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1. US-DPRK Relations

New York Times ("U.S. TO OFFER NORTH KOREA FACE-SAVING NUCLEAR PLAN", 2007-03-05) reported that Bush administration officials say they plan to tell the DPRK negotiators on Monday that Washington's doubts about how much progress the country has made in enriching uranium gives it a face-saving way to surrender its nuclear equipment. The new approach to solve a dispute over the existence and extent of a uranium program, which intelligence agencies say could have been developed using equipment that the DPRK purchased from Pakistan, will come at a meeting at the United Nations. On Sunday, Christopher R. Hill, the assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said that at the meeting he planned to "form an agenda to work on our bilateral relationship — what's involved in the establishment of diplomatic relations, what's involved before North Korea can get off the state-sponsor-of-terrorism list, and how to get them off the Trading with the Enemies Act." He said he would be "pressing for disclosure of all their nuclear programs, including highly enriched uranium."

(return to top) Reuters ("U.S. - NORTH KOREA TALKS FACE PITFALLS", 2007-03-04) reported experts as warning many pitfalls threaten the US-DPRK normalization process. The New York working group meeting between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill and DPR Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kae-gwan goes to the heart of what Pyongyang wants out of the newly resurgent diplomacy -- official ties with the world's superpower and guarantees its system can survive. If "North Korea comes out and says the United States has a hostile policy and isn't lifting sanctions as promised, then we have a problem," said Michael Green, formerly an Asia expert on President George W. Bush's National Security Council. "But if the North Koreans engage in real discussions about what they have to do on terrorism and (counterfeiting) and so forth to move to sanctions-lifting, that would be a good sign," said Green, now with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank. One early potential flash point is the DPRK's removal from the U.S. list of countries that sponsor terrorism. Japan has urged its ally to wait until the issue of Pyongyang's abduction of Japanese citizens is resolved. Charles Kartman, the Clinton administration's DPRK negotiator, said removing the DPRK from the terrorism list should be easy because the abductions, while heinous, are "an old crime. There's no real reason to keep them on the terrorism list that I know of," he said in an interview. But the administration, which in 2003 said it would not lift the terrorism designation without progress on abductions, is worried about a break with Japan if it moves too quickly. (return to top)

2. DPRK on HEU Program

Yonhap ("PYONGYANG READY TO "COUNTER" US CLAIMS ON HEU PROGRAMME PRO-N KOREA PAPER", 2007-03-05) reported that the DPRK is ready to counter allegations that it is developing a highly enriched uranium (HEU) programme at an upcoming meeting for normalizing ties with the United States. "Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Kim Kye-kwan [Kim Kye Gwan] expresses intent to counter the US evidence on the HEU programme and is confident of solving the problem," said the Choson Sinbo, a Korean-language newspaper published by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan.

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3. DPRK-Japan Relations

Yomiuri Shimbun ("GOVT TO ASK DPRK TO LOOK AT ABDUCTIONS", 2007-03-05) reported that

Japan will ask the DPRK to conduct a reinvestigation on abductees at bilateral working group talks on normalizing ties scheduled to begin Wednesday in Hanoi. Japan will only participate in economic and energy assistance to North Korea agreed at the latest six-party talks when there is "concrete development" in the abduction issue. When North Korea agrees to the reinvestigation, the government will judge whether some concrete development is confirmed in the problem, after examining the results of the reinvestigation.

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4. DPRK-PRC Relations

Associated Press ("N. KOREA LEADER VISITS CHINA'S EMBASSY", 2007-03-05) reported that Kim Jong Il visited the Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang Sunday, perhaps an indication of Kim's efforts to mend ties with his main ally. The countries' relationship has been strained by missile launches and a nuclear test carried out by the DPRK last year. Kim received a message from Chinese President Hu Jintao, the Korean Central News Agency reported, without describing the message. The visit was to mark the first full moon of the lunar year, a day observed in both countries, the report said.

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5. US-ROK Trade Relations

Korea Times ("FTA TALKS PICK UP STEAM", 2007-03-05) reported that free trade agreement (FTA) talks between the ROK and the US are picking up steam as the two sides hope to wrap up negotiations before an April 2 deadline. The two countries will hold the eighth and last round of free trade talks from March 8-12 in Seoul. But skepticism is still prevalent among some activists and economists as the ROK is seen as gaining little from an FTA with the world's largest economy, while the deal will benefit the US more.

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6. Japan-ROK Territorial Dispute

Agence France Presse ("JAPAN, SKOREA HOLD TALKS ON DISPUTED ISLETS", 2007-03-05) reported that Japan and the ROK opened talks aimed at settling a territorial spat over a cluster of disputed islets. The one-day meeting is expected to focus on ways for the two countries to notify each other in advance if they want to conduct marine surveys around the islands claimed by both neighbours.

