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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

GRINDING TO A HALT – THEN KIM PULLS THE PLUG

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The inter-Korean peace process that blossomed in 2018 shriveled in early 2019. Pyongyang was slowing the pace even before February's Kim-Trump summit in Hanoi; since then it has severed almost all contacts with Seoul – whose “meddling” mediation Kim mocked in a speech in April. The North's ebbing interest can be seen across a range of sectors, including Kim Jong Un's failure to visit Seoul, high-level talks, the joint liaison office, NGOs, sports exchanges, tension reduction measures at the DMZ, family reunions, medical aid, and more. The DPRK's missile launches in early May are a further blow. Despite President Moon Jae-in's efforts to keep a brave face, it is hard to see where North-South relations go from here. Kim may regret dissing the most sympathetic interlocutor he is ever likely to have in Seoul, while Moon needs to think harder about what it will take to make the “irreversible” progress in inter-Korean ties that he craves.

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Introduction

With anything involving North Korea, the tea-leaves are often hard to read. But sometimes they are all too clear. As of May 2019, the peace process on the Korean Peninsula has ground to a halt. After almost a year and a half when the DPRK observed a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing, its two missile launches in early May (maybe more, by the time you read this), both personally supervised by Kim Jong Un, signal beyond doubt that the momentum for peace has been lost. That does not mean it is irrecoverable, though at this point it is hard to see how. One side or the other would have to yield at least a little, be it on-site inspections or sanctions relief – precisely the kinds of concessions they have each refused to make hitherto, which is what has brought us to this impasse. There seems scant prospect of that happening.

Thus far, I am referring to the recent peace process *in general*, where the principal actors are North Korea and the United States. No offense intended to South Korea, especially given the inter-Korean remit of this article. But the events of the past four months, galling as they are to President Moon Jae-in's government and to all who hoped we were seeing the dawn of a new 'sunshine' era of reconciliation on the peninsula, brook no other interpretation. Kim Jong Un, it is now clear, does not regard South Korea as an important dialogue partner in its own right.

Our last update on inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections* bore the title: "An Unprecedented Year, But Will Progress Continue?" While lauding what the two Koreas had achieved in 2018, we could not but note a slowing down toward the end of the year, after the blistering pace set earlier on. Sadly, that caution has proved prescient. Even before the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February, discussed elsewhere in this issue, this deceleration got worse in early 2019. As detailed below, on all fronts meetings and exchanges grew fewer and further between. In the weeks after the Hanoi summit broke down, the slowdown became a full stop. As of early May, North-South dialogue has ground to a halt completely.

Dismaying though it is, one can only conclude that for Kim Jong Un, last year's three North-South summits, and the lofty aspirations

written into both the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations, were just hot air – or rather, a means to an end. He took advantage of Moon's good offices to get the prize he really wanted: a line to Donald Trump. But once that new relationship was up and running, who needs the middleman? Adding insult to injury, in April Kim sneered at "the south Korean authorities" for what he had the gall to call "pos[ing] as a meddling 'mediator' and 'facilitator' as they busy themselves with foreign trips." This was on the very day that President Moon flew back from Washington, after yet another valiant effort to kickstart the peace process. (Trump, for his part, didn't even deem Moon's visit worth tweeting about. Nobody loves or respects the middleman, it would seem.)



Figure 1 Moon and Trump meet for bilateral talks in Washington. Photo: Reuters

A reality check is overdue. For Trump and Moon alike, it is painful to admit that 2018's push for peace has now stalled. The debacle in Hanoi prompted still ongoing *post-mortems* in both Washington and Seoul, with divergent views over what went wrong and who is to blame. *Mortem* is Latin for death, which alas is correct. The Moon administration in particular seems loath to admit that. Moon was unlucky to publish a lengthy and ruminative *article* in a leading German newspaper, including a boast that "the sounds of gunfire have disappeared in the air, on the sea and on the ground around the Korean Peninsula," just as Kim Jong Un was rudely proving him wrong. Yet clearly Moon was too sanguine by half – jumping the gun, is an apt metaphor. Declaring peace is by no means the same as establishing and securing it.

No Kim visit; meetings ever fewer

The four months under review were a game of two halves – before and after Hanoi. In the run-up to the second Kim-Trump summit, i.e., during January and most of February, the positive tenor of expectations – totally misleading, it turned out – regarding what that meeting might yield allowed for a good deal of optimism, in Seoul and beyond. (One example: amid widespread speculation that the Hanoi agenda could include a declaration that the Korean War was finally over, on Feb. 20 the noted if anonymous blogger of “[AskAKorean](#)” published a long, heartfelt [post](#) titled “How To End A Forever War.” It reads painfully now.) There was also widespread anticipation, not least in Seoul, that Trump would offer Kim some relief on sanctions, such that practical projects for inter-Korean cooperation discussed in 2018 – reconnecting roads and railways, and reviving joint ventures at Kaesong and Mount Kumgang – could go ahead.

