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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

TESTING TIMES

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Inter-Korean relations stayed frozen in the early part of 2020. ROK President Moon Jae-in's outreach was hardly reciprocated by Kim Jong Un, whose sister snapped back when Seoul mildly criticized Pyongyang's missile launches in March. For both Koreas the challenge of COVID-19 was overwhelming, yet the North refused any cooperation on this. In April Moon's liberal party scored a big win in parliamentary elections; two DPRK defectors gained seats for the conservative opposition. Kim caused a global media frenzy by briefly vanishing from view. Moon has less than two years left in office, so Kim's shunning of him looks short-sighted.

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Introduction

This journal's remit is to cover key bilateral relationships in the Indo-Pacific. If interpreted narrowly, that could beg an important question: how significant, actually, was this particular relationship, during the period covered, for the two states involved? And, relatedly: what was the wider context of global events, within which a given relationship needs to be understood?

All this varies over time, for the two Koreas more than most. In 2018, their suddenly revived relations took center stage. The Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, an unprecedented three inter-Korean summits, substantial-seeming agreements, and many other meetings, ensured that our topic was at the heart of politics in both Koreas, as well as making headlines worldwide.

2019 was very different, as North Korea in effect broke off what had begun so promisingly. The two Koreas remained significant to one another—as they always have, and always will—but more negatively, and with very little direct interaction. There was plenty going on, as we duly recorded in these pages, but it became more of a sideshow than center stage.

2020, so far, has added a further twist. North Korea continued to largely ignore or criticize the South, but both states were busy on other fronts. One major preoccupation they had in common, yet sadly failed to share: on the Korean Peninsula as across the planet, the first four months of 2020 were dominated, as the rest of the year threatens to be, by the challenge of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Each Korea tackled this in its own very different way—quite separately, since Pyongyang spurned Seoul's repeated offers of cooperation and assistance.

Also, for each Korea the period's top political story did not involve the other. South Korea held a parliamentary election—despite the virus—on April 15, which gave President Moon's ruling party an increased majority. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un vanished from view, prompting feverish speculation amid rumors that he was gravely ill or even dead—until he reappeared on May 1. Strictly, these fall outside our bilateral remit, and of the latter story – enough already. But each has an interesting inter-Korean angle, so that will be our focus here.

He's Just Not That into You

As noted in our [update](#) in January, the year began unusually. Kim Jong Un did not give his normal New Year address, evidently having nothing to add to the mammoth report he had just delivered at a key party meeting: the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers Party (WPK), held December 28–31. Despite lasting for seven hours and otherwise ranging widely, this said absolutely nothing about inter-Korean relations, a topic that is usually a staple of the new year addresses, as well as of the joint editorials that served the same function during the reign (1994–2011) of Kim's speech-averse father, Kim Jong Il.

South Korea is used to Northern diatribes, but being ignored was new and unsettling. On January 2, the Ministry of Unification (MOU) said Seoul was “closely watching” whether this lacuna in Kim's speech meant that Pyongyang would be issuing a separate message on inter-Korean relations. Needless to add, they waited in vain. The obvious interpretation—he's just not that into you—was evidently too painful to admit.

This rather pathetic asymmetry sums up Moon's whole approach, whose pros and cons were debated in our [last update](#)—which also covered his own New Year [address](#), given on January 7. To summarize: Moon, unlike Kim, had a lot to say about inter-Korean relations—despite their current nonexistence. While expressing regret for the current impasse (which has now lasted for over a year), he did not blame the North, and reiterated his unswerving commitment to cooperation across the board. The nuclear issue went wholly unmentioned. Moon even called on both sides to make efforts to facilitate Kim Jong Un's visit to Seoul, promised in 2018. Yet he must know there is no prospect of that happening any time soon.

Stop Meddling, Pyongyang Tells Seoul

It is not as though the North offers any encouragement. If Moon is constant in proffering olive branches, Pyongyang is equally consistent in rebuffing them. One case in point, trivial but revealing, occurred in early January. Chung Eui-yong, who heads the national security office in the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the ROK presidential office and residence), fresh back from Washington, said that President Trump had asked Moon to wish Kim Jong Un a

happy birthday—the day was January 8, his likely age 36—on his behalf, and this had been done.

That claim promptly brought a withering retort from Kim Kye Gwan, a name familiar from the past, as North Korea's long-time chief nuclear negotiator at the Six-Party Talks (2003–09). Now an adviser to the DPRK foreign ministry, Kim sneered at “the excited south Korean authorities” for their “lingering hope for playing the role of ‘mediator’ in the DPRK-US relations,” which he called “presumptuous ... meddling.” He further warned the South not to “dream a fabulous dream that we would return to the dialogue with thankful feelings for the birthday greetings.” The US came in for a tongue-lashing, too. North Korea's stance can be hard to read sometimes, but not currently. There is really no ambiguity or room for doubt.

