

# COMPARATIVE

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**NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

## CAN MOON RESTORE SUNSHINE?

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The first four months of 2017 have been a momentous and tumultuous period for Korea. The reasons for this latest bout of tension are partly local but most global, or more precisely trans-Pacific. The local causes derive from both Koreas, if as usual mainly the North. Kim Jong Un's regime has shown little wish to lower tensions, mend fences, or even pursue normal relations with other states, friend or foe. The DPRK's boasts of self-reliance may be mendacious on the economic front, where Chinese sustenance remains vital. Yet diplomatically it does indeed stand alone. This Kim has markedly accelerated the DPRK's development of both nuclear weapons and the ballistic missiles (BM) that might one day carry them. True to form, the first four months of 2017 saw half a dozen BM tests, not all successful. Yet, Kim has not (so far) marked the recent transitions of political power in two of his main foes with a nuclear test. Still, with most of 2017 still to go, it might be premature to seek to explain what may be a temporary non-event.

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## Introduction

The first four months of 2017 have been a momentous and tumultuous period for Korea. As of mid-May, the peninsula remains in a state of high anxiety and no little tension. A crisis? Maybe. Yet without counseling complacency, recent history suggests that that term tends to be over-applied to this part of the world's recurring episodes of tension: amply chronicled down the years (for the present century) in successive [issues](#) of *Comparative Connections*.

The reasons for this latest bout of tension are partly local but most global, or more precisely trans-Pacific. The local causes derive from both Koreas, if as usual mainly the North. During the past four months as in the previous five years, Kim Jong Un's regime has shown little sign of a wish to lower tensions, mend fences, or even pursue normal relations with other states, friend or foe. Now in his sixth year in power, the third Kim remains unique as a 21<sup>st</sup>-century leader who in this era of globalization – and despite his own years of schooling in Europe – has neither ventured abroad nor met any other head of state or government, even on his home turf. The DPRK's boasts of self-reliance may be mendacious on the economic front, where (as widely canvassed) Chinese sustenance remains vital. Yet diplomatically it does indeed stand alone; the more so as Pyongyang has begun bombarding even Beijing with the aggressive [insults](#) long hurled by Pyongyang at Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. Kim seems to share the stance of Millwall FC, a notoriously 'hard' London soccer club whose fans [chant](#): "No one likes us, we don't care." His father and grandfather were more subtle, at least in not picking fights Bruce Lee-style with all comers simultaneously. But just as success has long eluded Millwall, showing the finger to everyone can hardly work for Kim Jong Un long-term.

It is not just words that North Korea lobs. This Kim has markedly accelerated the DPRK's development of both nuclear weapons – an unprecedented two tests in 2016, after three in the decade from 2006 – and the ballistic missiles (BM) that might one day carry them. True to form, the first four months of 2017 saw half a dozen BM tests, not all successful. Yet *contra* many predictions, Kim has not (so far) marked the recent transitions of political power in two of his main foes – Washington first, and now Seoul too – with a nuclear test; unlike in May 2009 when Barack Obama faced that

challenge, or February 2013 when a nuclear blast greeted both the re-elected Obama and the incoming Park Geun-hye. Still, with most of 2017 to go, it might be premature to seek to explain what may be a temporary non-event.

## The Trump factor

Suffice it to say that the shock waves created by a new US president, whose strategy (if any) was hard to read behind an unconventional mode of conducting diplomacy, may well have given Kim Jong Un pause for thought. For that matter, Donald Trump's and his colleagues' regular menacing hints that no option was off the table for dealing with North Korea stoked anxiety in Seoul as well. In the past, shared uncertainty about great powers' real intentions has occasionally brought the two Koreas closer. Some [liken](#) Trump's tactics to Richard Nixon's 'madman' approach, and it was Nixon's Guam doctrine and his overtures to Mao Zedong that precipitated the first, initially secret, inter-Korean contacts in the early 1970s.

Could a common concern about Trump have the same effect? This would have been a perfect opportunity for behind-the-scenes contacts – had not Park Geun-hye forsworn any such secret talks, in reaction to [revelations](#) – leaked by Pyongyang out of spite, and later confirmed with indiscreet frankness by the man himself – that her predecessor [Lee Myung-bak](#) did quite a lot of this (in contradiction to his public hard line). But with Park impeached, and her caretaker successor lacking a mandate for any new initiatives, this opportunity was probably missed.

## Park Geun-hye: decline and fall

South Korea's contribution to the peninsula's current unease was quite different. As outlined in our [previous](#) article, covering the last four months of 2016, the political crisis involving allegations of malfeasance and influence-peddling – widely called "ChoiSunSil-gate" – which from October increasingly ensnared Park Geun-hye, climaxing in her impeachment on Dec. 9, could not but sap the ROK as well as its president. That weakness continued in early 2017, as Park's and the nation's misery dragged on. On March 10, in a verdict delivered live on television by the (also female) acting Chief Justice Lee Jung-mi, the Constitutional Court unanimously confirmed Park's impeachment, judging her sharing of state affairs with her old

friend Ms. Choi unconstitutional; it dismissed several other charges. Park thus became South Korea's first democratically elected leader to be ousted from office. Having lost her immunity from criminal prosecution, her downfall was swift. By March 31, the 65-year-old Park was behind bars as Prisoner [503](#) in Seoul Detention Center, after a court ordered her detention as requested by prosecutors – who had yet to charge her but [claimed](#) she might destroy evidence.