Yet at the same time, and despite Moon’s expressed aim to put Seoul back in the driver’s seat in peninsular affairs, the inter-Korean dimension was visibly slowing down. As we noted last time, on Dec. 30 Kim Jong Un wrote to Moon, apologizing for not visiting Seoul yet, and promising to meet “often” in 2019. Yet there was no indication of any fourth summit being prepared. So did Kim ever really have the intention to come to Seoul, or was he just stringing Moon along? Either way, they have not met again since Pyongyang in September, and show no signs of doing so. On April 15 Moon [called](#) for a fourth North-South summit to break the post-Hanoi US-DPRK deadlock, “without being restrained by the venue and format.” Such flexibility might seem laudable, but as critics noted it came at the cost of reciprocity. Just as his father Kim Jong Il reneged on pledges to visit Seoul, Kim Jong Un seems to be doing the same. Bottom line: there was and is no sign of a fourth Moon-Kim summit, anywhere.

Lower-level inter-Korean meetings also dwindled, before they stopped completely. After a flurry of sectoral talks in various fields in the latter half of 2018 – discussed in our last two update articles, and listed [here](#) on the ROK Unification Ministry (MOU)’s website – the first such meeting in 2019 was also, for now, the last. On Jan. 31 the two Koreas met in Kaesong to discuss connecting cross-border roads and modernizing those in the North. This followed

similar talks and joint field surveys last year. According to *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, they [discussed](#) a possible visit by Northern officials to look at Southern roads, exchanged documents on each other’s highway systems, and “agreed to discuss further details in the near future through additional talks or exchange of documents.” That did not happen, nor any further meetings in other fields – e.g., forestry – which had been discussed in 2018.

Liaison Office: A Shell Drained of Substance

True, the inter-Korean permanent liaison office in the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) remains nominally open. But this year so far has been a far cry from last. On Dec. 20, *NKNews* [reported](#) an MOU briefing which tallied no fewer than 285 meetings hosted by the new liaison office during its first 100 days of operation. These included 10 high-level talks, 10 ministerial talks, 26 at vice-ministerial level, 49 on-demand working-level consultations, and 188 regular meetings. At that stage it seemed that both Koreas meant business.

It was a very different story four months later. On April 19, MOU confirmed that what were supposed to be regular weekly meetings between the liaison office’s joint directors had not been held for two months, since Feb. 22 when the North sent a stand-in. The two co-heads of the office – ROK Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung and the DPRK’s Jon Jong Su – last met on Jan. 25. These dates show that the North was losing interest even before Hanoi – though the latter is presumably what prompted a bigger if temporary hiccup. On March 22, the office’s Northern staff all abruptly [left](#), with no reason [given](#) except “instructions from higher authority”; they told their Southern colleagues to stay on if they liked. But most of them returned three days later, again sans explanation – disingenuously [saying](#) “we came to do our shift as usual.” Their absence was over a weekend, so perhaps too much was made of what may just have been a recall to Pyongyang for a briefing. Nonetheless this was unsettling. And present or absent, no real business is being done at the liaison office any longer.

NGOs: Emphasis on the GO

It was a similar story with NGOs. Last year ROK charities and other nonstate bodies got busy organizing all manner of visits and exchanges,

but here too the pace has drastically slowed in 2019. In fact, the only visit of any substance was on Feb. 12-13, when some 250 South Koreans from a range of NGOs – religious groups, labor unions, and organizations of women, youth and farmers – [joined](#) Northern counterparts at the Mount Kumgang resort on the DPRK's east coast for a delayed New Year get-together. The two sides appealed for full implementation of last year's summit accords, and full-fledged cross-border cooperation. As the Northern participants may have known – though not necessarily, given the top-down way the Kim regime operates – none of that was about to happen; in fact, quite the reverse.

Two months later, on April 18, the center-right Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* ran a headline, “North severs contacts in South.” The [article](#) cited several unnamed Southern NGO sources telling the same story: all were now getting the brush-off from counterparts in the North, who had previously been keen to pursue joint projects. Ever since the Hanoi summit, meetings and visits were being cancelled, with no reason given save “orders from superiors.” Faxes went unanswered in the North, as did telephones. Some in Seoul said they heard that Kim Jong Un had personally issued a blanket ban, forbidding DPRK organizations to contact Southern ones.

Sport: What chance joint teams now, much less co-hosting?

