

SOUTH KOREA IN 2016

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Executive Summary

1. South Korea had an unusually eventful year in 2016. A scandal that involved President Park Geun-hye and her confidante shook the country.
2. Cases of bribery, corruption, nepotism, cronyism, illegal persecution of dissenters including writers, entertainers, film directors, singers and others in the cultural industry surfaced along with the president's failure to fulfil bestowed responsibilities by leaving the decision making to non-officials and an allegation that the president was behind all these.
3. The disclosure of the cases came as a shock as President Park had enjoyed high approval ratings till nearing the eruption of the scandal in October. Confidence in her leadership began to waver when she closed the chapter on 'comfort women' issue with Japan in December 2015 without public consultation.
4. The 'agreement' with Japan was defined as having 'finally and irreversibly' solved the issue if all conditions were met. Japan has also promised to contribute 10 million Japanese yen as compensation. The deal was unacceptable to the Korean public in the absence of a formal apology from the Japanese government.
5. The speed with which President Park sealed the agreement with the United States to deploy Thermal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) also took the country by surprise. The decision to negotiate with the United States on the THAAD deployment was in February 2016. Within a few weeks, the two sides came to a tentative agreement to deploy THAAD.
6. The final decision on THAAD was effected on 8 July 2016, again without any previous public consultation.
7. In October 2016, President Park also rushed through the signing of General Security of Military Information Agreement with Japan, the first military pact concluded with Japan's former colony whose historical controversial stance has not been settled.

8. These foreign affairs endeavours have wiped out her diplomatic success in 2015 which accounted for her popularity and high approval ratings. President Park's decision on 'comfort women' issue in December 2015 especially had cast doubts on the wisdom of her decisions.
9. President Park's decisions had deeply divided society, between those who support her decisions and those who oppose. All these developments dampened the Korean public's support for her leadership.