Pre-trial detention is common in South Korea. Park's fate was prefigured by Lee Jae-yong, the *de facto* boss of Samsung; [jailed](#) on Feb. 17 as part of the ChoiSunsil-gate probe, but not [charged](#) until Feb. 28. His trial, which like Park's promises to be lengthy, [began](#) on March 9. Park Geun-hye in turn was indicted on April 18, when prosecutors threw the book at her: 18 separate charges, including bribery, extortion, abuse of power, and leaking state secrets. After a preliminary [hearing](#) on May 2, her full trial is expected to commence in mid-May. She is the third former South Korean president to be jailed; the other [two](#) were generals turned coup-makers (in 1980–81), Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. Park can take solace from this precedent. Given lengthy sentences in 1995 for offenses far more heinous than hers, both men were pardoned just two years later. In theory the charges Park now faces could see her facing 10 years to life in jail. In practice her sojourn there will surely be much shorter.

North Korea observed the decline and fall of Park Geun-hye with a mixture of glee and grim satisfaction. Not often does history go Pyongyang's way, or appear to. In their frenetic and indiscriminating way, DPRK media had long hurled insults at Park – even before she shifted from ambivalent 'Trustpolitik' to her latter-day hard line – just as they used to bad-mouth her fellow-conservative predecessor Lee Myung-bak (president in 2008–13), as *Comparative Connections* chronicled at the [time](#). Strident prophecies that puppet traitors must face the harsh verdict of history and meet their inevitable doom form part of the regular stock-in-trade of North Korea's hyperbolic rhetoric. And now, just for once, it actually happened. If at one level this confirmed Pyongyang's worldview, it might also backfire. As North Korean readers learned, in broad outline at least, over several months about Park's impeachment and its various processes, at least some must have thought: 'well now, in the South if they

don't like their leaders, they can get rid of them.' That could be a subversive seed.

### Playing games: soccer and hockey

Given the freeze in North-South relations since 2016, the sole direct inter-Korean contacts in early 2017 occurred in sports. Coincidentally, in April each Korean state hosted international meetings – the South in women's ice hockey, the North in women's soccer – in which the other Korea took part, despite the tensions. Both governments seem to have behaved correctly in facilitating this, though there were some hiccups. In April the northeastern ROK city of Gangneung, Gangwon Province – itself bisected by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) – hosted the International [Ice Hockey](#) Federation (IIHF)'s Women's World Championship; this doubled as a qualifying event for the nearby Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, now less than a year away. Kim Jong Un is keen on sports. When the ROK's Incheon city hosted the [Asian Games](#) in 2014, despite some squabbles the North sent not only a full team but a top-level political delegation. However, in 2015 worsening inter-Korean relations saw Pyongyang pull out of two international contests in South Korea: the Gwangju [Universiade](#) (world student games) in July, and then the [Military World Games \(CISM\)](#) in Mungyeong in October.

Rising tensions on the peninsula this year brought fears of another no-show. Preparations and permissions seem to have been last-minute, but North Korea did send a 30-strong team to Gangneung, [comprising](#) 20 players and 10 coaches and officials. On April 6 the visitors were drawn against the hosts: this was the first inter-Korean sports match held in the South in three years, and the first inter-Korean game in women's ice hockey. The ROK's [all-conquering](#) team won 3-0. The atmosphere was [friendly](#); hundreds of Southern activists in a block in the stands waved the unification flag, [Hanbandogi](#) (blue Korean Peninsula on white background), wore T-shirts with the same motif, and sang pro-unification songs. Subsequent news dampened the mood a little. The visitors [left behind](#) most of the gifts presented to them, including boxes of red ginseng and even the hand-made pine key-chains given to all 1,700 participants. All they took were some soft toys: Soohorang and Bandabi, the tiger and bear [mascots](#) of the Pyeongchang games.

Looking ahead to those, next February, the new Southern government will doubtless pull out all the stops to welcome Northern participation. Given Moon Jae-in's keenness to improve ties, perhaps the idea of partial co-hosting might be raised (as it was, ultimately to no avail, in the run-up to the Seoul Summer Olympics in 1988). As the crow flies, North Korea's newish flagship [Masikryong](#) ski resort is not so distant from Pyeongchang; though on the ground in mountainous terrain the logistics would be formidable, not to mention having to cross the DMZ.

A more immediate issue is displaying the DPRK flag, which remains illegal in the ROK. That restriction [bedeviled](#) the Incheon Asiad, and was also enforced in Gangneung – in [breach](#) of IOC rules. Might Moon Jae-in have the political nerve to do what neither Kim Dae-jung nor Roh Moo-hyun ever dared, and repeal or at least revise the National Security Law (NSL) which mandates this and similar curbs? The ROK's longstanding blanket ban on all DPRK media content is absurd and undemocratic. It also ensnares innocent third parties such as *NorthKoreaTech*, an indispensable website run by British IT journalist Martyn Williams. In a rare victory on April 24, a Seoul court [ruled](#) against the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC) for blocking access to NKT since last year. KCSC may yet appeal.

But to return to sport: while North Koreans passed the puck in Gangneung, their Southern sisters were kicking the ball in Pyongyang, which hosted the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Women's Asian Cup Group B qualifying tournament in early April. The Koreans were among five countries battling for a single spot at the 2018 Women's Asian Cup in Jordan; this is also a qualifying tournament for the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France, so the stakes were doubly high. Gallingly for the hosts, the ROK [beat](#) them by a whisker. Both Koreas tied for first place with three wins and a draw each, but the South won on goal difference. When the two Korean teams played each other, the (perhaps tactful) result was a 1-1 draw. Unlike in Gangneung, none of the 40,000 strong crowd [cheered](#) for the visitors. (Had the South won, would the Taegukki have been raised in Kim Il Sung Stadium and the ROK anthem sung?)