A Seriously Daft Idea

Nonetheless Seoul persisted, with perverse consequences. Determined to find some scope for inter-Korean cooperation that did not fall foul of UN and other sanctions, Moon's government came up with the bright idea of individual (as opposed to group) tourism to Mount Kumgang, the ROK-developed but long-shuttered east coast resort just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). That is baffling, since multiple obstacles render this impractical. First, it is not certain that this would avoid sanctions; legal opinions differ. Second, the North is refusing all cooperation with the South, in general. And in particular, third, as discussed in our last article, far from seeking to resume Kumgangs tourism, Kim Jong Un now wants the Southern-built facilities there torn down. Fourth, the DPRK has closed its borders due to COVID-19 concerns.

Fifth, is there even a market? In a thoughtful [article](#) for *NK News*, Jumin Lee is skeptical on several counts. At the outset (it began in 1998) Kumgang tourism had novelty value to South Koreans, but that soon wore off. With numbers falling, Kim Dae-jung's government began to subsidize the tours, a flagship of his ‘sunshine’ policy. They became so cheap that demand recovered, but then in 2008 a straying female tourist was shot dead. The North refused to apologize or permit an investigation, so then-ROK President Lee Myung-bak suspended the program. With that checkered history, why exactly in 2020 would today's sophisticated

globetrotting South Koreans plump to head for this rotting relic of a resort?

Despite all that, Seoul persisted and indeed still persists. As itemized in the chronology, pushing for individual tourism to Mount Kumgang has been a constant refrain, from Moon downward. That has consequences. When Harry Harris, US ambassador to South Korea, said on January 17 that Seoul should consult the US on any plans to engage Pyongyang, the Ministry of Unification retorted “Our policy with regard to North Korea comes under our sovereignty.” No doubt. Yet it is hard to fathom why Moon's government is letting a scheme that cannot possibly happen become a bone of contention between allies. What is the point?

Enter the Virus

By end-January both Koreas had other urgent priorities, originating in Wuhan. As neighbors of China, with close commercial and other ties—Beijing is by far the largest trade partner of Seoul and Pyongyang alike—growing awareness of the coronavirus threat galvanized them both. But each reacted differently—and separately. During the honeymoon year of 2018, medical cooperation and disease prevention were on the inter-Korean agenda. Yet by 2019, when both Koreas were hit by outbreaks of African swine fever, the North—as discussed in our last issue—refused even to share information with the South, much less accept any help.

Regrettably, it has taken the same stance on COVID-19. The two Koreas' sole joint action on this came on Jan. 30, when they agreed to close their liaison office at Kaesong owing to virus concerns. The ROK's 58 staff returned home across the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) the same day. The closure is meant to be temporary, but this office had had little to do for the past year. Unless North-South relations somehow revive, it may well stay shuttered.

Elsewhere, the coronavirus had a small silver lining for Seoul. One day later, on January 31, North Korea said it is suspending its demand (discussed in our last issue) that the South remove its facilities from Mount Kumgang. Perhaps this too will now be quietly let go.

The wider impact and handling of COVID-19 in each Korea are beyond our scope here. The North shut its borders early and drastically, at high economic [cost](#). It still [claims](#) to have no cases,

but most observers [doubt](#) that. South Korea, meanwhile, has been on a roller-coaster. An early victim of the epidemic, it is now praised worldwide as a model of containing it. Many countries are keen to learn from Seoul, but North Korea is not among them—though Moon is eager to help, as indicated in the chronology. At stake are Pyongyang’s pride, plus the probable puncturing of its pretense to be virus-free. The result is one more inter-Korean opportunity sadly lost.

These Testing Times

March was a testing time for both Koreas, in more senses than one. Victor Cha [noted](#) the irony: “South Korea is exporting test kits to the world. North Korea is restarting missile tests to threaten the world.” March was the month when South Korea, sorely tested at first by the coronavirus, morphed from victim to victor. Testing in the medical sense, as part of a 3T approach—test, trace, treat—was key to Seoul’s turning its situation around. By the end of the month the ROK was exporting test kits, as well as its example, to other nations.

Pyongyang was busy testing too, but less usefully. After a lull since last year, North Korea resumed missile tests—and how. Two launches on March 2, three more on March 9, two again on March 20 and a final two on March 28, made this the DPRK’s [busiest](#) month ever for missile tests. All were short-range ballistic missiles, plus other weapons such as multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS). As Shea Cotton has [noted](#), these are new types of missiles—and the tests appear to have been largely successful. This is ominous.

Being short-range, these new weapons clearly threaten South Korea, and also Japan. So, it is hardly unreasonable or unexpected if they react negatively. In fact, Seoul’s remonstrations were mild, as usual under Moon. After the first tests on March 2 the South held an emergency videoconference of security chiefs. Expressing “strong concern,” the Blue House urged the North to halt acts “not helpful to efforts to ease military tensions on the Korean Peninsula.”

That could hardly have been worded more gently, yet it elicited a furious counterblast—from an intriguing source. Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong had never before issued a statement in her own name, but March saw two such. Later in the month, she would politely [decline](#) a

(previously undisclosed) offer of unspecified aid on the virus front from Donald Trump to her brother. In sharply different tone, her debut statement on March 3 savaged Seoul’s criticisms of what she called a “firepower strike drill ... by the frontline artillerymen of the Korean People’s Army,” which she claimed “was not aimed to threaten anybody” (though “frontline” is rather a giveaway). Likening the Blue House variously to a frightened dog or a burnt child who dreads the fire, peppering her critique with terms like “shocking,” “senseless,” and “imbecile,” she declared: “Such incoherent assertion and actions made by Chongwadae only magnify our distrust, hatred and scorn for the south side as a whole.”



