

COMPARATIVE

CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL
ON EAST ASIAN BILATERAL RELATIONS

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

A SPORTING CHANCE FOR DETENTE

AIDAN FOSTER-CARTER, LEEDS UNIVERSITY, UK

The last four months in inter-Korean relations were a game of two halves, except the “halves” were vastly unequal in length. Despite hopes that the election of a left-leaning president in South Korea would be welcomed in Pyongyang, inter-Korean relations sustained their downward spiral until late December as North Korea continued to cold-shoulder South Korea. In the space of just a few days, Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s speech and his Olympic olive branch transformed at least the immediate atmosphere on the peninsula. Following a swift positive response from Seoul, the first high-level inter-Korean talks since Dec. 2015 agreed that North Korea will send a large contingent to the Winter Olympic Games. Working-level meetings and military talks are expected imminently to fine-tune the details.

This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 3, January 2018. pp 71-81

A game of two ‘halves’

In my country, sports commentators sometimes refer to “a game of two halves.” Rather a cliché, this means a match – usually football (soccer) – where the play and advantage differ markedly in the period before half-time compared to the second half and the eventual result.

In that sense, the past four months in inter-Korean relations were also a game of two halves. Except in this instance, the “halves” were vastly unequal in length. Indeed, strictly speaking, the last third of 2017 continued the standoff described in our last [update](#) for *Comparative Connections*. As of early September, our headline could not but pose the gloomy question: “Has Kim Jong Un Made Sunshine Moonshine?” We admitted being wrong-footed, as were many commentators, in assuming that the election of a left-leaning president in South Korea, avowedly keen to restore the ‘Sunshine’ policy of engagement, would automatically be welcomed in Pyongyang and elicit a positive response there, thus reviving inter-Korean relations from their downward spiral under two successive conservative ROK leaders, Lee Myung-bak (2008-13) and the disgraced Park Geun-hye (2013-17).

Not a bit of it. Instead, Kim Jong Un brusquely ignored or rejected all of Moon Jae-in’s many initiatives, in his single-minded focus on forging ahead with weapons of mass destruction (WMD); especially ever more powerful ballistic missiles explicitly intended to be capable of delivering a nuclear warhead to the mainland United States. Washington was Kim’s target in every sense, diplomatic as much as military, throughout 2017. Hence, despite Moon’s wish to put Seoul back in the driving seat as regards the nuclear crisis and peninsula affairs generally, to his frustration the ROK’s new leader found himself sidelined in the highly personalized war of words, menacing and puerile by turns, between the leaders of North Korea and the US. Our conclusion in September was pessimistic: “Scorned alike by Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, Moon Jae-in simply lacks political traction to pull the peninsula back from the brink. It is difficult to see how he might find a workable way to do that.”

The quarter that followed was no different. The pace of WMD tests slowed, but any hopes of a *de facto* moratorium were shattered on Nov. 29 when the DPRK launched its most powerful

ICBM yet. The *Hwasong 15*’s apogee of 4,475 km (2,780 miles) really does, experts agreed, potentially put the entire continental US within range – if North Korea can overcome the technical challenges of a warhead re-entering the earth’s atmosphere without burning up. That remains an unknown, but given the overall prowess and progress Pyongyang has shown in the past two years, it would be foolishly complacent to assume it cannot also solve that problem.

Meanwhile, North Korea continued to cold-shoulder South Korea. As recently as Dec. 25 *Yonhap*, the semi-official ROK news agency, could offer its readers no Christmas cheer, publishing a news focus article [headlined](#): “Uncertainties shroud prospect of dialogue with N. Korea in 2018.” It noted that “All eyes are now fixated on Kim [Jong Un]’s upcoming New Year’s address, which would likely serve as a bellwether for the reclusive state’s policy stance over its external relations, including those with Seoul and Washington.”

And so it proved. As of mid-January, 2017’s gloom suddenly seems so last year. In the space of just a few days, Kim’s Olympic olive branch has transformed the immediate atmosphere on the peninsula. Following a swift positive response from Seoul, on Jan. 9 the first high-level inter-Korean talks since Dec. 2015 agreed that North Korea will send a large contingent to the Winter Olympic Games, which open Feb. 8 in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Working-level meetings and military talks are expected imminently to fine-tune the details.