## North Korea? Hardly an issue

By April, when Korea's sportswomen were duking it out in Gangneung and Pyongyang, most South Koreans were focused on a different contest: the race to succeed Park Geun-hye, whose impeachment triggered a snap early presidential election on May 9. Most elections are fought on domestic, bread and butter issues, and this was no exception. Besides a wave of antipathy toward Park and the wider establishment, lackluster economic growth and high youth unemployment were among voters' concerns. By contrast, few saw North Korea as a pressing issue, despite the air of crisis around the peninsula, a remarkable fact in itself.

Indeed, with contenders starting to emerge even before March's judicial upholding of Park's impeachment confirmed an early election, [few](#) – as we noted in some detail in our [last article](#) – advocated sticking with her hard line. Certainly not Ban Ki-moon. Already this moment is fading into history – or oblivion – but for a brief time the hopes of conservatives, demoralized by Choi Sunsil-gate and divided between Park's foes and her few remaining fans, fastened on Ban as a *deus ex machina*. During his decade as UN secretary general Ban often professed a wish to promote peace on the peninsula, though he never got to visit the DPRK. A centrist who was President Roh Moo-hyun's foreign minister in 2004-06 during the 'Sunshine' years, Ban would surely have explored outreach to Pyongyang. In the event, less than a month after his [triumphal](#) return to Korea and before declaring for any party, on Feb. 1, he abruptly [pulled out](#), blaming "fake news" and other pressures. Truth to tell, his poll ratings were already slipping as voters began to wonder what the man [nicknamed](#) "slippery eel" really stood for.

With Ban no longer in the running, once the election was called the various political parties duly held primaries and chose candidates. There were few surprises. Minjoo (Democrats), the liberal main opposition party, had three fancied contenders. Rather than the abrasive leftist [Lee Jae-myung](#) or the emollient centrist [Ahn Hee-jung](#), party and public – this was an [open](#) primary – plumped for the man who had borne their standard last time in 2012, when he ran Park Geun-hye a close second. At 64 a decade older than his challengers, Moon Jae-in was the obvious and safe choice, having long established a large lead in most opinion polls.

Equally predictable was that the centrist People's Party (PP) would pick Ahn Cheol-soo. A doctor, educator, and software magnate, in 2012 before he entered politics Ahn's popularity rivaled Park Geun-hye's. Joining the 2012 presidential race as a third-force candidate, Ahn ultimately withdrew to give Moon Jae-in a clear run. Despite that gesture and a party merger in 2014, the two men never got on; in late 2015 Ahn quit and formed the PP. His star, already tarnished by the mire of party politics, blazed again in early April before the Right got its act together; he briefly drew level with Moon Jae-in, gaining conservative support as apparently the only man who could stop Moon. On North Korea as generally, Ahn's stance was middle of the road: pro-dialogue, including resuming the Six-Party Talks, but he would also boost defense spending. As a perceptive critic [noted](#), such nuance worked against a clear narrative.

Right-wing backing for Ahn ebbed after the Liberty Korea Party (LKP) – as the conservative party Saenuri had renamed itself, to expunge the taint of Park Geun-hye – chose [Hong Jun-pyo](#), a former party chairman and provincial governor, as its candidate. Hitherto seen as a maverick, Hong's [hard](#) line on everything from North Korea (no) and homosexuals (hell no) to capital punishment (bring it on) rallied South Korea's conservatives, unfazed by his past [admission](#) (which he sought to retract) of abetting a date-rape. Hong also did well in the five mandatory TV [debates](#), whereas Ahn performed poorly. More specifically Hong proposed an “armed peace” on the peninsula, and the return of US tactical [nuclear weapons](#) to maintain it. Hong was the only candidate who came out firmly and unambiguously as pro-THAAD.



Campaign poster for conservative candidate Hong, suggesting that a vote for his main rivals (Moon or Ahn) is like voting for North Korea.

The field also contained a more moderate conservative. Before Saenuri had morphed into the LKP, opponents of Park Geun-hye split off and formed the Bareun (Righteous) Party. Though its candidate Yoo Seung-min scored well in the TV debates, his support remained stubbornly low even before some Bareun lawmakers drifted back to the LKP. Unlike the hardline Hong, Yoo [advocated](#) a military hotline and defense exchanges with North Korea to create “a de facto peace system,” with economic cooperation to follow once the North had denuclearized.

The fifth serious candidate, and the only woman, was Sim Sang-jung of the far-left Justice Party. Predictably she would send THAAD back to the US, while pursuing unconditional engagement with Pyongyang on every front, including reopening and expanding the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). Actually, Sim and the JP represent the [less](#) pro-North wing of the ROK hard left. The United People's Party (UPP), from which the JP split away in 2012, was controversially [banned](#) in 2014 as allegedly a pro-enemy organization. Earlier that year UPP lawmaker Lee Seok-ki had received a 12-year [jail](#) sentence for plotting armed insurrection.

## Moon: out on a limb?

No one expected Sim Sang-jung in the Blue House (though the hard left's steady 6-7 percent of the vote in most ROK elections is something to ponder). What exercised conservatives, and not a few in Washington, was that the front-runner Moon Jae-in's positions on North Korea sometimes sounded scarcely less extreme, and radically at odds with not only Park Geun-hye but the hawkishness of overall Western policy since early 2016. We rehearsed the key points in our last issue, including: his hostility to THAAD; his call to not only reopen but expand the Kaesong complex, and establish an economic commonwealth with the North; and his pledge if elected to visit Pyongyang before going anywhere else.

