize the alliance. The prime minister returned home to face the same domestic political challenges, but with an important if limited accomplishment in foreign policy.

US-China Relations: Xi Visit Steadies Ties; Dissident Creates Tension by Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley

Xi Jinping's visit to the US went smoothly and laid the foundation for a strong bilateral relationship after the 18th Party Congress this fall. Speeches to mark the 40th anniversary of Nixon's visit to China highlighted progress while recognizing deep mutual strategic mistrust. The third Asia-Pacific Consultation was held to manage suspicions and enhance cooperation. President Obama met Hu Jintao on the

sidelines of the Seoul Nuclear Security Summit. Friction increased with the filing of a complaint with the WTO that charged China with manipulating prices of rare earth elements. Beijing angered Washington by vetoing a UNSC resolution that called for Syria's president to step down. But, the Council later passed a resolution that authorized observers to monitor the ceasefire. China rebuffed US entreaties to reduce oil imports from Iran and the US imposed sanctions on a Chinese company for selling refined oil to Iran.

US-Korea Relations: North Korea's Rocket Launch

by Victor Cha and Ellen Kim

The most significant news in early 2012 centered on North Korea's rocket launch. In a slightly different twist, this latest provocation came just two weeks after reaching what seemed to be a new deal with the US to freeze its missile and nuclear programs in exchange for food assistance. After Pyongyang went ahead with the launch in defiance of its international agreements and its so-called "Leap Day" deal with the US, it felt like Groundhog Day. The question soon became how soon a nuclear test might be in the offing. Meanwhile, the KORUS FTA finally took effect after seven years of deliberation, and US sanctions on Iran and US beef imports in the ROK reemerged as issues for the relationship.

US-Southeast Asia Relations: Conflict in the East; Opportunity in the West by Sheldon Simon

US attention was focused on both ends of Southeast Asia: in the east on tensions in the South China Sea between China and the Philippines, which have energized the US-Philippine alliance; and in the west on the impact of April by-elections in Burma, which have paved the way for a quantum leap in US engagement with the country. Attacks and explosions in Thailand and the Philippines were a reminder that terrorism is still a serious threat. Policy debate over the US "pivot" to Asia was stimulated by a US request to double the number of littoral combat ships to be docked at Singapore as well as by discussion on the rotation of US troops through Philippine bases. Both represent modest steps toward "flexible bases" in Southeast Asia. The unprecedented number of US joint exercises and other forms of military cooperation anticipated in 2012 suggest the "pivot" is an ongoing and incremental process that has been underway for years.

China-Southeast Asia Relations: Hu Visits Cambodia as South China Sea Simmers

by Robert Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang

Chinese interchange with Southeast Asia featured President Hu Jintao's visit to Cambodia. The unusual attention was related to China's efforts to manage disputes with claimants in the South China Sea and Cambodia's appointment as the chair of ASEAN. Playing host at the Boao International Forum, Vice Premier Li Kejiang supported Hu's

emphasis on managing disputes diplomatically. Chinese leaders also endeavored to solidify relations with officials from several regional governments, emphasizing the importance of growing economic ties. Chinese commentary generally supported China's South China Sea claims in carefully measured terms, though a widely publicized faceoff between Chinese and Philippine ships over fishing rights in a disputed area was accompanied by strong warnings to the Philippines as well as Vietnam, and repeated charges against the US along with accusations against Russia and India.

China-Taiwan Relations: Post-Election Continuity

by David G. Brown

In January, President Ma Ying-jeou won re-election and the KMT retained its majority in the legislature. Voters endorsed Ma's gradual approach to developing constructive relations with the Mainland. In Beijing, the outcome validated President Hu's "peaceful development" policies. Both sides have indicated there will be continuity in cross-strait relations with a focus on a busy economic agenda. While understanding the domestic factors constraining Ma's willingness to discuss political issues, Beijing has emphasized the importance of building political trust and strengthening a common Chinese heritage. Meanwhile, the DPP defeat provoked an internal debate on the party's policy toward Beijing, but no clear picture has emerged on whether or how party policy might change.

