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Contents in this Issue:

- I. NAPSNet
 - [1. DPRK Nuclear Program](#)
 - [2. PRC on DPRK Nuclear Program](#)
 - [3. US on DPRK Nuclear Program](#)
 - [4. Alleged DPRK-Syria Nuclear Cooperation](#)
 - [5. ROK Politics](#)
 - [6. ROK on Japan, Russia Missile Programs](#)
 - [7. Sino-Japanese Relations](#)
 - [8. Sino-Indian Military Relations](#)
 - [9. Hong Kong Government](#)
 - [10. PRC Aid to Africa](#)
 - [11. PRC Energy Supply](#)
 - [12. PRC Demographics](#)

[Preceding NAPSNet Report](#)

I. NAPSNet

1. DPRK Nuclear Program

The Associated Press ("EXPERTS BEGIN REMOVING FUEL RODS FROM N KOREA REACTOR - KYODO", Tokyo, 2007/12/17) reported that nuclear experts have begun removing fuel rods from the DPRK's only nuclear reactor but the country won't meet a year-end deadline to disable the facility under a six-way denuclearization agreement, a news report said. The transfer of the reactor's irradiated fuel rods into adjacent water pools began last week, Kyodo News agency reported. The report said the process is expected to take about 100 days, Kyodo said - meaning disablement wouldn't be complete until March. Experts have said once the rods are removed, it would be technically difficult to reload them.

[\(return to top\)](#)

2. PRC on DPRK Nuclear Program

Agence France-Presse ("CHINA'S TOP NUCLEAR ENVOY INSPECTS NKOREA NUKE DISABLEMENT PROCESS", Beijing, 2007/12/17) reported that the PRC's top nuclear envoy inspected the atomic disarmament process in the DPRK, as part of efforts to push the reclusive country to meet a key agreement, state media and officials said. Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei was also to meet DPRK leaders, including top nuclear envoy Kim Kye-Gwan, during his visit, ministry spokesman Qin Gang told journalists. "The purpose of his visit is to exchange ideas with the DPRK side... on the current situation in the six-party talks and the work for the next phase," Qin said, without saying how long Wu would stay in Pyongyang.

[\(return to top\)](#)

3. US on DPRK Nuclear Program

Yonhap (Lee Dong-min, "U.S. DEFENSE NOMINEE UNSURE IF N.K. WILL GIVE UP NUCLEAR AMBITIONS", Washington, 2007/12/18) reported that a senior U.S. defense official questioned whether the DPRK is willing to give up its nuclear ambitions, and stressed that Pyongyang can prove its commitment to denuclearization with its nuclear disclosure, due by the end of this month. James Shinn, tapped as assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs, said the current troop levels in the ROK and Japan are appropriate for U.S. defense needs but would be open to continuous evaluation for increase.

[\(return to top\)](#)

4. Alledged DPRK-Syria Nuclear Cooperation

Joongang Ilbo ("SYRIA-NORTH TIES CALLED 'RIDICULOUS'", Washington, 2007/12/18) reported that the top Syrian envoy to the US denied allegations of nuclear cooperation with the DPRK, brushing it off as "silly, absurd, ridiculous hype." Speaking at the Woodrow Wilson Center, a think

tank in Washington, Ambassador Imad Moustapha said Syria was “never told” that its relations with the DPRK were an issue with the US. Moustapha claimed U.S. officials quietly have said they do not believe Syria is collaborating with the DPRK on the nuclear front. “Even here in the United States, at a highly classified hearing that was presented at the U.S. conference a couple of weeks ago, key officials from the U.S. administration had to say behind closed doors that there are no Syrian nuclear projects, no Syrian-Korean nuclear cooperation,” the envoy said.

[\(return to top\)](#)

5. ROK Politics

Washington Post (Blaine Harden, "VIDEO SNAGS SOUTH KOREAN FRONT-RUNNER DAYS BEFORE VOTE", Seoul, 2007/12/18) reported that Lee Myung-bak was cruising toward a landslide victory in Wednesday's ROK presidential election when he skidded over the weekend into a speed bump built out of his own words. Lee, a former mayor of Seoul and onetime boss of this country's largest construction company, was confronted Sunday with a seven-year-old video clip in which he says that he "established" a company at the heart of a major investment scandal in the ROK. It seems, two days before the election, that the video is unlikely to erase Lee's 30-point lead in the polls. But it could hobble his presidency.

Associated Press ("EXIT POLLS SHOW LEE WINNING ELECTION", Seoul, 2007/12/19) reported that exit polls showed Lee Myung-bak winning the ROK presidential election by a landslide Wednesday. Lee received 50.3 percent of the vote, according to an exit poll sponsored jointly by TV stations KBS and MBC, with Chung Dong-young at 26 percent and independent Lee Hoi-chang at 13.5 percent. SBS had Lee winning with 51.3 percent of the vote, while YTN news channel put Lee at 49 percent.