As Election Day drew nearer and his victory looked ever surer, Moon rowed back from some (but by no means all) of this, telling the [Washington Post](#) it was "absolutely not true" he had said he would visit Pyongyang first, and generally sounding emollient toward the US. But he also faced resurgent allegations of being soft on the DPRK. The most serious was the [charge](#), leveled by Song Min-soon – Roh Moo-hyun's foreign minister during 2006-08, when Moon was Roh's chief of staff – that in late 2007, soon after Roh visited Pyongyang for the second inter-Korean summit, Moon urged that Seoul should heed Pyongyang's views and abstain (as in fact it did) on a UN resolution critical of DPRK human rights abuses. Moon denied all of this, calling it a red [smear](#), and threatened to sue his erstwhile colleague. Yet the documents Song has produced [look](#) convincing. Regardless, voters seem to have shrugged this off.

## The Moon era dawns

On the day (May 9), South Korea's 19<sup>th</sup> presidential election yielded no surprises. Soon after voting closed, exit polls – occasionally misleading in the past – forecast that Moon Jae-in was on course for the landslide victory that opinion polls had long and consistently predicted (except for a slight blip in mid-April, when Ahn Cheol-soo briefly seemed to be catching up.)

And so it transpired. The highest turnout in 20 years (77.2 percent) gave Moon an overwhelming win: 5.5 million votes and 16 points ahead of the conservative Hong Jun-pyo in second place. Overall, Moon gained a plurality

rather than a majority; ironically winning with fewer votes than the 14.7 million he received in 2012 when he lost to Park Geun-hye, in a virtual two-horse race then rather than the more crowded field this time. (13 candidates registered, but eight were fringe no-hopers. The ROK uses a simple first-past-the-post direct voting system, with no Electoral College or transferable preferences.) The precise tallies were as follows:

Candidate	Votes Received	Percentage
<b>Moon Jae-in Minjoo (Democrats)</b>	<b>13,423,800</b>	<b>40.1</b>
Hong Jun-pyo Liberty Korea Party	7,852,849	24.0
Ahn Cheol-soo People's Party	6,998,342	21.4
Yoo Seung-min Bareun Party	2,208,771	6.8
Sim Sang-jung (f) Justice Party	2,017,458	6.2

Moon had little time to savor his victory, or to relax. Within hours of the National Election Commission confirming his victory, on May 10 a brief ceremony at the National Assembly saw him sworn in as the ROK's 19<sup>th</sup> president. The unprecedented circumstance of a snap election ruled out the normal two-month transition period (modeled on the US) between being elected and taking office, or the usual pomp of a grand formal inauguration. Park Geun-hye's impeachment had left the ROK effectively rudderless since December, if not earlier – no disrespect to acting president Hwang Kyo-ahn, the prime minister unexpectedly pitched into power, who did a better job than many expected. But as a caretaker Hwang lacked authority to make policy, for instance on how to handle Donald Trump. With Park widely discredited even before her final disgrace, South Korea badly needed a new government with a fresh mandate.

Now it has one. Moon Jae-in hit the ground running – and immediately flagged relations with North Korea as high on his agenda. His brief inauguration speech included the following section on security issues (in *Yonhap's* unofficial [translation](#)):

I will solve the security crisis promptly. I will go anywhere for the peace of the Korean Peninsula.

If necessary, I will fly straight to Washington. I will go to Beijing and Tokyo and under the right circumstances go to Pyongyang as well. I will do whatever I can to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula. I will further strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance. Meanwhile, I will negotiate earnestly with the U.S. and China to solve the THAAD problem. Strong security depends on robust defense capabilities. I will try hard to strengthen our independent defense power. I will also lay the foundation for the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. I will provide a turning point to lower tensions on the peninsula by firmly establishing a Northeast Asia peace regime.

That passage, with its delicate balances and studied ambiguities, will be much parsed – above all in Washington – as we await actions to put these words into practice. On the inter-Korean front, there was no more talk of going to Pyongyang first; as noted above, Moon had already rowed back from that heady idea. Meanwhile two early appointments, made on Moon's first day in office, further signaled that not only is North Korea a high priority, but it will be handled by cadres of a very different stripe from those they replace (who in truth have had precious little to do lately, given the past 15 months of hardline mutual hostilities).

### Yes Suh!

Thus Suh Hoon, nominated to head the National Intelligence Service (NIS) – his appointment will require confirmation by the National Assembly – is [said](#) to have met the late Kim Jong Il more often than any other South Korean, in his behind-the-scenes role helping to arrange both North-South summits in 2000 and 2007. A career intelligence officer who joined the then Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) back in 1980 (when its remit extended to [brutalizing](#) those who defied the dictators then in power in Seoul, and other [innocents](#)), Suh's North Korea connection began in 1997 when he lived there for two years. Any reader curious how a South Korean could do that has [forgotten](#), as many have, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation ([KEDO](#)), whose [field office](#) at Sinpo on the DPRK's east coast Suh headed. (No surprise that Seoul sent a spook; no doubt Pyongyang knew his background.)

Moon's presidential chief of staff also has a DPRK connection, of a rather different kind. [Im Jong-seok](#) was active in the struggle for

democracy which triumphed in 1987. Two years later he organized an illegal, highly publicized visit to Pyongyang by a fellow-student, “flower of unification” Im (or [Lim](#)) [Su-kyeong](#). That earned him three years in jail: more than Ms. Im (no relation) served before Kim Dae-jung pardoned her. Ms. Im remains a [contentious](#) figure. Her male namesake, by contrast, is a smooth operator – and good-looking to boot, which one Seoul daily [reckoned](#) is important; seriously – who went into opposition politics, serving as a lawmaker and vice-mayor of Seoul before Moon tapped him as his chief of staff, a role he has been playing throughout the presidential primaries and election campaign.