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7. Japan on Comfort Women Issue

BBC News ("JAPAN REFUSES SEX SLAVE APOLOGY", 2007-03-05) reported that Shinzo Abe has said that Japan will not issue another apology for its World War II military brothels. Abe said none of the testimony in recent US Congress hearings showed solid proof prostitutes were abused. Elaborating on comments he made last week, he said he would not go beyond a 1993 apology on the issue, even if Washington asked for one.

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8. Japan Afghanistan Role

Kyodo News ("JAPAN TO BOOST NATO AFGHAN AID", 2007-03-05) reported that Japan plans to step up cooperation with the NATO for provincial reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan by increasing the number of local Japanese Embassy staff and financial resources. The government has decided to increase the staff number to around 30 from the current 25 to strengthen coordination with NATO's Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Tokyo is also considering diverting to the PRTs the bulk of an additional $300 million Afghan aid it plans to disburse.

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9. Japan Iraq Role

The Associated Press ("JAPAN WEIGHS EXTENDING IRAQ MISSION", 2007-03-05) reported that Tokyo is undecided about whether to extend the nation's air force mission in Iraq when it expires in July, but that a decision is expected by the end of this month. Tokyo has been airlifting U.N. and coalition personnel and supplies into Baghdad and other Iraqi cities from nearby Kuwait as part of efforts to support the reconstruction of Iraq. A debate is already gearing up about whether Tokyo will continue its contributions to a war increasingly unpopular at home.

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10. US-Japan-India Security Relations

Agence France Presse ("JAPAN, US, INDIA TO CARRY OUT PACIFIC MILITARY DRILL: REPORT", 2007-03-05) reported that Japan, the US and India will carry out a joint military drill next month in the Pacific off Japan's. The drill is likely to focus on safety measures to be taken in the event of a major natural disaster in the Pacific such as a tsunami. Japanese naval escort vessels and maritime patrol helicopters are expected to participate in the drill.

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11. Japan on Cross Strait Relations

Kyodo News ("KYOTO DORM LEGAL WAR MOVES FORWARD", 2007-03-05) reported that former students from the PRC have pressed their case in a lawsuit over the ownership of a Kyoto dormitory. The suit was filed in 1967 by Taiwan to demand that pro-Beijing Chinese students leave the Kokaryo dormitory at Kyoto University. It was before Japan switched its diplomatic recognition to the PRC from Taipei in 1972. The former students said in their argument, "The trial was started by Taiwan as a 'state.' Since the government recognized (by Japan) has been changed (as of 1972), Taiwan no longer has any power to engage in the lawsuit."

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12. Cross Strait Relations

BBC News ("CHINA DEMANDS US HALT ARMS SALE", 2007-03-05) reported that the PRC has called on the US to cancel a planned sale of hundreds of missiles to Taiwan. The foreign ministry said the deal would harm peace and stability in the region and damage PRC-US relations. The US defence department this week told Congress it planned to sell $421m (£216m) worth of missiles to

Taiwan.

(return to top) BBC News ("CHINA FURY AT CHEN'S TAIWAN CALL", 2007-03-05) reported that the PRC has hit out at Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian after he made a strongly pro-independence speech on Sunday. Mr Chen said Taiwan should pursue independence, write a new constitution and change its official name from "Republic of China" to Taiwan. The PRC's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said anyone wanting to split Taiwan from the mainland was a "criminal". (return to top)

13. PRC Military

New York Times ("BEIJING ACCELERATES ITS MILITARY SPENDING", 2007-03-05) reported that the PRC has announced its biggest increase in defense spending in five years. A PRC spokesman said the country's military budget would rise this year by 17.8 percent to roughly 350 billion yuan, or just under $45 billion. The PRC's military modernization efforts, particularly its drive to develop advanced weaponry, have been raising concern from Washington to Tokyo to New Delhi, where officials are worried that the buildup could be as much offensive as defensive.

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14. PRC Environment, Rural Poverty

New York Times ("CHINESE PREMIER FOCUSES ON POLLUTION AND THE POOR", 2007-03-05) reported that Prime Minister Wen Jiabao conceded that the PRC was failing on important energy and pollution goals and declared that the country must become more energy-efficient and quickly improve environmental protection to safeguard the long-term health of its booming economy. Mr. Wen also pledged more government spending on education and health care, particularly for poorer residents in rural areas.

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15. PRC Judicial System

The Los Angeles Times ("CHINA MAY CLOSE REEDUCATION PRISONS", 2007-03-05) reported that the PRC's parliament will consider reforming or abolishing the reeducation through labor program during its annual session, which begins today. This program has allowed police to sentence petty criminals to as many as four years of incarceration without trial. The United Nations, Western governments and human rights groups as well as PRC's Supreme People's Court have roundly criticized the reeducation through labor program.

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