Comparative Connections strives to be a journal of record. Yet there is little point in dwelling on non-events and snarls; the more important of those are recorded in the chronology. Our main text focuses on the new inter-Korean thaw, recent and fledgling though it is, including the big question: is this just a pause for the Olympics, or might a wider peace process be under way?

New year, new approach

North Korea has long been in the habit of laying out its policy priorities at the start of each year. Its founding leader, Kim Il Sung, [began](#) this practice in the form of a new year address in 1946, and for almost the next half century till his death in 1994 he never missed a year. His son and successor Kim Jong Il abhorred public

speaking, so during his reign (1995– 2011) the format changed to a joint editorial in the DPRK's three main daily papers. His son Kim Jong Un, keen to don the mantle of his still popular grandfather's legacy, reinstated the tradition of giving a speech personally; this year's was his sixth.

While there is almost always a reference to unification issues, we have [warned](#) against over-interpreting what is often Pyongyang boilerplate rhetoric. No risk of that this time: the U-turn was clear and striking. To illustrate it, by way of contrast, here are the official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)*'s final [headlines](#) for 2017 on inter-Korean relations:

S. Korean Foreign Minister's Servile Junket to Japan Flailed (2017.12.23)
S. Korean Regime Will Be Made to Pay Dearly for Anti-DPRK Moves (2017.12.15)
S. Korean Newspaper Criticizes U.S.-S. Korea Joint Air Drill (2017.12.08)
S. Korean Authorities' Anti-Reunification Act Will Face Curse and Censure: GFTUK Spokesman (2017.12.07)
U.S. and S. Korean Puppet Forces' Projected Aerial Drill Will Be Followed by Merciless Retaliation: CPRC Spokesman (2017.12.03)
War Servants Will Face Bitter Disgrace: KCNA Commentary (2017.11.20)
S. Korea-Sponsored "International Film Festival for Human Rights in North" Flailed (2017.11.10)
S. Korean Regime Will Have to Pay Dearly for Racket for Sanctions on DPRK (2017.11.09)

Not much sign of fraternal peace and love. Yet Kim Jong Un sounded a completely different note in his New Year address – if only toward South Korea. The US, by contrast, was famously warned that “the nuclear button is on my office desk all the time; the United States needs to be clearly aware that this is not merely a threat but a reality.”

Though mainly devoted as usual to domestic affairs, especially the economy, inter-Korean issues occupied almost a quarter of Kim's speech (1,259 of 5,109 words, toward the end). This is too long to quote in full, as we have in the past; the entire text can be read [here](#). It was not quite all sweetness and light. Kim began this section by grumbling that despite the demise of the “fascist” Park Geun-hye regime, “nothing has been changed in the relations between the north and the south” because the new Southern government has continued “siding with the

United States in its hostile policy towards the DPRK.”

That negative note was brief, however. To delight and huge relief in Seoul, where the North Korean nuclear crisis has cast a cloud of [worry](#) over Pyeongchang – some major countries, including South Korea's US ally, openly wondered whether it was [safe](#) to come – Kim unexpectedly and unreservedly praised the forthcoming Games as a great national event for all Koreans:

As for the Winter Olympic Games to be held soon in south Korea, it will serve as a good occasion for demonstrating our nation's prestige and we earnestly wish the Olympic Games a success ... We are willing to dispatch our delegation and adopt other ... measures; with regard to this, the authorities of the north and the south may meet together soon. Since we are compatriots of the same blood as south Koreans, it is natural for us to share their pleasure over the auspicious event and help them.

This was a tad disingenuous given its belatedness. Until then North Korea had evinced zero interest in Pyeongchang, and missed the October deadline for registering participation. Still, better late than never. Kim even compared the Olympics to North Korea's own big event this year: the 70th anniversary of the DPRK's founding, which falls on Sept. 9.

While it would be unwise to jump the gun as to how far this new peace process may go, at the very least we can take it that Kim will not rain on the South's Pyeongchang parade, since he has now in effect invited his country to the party. As well as participating in some shape or form (more on that shortly), this renders it unlikely that North Korea will conduct any major provocations, such as ballistic missile (BM) or nuclear tests, during the Olympics or the ensuing Winter Paralympic games, due to finish March 18. Such optimism is buttressed by a separate development – President Trump's earlier acceptance of President Moon's request that the two allies' annual spring military exercises, *Foal Eagle* and *Key Resolve*, be postponed until after the two Olympiads. (North Korea continues to demand that these war games be cancelled outright.)