Figure 1 Kim Yo Jong with Moon Jae-in, in 2018.

Then her brother played good cop. On March 5, the Blue House said Kim Jong Un had sent Moon a personal letter. The text was not disclosed, but the tone was evidently sweeter than his sister’s—or indeed his own in the past, as in April 2019 when he derided Moon as a “meddlesome mediator.” As reported, Kim offered “quiet support” for South Korea’s fight against the coronavirus (still raging at that point), and solicitude for Moon’s own health amid the outbreak, assuring him of “his constant friendship and trust.” Kim also offered his “frank” thoughts about the situation on the peninsula. It would be good to know what those were, but no one is telling. Overall it is hard to put much weight on this mysterious missive. (MOU denied a claim by the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* that Kim also asked for help fighting the coronavirus, and that Moon responded positively.)

April Contrasts

This April 15 was a red-letter day on both sides of the DMZ. In the North it always is, being “Sun’s Day,” a public holiday for the birthday

(in 1912) of the DPRK's founding leader Kim Il Sung. This year's celebrations were low-key, given coronavirus concerns. And there was one notable absentee: Kim Jong Un missed the statutory obeisance at his late grandfather's mausoleum. That set tongues wagging, more so as days passed and he still failed to appear.

They do politics differently in South Korea, where leaders are rotated regularly rather than compulsorily venerated forever. Whereas the deceased Kim Il Sung [remains](#) the DPRK's "Eternal President," ROK presidents are elected every five years; no second term is allowed. Separate parliamentary elections are held every four years, in April. Coincidentally, this year the date fell on April 15. Remarkably, unlike other countries in the grip of coronavirus, there was little debate about postponing this poll, so much do South Koreans cherish their hard-won democracy, barely three decades old. Instead, with the thoroughness that has characterized the ROK's handling of the pandemic almost throughout, all efforts were devoted to ensuring that everyone could vote and vote safely, while maintaining social distancing.

With Moon Jae-in just past the halfway point of his presidency—he began in May 2017 and must quit in May 2022—this would normally serve as a mid-term verdict on the incumbent. Quite often such elections produce a swing to the opposition. Not this time. North Korea was hardly an election issue; it almost never is. As everywhere, the economy is what counts. On that front Moon had been struggling, with low growth and failure to create jobs as promised.

Viral Victory

COVID-19 swept all that aside. In February or March this might have hurt Moon, but by mid-April not only was the virus under control, but South Koreans realized with some pride that they were tackling it better than many other countries. On the highest turnout (66.2%) since 1992, Moon's left-leaning Democratic Party (DP) and an affiliated party won 180 of the 300 National Assembly seats, enough to push through bills on their own, as they could not before.

With no second term allowed, most ROK presidents become lame ducks as their tenure draws towards a close. Moon, by contrast, enters his final two years in office strengthened. This election win will boost and embolden him on all

fronts, including North Korea. Whether Pyongyang will respond remains moot, but on at least one front Moon is not waiting to see.

On April 23 South Korea officially designated a planned 111-km railway, running north from the east coast port city of Gangneung to Jeju near the DMZ, as an inter-Korean project. This designation means that reconstruction can proceed without the normal feasibility study. This project has been mooted often over the years. Before 1945 a railway line ran along Korea's east coast, but this was sundered by partition and parts fell into disuse. The Sunshine era saw the west coast railway north of Seoul fully reconnected in 2006, but gaps remained on the east coast line. The Moon administration has resolved to build new track on its side of the DMZ in hopes that one day this can be relinked to the North. This will also boost the local economy in a remote and sparsely populated province (Gangwon) which in April voted mainly for the conservative opposition.

Watching the Defectors

From the inter-Korean point, one notable feature of this election was the role of North Korean defectors. That had at least two strands. For the first time, defectors formed their own political group, launched in Seoul on March 6. The Inter-Korean Unification Party (IKUP) proclaimed two main policy planks: to liberate the North from autocracy and promote defector rights in the South. Laudable enough, yet defectors number barely 33,000 in a total population of 51 million, far less than the millions who fled south after 1945 and during the Korean War, forming a solid hard-core core of anti-communist rightwing voters in the ROK ever since.

IKUP may have been inspired by tweaks to electoral law, supposed to make it easier for small parties to win the 53 seats chosen by proportional representation (PR) from national lists. That hope proved vain, as the big parties gamed the system by creating satellites to contest the PR seats. On the day, IKUP garnered a paltry 10,833 votes (by contrast, each of the main parties polled over 9 million). Its future is uncertain.

Among those present at IKUP's launch was Thae Yong-ho, a high-profile former diplomat who defected from the DPRK's London embassy in 2016. Thae congratulated the new party, but did

not himself join it— he had other fish to fry. He fought and won a safe seat in wealthy Gangnam, in southern Seoul, for the main opposition United Future Party (UFP, its latest of many names). He too changed his name, to Tae Kumin. Tae is the first defector to win a constituency seat in the ROK. Others have entered the National Assembly via party lists—including Ji Seong-ho, elected this time for the UFP’s clone, the Future Korea Party.



