



North Korea: A Month in Review

An analytic look at the main developments
of the March 1-March 31 period

By NK Pro Staff Analysts



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NK Pro has conducted an in-depth analytic review of news on the peninsula for the period between March 1 and March 31.

In addition to an Executive Summary providing top-line findings, the following review includes detailed analysis on a wide range of other specialist focus areas.

Furthermore, it also includes a look ahead at the five events most likely to create news in April.

Please send any feedback about this feature to chad.ocarroll@nknews.org

Published by Korea Risk Group, the world's premiere resource for analysis, research tools and data on North Korea (www.korearisk.com)

Contents

04 Executive Summary

06 **Foreign Relations:** Different Perspectives on Hanoi, Russia Summit Preparations Ongoing

09 **Human Security / Human Rights:** Cheollima Civil Defense Invade DPRK Embassy, Food Situation Worsens

12 **WMD:** Signaling at Sohae, Some Nuclear Facilities Dormant

15 **Inter-Korean:** Progress Stalls, but Ambitious Plans Revealed

18 **Military:** Major Drills Axed, but Quiet on Inter-Korean Military Cooperation

21 **Leadership:** Month Marked by Surprising Parliamentary Elections, Diplomacy

24 **Sanctions:** Confusion on U.S. Sanctions, Impacts on Humanitarian Sector

27 **Economy:** Hanoi Investment & Imports Decline, but Tourism Trends

30 **DPRK State Media:** New and Notable

31 **The Month Ahead:** What to Expect

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Section by Chad O'Carroll



A light is illuminated at the top of the Ryugyong Hotel in Pyongyang | Picture: NK Pro

FOREIGN RELATIONS: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON HANOI EMERGE

Accounts of the breakdown of the Hanoi summit which emerged in media during March presented differing perspectives on what led to problems between the two sides. But despite the differences, information publicly revealed by senior U.S. officials and subsequently leaked to journalists suggests that Washington sought much more ambitious goals at Hanoi than had been expected in advance of the summit. Notably, a much expanded definition of "denuclearization" was pursued, also including calls for North Korea to eliminate its chemical and biological weapons programs and the entirety of its ballistic missiles. Furthermore, a Reuters report in late March said the U.S. also requested that the DPRK hand-over its nuclear weapons and fissile materials. While the North Korean side has not yet precisely corroborated the accounts of U.S. demands, vice foreign minister Choe Son Hui on March 15 blamed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton for creating an unspecified "obstacle" at the summit.

RISK: With both the U.S. and DPRK suggesting that it is now up to the other to rekindle negotiations and show increased flexibility, it is uncertain how and when working-level talks can recommence. On the one hand, Hanoi showed that a significant gulf exists between the positions of the two sides, making it hard to see where common ground can now be found. On the other, both pre-summit talks and the summit itself confirmed that Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un favor top-down approaches, raising questions as to the utility and purpose of further working level negotiations.

HUMAN SECURITY / HUMAN RIGHTS: CHEOLIMA CIVIL DEFENSE INVADE DPRK EMBASSY

March was punctuated by the news that the shadowy Cheollima Civil Defense (CCD) organization had been responsible for February's invasion of the DPRK embassy in Madrid, with the U.S. subsequently attempting to distance itself from the organization's activities. Led by human rights activist Adrian Hong, a U.S. permanent resident, the CCD raid resulted in computers and memory cards being stolen from the embassy, as well as violence being reportedly used against the diplomats and family members stationed there. With reports emerging in Spanish media that two CCD

members met with CIA representatives prior to the incident – and CCD stating it later provided information from the embassy to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) – the U.S. government issued multiple statements to try and create distance between it and planning of the invasion. Overall, the CCD invasion of the DPRK embassy marks the most sophisticated and ambitious attack taken against overseas official North Korean representatives by a human rights group in recent history.

RISK: Though the U.S. government has sought distance from the event, given the moribund nature of talks between the two countries there is a possibility that North Korean authorities will in future release a detailed and public account of the invasion. Given the DPRK has in the past published alleged evidence to explain CIA involvement in [an assassination plot on Kim Jong Un](#), it remains possible that Pyongyang will – in a similar way – issue evidence-based claims to link American intelligence authorities to the incident. Naturally, such a development would not bode well for a smooth resumption of U.S.-DPRK diplomacy any time soon.

WMD: SIGNALING AT SOHAE, SOME NUCLEAR FACILITIES DORMANT

Open source satellite imagery specialists in early March drew attention to construction activity at the Sohae Satellite Launch Center. Commenting on the issue, Trump said on March 6 that Washington would be “very disappointed” if reports on Pyongyang rebuilding the site [were accurate](#). North Korean efforts to reconstruct parts of the facility were detected as ongoing in imagery of the area dated [March 8](#), despite Kim Jong Un’s pledge to Donald Trump to dismantle parts of the site last year in Singapore.