South Korea at once welcomed this olive branch, and events moved quickly. On Jan. 3, DPRK media reported that Kim Jong Un, praising Seoul's positive response, had ordered the reopening of the Panmunjom liaison channel (hot line) from 3pm that day, so inter-Korean talks on DPRK participation in the "Phyongchang Olympiad"¹ (as North Korea spells it) could be arranged. This was done, and a telephone/fax line idle for two years suddenly burst back into life. (To be clear, talk of this line having been 'cut' meant nothing physically violent; just that each time the South called morning and evening, the North did not pick up. Also, are the two Korean governments the last people on earth still sending faxes? – as the DPRK's very limited use of email necessitates.)

Panmunjom: from bullets to handshakes

The first high-level North South talks since December 2015 (and those got nowhere, as we [reported](#) at the time) were held Jan. 9 in the southern side of Panmunjom. This longstanding border contact point – the phrase 'peace village,' often used by media, is highly misleading – had last made headlines in very different circumstances, almost two months earlier.



1A North Korean soldier lies injured on the ground in Panmunjom after trying to escape across the border. Photo: AP

On Nov. 13 a Northern soldier made a rare and dramatic escape to the South at Panmunjom. Initially driving a jeep at high speed, when that got stuck in a ditch he ran across the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) in a hail of bullets – including automatic weapons, banned within

¹ Speaking of spellings: Lest you wonder why South Korea has officially adopted a camel case rendition of what it [calls](#) PyeongChang 2018, this is to avoid any risk of an ill-informed world getting Pyeongchang confused with Pyongyang. In 2014 an unfortunate

the Joint Security Area (JSA) -- from his KPA compatriots. Although some of the 40-odd rounds fired crossed the border, [criticism](#) of ROK forces for not returning fire is misplaced. Given the crisis that has hung over the peninsula for most of 2017, an unforeseen incident like this was a moment of great peril, which could have triggered a wider conflict with real risk of escalation. Instead thankfully it was contained, including by the North: one KPA soldier briefly crossed the MDL, but rapidly retreated when he realized his position.

Six US and ROK soldiers, later decorated for this, rescued the severely wounded man, who was airlifted by US *Black Hawk* to the trauma center at Ajou University Hospital in Suwon, south of Seoul. Initially not expected to live, he recovered thanks to prompt and skilled medical care. Regular updates (with scant regard for patient confidentiality) from the surgeon treating him, John Cook-jong Lee, attracted local and global interest – none more so than the revelation that during lengthy surgery to remove bullets and repair damaged organs, dozens of [parasites](#), some almost a foot long, had been found in the patient's digestive tract, suggesting that even elite North Koreans (none other would get a sensitive posting inside the JSA) suffer chronic ill-health due to poor diet and prevalent use of night soil (human feces) as fertilizer.

Eventually named as KPA Sergeant Oh Chong Song, on Dec. 16, he was moved from Ajou to a military hospital. One hopes the National Intelligence Service (NIS) will allow him time to make a full recovery, including psychologically – after regaining consciousness, he took some convincing that he really was in South Korea – before firing a barrage of questions at him.

From Pyongyang to Pyeongchang

Two months later, Panmunjom witnessed smiles, handshakes, and 11 hours of serious and productive North-South talks. The South's delegation was led by Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gon. His Northern counterpart was Ri Son Gwon, chairman of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRC;

Kenyan really did make that [mistake](#), or rather his travel agent did; ending up in the DPRK capital rather than the ROK mountain resort which was his intended destination.

sometimes rendered by outside media as CPRK [Korea] or CPRF [Fatherland]; in Korean, 조국평화통일위원회).



2North and South Korea meet in Panmunjom. Photo: CNN

The agreed joint statement from the meeting is worth quoting in full. (This is the North's version, as carried by the Workers' Party daily *Rodong Sinmun* and other DPRK media. The South's slightly different English rendition can be found on MOU's [website](#).)

Inter-Korean high-level talks were held at Panmunjom on Jan. 9.

At the talks both sides had sincere discussions on the participation of a delegation of the north side in the 23rd Winter Olympics and Paralympics and the improvement of the inter-Korean relations in conformity with the desire and expectations of all Koreans and agreed as follows:

The north and the south agreed to proactively cooperate in ensuring that the 23rd Winter Olympics and Paralympics in the south side area would be successfully held, providing an occasion for enhancing the prestige of the nation.