Figure 2 Thae Yong-ho on the stump, pretty in pink. Photo: The Times

It will be interesting to see how they both fare, especially Tae who is able and ambitious. To their discredit, many ROK “progressives” are uncomfortable with the likes of Tae, who inject a blast of reality and lived experience into their 88ollyanna fantasies of peace and engagement. Right-wingers, by contrast, are more welcoming; yet from any perspective, a pan-Korean trajectory like Tae’s should surely be welcomed. He is a man to watch, even though he and Ji both tripped up in the matter of Kim’s imagined demise—to which we now turn.

Kim Jong Un: ‘Death’ and Resurrection

The media circus around Kim Jong Un’s brief vanishing in April is doubtless fresh in readers’ memories, and also outside our remit. Like many others, this writer weighed in, arguing that 1. North Korea does have a potential [succession](#) problem if something happens to Kim; and 2. DPRK specialists thus need to [discuss](#) such issues. Here we confine ourselves to the inter-Korean aspects, of which there are at least three.

First, the original source of the rumor of heart surgery was the Seoul-based [Daily NK](#). Run by defectors and activists, this is an indispensable resource, with seemingly good if necessarily uncredited sources inside North Korea. Unlike CNN and some others, *Daily NK* never claimed

that Kim was gravely ill. But it did change its story twice, and to its credit flags this: from claimed multiple sources to just one, and from “heart surgery” to “cardiovascular procedure” (apparently a translation issue). That may still be true, as a new mark [spotted](#) by NK News (a totally different organization) on Kim’s wrist could indicate he had such a procedure recently.



Figure 3 Kim Jong Un resurfaces in Suncheon with a new mark on his wrist. Photo: NK News

Second, the aforementioned defector duo rashly smeared egg on their faces. Ji Seong-ho said he was “99% sure” Kim was dead on May 1, the very day he reappeared. Ji apologized, as [did](#) Thae Yong-ho, who had suggested Kim could no longer stand or walk. Naturally, their foes crowded, accusing them of attention-seeking, “fake news,” and worse. One DP lawmaker even urged, outrageously, that neither man should be allowed to join the National Assembly’s Defense or Intelligence Committees.

By contrast, thirdly, the ROK government was both steadfast and, as it turned out, correct in denying that anything was amiss with Kim or North Korea. This suggests good intelligence. Seoul’s claim that Kim was in Wonsan on the east coast, rather than Hyangsan north of Pyongyang as *Daily NK* said, seemed borne out when satellite photographs [analyzed](#) by 38 North showed his personal train parked at his personal station there. Yet Suncheon, where Kim reappeared on May 1, is somewhere else again. There is still much that we do not know.

South-South Outreach Needed

Looking ahead, after his election triumph Moon Jae-in is riding high domestically—for now. But the ROK electoral calendar is unrelenting. He only has two more years to serve, and then what—or rather, who? So far, in a neat pendulum since democracy was restored in 1988, left and right have alternated in power every 10 years, each having two successive presidents. On that basis, another liberal may succeed Moon in 2022; his former premier, Lee Nak-yeon, is one contender. With conservatives

in disarray even before their defeat in April, such continuity is quite likely. Then again, despite the DP's victory in the constituencies, in the national vote the conservative party's clone actually won more votes than the DP's, though it was close.

If Pyongyang remains recalcitrant, and Moon gets blamed for the job losses and fall in GDP already evident due to COVID-19—with worse surely to come—then in 2022 voters may swing back toward the Right again. In that case, as in 2008 when Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh Moo-hyun, Pyongyang will face a much frostier foe in Seoul. As a fascinating [analysis](#) of their programs by Jeongmin Kim of *NK News* confirmed, South Korea's main parties espouse sharply different policies toward North Korea. If he is wise Kim Jong Un really should make nicer with Moon—while the latter is still there.

Equally, both political camps in Seoul should strive, as they have signally failed to hitherto, to forge a bipartisan policy consensus toward Pyongyang. Otherwise, prospects for engagement or even policy consistency in the long term look bleak. The real, or prior challenge may not be so much North-South relations as South Korea's internal divisions. But regrettably, in a winner-takes-all political culture, reaching out to overcome these entrenched South-South hostilities seems even less likely than a renewal of North-South détente any time soon.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2020

Dec. 28–31, 2019: North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) holds a major [meeting](#): the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC). Kim Jong Un gives a wideranging and hardline speech, lasting seven hours. (In view of this, Kim does not deliver his customary New Year address.) Personnel changes are announced, while others apparently go [unannounced](#).

Jan. 1, 2020: Official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) and other DPRK media publish [reports](#) on the just-concluded WPK CC Plenary. From these lengthy summaries (circa 3,000 words), it seems that Kim Jong Un, unprecedentedly, made no mention of South Korea or inter-Korean relations. (This is usually the topic of a substantial section of his New Year address; see [past issues](#) of *Comparative Connections*.)