In one field, sports, some cooperation did continue, although here too future prospects now look uncertain. Last year's inter-Korean thaw began with sports, when at the last minute the North invited itself to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Various exchanges in different sports followed, and ‘Korea’ fielded a few unified squads at the Asian Games in Indonesia. Grander plans were laid too, including some joint teams at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, and even a bid to co-host the 2032 Olympics. Those two plans required a trip to Lausanne in February by the sports ministers of both Koreas. They met with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which duly gave its blessing.

Co-hosting must be a nonstarter. Even if a bid does go forward, it will surely gain few votes. If the two Koreas fall out after barely a year of dialogue, what chance of them staying friends for over a decade? By 2032 South Korea will have had two further presidents after Moon Jae-in,

and will just have elected a third. As for Tokyo 2020, it remains to be seen whether inter-Korean relations will recover in time to prepare joint teams – or if Kim Jong Un, who is keen on sport, makes an exception. A leaked [report](#) claiming that the North has set a target for its athletes to win 180 medals (including 50 golds) in international meets this year, including qualifying events for the 2020 Olympics, suggests that the DPRK does indeed plan on coming to Tokyo – but in its own right, rather than sharing the honors with the ROK. We shall see.

Meanwhile inter-Korean sports exchanges, vigorous last year, have largely ceased – with one exception. In April the two rival global bodies in taekwondo – the International Taekwondo Federation ([ITF](#)) and World Taekwondo ([WT](#), no longer WTF) – [staged](#) joint demonstration [events](#) in Lausanne and Geneva to mark the 25th anniversary of taekwondo's acceptance as an Olympic sport. Though the ITF and WT are broadly run by the DPRK and ROK respectively, in this instance control may not be absolute. Headquartered in Vienna, the ITF was founded by an ROK general who ended up in Pyongyang via exile in Canada – whereupon the ROK created the rival WTF. It will be interesting to see if the two bodies continue to cooperate. Or perhaps this Olympic anniversary gig was a one-off high-profile event that for reasons of face could hardly be cancelled, despite the new freeze between the two Koreas.

DMZ: Seoul goes solo

One striking aspect of last year's thaw was the signing in September of a radical new inter-Korean Comprehensive [Military Agreement](#). As described in our last issue, the CMA's provisions included creating no-fly zones along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ, the *de facto* inter-Korean border); shared administration by unarmed troops from both sides of the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom; some demining, and the closure of a few of each side's guard posts in the JSA and elsewhere; and joint searches for MIA remains in a sector of the central DMZ known as Arrowhead Ridge, which had seen heavy fighting during the Korean War. Other aspects of the CMA, including the pledge to create a joint military committee that would meet regularly, were never implemented.

Here too 2019 has seen a Northern retreat. The no-fly zone and JSA arrangements remain in

force. The latter make a real difference to the atmosphere at Panmunjom, as visitors [reported](#) when tours from the South resumed on May 1, after a six-month hiatus while the changes were implemented. (Tourism from the Northern side had never stopped; it is unclear why the two Koreas applied different policies in this regard.) Even the UN Command (UNC), which administers the Southern side of the JSA, [opined](#) in uncharacteristically hippie tones that at Panmunjom “what once was a vibe of tension is now a vibe of peace.”

The wider impact should not be exaggerated. Outside the DMZ, the Korean People's Army (KPA)'s heavy deployments along the border are unchanged. Perhaps in a sense Panmunjom was yesterday's war, frozen in time. In 2019, even if inter-Korean relations worsen as they have, the threat now would be missiles or cyber-attacks – not KPA tanks surging south, as in 1950. Panmunjom is still the frontier, but no longer so much where the action is or would be.

Elsewhere, South Korea is carrying on alone. Last autumn's striking scenes of soldiers from both sides shaking hands and working together in the DMZ have not been repeated. Instead, and again predating Hanoi, in 2019 the DPRK has simply not replied to repeated ROK efforts to concretely organize the previously agreed joint demining and MIA searches. So Seoul perforce went solo. On April 1, it began [digging](#) at Arrowhead Ridge on its own, unhelped but also unhindered by the North. (Operations are of course limited to the southern side of the Military Demarcation Line.)

Video reunions: much ado about nothing

Similar uncooperativeness played out across the board, though in some cases South Korean reporting hardly stressed that. Readers of *Yonhap* could be forgiven for thinking that the two Koreas are in process of organizing video-link reunions of separated families, as they agreed last year. Several reports highlighted successive stages of this – obtaining a sanctions waiver from the UN Security Council (UNSC) to send video equipment to North Korea, acquiring the equipment, installing it across the South, and most recently (early May) testing it.