In this regard the north side agreed to send a delegation of the National Olympic Committee, sports team, a cheer group, an art troupe, a Taekwondo demonstration group and a press corps along with a high-level delegation to the Olympics, and the south side agreed to provide conveniences needed for them.

Both sides agreed to open working-level talks with regard to the north's dispatching of an advance party for a field tour beforehand and participation

in the Winter Olympics, and agreed to discuss a schedule in the way of exchange of documents hereafter.

The north and the south agreed to make concerted efforts to ease the military tension, create a peaceful environment in the Korean peninsula and promote national reconciliation and unity.

They shared the viewpoint that the present military tension should be ironed out and agreed to have talks between the military authorities to this end.

They agreed to promote national reconciliation and unity by invigorating contacts and travels, and exchange and cooperation in various fields.

The north and the south agreed to respect the north-south declarations and solve all problems arising in inter-Korean relations through dialogue and negotiations on the principle of By Our Nation Itself.

To this end, both sides agreed to have talks of every field along with high-level talks between the north and the south aimed at improving the inter-Korean relations.

These are encouraging words. Given the vicissitudes of inter-Korean relations, however, it remains to be seen what will be delivered, or whether it may all end in tears.

Much more than sport alone

Paragraph four is the crux. For North Korea, this is about much more than just sport. That was perhaps inevitable, since only two DPRK athletes – a figure skating [pair](#), Ryom Tae Ok and Kim Ju Sik, who seem to have real [star](#) quality – have actually qualified for the Pyeongchang games. Fortunately, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has a 'wild card' category, whereby those not formally registered or qualified may nonetheless compete. That will have to be used if the North, and the IOC, accept South Korea's [proposal](#) that the two Koreas field a joint Korean women's ice hockey team, since the DPRK did not make the cut in that sport.

If it comes off, this will be the first joint North-South sports team since two one-off ventures back in [1991](#) – in youth soccer, but above all in that year's world table tennis championships in Chiba, Japan, when a joint Korean women's pair beat the favorites, China. Korean hearts everywhere missed a beat, and the memory lingers: much later (2012) a [movie](#) was made about this in South Korea. By then, alas, it was painfully clear that this had been a one-off rather than the hoped-for leap forward. That question will inevitably arise in 2018 as well. (A useful summary of the two Koreas' sporadic joint sports endeavors over the years is [here](#).) At this writing the North has yet to accept either the joint hockey team or another Southern idea – that their two teams march together during Pyeongchang's opening ceremony, as they did several times at Olympic and Asian games between 2000 and 2007, but not since.

Athletes are only one (not even listed first) of no fewer than seven different types of delegations that North Korea plans to send to Pyeongchang. The salience of this soon became clear. South Korea followed up Jan. 9's initial talks, logically enough, by offering a working meeting on Jan. 15 to firm up details of how DPRK athletes will compete at Pyeongchang. That seems not to be Kim Jong Un's priority, for the North countered by suggesting a different kind of meeting, focusing on its plan to send an art troupe. Seoul accepted this, while urging Pyongyang to respond specifically on the sports issues soon.

Hence, on Jan. 15, South Koreans crossing the line to the North's Tongilgak building at Panmunjom will not be sports officials but cultural figures, including the CEO and artistic director of the Korean Symphony Orchestra. Their Northern interlocutors include Kwon Hyok Bong, ex-head of the Unhasu Orchestra, who now directs the culture ministry's performing arts bureau – and also Hyon Song Wol, leader of Kim Jong Un's poster group for his vision of a more modern North Korea, the all-female Moranbong band. Many a lurid rumor has swirled around Hyon, including of her [execution](#) for a pornographic video (hardly, if [this](#) is really it) and that she was Kim's former lover (in fact more probably his late [father's](#)). Anyway, since October Hyon has been a WPK [Central Committee](#) member and is clearly a power in the land.

Will Pyeongchang audiences be treated to Moranbong's pop-Stalinist [kitsch](#)? Maybe not.

As a salutary reminder of how cultural exchange can end in tears, what would have been the band's first overseas concerts, scheduled for Beijing in December 2015, were [cancelled](#) at the last minute: already in town, they packed up and flew home. One theory is that the PRC downgraded the handpicked officials who would have been the audience, after Kim Jong Un claimed to have a hydrogen bomb. Another is that China objected to parts of the program's political content. It is not hard to imagine similar disputes arising at Pyeongchang.