Jan. 1, 2020: South Korea [urges](#) the North not to carry out Kim Jong Un’s threat to test a “new strategic weapon,” as this “would not help denuclearization negotiations and efforts to build peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

Jan. 2, 2020: *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, [quotes](#) the Unification Ministry (MOU) as saying that, given Kim’s silence about South Korea in his recent speech, Seoul is “closely watching” whether Pyongyang plans to issue a separate message about inter-Korean relations. This stance of watching and waiting is [reiterated](#) on January 7. The South waits in vain: no message is forthcoming from the North.

Jan. 4, 2020: The *Wall Street Journal* reports that US diplomats [intervened](#) with Vietnamese authorities in December to prevent 13 North Korean refugees—two of whom had attempted suicide—from being repatriated to Pyongyang. The ROK government denies allegations that it had been reluctant to assist. The 13 are said now to be safe in an undisclosed location.

Jan. 6, 2020: Seoul announces what it calls a major restructuring of MOU. This will create a new division within the ministry’s Office of Exchange and Cooperation to handle border cooperation issues, such as turning the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into a “global peace zone.” The ROK Cabinet duly [approves](#) the reorganization on February 4.

Jan. 7, 2020: President Moon Jae-in delivers his New Year’s [Address](#). Unlike Kim, Moon has much to say about inter-Korean relations. Regretting the current impasse, but not blaming the North, he reiterates his commitment to cooperation across the board, and also to realizing Kim’s long-promised [visit](#) to South Korea. He does not mention the nuclear issue.

Jan. 9, 2020: MOU [tells](#) *NK News* that, despite the impasse in inter-Korean ties, it approved 612 contacts with North Korea last year, down 15% from 707 in 2018. A larger fall might have been expected, but these data are only for *applications* by South Koreans to meet, phone, fax, or email the North. They do not necessarily imply that such contact actually took place.

Jan. 10, 2020: *NK News* [reports](#) MOU as saying that Seoul is considering how to make it easier for South Koreans to visit the North—including, potentially, being issued DPRK visas. The spokesperson added: “It is our consistent stance that sanctions against North Korea [do] not apply to independent tours.” He added that North and South are “in discussions” on the resumption of tourism, while admitting “differences in stance” and continued concerns.

Jan. 10, 2020: Fresh back from Washington DC, where he briefly met President Trump, Chung Eui-yong, head of the Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae) national security office, [says](#) that the US president asked President Moon to wish Kim Jong Un a happy birthday on his behalf. (The DPRK leader turned 36—probably—on Jan. 8.) Chung adds that the birthday greeting was duly delivered, but does not reveal how it was transmitted.

Jan. 11, 2020: Reacting to the above, North Korea's ex-nuclear negotiator Kim Kye Gwan, now an adviser to DPRK foreign ministry, [chides](#) "the excited south Korean authorities" for their "lingering hope for playing the role of 'mediator' in the DPRK-US relations," which he calls "presumptuous ... meddling." He warns Seoul it "had better not dream a fabulous dream that we would return to the dialogue with thankful feelings for the birthday greetings."

Jan. 14, 2020: Moon at his New Year's press conference [insists](#) that it is premature "to be pessimistic about South-North dialogue and North Korea-US dialogue." Despite admitting that now is "not a stage to be optimistic" either, Moon says he will keep pushing to expand inter-Korean cooperation with an "optimistic prospect." He [adds](#) that such cooperation could help build momentum for easing sanctions against Pyongyang.

Jan. 14, 2020: In a thinly veiled criticism of Moon's push for individual tourism to Mount Kumgang, the US State Department [insists](#) that Washington and Seoul are committed to a unified approach toward Pyongyang.

Jan. 15, 2020: Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [affirms](#) that Seoul will look at ways to improve relations with Pyongyang without waiting for progress in US-DPRK talks. The same day his ministry [says](#) it is looking at "various formats" to allow South Koreans to visit Mount Kumgang. A day later MOU [adds](#): "We are making a list of what we can do on our own [in terms of joint projects with North Korea] with regard to inter-Korean relations"

Jan. 16, 2020: Citing unspecified ROK government sources, Yonhap [says](#) North Korea has again demanded that the South remove its facilities at Mount Kumgang. (But see January 31.)

Jan. 17, 2020: A day after US Ambassador to the ROK Harry Harris says Seoul should consult Washington on any plans to engage Pyongyang, MOU [retorts](#) that "Our policy with regard to North Korea comes under our sovereignty."

Jan. 27, 2020: MOU [says](#) that 1,048 North Korean defectors arrived in the South in 2019, the lowest figure in 18 years. As usual, females (845) outnumbered males (202). After peaking at 2,904 in 2009, since Kim Jong Un took power in 2011 numbers have fallen to below 1,500 annually.

Jan. 30, 2020: In a rare meeting at the now largely idle joint liaison office at Kaesong, North and South Korea [agree](#) to temporarily close the facility, due to concerns about the new Wuhan coronavirus strain. All 58 South Koreans working there—17 officials and 41 support staff—return home across the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) the same day. MOU says the two Koreas will set up new telephone and fax lines to maintain contact during the suspension.