Yet all this activity is by the South alone. The ROK Red Cross is still waiting to hear from its DPRK counterpart when or whether they will deign to take delivery of these gifts, strenuously

acquired and generously paid for by the South; let alone whether they will actually use them to allow a few elderly citizens to at least see and speak with, though not embrace, their long-lost Southern kin – before this rapidly dwindling cohort dies out completely, as it soon will.

In that regard, it was already puzzling that 2018's burst of North-South activity included only one round of face-to-face family reunions, last August. Given the ticking clock of mortality, a meaningful resumption of inter-Korean engagement would mean urgently setting a schedule for regular and frequent meetings, as indeed Moon and Kim pledged in Pyongyang a month later. In this field at least, sanctions are no obstacle. That this never happened, even before 2019's freeze, should already have warned that North Korea was insincere, or had different priorities. One also wonders how hard the South pushed on this; it barely did so in public.

The great Tamiflu mystery – solved?

In other areas, even establishing the facts is problematic. In December, South Korea agreed to send a batch of the antiviral drug Tamiflu, worth \$3.2 million and enough for 200,000 people, to help the North through the worst of the winter influenza season. In January, this was said to be shipping imminently. Then it was delayed for reasons unclear, and ultimately it was never sent at all. Why not?

In a [round-up](#) of the inter-Korean situation on April 26 (whose title mixed metaphors, “Sea change in inter-Korea relations, bumpy road still ahead”), *Yonhap* blamed “Washington's [apparent] concerns that [this] could undermine the sanctions on Pyongyang.” Yet on Feb. 7, reacting to earlier rumors in that vein, UNC [said](#) publicly on Twitter that it had approved the shipment. The US Embassy in Seoul promptly retweeted this. So what really happened?

The Tamiflu and other cases prompted some dogged and timely investigative journalism by *NKNews*. In a long [article](#) (not paywalled, unusually for this site) published on Feb. 22, Chad O'Carroll and Dagyum Ji explained the legal complexities of any and all transfers from South to North Korea. As the DMZ is not a normal international border, UNC permission is needed – with UNSC, US and other sanctions now a further complication. But the authors also

found much stonewalling, obfuscation and buck-passing (that is my paraphrase, they were more polite) between different agencies of the US and ROK governments; both on the generalities – what counts as a ‘transfer,’ and who decides? – and as regards specific cases.

On Tamiflu, “multiple sources” told them the reason it “has still not been delivered is that North Korean authorities simply haven’t taken action to receive it.” That tallies with other instances of DPRK noncooperation cited above – and again, this happened before Hanoi. But the fault is not only or always Pyongyang’s. The article also probes the bizarre case of South Korean journalists covering February’s inter-Korean civilian confab at Mount Kumgang cited above, who were forbidden to bring laptops and cameras – not by the North, but by their own side for fear of breaching sanctions. That does seem like overkill, or obstruction by someone.

Kim Disses Moon’s ‘Meddling’

By early April Pyongyang’s new coolness was clear, both from its actions (or inactions) and a rising tide of critical comment in DPRK media. Then on April 12, Kim Jong Un weighed in. Unusually, indeed for the first time since his grandfather Kim Il Sung in 1990, the leader used the annual spring session of the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) to deliver a major policy [speech](#); the SPA ran to a second day for this. Kim was hardline on all fronts, not least toward South Korea which he criticized on three main counts. First, it was still holding joint war games with the US; Kim was unimpressed that these had been scaled down and renamed. Second, he urged the South to honor last year’s accords – hypocritically, given the North’s failure to do so in key aspects – and to maintain an independent national stance (translation: support the DPRK line in all things). Yet Kim surely understands the constraints of the US alliance. He should also appreciate that he could not possibly have – and may well never have again – a more sympathetic interlocutor in Seoul than Moon Jae-in.

Not a bit of it. For third, as already quoted, Kim rudely dissed Moon’s activity as a mediator – even though without this he would never have gotten his two summits with Donald Trump. It hardly seems tactful to make it quite so clear that he was just using Moon, as the proverbial sprat to catch a mackerel. To rub it in, later the same month Kim marked the first anniversary

of the Panmunjom summit by heading to Vladivostok for his first meeting with Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, sending a clear signal, to extend the piscine metaphor, that he now had other fish to fry. In a sad, nay humiliating sign of how progress has been reversed, on April 27, South Korea staged an anniversary [concert](#) at Panmunjom, including [artists](#) from the US, China, and Japan – but none from North Korea. One hand clapping, indeed. With a certain inevitability, the program included John Lennon’s ‘Imagine.’ But as I have written [elsewhere](#), in truth Roy Orbison would have been more appropriate. [It’s Over](#).

Missiles? what missiles?