### One hand clapping?

Yet it takes two to tango. As Seoul executes a U-turn to go back to the future with Sunshine 2.0, how will Pyongyang respond? Suh Hoon may have gotten to know Kim Jong Il, but that cuts little ice now. Kim's son and heir remains a largely unknown quantity, who has ramped up hostility while evincing scant interest in outreach to the South. Still, first indications look cautiously positive. On May 11, the day after Moon Jae-in took office, the Party daily *Rodong Sinmun* [urged](#) that “the two Koreas should respect each other and open a new chapter to move toward an improvement of their ties and inter-Korean unification.” But the devil is in the detail. The paper called for an end to “confrontational” policies: the South should end military exercises with the US and stop activists sending hostile leaflets across the DMZ. Both of these, especially the former, are longstanding Northern demands. They should, and hopefully will, be nonstarters unless the North makes some conciliatory moves of its own.



*S.Korea wins 3-0 against North in Women's Ice Hockey match in South.*

Barring any direct bilateral initiatives, the first actual meeting between the two Koreas in this new era may occur in Beijing in mid-May. China has invited both Koreas, along with the rest of the world, to its clunkily named [Belt and Road Forum](#) for International Co-operation on May 14-15, which 28 heads of state are due to attend. North Korea, whose invitation some [see](#) as a slap to Donald Trump, is [expected](#) to send external economy minister Kim Yong Jae. South Korea was to be represented by Ambassador to China Kim Jang-soo, but Moon Jae-in has also [dispatched](#) a senior lawmaker, Park Byeong-seug, as his special envoy. While mending ROK-PRC fences is the main point, as discussed elsewhere in this issue, it will be interesting to see whether the two Korean delegations talk – and what might come of that.

### Sunshine 2.0?

Moon's bid to reboot the Sunshine Policy faces many challenges. One is a sudden shrill claim by Pyongyang on May 5 that ROK intelligence conspired with the CIA in a "state terrorist" bid to kill its supreme leadership – Kim Jong Un was not named – using "biochemical" weapons, recruiting a lumberjack in Siberia called Kim for this nefarious end. Far-fetched as this sounds, there has been much recent talk of "[decapitation](#)" strategies, albeit in a wartime scenario. Not forgetting the exploding [cigars](#) which, like a claimed 600+ other CIA plots, failed to kill Fidel Castro. On May 12, DPRK prosecutors said they would seek the extradition of those involved; they named three NIS operatives including the agency's outgoing director, Lee Byung-ho (who remains in the post until the National Assembly confirms his successor). The gloomy thought arises that this palaver might be a pretext not to talk to Seoul; we shall see.

Bracketing all that, on the broader picture, Heraclitus's famous words are apt. No one steps into the same river twice. Much water has flowed down the Imjin River in the decade since South Korea last tried to engage the North – with what effect, remains deeply controversial. Not only does the DPRK have a feisty new leader, but it is unclear how many of the Northern counterparts whom Sun Hoon and others worked with back then remain in post in Pyongyang. Some were reportedly [purged](#) after Lee Myung-bak drew down the blinds on the Sunshine Policy. Especially missed will be [Kim Yang Gon](#), Pyongyang's longtime point man on

South Korea, who forged a close relationship with his opposite number in Seoul, then NIS head Kim Man-bok (whom Suh Hoon assisted). Kim Yang Gon's reported death in a car accident at the end of 2015 struck some as [suspicious](#), though Kim Jong Un's [tears](#) at his bier looked genuine enough. Kim YG's successor as head of the WPK United Front Department, yet another Kim (Gen. Kim Yong Chol), has a [military](#) background and a [hardline](#) reputation.

Moreover, when Sunshine was first tried the DPRK was not yet a nuclear power. Pyongyang resolutely refused to discuss the nuclear issue with Seoul, but denuclearization negotiations proceeded in tandem, notably in the Six-Party Talks. The North's first nuclear test, in 2006, was a body-blow to advocates of engagement. Fast forward a decade and things are much worse. After five nuclear tests (two in 2016 alone; a sixth may be imminent) and dozens of missile launches, the DPRK's fervid boasts of being able to strike the US, even if premature, cause legitimate concern in Washington and elsewhere. By accelerating the WMD programs inherited from his father and grandfather, Kim Jong Un has upgraded his rogue state from a local and regional menace to a global one. (One could also cite the outrageous use of chemical weapons to murder his half-brother Kim Jong Nam in Kuala Lumpur in February: a vile crime which looks likely to go unpunished.) All in all, Moon Jae-in's insistence that the DPRK is first and foremost a Korean issue for Koreans to resolve may not go unchallenged.

Furthermore, whether or not Sunshine is the right policy, South Korea's or any nation's ability to engage economically with the North is now constrained by many tranches of ever-tighter sanctions, imposed by the UN Security Council (UNSC) and individual states (also the EU) to punish the DPRK's successive nuclear and ballistic missile tests. For example, Moon Jae-in's pledge to reopen or even expand the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which Park Geun-hye abruptly shut in February 2016, might breach UNSC sanctions. Reviving the dead KIC is in any case a bad idea for several other reasons, as Andray Abrahamian cogently argues in a must-read recent [article](#) at *38North*. Rather, as Abrahamian proposes and as Moon has also pledged, the ROK government should take a back seat while letting firms and NGOs make their own decisions – weighing up the economic, legal, and other factors – on whether to venture North. The potential risks now

include tighter US sanctions, if the Korean Interdiction and Modernization of Sanctions [Act](#) (wittily abbreviated as KIMS; its formal reference is HR 1644), which the House passed unanimously on March 29, proceeds to the Senate and becomes law. This new bill stipulates secondary sanctions against those doing a wide range of business with the DPRK. Mainly aimed at Chinese entities, this could equally be deployed against ROK ones, adding yet another quarrel to what already promises to be a rocky patch for the ROK-US alliance, as discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Comparative Connections*.