Taekwondo, also on Pyongyang's agenda, has fewer pitfalls. It is also less of a novelty. South Koreans got to see Northern martial artists in action as recently as last [June](#), when the new Moon government allowed them entry for demonstration matches at the world championships organised in Muju, ROK by World Taekwondo Federation (WT, formerly WTF): the Seoul-based organization recognized by the IOC and most countries. North Korea's rival body, the International Taekwondo Federation (ITF), was supposed to issue a reciprocal invitation to the South to attend its own world championships in September, but went back on its word, citing the international security situation. Despite this hiccup, WT and ITF are [said](#) to be in regular communication, so optimism on this front appears reasonable.

Returning to the DPRK's list of would-be Pyeongchang attendees, National Olympic officials are uncontentious, as are journalists. That leaves two further categories. [Cheering squads](#) of comely young women (modestly clad; US-style cheerleaders they are not) are a North Korean peculiarity, seen in the South several times already if with mixed results. Warmly greeted on their first visit at the Busan Asian games in 2002, as *Comparative Connections* [reported](#) then, a year later their image soured after some of them tearfully got off a bus to try to [protect](#) a portrait of Kim Jong Il from rain. (Again, we [covered](#) this at the time, though no one knew then that the squad included Kim Jong Un's future wife, the young Ri Sol Ju. Of course, back then we had never officially [heard](#) of Kim himself.)

Sanctions: an own goal?

A decade later, no cheerleaders accompanied the DPRK squad to the Incheon Asiad in 2014, possibly because the Park Geun-hye government refused to [pay](#) for them. Moon Jae-

in will be more generous, but a further problem looms. In Busan the cheering squad stayed on a ship in the harbor, and the same could happen this time using Gangneung port – or at least the squad may arrive by sea. However, in the rush to punish North Korea ever more severely for its successive nuclear and BM tests, the ROK has a bilateral [sanction](#) banning ships that have docked in DPRK ports during the past 180 days – and has invoked it twice in recent weeks. Air travel is no less problematic, since the DPRK carrier Air Koryo is on a US blacklist.

That such bans also extend to many named persons is a further headache. North Korea's final category is "a high-level delegation." For political reasons Moon Jae-in would welcome such a visit, and again precedent exists. In 2014, Kim Jong Un [sent](#) three of his most senior aides – Hwang Pyong So, Choe Ryong Hae, and Kim Yang Gon – to the Incheon Asiad; albeit only for the closing ceremony, and (it later emerged) bearing no wider message about dialogue. That disappointed the South, where Park Geun-hye was still in her 'trustpolitik' phase.

Three years on, Hwang has vanished (presumed purged) and Kim YG is dead. That leaves Choe, still very much a power in Pyongyang – but now on the ROK's own sanction list, though not explicitly subject to a travel ban. The South has little choice but to suspend such measures, if it wants to realize the North's visit to Pyeongchang in full. Few would criticize such a suspension. But this dilemma highlights the difficulty, or perhaps contradiction, in seeking to balance sticks and carrots while trying to solve the North Korea knot.

Adieu, Kaesong IC

In another sphere, however, UNSC sanctions appear an insuperable stumbling-block to any hopes Moon might still harbor of restoring the old 'sunshine' *status quo ante*. He and his party, then in opposition, opposed Park Geun-hye's abrupt closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last inter-Korean joint venture, in February 2016 as a riposte to North Korea's nuclear and BM tests. For better or worse, one emerging feature of Moon's policy overall is to call into question or even attempt to undo some of Park's decisions. His wish to revisit her "final and irreversible" December 2015 agreement regarding comfort women with Japan, to Tokyo's fury, is covered elsewhere in this issue.

In similar vein, in late December a panel set up by the MOU on the KIC closure reported that Park did this unilaterally, without proper intra-governmental consultations or procedures. It added that there was no evidence for Park's claim that KIC revenues were directly funding Pyongyang's nuclear program, a [finding](#) that the Moon government "humbly accepted."