Against this background, Kim Jong Un’s resumption of missile testing in May heightened the Moon administration’s discomfort, while also exposing its incongruities. Just as this was an unfortunate time for Moon to claim that the guns had fallen silent on the peninsula, the ROK government’s use of the term ‘projectiles’ in an attempt to deny that the North had launched ballistic missiles (among other things) did not impress local [media](#), and was [grist](#) to the mill of the conservative opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP). After the first such incident but before the second, security expert Jeffrey Lewis [tweeted](#) acerbically that “If I write an article about the trouble that the ROK government has telling the truth about North Korea’s May 4 missile launch, I may have to title it “PROJECTILE DYSFUNCTION.” While of course it is entirely proper to wait for technical [analysis](#) to clarify exactly what Pyongyang has fired on such occasions, the fact that as of May 12, after the second launch, the Moon administration (but no one else) was still in BM [denial](#) mode is clearly a political choice, and not a wise one.



Figure 2 North Korea tests short-range missiles on May 9.
Photo: The Washington Post

Conclusion and Prospects

As of mid-May 2019 it is hard to predict where inter-Korean relations will go, and equally hard to be optimistic. Unexpectedly, and in my view also [unwisely](#), Kim Jong Un has brutally exposed the flimsiness of what the two Koreas accomplished in 2018. Not that nothing was done, far from it. But as we now see, it could all – or almost all – be swiftly undone again, by the North simply withdrawing cooperation. In that sense, both of Moon’s key avowed aims – to put Seoul in the driver’s seat and create a peace process that is [irreversible](#) – remain utterly unfulfilled. Frustratingly, South Korea remains a largely impotent bystander on its own peninsula, vulnerable to the whims of Washington and Pyongyang alike. With Kim Jong Un reverting to hardball to show his post-Hanoi annoyance, plus the usual worrying uncertainty as to how Trump will react, Moon’s peacemaking is needed more than ever – yet may not be welcomed by either side.

Conceivably, if he sees advantage in it, Kim might at some point try to make nice with South Korea again. But it may not work – the damage has been done. The [genius](#) of his coming-out diplomacy last year was to do just enough to inspire a plausible belief that this latest young Kim might be different and sincere. That was true everywhere, but South Korea is a special case; it is not just some foreign country. 74 years after the peninsula was divided, attitudes to the North are varied and complex, but the pain of partition runs deep. So it was foolish as well as cruel for Kim Jong Un to raise hopes in 2018, only to dash them cynically in 2019.

If Kim does come knocking on Seoul’s door again, he will find wariness at best. Even media strongly supportive of engagement, like the left-wing daily *Hankyoreh*, did not conceal their [exasperation](#) with Pyongyang’s reversion to missile launches. Not least, as Kim must know, his new *froideur* seriously undermines his Southern counterpart. Moon Jae-in has just three more years in office, with no second term. For now, progressive parties have a majority in the National Assembly (if they cooperate), but parliamentary elections next April may see the conservative LKP gain seats. Moon is still more popular than any previous ROK president at this stage, but his support is ebbing. While voters mainly judge him on domestic issues, for failing to create jobs or boost economic growth, Nordpolitik is not helping.

In a useful Twitter [thread](#), Christopher Green of the International Crisis Group (ICG) looked at recent ROK public opinion survey data. While RealMeter [found](#) a narrow majority still in favor of Moon’s North Korea policy (52.2% for, 44.7% against), a different poll by Gallup Korea found that support for Moon’s approach has fallen from 83% in May 2018 – just after the Panmunjom summit – to 45% today. That is still substantial, yet the trend is ominous. If Kim launches more missiles, backing for engagement will surely erode further.

Moon’s position is unenviable. One challenge, as I have argued [elsewhere](#), begins at home. South Korea needs to build a bipartisan consensus on how to handle the North long-term, so that policy does not zigzag every five years with the advent of a new president. That is a very tall order, given the ROK’s ideological divisions and the DPRK’s rebarbateness. As to the latter, Seoul should insist on reciprocity and also call out Pyongyang’s bad behavior. Why did Moon not riposte sharply to Kim’s jibes about “meddling”? He would gain more respect that way than from a Panglossian pretense that all is well when plainly it isn’t. One sympathizes with his predicament, but hopefully this will force a rethink on what it would take to make real, irreversible progress in inter-Korean relations.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2019

Jan. 1, 2019: North Korea’s supreme leader Kim Jong Un delivers his annual New Year [address](#). Regarding North–South relations, he praises 2018’s achievements but warns that “joint military exercises with foreign forces ...should no longer be permitted.”

Jan. 4, 2019: Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung, the ROK joint head of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, [meets](#) very briefly (just 20 minutes) with Kim Kwang Song, the DPRK’s vice-chief at the office, to discuss “pending issues.”