[\(return to top\)](#)

6. ROK on Japan, Russia Missile Programs

Joongang Ilbo (Brian Lee, "RUSSIA, JAPAN ENJOY SEPARATE MISSILE SUCCESSES", 2007/12/18) reported that after Russia announced this week that it had developed a new type of missile and Japan successfully shot down a test missile of its own, experts here expressed insecurities that this country will fall behind in an increasingly competitive arms race. “It’s a dilemma. We would like to improve our own knowledge about missiles by participating in missile projects, such as the missile shield, but there are realistic concerns as well as political ones,” said a ministry official requesting anonymity. “There was fear of agitating North Korea and China, but one has to consider that all of the countries that surround the Korean Peninsula have nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities,” said Yoon Duk-min, a professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security. “A missile defense system is a tangible asset that can strengthen the alliance with Washington. In the long term, it is beneficial to be part of it.”

[\(return to top\)](#)

7. Sino-Japanese Relations

The Yomiuri Shimbun ("FUKUDA TO START 4-DAY TRIP TO CHINA FROM DEC. 27", 2007/12/18) reported that Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda will visit the PRC for four days from Dec. 27,

government sources said. Fukuda will meet with President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and other top officials in Beijing and also visit other cities. Fukuda's visit will be the first by a Japanese prime minister since Shinzo Abe in October 2006. Fukuda and Hu have not met before. Fukuda aims to foster friendship between the two countries and to ensure mutual visits by their leaders happen regularly, the sources said.

[\(return to top\)](#)

8. Sino-Indian Military Relations

Times of India ("INDIA-CHINA WARGAMES SET TO BEGIN ON DEC 21", Beijing, 2007/12/18) reported that India and the PRC are getting ready for a unique game, where observers and the audience will count for more than the actual players. The two nations are set to hold their first joint military exercise from December 21 ending a year of both distrust and intense parleys to build friendship. Just about 80 soldiers from each side will participate in the five-day anti-terrorism drill scheduled to take place in the picturesque mountain ranges of Yunnan close to the provincial capital of Kunming. They will be led by a company commander, usually an officer of the rank of Major, from each side. "The purpose is to feel each other and see if we can work together in future. The key word is inter-operability. We would be in better equipped just in case the military of the two countries need to fight terrorists in future," a senior defense ministry official told TNN over phone from Delhi.

[\(return to top\)](#)

9. Hong Kong Government

Reuters (James Pomfret, "CHINA TO CONSIDER HONG KONG PUSH FOR DEMOCRACY", Hong Kong, 2007/12/18) reported that the PRC's parliament will decide next week whether to allow greater democracy in Hong Kong, but no one in the liberal camp is expecting a surprise Christmas present from the Communist rulers in Beijing. Hong Kong Chief Executive Donald Tsang urged the PRC this month to allow greater democracy in the former British colony in a report that said the majority of people in Hong Kong wanted direct elections by 2012. But the report was criticized by the pro-democracy camp for its lack of a timetable and for suggesting a delay until 2017 as a more pragmatic option.

[\(return to top\)](#)

10. PRC Aid to Africa

Reuters (Alan Wheatley, "WORLD BANK EYES JOINT AFRICA PROJECTS WITH CHINA", Beijing, 2007/12/17) reported that the World Bank is planning joint projects in Africa with the PRC's Export-Import Bank to address concerns that Beijing is taking more than it gives as it scours the continent for oil and minerals. World Bank President Robert Zoellick, wrapping up a four-day trip to the PRC, said the pros and cons of the country's push into Africa had been an important topic during his talks with senior officials including Ex-Im Bank Governor Li Ruogu. PRC investors were building infrastructure and generating revenues for poor countries. But tapping Africa's natural resources also highlighted the need to ensure transparency and avoid corruption, Zoellick told a news conference.

[\(return to top\)](#)

11. PRC Energy Supply

The Associated Press (Joe McDonald, "CHINA'S SOUTHWEST HIT BY FUEL CRUNCH", Beijing, 2007/12/17) reported that drivers waited in lines up to a half-mile long to buy gasoline in the PRC's mountainous southwest Tuesday amid rationing aimed at easing a fuel crunch in key export regions elsewhere. Supplies began to run out Sunday in Yunnan province, triggering rationing, filling station employees and news reports said. The crunch follows a diesel shortage in the PRC's export-driven southeast in October and November that disrupted trucking and prompted the government to order suppliers to take emergency measures.

The Financial Times (Richard McGregor, "BEIJING SPARKS FUEL TAX DEBATE", Beijing, 2007/12/18) reported that a senior PRC official has reignited the long-running debate on the imposition of a road fuel tax, saying in a speech released on Tuesday "the time was ripe now" for its introduction. Zhu Zhigang, a vice-minister of finance, said the ministry also supported the introduction of a tax on crude oil production, starting at 5 per cent, to be raised later to 10 per cent. The ministry did not specify when the tax would take effect, saying "it should be imposed as soon as possible".

[\(return to top\)](#)

12. PRC Demographics

China Daily (Wu Jiao , "NATION FACES CHALLENGES OF GRAYING POPULATION", 2007/12/18) reported that the country faces unprecedented challenges in economic and social spheres as a result of a fast expanding aging population, top officials warned. With two working people for every retiree between 2030 and 2050, the country is expected to see the end of a decades-long advantage it enjoyed with a low-cost labor market. Currently, the ratio is 6:1, according to figures from the China National Committee on Aging (CNCA). "We might encounter the heaviest burden especially after 2030, when the demographic dividend is set to end," said Yan Qingchun, deputy director of the office of the CNCA.

[\(return to top\)](#)

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