Jan. 31, 2020: Via the new inter-Korean phone line (see Jan. 30), Pyongyang [notifies](#) Seoul that, because of coronavirus concerns, it is suspending plans to remove South Korean-built facilities at the Mount Kumgang resort on its east coast.

Feb. 3, 2020: ROK defense ministry (MND) [insists](#) that, contra assertions in local media, the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement signed in September 2018 does not bar or restrict joint US-ROK military exercises, including near the DMZ.

Feb. 7, 2020: MND [clarifies](#) that despite otherwise stalled relations, inter-Korean military hotlines are working normally. The two sides communicate twice daily, at 0900 and 1600, plus additionally as circumstances require. MND [reiterates](#) this message on April 27.

Feb. 7, 2020: MOU [says](#) that in weighing the possibility of individual tourism to North Korea, it is "taking the issue of the new coronavirus into consideration."

Feb. 9, 2020: At a forum in Pyeongchang, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [reaffirms](#) the need to push for inter-Korean cooperation in railways, roads and tourism.

Feb. 10, 2020: MOU [insists](#) that individual tourism to North Korea by South Koreans is not a matter for consultation with Washington, as this is not banned under UN sanctions.

Feb. 10, 2020: Four years after South Korea's then President Park Geun-hye abruptly closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last inter-Korean joint venture, business persons with investments there hold a [rally](#) in Seoul. Urging that the zone be reopened, they ask the government to deliver a letter asking North Korea to let them visit and prepare for reopening. Separately, MOU [reiterates](#) its own (more abstract) view that the KIC should reopen when conditions are right.

Feb. 13, 2020: The DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [denounces](#) the Liberty Korea Party (LKP), the main ROK conservative opposition party, for recruiting two prominent defectors from North Korea to run as its candidates in forthcoming parliamentary elections in April.

Feb. 16, 2020: North Korea finally mentions South Korea's push for individual tourism to the North—but not favorably. *DPRK Today* [attacks](#) Seoul for seeking US approval for this plan.

Feb. 17, 2020: MOU [says](#) Pyongyang has made no response to calls for the KIC to reopen.

Feb. 18, 2020: Meeting in Seoul, some 200 North Korean defectors [launch](#) a preparatory committee to establish their first-ever political party. (See also March 6, below.)

Feb. 19, 2020: Seoul [says](#) the ROK will consider any requests from international agencies to help Pyongyang fight COVID-19, provided it is formally asked to assist.

Feb. 21, 2020: In a rare if backhanded compliment, *Choson Sinbo*, the newspaper of pro-DPRK ethnic North Koreans in Japan, [praises](#) the Oscar-winning ROK film *Parasite* as a “masterpiece” for laying bare the problem of class warfare, and “clearly revealing the reality in which a small number of the wealthy dominates the absolute majority.” This is the movie's first mention in any DPRK-related media.

Feb. 24, 2020: The magazine *DPRK Today* [attacks](#) ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha for what it calls the “spineless act” of discussing North Korean denuclearization with US and Japanese counterparts at the recent Munich Security Conference: “There are still fools asking for subservience and humiliation ... oblivious to the bitter lesson history has taught us.”

Feb. 24, 2020: With coronavirus cases spiking in South Korea, MOU [says](#) it will postpone the resumption of tourism to Panmunjom, scheduled to begin on February 26–28.

Feb. 26, 2020: Reacting to news that North Korea's former diplomat Thae Yong-ho will stand for the conservative United Future Party (UFP) in South Korea's parliamentary election on April 15, the DPRK website *Meari* [renews](#) allegations against Thae (first made in 2016) of embezzlement and rape. It adds: “Driving these scums (sic) to the forefront of confrontation between the two Koreas is an intolerable challenge to our nation's desire for unification.”

Feb. 26, 2020: A poll of 3,000 Northern defectors (almost 10% of the total, 33,523) by Hana, a state foundation which aids their resettlement, [finds](#) that 17.2% experienced discrimination last year: slightly less than the 2018 figure of 20.2%.

Feb. 27, 2020: DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [scorns](#) Moon's outreach to Japan, accusing him of “begging for more frequent meetings” with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo.

March 1, 2020: On the 101st anniversary of an historic uprising against Japanese occupation, and with coronavirus cases rising fast, Moon [calls](#) for international cooperation to fight the virus, including with North Korea and Japan: “The March 1 Independence Movement once again reminds us that we can prevail over anything as long as we stand together.”

March 2, 2020: MOU [says](#) South Korea will prepare to expand cooperation with the North in health and related fields. A day later the ministry [notes](#) that inter-Korean cooperation on healthcare is a key focus of its annual policy plan, recently delivered to the Blue House. Other goals—easier said than done—include a push for individual tourism to North Korea, and transform the DMZ into a peace zone.

March 2, 2020: North Korea [test-fires](#) two short-range projectiles, for the first time this year. After holding an emergency videoconference of security chiefs, the Blue House [expresses](#) “strong concern” and, in notably mild terms, urges the North to halt acts that are “not helpful to efforts to ease military tensions on the Korean peninsula.”

March 3, 2020: In her first ever statement published in her name, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [lambastes](#) Seoul's criticism of the North's strike drills as (among much else) shocking, senseless, imbecile, and like a frightened dog: "Such incoherent assertion and actions made by Chongwadae only magnify our distrust, hatred and scorn for the south side as a whole."