Jan. 5, 2019: Thae Yong Ho, a senior North Korean diplomat who defected in 2016, in an open letter [urges](#) the former DPRK *chargé d’affaires* in Rome, Jo Song Gil, who is reportedly seeking asylum in the US, to choose South Korea instead. Thae calls this “an obligation, not a choice” which will accelerate reunification.

Jan. 9, 2019: South Korea’s Ministry of Unification (MOU) [says](#) it will “consider various elements” before allowing companies who invested in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) to visit the site and check the state of facilities there. It has refused six previous applications from them for such visits since then-President Park Geun-hye closed the KIC in early 2016.

Jan. 10, 2019: Saying more preparation is needed, MOU [postpones](#) delivering 200,000 doses of Tamiflu antiviral drugs and 50,000 early detection kits to the North, planned for Jan. 11. Seoul trade media earlier reported [dismay](#) among ROK pharmaceutical firms that the costly Roche original is being provided, rather than cheaper ROK-made generics; and also suspicion that Pyongyang may sell these on rather than use them itself.

Jan. 10, 2019: In his New Year press conference, ROK President Moon Jae-in [calls](#) on Pyongyang to take bolder steps toward denuclearization – and for the US to reward these.

Jan. 14, 2019: The DPRK website [Uriminzokkiri](#), aimed at external audiences, [says](#): “Active efforts should be made to expand and advance North–South cooperation and exchanges in all aspects.” It commends results achieved so far despite “brutal obstruction” from the outside. *Meari*, another North Korean site, even claims that “Had inter-Korean economic cooperation been pushed actively, the South’s economy would not be in a devastating state as it is today.”

Jan. 15, 2019: In its latest biennial [White Paper](#), the ROK Ministry of National Defense ([MND](#)) [drops](#) its characterization of the DPRK government and military as an “enemy.” It also deletes other terms now deemed provocative, including Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPPR) – a plan to take out the North’s leadership in case of war – and the Kill Chain strike platform.

Jan. 16, 2019: South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha [says](#) that the future of two suspended inter-Korean joint ventures, the Kaesong complex and tourism to Mt. Kumgang, depends on how diplomacy goes between North Korea and the US:

Jan. 28, 2019: North Korea’s leading daily *Rodong Sinmun*, organ of the ruling Workers’ Party (WPK), [calls on](#) South Korea to stop “war exercises,” which it calls “a dangerous military action that runs counter to the current trend ... toward our people’s reconciliation, peace and stability.” Meanwhile the North’s million-strong Korean People’s Army (KPA) [continues](#) its own winter training exercises as usual.

Jan. 31, 2019: In the first such sectoral talks of 2019 – and the last, as of mid-May – the two Koreas meet in Kaesong to [discuss](#) connecting cross-border roads and modernizing those in the North, following surveys last year. They exchange documents, discuss a DPRK delegation visiting the ROK, and agree to plan future meetings and exchanges. None of that happens.

Feb. 4, 2019: Official of the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the ROK presidential office and residence), as usual anonymous, [tells Yonhap](#): “An inter-Korean summit will naturally be the next step following the second North Korea-U.S. summit.” *Yonhap*’s article is headlined: “S. Korea to push for fourth Moon-Kim summit to set stage for denuclearization.” Such optimism is widespread in Seoul at this juncture.

Feb. 5, 2019: MOU [data](#) highlight the urgency of family reunions, currently stalled. Out of 133,208 South Koreans who have applied since 1988, the majority (77,221) are now dead. Of the 55,987 still alive, most (62%) are now aged 80 or over.

Feb. 8-9, 2019: A 22-strong delegation from Hyundai Asan, which developed and ran tours to North Korea’s Mount Kumgang east coast resort from 1998 to 2008 (when Seoul suspended the program after a Southern tourist was shot dead), [visits](#) Kumgang-san for a ceremony to mark the firm’s 20th anniversary. MOU hastens to point out that this does not mean tourism is about to resume, despite rumors.

Feb. 11, 2019: ROK Olympic Committee [chooses](#) Seoul over Busan as the venue city for its bid to co-host the 2032 Summer Olympics with the DPRK. North Korea is not known to have conducted any equivalent exercise, but only Pyongyang has the necessary facilities.

Feb. 12-13, 2019: In the first (and last?) North-South civilian event of 2019, some 250 South Koreans from a range of NGOs – including religious groups, labor unions, and organizations of women, youth and farmers – [join](#) Northern counterparts at the Mount Kumgang resort on the DPRK’s east coast for a delayed New Year get-together.