3The Lighthouse Winmore, a Hong Kong-flagged vessel suspected of transferring oil to North Korea in violation of United Nations sanctions. Photo: Iwan Afwan/MarineTraffic

This raised hopes among the 123 ROK SMEs that invested at Kaesong and suffered from its closure (they insist official compensation has been inadequate). Their representatives [demanded](#) not only a full enquiry into the KIC's closure, but also its immediate reopening, chanting, "We would like to go to Kaesong." But they are not going anywhere. Arguments about whether UNSC sanctions would now render the KIC illegal were settled definitively as of Jan. 10. On that date, a clause in UNSCR 2375 came into effect, 120 days after the resolution was passed on Sept. 11, which bans all joint ventures (new or pre-existing) with the DPRK. So that is that: the Kaesong IC is history. Any suggestion of reviving North-South trade – Moon long supported an inter-Korean economic commonwealth, no less – would similarly fall foul of the spirit, and probably the letter, of the ever-tighter sanctions noose.

Still on hypotheticals, the Moon administration might have better luck with another of its avowed goals – a resumption of family reunions, last held in 2015. Sadly, as the elderly cohort involved ages, only 59,000 South Koreans (most over 80) remain on MOU's register for reunions, barely half as many as originally signed up. Seoul would like to see a reunion – presumably held as usual at the Hyundai-built Kumgang resort, now idle for

almost a decade – over the Lunar New Year, which this year falls on Feb. 15-17 (and coincides with Kim Jong Il's birthday). But this will not happen unless North Korea drops its current stance of no more reunions unless the South returns 12 restaurant workers who left China in 2016: defectors according to Seoul, but Pyongyang insists they were kidnapped.

As *Comparative Connections* went to press, Pyongyang issued a timely reminder of the hard road ahead. A Jan. 14 *KCNA* commentary took strong exception to Moon Jae-in's praise of Donald Trump for enabling the new inter-Korean opening. Pyongyang must know the ROK president was just flattering his US counterpart's vanity, Trump having already claimed credit in one of his notorious tweets. But the North was not amused at what it called "coarse invectives," adding that Moon's "brownnosing attitude is something beyond imagination." It warned that "Everything is now at the beginning ... [the] train and bus carrying our delegation to the Olympics are still in Pyongyang."

By North Korean standards this was relatively mild. Our bet is that the Northern bus will make it to Pyeongchang, perhaps even literally. (Not the train, however: despite Seoul's best efforts and substantial investment in reconnecting track in the sunshine era, the North never allowed serious cross-border rail traffic.) Beyond that, it is too early to predict whether a successful Olympics may create momentum for an ongoing peace process. The odds are against this, while the nuclear knot remains as intractable as ever. Still, let us enjoy this pause while it lasts.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2017

Sept. 2, 2017: [Health](#) authorities in Gyeonggi Province, which surrounds Seoul and abuts the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), say that nine out of 10 malaria infections in South Korea occur in areas bordering the North. Malaria cases in the South have [risen](#) since joint efforts, funded by the ROK, to tackle the disease on the Northern side lapsed in 2012 as tensions worsened.

Sept. 3, 2017: DPRK conducts sixth, and most powerful, nuclear test since 2006. Most observers accept Pyongyang's claim that this was a hydrogen bomb. In response, the ROK on Sept. 4 holds a live-fire ballistic missile drill.

Sept. 3, 2017: Under the headline "Anti-DPRK Campaign of S. (sic) Korean Puppet Reptile Writers Will Be Foiled," North Korea's official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* [quotes](#) the Central Committee of the Journalists Union of [North] Korea as excoriating Southern media, five of them by name. The CCJUK vows to "... sharpen the just writing brushes to defend our leader, our party and our social system" and to "track down the puppet conservative reptile writers fostering discord ... and throw overboard all of them ... Our grime (sic) and merciless pen will sight the bases which commit hideous crimes against the DPRK by spreading misinformation about it, and beat them to pieces."

Sept. 10, 2017: Reacting to an [NBC report](#) that the US does not rule out moving tactical nuclear weapons to the ROK if Seoul requests, the Blue House [denies](#) any such plans saying, "There is no change in the government's policy principle of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and we have never reviewed a re-adoption of the tactical nukes."

Sept. 11, 2017: Responding to North Korea's Sept. 3 nuclear test, the UN Security Council passes – unanimously – its eighth major resolution since 2006 censuring North Korea. UNSCR 2375 (full text [here](#)) tightens economic sanctions against the DPRK, which [denounces](#) these measures – with even more vitriol than usual.

Sept. 11, 2017: Unification Ministry (MOU) [says](#) that although there is no official word, the Seoul-based World Taekwondo ([WT](#), formerly WTF) has been told by the DPRK-based International Taekwondo Federation that "given the current security situation" it can no longer send a demonstration team to the ITF championships in Pyongyang on Sept. 15-21.