### **MOLIT gears up**

Finally, as a coda we should note that the eve of South Korea's presidential election brought a tantalizing glimpse of how inter-Korean relations may develop under Moon Jae-in. On May 8, the subscription website [NKNews reported](#) that a week earlier, with little fanfare, the ROK Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT) gave notice of [plans](#) to develop North Korea's infrastructure and mining sector. As yet this is just a bid for a research project, costed modestly at 40 million won (\$35,354) over seven months.

The aim is to save much larger sums in the long run. MOLIT argues that developing North Korea must start as soon as possible, to cut the enormous cost of eventual reunification by reducing the "huge financial burden caused by underdeveloped infrastructure." The parlous state of most DPRK infrastructure is no secret. MOLIT cites several examples:

- Railway track and other facilities are so dilapidated that train operating speeds average a snail's-pace 30-50-km per hour (roughly 20-30 miles per hour);
- Port cargo capacity has been stagnant for 20 years at some 37 million tons.
- Major power generation facilities are aging and run at just 30 percent of capacity. At 19 billion kWh, North Korea's annual power production is just 3.5 percent of the South's.

Upgrading all that, and much more, will be costly. Here too MOLIT has a plan – only it may prove more contentious. Not for the first time in Seoul, covetous eyes are cast on the DPRK's mineral resources, whose total value is

estimated at some [\\$6 trillion](#). These include a range of minerals that the South imports, including magnesite, zinc, iron, coal, copper, and gold. Exploiting these would not only contribute further modernization of the Northern economy – by developing mines, as well as the necessary local power and transport facilities – but would also pay for MOLIT's proposed wider investments in the North. How so? "Profitability will be secured by owning the development rights of resources or exploiting mineral resources."

"Owning"? That depends on a party yet to be consulted: the DPRK government. Precedent suggests Pyongyang might permit the leasing of assets, but never outright ownership.

MOLIT suggests four specific sites for such development. Two are on the border with China: Hyesan City and Musan in the far northeast, which has North Korea's largest iron ore mine (reserves are estimated at 3 billion tons). Those were taken; in 2005 the Chinese firm Tianchi signed a 50-year lease, only to [pull out](#) in 2012 after Pyongyang demanded 20 percent more money despite falling global prices. It remains to be seen if fellow Koreans get treated any better.

The other two locations proposed are South Pyongan Province (all of it?) and Tanchon, a port city on the DPRK's east coast. The latter name should ring a bell for veteran readers of these articles. Rewind six years to April 15, 2011 (Kim Il Sung's birthday, coincidentally no doubt). Korea Resources Corporation (KORES), an ROK parastatal, held a forum in Seoul to chafe at the losses the firm had suffered due to then-President Lee Myung-bak's ban on inter-Korean trade and investment (Kaesong excepted), imposed the previous May as punishment for the sinking of the corvette *Cheonan*. As we [wrote](#) at the time:

Kim Shin-jong, KORES' president, complained that having invested in 10 Northern projects, he now cannot even ascertain their status, much less visit. The most advanced of these was a \$10 million graphite mine near the DMZ, which had twice delivered supplies to the South – but none for over a year. In the same border province, South Hwanghae, KoRes also signed MOUs for coal mines at Ayang in Sinwon County and Pungchon in Yonan County, where the first joint drilling took place in October 2008. In the northeast, MOU was directly involved with three

major mines in Tanchon, South Hamgyong Province – Komdok, Ryongyang, and Taehung – producing coal, zinc, lead, and the rare metal magnesite, used to line blast furnaces and found only in North Korea and China. By early 2008, the Tanchon project had had its third feasibility study, but it has since ground to a halt. Three other mining JVs with the North involved Southern private capital. One was to supply the phosphate apatite, a key ingredient of fertilizer. The ROK imports all of its apatite, some from as far away as Nauru. Like KITA, the KoRes forum noted that the Lee administration curtailed cooperation with the North even before the *Cheonan* sinking – and warned that this creates openings for China. KoRes claims that annual Chinese imports of DPRK minerals have risen threefold in five years, from \$300 million in 2005 to \$900 million in 2010.

Given this tale of woe, Moon Jae-in's election should make KORES' [new](#) president a happy man. Yet two questions arise. Why is MOLIT mulling a new feasibility study, when Tanchon has already had three of them? KORES' and doubtless other files gathering dust in ROK ministries and parastatals must already contain reams of information about such projects.

The second issue is UN and other sanctions, far tighter now than a decade ago and thus a new hazard which any resumption of inter-Korean commerce under Moon Jae-in must navigate carefully. MOLIT seems not to have done that. Marcus Noland and Kent Boydston [spell](#) it out at their blog *Witness to Transformation*: “The mining industries listed by MOLIT – iron, coal, gold, copper, zinc, and magnesite—are all banned by either UNSCR 2270 or 2321. Put another way, MOLIT is putting out a call for bids to violate sanctions.”

Others are more optimistic. In a detailed [article](#) for *NKPro* (an affiliate of *NKNews*), senior analyst Tristan Webb – who formerly worked on and in North Korea for the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office – reckons Moon Jae-in has plenty of scope to reach out to Pyongyang, including in the economic realm, without falling foul of sanctions. So who is right? Rather than speculate in advance, no doubt the next issue of *Comparative Connections* will have much that is concrete to report on the subject. Watch this space.