Feb. 14, 2019: MOU [says](#) Pyongyang has not responded to its proposal to jointly mark the centenary of the March 1, 1919 protests against the Japanese occupation of Korea, as agreed at last September’s Pyongyang summit. On Feb. 21, the North finally [replies](#) in the negative, saying circumstances do not allow this – but offering no further explanation.

Feb. 15, 2019: The sports ministers of North and South Korea [meet](#) Thoma Bach, president of the International Olympic Committee, at IOC headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland. Bach says they plan to march together at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics and to enter joint teams in four sports. He adds: “We warmly welcome the historic initiative of the two Koreas to put forward a joint Korean candidature for the Olympic Games 2032.”

Feb. 18, 2019: Citing unnamed “officials” and a raft of concrete cases, *Yonhap* [reports](#) that ROK local governments are gearing up for expanded cooperation with the DPRK, expecting fresh momentum for peace from the upcoming Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi. Sports, culture, education and economy are seen as promising areas for such activity.

Feb. 22, 2019: *New York Times* headline [reports](#) that “South Korea Awaits 2nd Kim-Trump Summit With Both Hope and Fear.”

March 5, 2019: Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon (soon to be sacked) [says](#) Seoul will discuss with Washington ways to prepare for future resumption of the Kaesong and Kumgang joint North-South projects, including sanctions waivers. (But see March 7, below.)

March 6, 2019: Blue House [announces](#) that Choi Jong-kun, a professor of international relations, has been appointed as the new presidential secretary for peace at the National Security Office (NSO). Choi was previously secretary for arms control within the NSO.

March 7, 2019: Asked on background whether Washington is considering allowing sanctions exemptions so that key inter-Korean economic projects can resume, a senior State Department official ([presumably](#) Special Representative Stephen Biegun) bluntly [replies](#): “No.”

March 7, 2019: DPRK’s official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* [attacks](#) the new *Dong Maeng* exercise (replacing the former *Foal Eagle*), which runs March 4-12, as a “violent violation” of last year’s agreements between Pyongyang, Washington and Seoul.

March 8, 2019: As part of a wider Cabinet reshuffle affecting seven portfolios, President Moon [nominates](#) Kim Yeon-chul, head of the Korean Institute of National Unification ([KINU](#) – a think-tank under MOU) as minister of unification, to replace Cho Myoung-gyon.

March 11, 2019: South Korea's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism ([MCST](#)) [says](#) it will continue to pursue cooperation and exchanges with North Korea. Plans include joint teams in four sports at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics; a joint bid to co-host the 2032 summer Olympics; and inviting the North to various sports meets in the South. MCST will also “push for joint projects to compile a unified Korean-language dictionary, unearth historic relics at the Manwoldae site in the North's border town of Kaesong, and conduct a joint survey of ancient tomb murals in Pyongyang.”

March 15, 2019: *Washington Post* headline [reads](#): “After Hanoi breakdown, Moon's credibility as U.S.-Korean intermediary is on the line”.

March 22, 2019: Entire DPRK staff of the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong [leaves](#), abruptly and mysteriously, [citing](#) “instructions from higher authority.” Most return on March 25 after the weekend, simply [saying](#) “we came to do our shift as usual.” By March 29 the Northern complement is back to [normal](#).

March 28, 2019: The IOC [announces](#) that it has approved the two Koreas' proposal to form some unified teams and march together at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics.

March 29, 2019: MOU releases [findings](#) from last year's joint inspections of DPRK roads and railways. Both the west and east coast main rail lines, totaling 800 miles in length, “are in serious condition,” with erosion and damage to rails. Tunnels and bridges are a particular concern: some bridges 70-100 years old (i.e., built by Japan) have never been renovated. Highways, though newer, are no better. On the 100 mile-long [main road](#) from the border (Kaesong) north to Pyongyang, completed in 1992, there was high risk of rock slides in 33 places and 90 bridges were cracked, as were tunnels. (See also April 9 below.)

April 1, 2019: The ROK military [begins](#) de-mining and search operations for MIA remains at Arrowhead Ridge, a Korean War battle site in the central DMZ. This was meant to be a joint operation, but this year the North has not responded to Southern attempts to set a schedule.

April 3, 2019: DPRK website *Meari* [accuses](#) the ROK of excessive caution toward the North: “Talks of prudence by the South Korean authorities are an evasion of responsibility over implementing North-South declarations promised in front of the whole nation, and an overt surrender to the pressure from the US and the conservatives.”

April 5, 2019: MOU [says](#) South Korea has shared information on a serious forest fire in its northeastern border region with North Korea via the Kaesong liaison office.

April 8, 2019: Kim Yeon-chul is [sworn in](#) as South Korea's new minister of unification, despite the National Assembly's failure to confirm him – which is not mandatory. The conservative opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) calls him unacceptably “pro-North.”