March 4, 2020: Spokesman [says](#) the Blue House is "prudently" analyzing Kim Yo Jong's diatribe, and does not plan to respond formally. MOU [calls](#) for "mutual respect" between the two Koreas.

March 4, 2020: DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [attacks](#) ROK movies and dramas for "anti-republic" fabrications. No names are mentioned. Ironically, the TV drama "Crash Landing on You," all the rage, is widely seen in the South as giving a favorable portrayal of the North—and [criticized](#) on that count by some conservatives.

March 5, 2020: After an ROK TV channel aired footage of a DPRK medical worker wearing a dental mask with the logo of a Southern brand, Seoul [denies](#) that South Korea has provided any facemasks to North Korea.

March 5, 2020: Blue House [says](#) Kim Jong Un has sent Moon a personal letter, delivered the previous day. Expressing "quiet support" for South Korea's fight against the coronavirus, and solicitude for Moon's health, Kim assures Moon of "his constant friendship and trust." Kim also gives his "frank" thoughts about the situation on the peninsula; these are not revealed.

March 6, 2020: Conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* [claims](#) that Kim's letter to Moon asked for help fighting the coronavirus, and that Moon responded positively. MOU [denies](#) this, insisting that the North has not requested any such assistance.

March 6, 2020: The Inter-Korean Unification Party (IKUP), the first political party formed by North Korean defectors in the South, is officially [launched](#) in Seoul. Its program is to liberate the North from autocracy and promote defector rights in the South. It goes on to gain a paltry 10,833 votes in April 15's elections. (See also February 18 above.)

March 8, 2020: North Korea again [test-fires projectiles](#) (three, this time) into the East Sea. South Korea again remonstrates. Two further tests follow on March 20 and 28—making this the DPRK's [busiest ever](#) month for missile launches, with a total of nine projectiles fired.

March 11-12, 2020: In two statements on successive days, MOU [pours](#) cold water on [calls](#) for the KIC to be [reopened](#) to produce face masks, in short supply in the South. The ministry [notes](#) that, among other obstacles, North Korea has completely closed its borders as an anti-coronavirus measure.

March 19, 2020: MOU [licenses](#) two border cities, Paju and Goyang, to operate independent humanitarian aid projects in North Korea. Four other local governments—Seoul and Incheon cities, and South Chungcheong and Gyeonggi provinces (but see March 24 below)—already have such permission. This is all somewhat notional, given Pyongyang's non-cooperation.

March 20, 2020: Seoul renews its [call](#) for the two Koreas to cooperate in fighting COVID-19.

March 20, 2020: North Korea fires two projectiles presumed to be short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

March 23, 2020: A day after Kim Yo Jong [reveals](#) that Trump offered to assist Pyongyang in combating the coronavirus, Seoul [repeats](#) its call for the two Koreas to work together on this: "from the perspective of humanitarian and mutually beneficial cooperation ... closely related to the right to health and survival of the people of both countries."

March 24, 2020: Seoul [says](#) South Korean NGOs can get government financial support for coronavirus-related aid projects in North Korea if they have an agreement with Pyongyang. Two days later, though, MOU [nixes](#) a bid by the local administration in Gyeonggi province (which surrounds Seoul) to send masks and test kits worth 1.2 billion won (\$980,000), saying that this "failed to meet the requirements."

March 26, 2020: At a memorial [ceremony](#) at the ROK Navy's 2nd Fleet Command in Pyeongtaek on the 10th anniversary of the [sinking](#) of the frigate *Cheonan*, with 46 lives lost, Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo says, "We should protect the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto inter-Korean maritime border) all the more tightly to make sure past sorrows such as the Cheonan attack never are repeated, and establish North Korea's denuclearization and the Korean Peninsula's lasting peace." Pyongyang has always [denied](#) responsibility.

March 28, 2020: North Korea fires what appear to be two short-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea.

March 30, 2020: ROK's Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Promotion Council (IKECPC) [approves](#) spending 688 million won (\$565,000) to create a digital archive of relics unearthed when, for a decade starting in 2007, the two Koreas jointly excavated Manwoldae palace near Kaesong, which was Korea's capital during the Koryo dynasty (918-1392).

March 31, 2020: Despite Pyongyang's [threat](#) a day earlier to stop negotiating with the US, MOU [reiterates](#) Seoul's readiness to assist a resumption of long-stalled denuclearization talks.

April 2, 2020: MOU [says](#) it will give aid worth \$5.73 million to the DPRK via international agencies this year. This comprises \$4 million to the World Health Organization (WHO) for women and children, announced in December, and \$1.73 million through the Red Cross to help typhoon recovery efforts. Seoul's contribution is much the largest within the global total of \$9.43 million in aid to North Korea pledged this year. MOU also [okays](#) an unnamed NGO's plan to supply hand sanitizers worth \$81,000 to North Korea to help fend off COVID-19, the first such private aid this year.