Sept. 12, 2017: *The New York Times* [reports](#) that the ROK military is accelerating formation of a "decapitation unit," originally planned under Park Geun-hye as a medium-term project, to target Kim Jong Un in the event of war.

Sept. 14, 2017: President Moon firmly [rules out](#) any nuclear option for South Korea, be it the return of US tactical weapons or autonomously. But he accepts that the ROK must "develop our military capabilities in the face of North Korea's nuclear advancement."

Sept. 14, 2017: MOU says the ROK is considering giving [aid](#) worth \$8 million to the DPRK via the UN, on the principle that humanitarianism should be separate from politics. A decision will be made Sept. 21. \$4.5 million is for projects run by the World Food Program (WFP), with the rest to UNICEF for nutrition, medications, and vaccines. Seoul may also provide \$6 million for the UN-supported DPRK census, planned for next year.

Sept. 15, 2017: North Korean website [Uriminzokkiri](#) [warns](#) “the south Korean puppet forces” that “dependence on outside forces will lead to miserable destruction ... It is illogical to talk about ‘dialog’ and ‘restoration of south-north relations’ while desperately working to stifle the DPRK together with outside forces ... This reminds one of traitors Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye.”

Sept. 21, 2017: Moon government approves \$8 million humanitarian aid package for North Korea, via the UN.

Oct. 12, 2017: ROK SMEs formerly invested in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) [petition](#) their government to investigate reports that the North has illegally reopened the zone.

Nov. 13, 2017: In a rare and dramatic incident (video [here](#)), a North Korean soldier flees to the South at Panmunjom.

Nov. 17, 2017: Doctors treating the badly wounded but now stable Northern defector (said to be a KPA staff sergeant in his mid-20s) [reveal](#) that his digestive tract contained dozens of parasitic worms, some large; indicating that even elite North Koreans suffer from poor diet.

Nov. 21, 2017: United Nations Command finally releases video of the Nov. 13 defection at Panmunjom. On the same day, the defector regains consciousness.

Nov. 24, 2017: John Cook-Jong Lee, the surgeon treating the Panmunjom defector (whose surname is Oh), provides further [details](#) of his serious injuries and says he is a “nice guy.”

Nov. 24, 2017: Three ROK and three US soldiers who rescued the wounded North Korean defector at Panmunjom are awarded [medals](#) of commendation. The North, meanwhile, has reportedly replaced all its border guards there.

Nov. 27, 2017: Photograph taken at Panmunjom by acting US ambassador in Seoul, Marc Knapper, [shows](#) North Korean soldiers and workers digging a trench and planting trees so as to foil any future attempts to flee to the South.

Dec. 5, 2017: CNN publishes a further [account](#), including graphic medical footage, of the defector now named as Oh Chong-song (who it says gave his permission for publication).

Dec. 13, 2017: ROK daily *JoongAng Ilbo* quotes unnamed source claiming that Hwang Pyong So, who as political director of the Korean People's Army (KPA) was one of Kim Jong Un's two top aides, has been expelled from the ruling Workers' Party (WPK) for taking bribes. This remains unconfirmed, but Hwang was last seen in public on Oct. 14.

Dec. 16, 2017: Wounded defector Oh Chong-song is [transferred](#) from the Ajou trauma center which was treating him, to a military hospital where he will be questioned when well enough.

Dec. 19, 2017: Youbit, a Seoul-based bitcoin exchange, closes and files for bankruptcy after a cyber-attack steals 17 percent of its assets. Media reports [claim](#) ROK investigators suspect the DPRK, as also for an earlier \$72 million theft from Youbit in April and other cyberheists in Bangladesh (2016) and Taiwan (2017).

Dec. 21, 2017: Another KPA soldier defects at the DMZ, somewhere in the western sector (the exact location is not disclosed). Unlike Nov. 13's drama, the private simply walked to a Southern guard post under cover of fog. ROK forces fire about 20 warning shots when the KPA discover his absence and start searching close to the MDL.

Dec. 25, 2017: *Yonhap* publishes a news focus article [headlined](#): “Uncertainties shroud prospect of dialogue with N. Korea in 2018.” A week later, the shroud lifts somewhat...

Dec. 28, 2017: MOU-appointed panel into Park Geun-hye's abrupt closure in February 2016 of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) [says](#) this was done improperly by fiat, without due intra-governmental consultation.