April 9, 2019: *Uriminzokkiri* [attacks](#) MOU for publishing the results of last year's joint inspections of Northern railways, which found them in poor condition and in need of repair (see March 29, above). Calling this “disrespectful”, the DPRK website also criticizes the ministry more generally for poor performance, and the ROK government for kow-towing to Washington: “If South Korea is truly interested in North-South cooperation, it should tell the US what it should be told, instead of disclosing some clumsy report.”

April 10, 2019: Kim Jong Un chairs the fourth plenary [session](#) of the seventh term Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee (WPK CC). This key meeting of North Korea's ruling party immediately precedes the annual spring session of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), the DPRK's rubber-stamp parliament; see April 11-12.

April 11, 2019: First session of the 14th SPA, “elected” in March, is [held](#) in Pyongyang. As usual there is a budget speech with no hard numbers. Personnel changes include a titular head of state, Choe Ryong Hae, replacing Kim Yong Nam who at 90 has retired; and a new premier, Kim Jae Ryong, replacing Pak Pong Ju who has been moved to another post.

April 12, 2019: Running to a rare second day, the SPA hears a long and tough policy [speech](#) by Kim Jong Un. *Inter alia* Kim upbraids South Korea for continuing war games with the US and not implementing last year’s accords, while “pos[ing] as a meddlesome ‘mediator.’”

April 11-12, 2019: Two rival global organizations in Taekwondo – the DPRK-backed International Taekwondo Federation ([ITF](#)), and the more widely recognized ROK-backed World Taekwondo ([WT](#)) – [stage](#) joint demonstration [events](#) in Lausanne and Geneva, to mark the 25th anniversary of Taekwondo’s acceptance as an Olympic sport.

April 15, 2019: Moon Jae-in [says](#): “I hope the two Koreas will have another summit without being restrained by the venue and format,” given the need for “concrete and substantive discussions” that will yield “fruits.” Critics insist it is Kim Jong Un’s turn to come to Seoul.

April 15, 2019: Radio Free Asia (RFA) [reports](#) that North Korea is trying to buy South Korean high-yielding rice seeds via traders in China. The latter are reluctant, as PRC Customs inspections for farm products are stringent. They wonder why Pyongyang doesn’t simply ask Seoul, which in the ‘Sunshine’ era allowed civic groups to supply such seeds.

April 18, 2019: Under the headline “North severs contacts in South,” the center-right Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* [cites](#) several unnamed Southern NGOs who say that their Northern counterparts are cold-shouldering them: no longer replying to fax and phone messages. Some claim that Kim Jong Un has personally forbidden such contacts.

April 19, 2019: MOU [confirms](#) that supposedly weekly meetings between the inter-Korean liaison office’s joint directors have not been held for two months: since Feb. 22, when the North sent a stand-in. The two co-heads of the office – ROK Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung, and the DPRK’s Jon Jong Su – last met on Jan. 25.

April 20, 2019: Japanese daily *Mainichi Shimbun* [reveals](#) leaked details of North Korea’s never-published 2016 Five-Year Plan, acquired somehow by a South Korean researcher. *Inter alia*, so as to reduce economic dependence on China this advocates boosting trade with Russia – but does not mention either South Korea or Japan, both formerly major trade partners.

April 27, 2019: South Korea stages a [concert](#) at Panmunjom on the anniversary of Moon and Kim’s first summit there.

April 30, 2019: MOU [says](#) it will spend two weeks testing newly renovated nationwide facilities for family reunions via videolink.

May 4, 2019: Ending a 17-month moratorium on such testing, North Korea fires a volley of projectiles into the East Sea from Hodo-ri, near Wonsan. Kim Jong Un [presides](#). After some initial [confusion](#) in Seoul, observers [conclude](#) that these involved two types of large-caliber multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and a new short-range ballistic missile (SRBM).

May 6, 2019: Blue House releases an English [text](#) of “The Greatness of the Ordinary”: a long op-ed by President Moon for the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which [publishes](#) it on May 9.

May 9, 2019: North Korea [launches](#) two apparent SRBMs from Kusong-ri, north of Pyongyang. Again Kim Jong Un is [present](#). The Blue House calls this “very worrisome” and unhelpful for efforts to reduce tensions.

May 9, 2019: Interviewed by KBS hours after Pyongyang’s latest missile launch, President Moon [says](#): “I’d like to warn North Korea that if such behavior ... is repeated, it could make the current dialogue and negotiation phase difficult.”

May 10, 2019: MOU deputy spokesperson Lee Eugene [insists](#): “There is no change in [the Moon administration’s] position that it is necessary to provide humanitarian assistance to the North from a humanitarian and compatriots' perspective.”