April 7, 2020: MOU [predicts](#)—correctly, it turns out, suggesting good intelligence sources in Pyongyang—that coronavirus concerns may prompt North Korea to streamline its upcoming parliamentary meeting (see April 12) by having deputies register on the day—rather than the usual 1-2 days in advance, followed by paying homage at the Kims' mausoleum and the like.

April 11, 2020: Kim Jong Un chairs Politburo [meeting](#) of the Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers' Party (WP). Thereafter Kim is unseen until May 1, which sparks external speculation about his health and whereabouts.

April 12, 2020: DPRK Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), North Korea's rubber-stamp Parliament, [holds](#) its annual spring session—two days late, without explanation. The agenda includes the usual economic and budget [reports](#), as always with no hard numbers. Kim Jong Un, who is no longer an SPA deputy, does not attend this year.

April 15, 2020: Customary celebrations of "Sun's Day"—Kim Il Sung's birthday—in Pyongyang are scaled down, presumably due to COVID-19 concerns. Unprecedentedly, Kim Jong Un is [not present](#).

April 15, 2020: Four-yearly parliamentary [elections](#) in South Korea see a swing to Moon's ruling Democratic Party (DP), giving it an overall majority in the National Assembly for the first time. Two North Korean [defectors](#) win seats for the conservative opposition, including former diplomat Thae Yong-ho (now Tae Kumin), who is elected in Gangnam.

April 17, 2020: [Reiterating](#) its determination to facilitate individual tourism to North Korea, MOU adds that this is subject to progress in tackling the coronavirus.

April 20, 2020: MOU [reports](#) that the number of North Koreans visiting the South fell from 809 in 2018 to zero in 2019 as relations chilled. 9,835 South Koreans visited the North. If commuting by ROK staff at the joint liaison office in Kaesong is excluded, the figure drops to 576: sharply down from 4,612 in 2018.

April 21, 2020: *Daily NK*, a Seoul-based online journal run by activists and defectors with sources inside North Korea, [alleges](#) that Kim Jong Un is recovering after heart surgery. It later modifies that to "a cardiovascular procedure." (Unlike other media, *Daily NK* does not claim that Kim is gravely ill, much less dead.) This report intensifies worldwide media speculation.

April 21, 2020: Various South Korean government sources [insist](#) that all is normal in the North. Seoul firmly maintains that line, damping down speculation about Kim's health.

April 23, 2020: South Korea [designates](#) a planned 111-km railway, running north from the east coast port city Gangneung to Jeju near the DMZ, as an inter-Korean project. This means reconstruction can proceed without the normal feasibility study.

April 23, 2020: MOU [approves](#) an unnamed NGO's plan to send 20,000 items of protective clothing worth \$162,000 to help North Korea combat COVID-19. No more details are given.

April 24, 2020: MOU releases mid-term plan for developing inter-Korean relations. [Ideas](#) include a joint event in June to mark the 20th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit. There is no sign that Pyongyang is interested.

April 28, 2020: Reiterating the ROK's consistent stance, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [denounces](#) reports that Kim Jong Un is gravely ill as "fake news," and deplores what he [calls](#) an "infodemic" of speculation on the subject.

May 1, 2020: Kim Jong Un [reappears](#). Flanked by most of the top DPRK leadership, he [cuts](#) a ribbon to open the Suncheon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory, some 50 miles north of Pyongyang. *NKNews* [notes](#) a new mark on his wrist, which could indicate a minor cardiac procedure.

May 3, 2020: South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [report](#) that at about 0741 Northern gunfire struck a guardpost at Cheorwon in the central part of the peninsula, leaving four bullet holes. Following procedure, the ROKA reacted with broadcast warnings, followed by two bursts of return fire (10 rounds each). Though a clear breach of 2018's inter-Korean military agreement, Seoul reckons the North did not intend a provocation. The JCS noted that "it was quite foggy and the North Korean soldiers usually rotate shifts around that time,"

May 3, 2020: Yonhap cites an unnamed Blue House official as [denying](#) that Kim Jong Un has undergone any kind of medical procedure.

May 4, 2020: ROK MND [says](#) Pyongyang has not yet offered any explanation for yesterday's gunfire incident at the DMZ.

May 4, 2020: Yonhap [says](#) that the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), an ROK state think-tank, is proposing that South Korea sign a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with North Korea, "to accelerate reform ... and to help it integrate into the international market." (KIEP's [homepage](#) lists a report with this date, but in [fact](#) published last December—so it is unclear what exactly is new here.)

May 6, 2020: US-led United Nations Command (UNC) [says](#) it is conducting "a full investigation" into May 3 border shooting incident. It was reportedly unable to enter the Northern side of the DMZ. Pyongyang has still offered no explanation, much less apology.

May 6, 2020: South Korea's Unification Minister [visits](#) the DMZ. Kim Yeon-chul's trip to Panmunjom (nowhere near Cheorwon) is to assess preparations for the planned resumption of tourism there, suspended since last year's outbreak of African swine fever.

May 8, 2020: Maj. Gen Kim Do-gyun, MND's point man on inter-Korean affairs, is promoted to three stars—but also taken off the case. From next week he becomes chief of the Capital Defense Command. Kim led the ROK side in 2018's inter-Korean military talks. The [report](#) does not state who will replace him on the North Korea beat at MND.