North Korea-South Korea Relations: Plumbing the Depths

by Aidan Foster-Carter

Covering inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections* has been a roller-coaster ride, given the peninsula's changeable political weather. Even so, the current state of affairs is unprecedented. Pyongyang has spent the whole of 2012 hurling ever ruder and angrier jibes at ROK President Lee; plumbing the depths even by North Korean standards. In April, *KCNA* published and trumpeted a set of vicious cartoons that depict Lee as a rat being gorily done to death. From the viewpoint of inter-Korean relations, the past four months essentially saw almost no interaction except this one-sided name-calling. Unsurprisingly Seoul did say a few words in response, which only served to rile Pyongyang more. Wading through filth is no fun, but duty must be done as we describe and try to interpret North Korea's slander campaign, which showed ominous signs of escalating from words to deeds. In some obscure way, one intended function may be to boost the callow Kim Jong Un, so we also briefly report his formal accession to the DPRK's top leadership posts.

China-Korea Relations: China's Post-Kim Jong Il Debate

by Scott Snyder and See-won Byun

The 20-year anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea may provide a pretext for more active diplomacy to meet a growing list of potential disputes in the relationship. Presidents Hu Jintao and Lee Myung-bak have held two summits this year and there has been increased interaction among other senior leaders as well. These exchanges have sharpened focus on the prospects for the partnership. Meanwhile, high-level contacts between China and North Korea have stalled. Beijing renewed calls for restraint following North Korea's failed launch of an "earth

observation satellite" and a UNSC President's Statement strongly condemning it. This has dampened China's hopes for regional engagement.

Japan-China Relations: Happy 40th Anniversary

by James J. Przystup

With both Tokyo and Beijing intent on celebrating the 40th anniversary of normalization, bilateral relations started well in 2012 – and quickly went downhill. Contested history returned in a controversy sparked by Nagoya Mayor Kawamura Takashi's remarks questioning the reality of the Nanjing massacre. Repeated incidents in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands involving ships of China's State Oceanic Administration Agency and Japan's Coast Guard kept the volatile issue of sovereignty claims politically alive. Both sides engaged in island naming games to enhance sovereignty and EEZ claims in the region. In April, Tokyo Gov. Ishihara Shintaro announced plans for the Tokyo Municipal Government to purchase three of the Senkaku Islands. With that, the relationship moved into May and Prime Minister Noda's visit to China.

Japan-Korea Relations: Sisyphus

by David Kang and Jiun Bang

The most dramatic events affecting relations in early 2012 concerned North Korea. The power transition appears to be proceeding smoothly, although mixed signals indicate that a clear foreign policy has not yet been worked out in Pyongyang. Meanwhile, South Korea and Japan continue on their seemingly disconnected tracks. In economic relations and day-to-day issues, they continue to move closer together on issues from dealing with tax evasion to joint disaster relief planning. Yet, territorial claims or claims about history are a constant irritant that threaten to derail relations. Both sides seemingly wanted relations to worsen by picking fights over Dokdo/Takeshima and making claims about history. One could dismiss the squabbling as peripheral to the main relationship, but it hinders coordination and planning over important issues, diverts diplomatic attention, and remains salient for domestic politics of both sides.

China-Russia Relations: Succession, Syria...and the Search for Putin's Soul

by Yu Bin

By any standard, the first four months were a rough start to the year for both Russia and China. While succession politics gripped first Russia and then China, Moscow and Beijing coordinated closely over crises beyond their borders (Syria, Iran, and North Korea) and promoted multilateralism through summitry with the BRICS and the SCO. Toward the end of April, the Russian and Chinese navies held the largest joint bilateral exercise in seven years, codenamed *Maritime Cooperation-2012*, in the Yellow Sea. Meanwhile, China's future premier Li Keqiang traveled to Moscow to meet Russia's future-and-past President Putin in Moscow.