Dec. 29, 2017: Representatives of SMEs invested in the KIC [demand](#) the zone's reopening, chanting: “We would like to go to Kaesong.”

Dec. 29, 2017: *Yonhap* [cites](#) unnamed ROK officials as saying that the Hong Kong-flagged vessel *Lighthouse Winmore*, which docked in Yeosu on Nov. 24, has been seized on suspicion of transferring 600 tons of refined petroleum to a DPRK vessel on the high seas on Oct. 19.

Dec. 31, 2017: In the second such incident recently, South Korean authorities [say](#) they have seized in an ROK port a ship, the Panama-flagged *KOTI*, on suspicion of transferring oil to a DPRK vessel at sea in violation of UNSC sanctions.

Jan. 1, 2018: Kim Jong Un's New Year [address](#), broadcast live on state TV, repeats nuclear threats against the US but, in a major shift, is conciliatory toward South Korea. Kim praises the upcoming Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and offers to send a delegation.

Jan. 2, 2018: ROK Foreign Ministry (MFA) [pledges](#) that Seoul will continue "watertight" co-operation with Washington, even as it takes steps to resume dialogue with Pyongyang

Jan. 3, 2018: Northern media report that Kim Jong Un, welcoming South Korea's positive response to his New Year address, has [ordered](#) the Panmunjom liaison channel (hot line) to reopen from 3pm that day so that inter-Korean talks about DPRK participation in the "Pyeongchang Olympiad" (as North Korea spells it) and other matters can be arranged.

Jan. 6, 2018: The Blue House [calls](#) inter-Korean talks "the starting point for the settlement of peace on the Korean Peninsula and North Korean nuclear and missile problems."

Jan. 6-7, 2018: Long-idled inter-Korean hotline is busy all weekend, as the two Koreas embark on detailed [discussions](#) by phone and fax to arrange their upcoming talks, due Jan. 9.

Jan. 6, 2018: President Trump [says](#) apropos the upcoming inter-Korean talks: "I would love to see them take it beyond the Olympics ... And at the appropriate time, we'll get involved."

Jan. 7, 2018: North Korea [informs](#) the South of its five-person delegation for Jan. 9's talks. Leader is Ri Son Gwon, an experienced inter-Korean negotiator who chairs the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country. Other delegates include CPRC vice chairman Jon Jong Su and Won Kil U, a top sports ministry official.

Jan. 8, 2018: Launching a MOFA task force for foreign leaders' visits to the Pyeongchang Olympics (over 40 are expected), ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha [says](#) South Korea hopes momentum from North Korea's now expected participation in the Games will lead to progress in inter-Korean relations and the North's denuclearization.

Jan. 8, 2018: ROK Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon [says](#) that while tomorrow's talks will "basically ... focus on the Olympics," Seoul will "also seek to raise the issue of war-torn [separated] families and ways to ease military tensions."

Jan. 9, 2018: High-level North-South talks are held on the southern side of Panmunjom, for 11 hours. A [joint statement](#) agrees that North Korea will send athletes, an arts troupe, a cheering squad and more to the Pyeongchang Olympics, and that further talks including military will be held to firm up the details.

Jan. 11, 2018: *Yonhap* [notes](#) that several aspects of the effort to bring North Koreans to Pyeongchang might violate UNSC sanctions against the DPRK, or indeed the ROK's own. It claims that the Moon government's stance on this is as yet unclear.

Jan. 12, 2018: South Korea uses the newly reopened inter-Korean hotline to [inform](#) the North it plans to return four corpses found by ROK fishermen in a DPRK boat adrift in the East Sea.

Jan. 12, 2018: ROK Vice Sports Minister Roh Taekang [says](#) Seoul has proposed a joint inter-Korean women's ice hockey team, and that North and South should march together at the Olympic opening ceremony.

Jan. 13, 2018: Pyongyang [proposes](#) talks on Jan. 15 at Panmunjom about sending an art troupe to Pyeongchang, instead of a working meeting on sports issues as Seoul wanted. MOU notes that the art troupe seems to be the North's priority, rather than the Olympics as such. The South accepts, while urging the North to also set a date to discuss sports.

Jan. 14, 2018: A *KCNA* commentary [flays](#) Moon Jae-in for giving Donald Trump credit for the new inter-Korean peace process, calling this "brown nosing" and "coarse invectives."