RISK: On the one hand, therefore, developments at Sohae could represent a clear leading indicator that North Korea will use the facility to launch a satellite in the short-to-medium term. The more likely case, however, is that Pyongyang is simply posturing, taking action in a spot they know is well monitored in order to increase diplomatic pressure on the U.S. to renew talks on better terms. But if the warning ultimately does not have the desired effect, it should not be a surprise if North Korea takes further actions to sharpen it.

INTER-KOREAN: PROGRESS STALLS, BUT AMBITIOUS PLANS REVEALED

March was notable for seeing South Korean President Moon Jae-in reveal ambitious new plans for inter-Korean cooperation within less than 24 hours of the failure of the Hanoi summit. Despite his positive outlook, North Korean disinterest in cooperation with South Korea appeared to grow in March, with Pyongyang less enthusiastic about the prospect of talks absent any significant changes to the sanctions regime.

MILITARY: MAJOR DRILLS AXED, BUT QUIET ON INTER-KOREAN MILITARY COOPERATION

March confirmed Trump’s post-Hanoi indication that major further U.S.-ROK drills would be abandoned, ostensibly in order to keep diplomacy on track. But ongoing failure by the North to respond to South Korea’s military for talks and the U.S. and UK increasing naval efforts to monitor/prevent ship-to-ship sanctions violations suggest obstacles to diplomacy remain.

LEADERSHIP: MONTH MARKED BY SURPRISING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, DIPLOMACY

The highlights of North Korean leadership developments in March were the surprising parliamentary elections, in which Kim Jong Un did not win a seat in the legislature, and Kim’s “official goodwill visit” to Vietnam, the first visit to the country by a North Korean leader in 55 years.

SANCTIONS: CONFUSION ON U.S. SANCTIONS, IMPACTS ON HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

The past month saw sanctions confusion in the U.S. when Treasury announced two new designations and President Trump the following day Tweeted that “large scale sanctions” would be withdrawn. In addition, the UN published its Panel of Experts (PoE) report on North Korea, and a number of new humanitarian sanctions exemptions were issued.

ECONOMY: HANOI INVESTMENT & IMPORTS DECLINE, BUT TOURISM LIKELY TO THRIVE

March was noteworthy for several economic consequences emerging as a direct result of the failed Hanoi summit, a sharp drop in North Korean imports from China, and indicators that summer will be particularly busy in the world



THE MONTH AHEAD: WHAT TO EXPECT

Section by *Chloe Joo, Minyoung Lee*



Citizens of Pyongyang waiting for a bus Picture: NK Pro

Looking at the month ahead, six primary issues will likely dominate the North Korea news cycle, for a number of reasons:

The first session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA)	The SPA Presidium on March 21 announced that the First Session of the 14th SPA will be convened on April 11. In addition to the annual review of state budget execution for the previous year and the state budget for the current year, SPA opening sessions usually elect new cabinet members. The upcoming SPA session also could unveil structural changes and a constitutional revision to reflect those changes, given the unprecedented non-election of the supreme leader to the SPA in the March 10 SPA elections. North Korea implements institutional changes and constitutional revisions during SPA sessions.
Moon-Trump to hold a summit on April 11	South Korean President Moon Jae-in and U.S. President Donald Trump are scheduled to hold a summit on April 11, after the failed U.S.-DPRK summit last month. The Blue House announced on March 29 that Trump invited Moon to the White House and Moon accepted to see the U.S. president in Washington. During the meeting, the two leaders will have a discussion on the agenda of North Korea denuclearization as well as on U.S.-South Korea alliances. As nuclear talks seemed to have reached an impasse after the Hanoi summit, the Moon-Trump meeting is expected to be an opportunity to break the ice.
Celebration of Kim Il Sung's birth anniversary	North Korea will celebrate the 107th birth anniversary of Kim Il Sung on April 15, also known as the "Day of the Sun." Unlike in 2017, when North Korea commemorated the 105th anniversary with a military parade, the country's celebration of the day was significantly toned down in 2018, marking the 106th birth anniversary, considered an off year, with flower festivals and concerts. This year is also an off year for Kim Il Sung's birth anniversary, and celebrations are likely to be low key, like 2018.

Expected thorny reaction from the North

The South Korean defense authorities are set to carry out the Ssangyong joint marine exercise in April. Unlike last year, the Ssangyong exercise will take place without U.S. participation in 2019. On March 20, the North Korean external propaganda outlet *Uriminzokkiri* denounced South Korea for the Ssangyong exercise. The commentary depicted the exercise as a “violent violation” against the hopes for peace in Korean peninsula. The first F-35A stealth fighter jet will likely be deployed by April or May; and North Korea will likely criticize the move, probably via its external propaganda outlets.

Kim Jong Un’s possible visit to Russia?

North Korea-Russia exchanges have increased significantly since the collapse of the Hanoi summit. In that light, Kim Jong Un’s secretary Kim Chang Son’s visits to Russia and Vladivostok for five days during March 19-24 was viewed by many as laying the groundwork for the North Korean leader’s visit to Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia was expecting Pyongyang and Kremlin to agree on the exact date and venue of a summit in early April. Kim Chang Son is a close aide to the North Korean leader, and he checked protocol and security issues in Singapore and Hanoi ahead of the summit talks.



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