To end on a personal note: Whether you view South Korea's impending return to Sunshine

with gladness, [foreboding](#), or more neutrally, this author will just be glad to have something to write about once more. The last year or so on the inter-Korean front was depressingly empty – or just plain depressing. Now things are moving again; let us hope the movement is forward.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2017

**Jan. 1, 2017:** DPRK leader Kim Jong Un delivers his usual New Year [Address](#). Inter-Korean issues occupy about one-fifth of this, all standard rhetoric with no new proposals. (See full [text](#) in the previous issue of *Comparative Connections*.) South Korea swiftly [criticizes](#) the speech, urging Pyongyang to stop provocations and insults and to embrace denuclearization.

**Jan. 1, 2017:** Emerging briefly from her seclusion, South Korea's impeached President Park Geun-hye takes [tea](#) with the press in the Blue House. She denies any wrongdoing, calling the accusations against her "fabrication and falsehood."

**Jan. 1, 2017:** A joint opinion [poll](#) by *Yonhap* (South Korea's quasi-official news agency) and KBS (the ROK's state-owned main broadcaster) on the leading presidential contenders gives Moon Jae-in a 21.6 percent approval rating, with Ban Ki-moon on 17.2 percent and Lee Jae-myung 12.4 percent. No one else even makes double figures. As to party popularity, Moon's Minjoo (Democrats) on 36.3 percent far outpaces Park Geun-hye's Saenuri Party, now down to 12.4 percent.

**Jan. 5, 2017:** Citing an unnamed defense ministry (MND) source, *CNN* [claims](#) the ROK is speeding up the creation of a "decapitation unit," which, in the event of hostilities would be tasked with taking out the top DPRK military leadership, including Kim Jong Un. Originally slated for 2019, it will now be ready this year.

**Jan. 5, 2017:** *Rodong Sinmun*, the daily paper of North Korea's Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), carries a signed [article](#), moderate in tone and general in scope, headlined "Improvement of North-south Relations Is Starting Point of Peace and Reunification." (Pieces of this tenor, however, remain outnumbered by diatribes and insults.)

**Jan. 5, 2017:** Quoting an anonymous ROK government source, *Yonhap* [reports](#) that from next week the Center for North Korean Human Rights Records, launched in September, will interview newly arrived defectors to collect evidence of human rights violations. This will be used to craft government policy as well as potentially to "hold violators responsible for their crimes." Violators will be listed and their "mug shots" compiled (one wonders how), but the list and photographs will not be published.

**Jan. 5, 2017:** In a new tack, Park Geun-hye's lawyers [claim](#) that the weekly mass protests against her are pro-Pyongyang. Press reaction is derisive: *JoongAng* [calls](#) this "some serious self-deception." It transpires later that these allegations are based on [fake news](#).

**Jan. 6, 2017:** Ahead of Kim Jong Un's 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday on Jan. 8, MOU [says](#) there are no signs of imminent provocations by North Korea.

**Jan. 8, 2017:** Thae Yong-ho, former minister at the DPRK Embassy in London who defected to the ROK last year, [tells](#) *Yonhap* that, "North Korea has set the goal of developing miniaturized nuclear weapons that can fit atop a missile capable of reaching the US by the end of 2017 or early 2018 as it takes into account political transitions in South Korea and the US."

**Jan. 17, 2017:** Thae Yong-ho [tells](#) a conference in Seoul that "a significant number of [North Korean] diplomats came to South Korea" and more are waiting to do so, even though his is the only such recent case to have been publicized.

**Jan. 17, 2017:** ROK Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo [tells](#) the *Wall Street Journal* that North Koreans increasingly defect for political reasons, "not just because they are starving, but for a better life, and for freedom and for their children's education."

**Feb. 8, 2017:** KCNA publishes a [commentary](#) headlined: “Park Geun Hye Group Is Bound to Perish”; noting (presciently) that “the time to oust Park from Chongwadae is close at hand.” (DPRK media regularly carry much else in similar vein throughout the period under review.)

**Feb. 12, 2017:** In its first such act since Donald Trump took office, North Korea [fires](#) a mid-range *Pukguksong-2* ballistic missile while Trump is entertaining Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in Florida. Both leaders [condemn](#) the launch, which falls short of Japanese waters, landing 500 km east of the peninsula after reaching an impressive height of 550 km.

**Feb. 13, 2017:** Kim Jong Nam, older half-brother of Kim Jong Un, is killed at Kuala Lumpur airport in Malaysia by two young women who smear his face with a cloth laced with the nerve agent VX.

**Feb. 19, 2017:** South Korea’s Unification Ministry [says](#), a propos Kim Jong Nam’s death: “We believe the North Korean regime is behind this incident.”

**Feb. 22, 2017:** *Yonhap* [reports](#) that in recent days 34 South Korean loudspeakers along the DMZ informed North Koreans that Kim Jong Un had his half-brother murdered.

**March 1, 2017:** South Korea and the US [begin](#) their annual large-scale *Foal Eagle* military maneuvers, lasting two months. [Key Resolve](#), the accompanying smaller computer-based command and control exercise, begins a week later on March 8 and [ends](#) on March 23. As usual North Korea fiercely and repeatedly attacks both, even after they are [over](#).

**March 6, 2017:** DPRK [test-fires](#) four ballistic missiles simultaneously. Three land in Japanese waters, one only 350 km northwest of Akihita Prefecture.

**March 10, 2017:** In a unanimous 8-0 vote, the ROK Constitutional Court [upholds](#) Park Geun-hye’s impeachment, thus terminating her presidency almost a year early. Two Park supporters [die](#) in ensuing protests. (Park nonetheless [remains](#) in the Blue House until March 12.) The Prime Minister, Hwang Kyo-Ahn, continues as acting President, which he has been since Dec. 9, when the National Assembly voted to impeach Park.

**March 10, 2017:** With rare rapidity when covering domestic ROK politics, and fewer insults than often, DPRK media [report](#) Park’s defenestration within three hours of the event.

**March 13, 2017:** *Yonhap* [reports](#) that US special operations forces will participate in *Foal Eagle*, including for the first time US Navy SEAL Team Six, which killed Osama bin Laden, “to practice incapacitating (sic) North Korean leadership in the case of conflict.”

**March 15, 2017:** ROK government [announces](#) May 9 as the date of a snap election to pick Park Geun-hye’s successor as president. Under the Constitution this election must take place within 60 days of impeachment being confirmed. The victor will take office at once on May 10, forgoing the two-month transition period prescribed in normal circumstances.

**March 15, 2017:** As part of *Foal Eagle*, the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* and *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyer *USS Wayne E. Meyer* [arrive](#) in Busan, ROK.

**March 29, 2017:** MOU [says](#) it has approved a visit by North Korea’s women’s ice hockey team, to compete in the world championships at Gangneung April 1-9.

**April 2, 2017:** Hundreds of South Koreans [cheer on](#) the North Korean team participating in the women’s ice hockey world championships in Gangneung, ROK.

**April 2-3, 2017:** ROK women’s soccer team [flies](#) to Pyongyang via Beijing for the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Women’s Asian Cup Group B qualifying tournament.

**April 6, 2017:** MND [announces](#) that alongside *Foal Eagle* the allies will stage *Integrated Firepower Exercise 2017*, “a set of massive joint artillery drills” (open to the public), at Pocheon near the DMZ on April 13, 21, and 26. This had been held nine times since 1977.

**April 6, 2017:** ROK women’s ice hockey team [beats](#) the DPRK’s 3-0 in Gangneung.

**April 7, 2017:** The two Koreas’ women’s teams play the first inter-Korean soccer match in Pyongyang since 1990. The final score is a 1-1 draw.

**April 11, 2017:** The DPRK's Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) [holds](#) its annual session, as usual lasting just one day. Kim Jong Un [attends](#). It creates a new Diplomatic Commission, perhaps as a vehicle for fresh outreach.

**April 12, 2017:** South Korea's Ministry of National Defense (MND) [reports](#) that from Jan. 2016 through Feb. 2017 a total of 2,039,898 North Korean wind-borne propaganda leaflets were found in the South, almost all in Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi Province.

**April 15, 2017:** DPRK marks the 105<sup>th</sup> birthday of its founding leader and 'eternal president' Kim Il Sung with a large military [parade](#) in Pyongyang, featuring several types of new missile not previously seen.

**April 16, 2017:** North Korea [fires](#) an unidentified ballistic missile, which explodes (or is deliberately aborted) almost immediately after launch.

**April 25, 2017:** *Contra* outside expectations, no fresh nuclear or ballistic missile test marks North Korea's second big holiday this month: the ([fictitious](#)) 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the KPA's founding in 1932 (in reality under Soviet auspices on Feb. 8, 1948, the date celebrated until 1971). Kim Jong Un inspects a live-fire drill off Wonsan on the east coast.

**April 30, 2017:** US and South Korea [conclude](#) their *Foal Eagle* military exercises.

**May 5, 2017:** Pyongyang media [report](#) Kim Jong Un's conducting a field inspection of the KPA's Southwestern Front Command on Changjae and Mu Islets, close to South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island which Northern artillery shelled in November 2010, killing four. Calling that "the most delightful battle after the [sc 1953] ceasefire," Kim examines "the plan for fire strike" and commands his troops "to break the backbone of the enemy once ordered."

**May 5, 2017:** In a long statement, shrill even for Pyongyang and carried [in full](#) by the *BBC*, the DPRK Ministry of State Security accuses the US CIA and South Korea's 'Intelligence Service' of a dastardly plot to kill its supreme leadership using a "biochemical substance".

**May 5, 2017:** North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRC) [condemns](#) the South's "puppet Ministry of Unification" for planning a "south-north human rights dialogue." Choice insults include: "The 'idiots of the ministry' who are reduced into living corpses and being treated like a mange-affected dog" – and much more.

**May 9, 2017:** On the eve of the ROK election, *Rodong Sinmun* [advises](#) South Koreans to "judge the puppet group of conservatives, accomplices with Park ... as they punished Park."

**May 9, 2017:** South Korea holds its 19<sup>th</sup> presidential election, seven months ahead of the normal schedule owing to Park Geun-hye's impeachment. The main opposition candidate, Moon Jae-in of the Minjoo Party (Democrats), [wins](#) overwhelmingly.

**May 10, 2017:** Without delay, Moon Jae-in is [sworn in](#) as the ROK's 19<sup>th</sup> president. In his inaugural speech he expresses willingness to go anywhere for peace, including Pyongyang.

**May 10, 2017:** Two of Moon's first [appointments](#) highlight North Korea. New National Intelligence Service (NIS) Director [Suh Hoon](#) lived there for two years and helped organize inter-Korean summits. Im Jong-seok, Moon's Blue House chief of staff – one of [two](#), it later transpires – was jailed in his youth for organising an illegal visit to Pyongyang by a fellow-student.

**May 12, 2017:** DPRK Central Public Prosecutors Office [says](#) it will demand the extradition of those behind the alleged "bid to commit state-sponsored terrorism against its supreme leadership." It names three ROK NIS operatives, including its outgoing director.

