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**NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

## A TEMPESTUOUS SUMMER

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Claiming to be suddenly furious about defector activists sending propaganda via balloon across the Demilitarized Zone, North Korea issued ever more violent threats against the South, culminating in the symbolic but extreme act of blowing up the joint liaison office in Kaesong in June. Moon Jae-in's government deplored that and other aggressive Northern acts, yet its tone was more pained than sharp, and Moon remained oddly emollient toward Pyongyang overall. In July he named a new minister of unification who had allegedly been pro-North in his student days, as well as reshuffling three other top security posts. Although the new appointees were all even more strongly pro-engagement than their predecessors, North Korea showed little sign of being impressed.

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This was a tempestuous summer on the Korean Peninsula in more ways than one. Relations between the two Koreas, already bad, reached a new nadir in June. Claiming to be suddenly furious about defector activists sending propaganda via balloon across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), North Korea issued ever more violent threats against the South. These culminated in the symbolic but extreme act of physically blowing up the (by then unoccupied) joint liaison office in Kaesong, just north of the DMZ, on June 16. Moon Jae-in's government deplored that and other aggressive Northern acts, like opening dams to send floodwaters downstream into the South without warning. Yet its tone was more pained than sharp, and Moon remained oddly emollient toward Pyongyang overall. In July he named a new minister of unification (MOU) in Lee In-young, who had allegedly been pro-North in his student days, as well as reshuffling three other top security posts. Although the new appointees were all even more strongly pro-engagement than their predecessors, North Korea showed little sign of being impressed.

No doubt Kim Jong Un was preoccupied elsewhere, by tempests of a more literal kind. After the longest summer [monsoon](#) season ever recorded, the peninsula was buffeted by back-to-back typhoons in August and early September. Both Koreas suffered—separately, since Kim refused all aid from the South (or anyone), citing COVID-19 concerns, just as he had rebuffed Moon's offer to help regarding the virus itself. With North Korea turning inward and focused on reconstruction—a new Party Congress, set for January, looks like an attempt at a fresh start—and the clock starting to tick on Moon's term of office which must end in May 2022, the chances of inter-Korean cooperation reviving any time soon seem sadly small.

### More Fake News re: Kim Jong Un

Compared to the storms—manmade and otherwise—which were to come, the period under review began quietly. After coming back from the (allegedly) dead on May Day (discussed in our previous issue), Kim Jong Un promptly vanished again for three more weeks. Calm heads in Seoul advised that this was not unusual, and Kim duly resurfaced on May 24—but not before global tabloid [media](#) confected wild tales that the resurrected Kim was actually a double. The same used to be claimed regarding his [father](#) Kim Jong Il; one Japanese [professor](#)

has insisted that the real KJI died in 2003, with all subsequent appearances being by impostors.

Small wonder that in May the ROK Ministry of Unification (MOU) launched a “fake news” page to scotch some of the more egregious myths. It began with anti-Moon allegations on YouTube that South Korea was secretly sending facemasks to the North, when they were (or had briefly been) in short supply in the South. Such nonsense appeared unstoppable. August saw a new bout when [Chang Song-min](#), a known [maverick](#) with a history of spreading rumor, claimed that Kim was in a coma and his sister Kim Yo Jong was in charge. Though lacking a shred of evidence, this once again made [headlines](#). Clicks rule, and North Korea is great bait.

Back in the real world, May 10 was Moon Jae-in's third anniversary as ROK president. He marked this with a big speech, which *inter alia* renewed all the proposals South Korea has been making for cooperation—despite the North showing no interest since late 2018. Moon, in particular, suggested quarantine cooperation as a good first step, as this would not be in breach of international sanctions. Admitting that Pyongyang was not responding to Seoul's initiatives, he blamed this on “difficulties” due to COVID-19. The North kept its silence.

Late May brought a grimmer anniversary. On May 24, 2010 the ROK announced sanctions as a reprisal for the sinking of the corvette *Cheonan*, with 46 fatalities, two months earlier. Then-President Lee Myung-bak banned all inter-Korean trade—with the large exception of the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which he pragmatically kept going. (This journal [analyzed](#) that episode in detail at the time: still interesting reading, a decade later.)

Here is a puzzle: Moon's government constantly frets about how inter-Korean cooperation is stymied by sanctions, especially those imposed by nine unanimous [votes](#) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) between 2006 and 2017. Yet as Chad O'Carroll [noted](#) in July, successive ROK administrations over the years have also tied their own hands with a series of bilateral sanctions, beginning with Lee's “May 24 measures.” Moon has shown no inclination to undo any of these, which might have been tricky with Washington but surely not impossible.

As May 24 approached, MOU weighed in, [muddying](#) the waters further. On May 20 it claimed that past exemptions have effectively eroded the May 24 sanctions, so they no longer pose a hindrance to inter-Korean exchanges. Next day it reiterated that stance, but declined to say if the sanctions might therefore be lifted. At that point the minister stepped in: Kim Yeon-chul clarified that the May 24 measures will remain in place. As Christopher Green nicely [put](#) it, “they are Schrödinger’s sanctions: both alive and well, yet a dead letter at the same time.”

## An Explosive June

If a quiet May gave leisure for such casuistry, June sharply concentrated minds in Seoul. Our last issue recorded the debut in March of Kim Jong Un’s sister, Kim Yo Jong, as an issuer of statements in her own name and right: one upbraiding Moon Jae-in, then another—more polite—directed at Donald Trump. This pattern continued, and intensified. On June 4 Ms. Kim fired a second broadside at Seoul, which KCNA headlined: “Kim Yo Jong Rebukes S. Korean Authorities for Conniving at Anti-DPRK Hostile Act of ‘Defectors from North.’”

As that title suggests, Ms. Kim was vexed (purportedly) by defectors who launch propaganda-bearing balloons into the North, most recently on May 31. Insulting the perpetrators—“human scum” and “mongrel dogs,” three times each—she was scarcely less contemptuous of “the south Korean authorities” (not government) for failing to stop such activity. Unless they do, she warned, “they had better get ... ready for possibility of the complete withdrawal of the already desolate Kaesong Industrial Park following the stop to tour of Mt. Kumgang, or shutdown of the north-south joint liaison office whose existence only adds to trouble, or the scrapping of the north-south agreement in military field which is hardly of any value.”

No less remarkable than this diatribe, if far more polite, was Seoul’s swift reply. Without a word of reproach for Ms. Kim’s tone or content, the executive summary could well be: “Yes ma’am!” Or as Yonhap’s headline put it: “S. Korea to legislate ban on anti-Pyongyang leaflet campaign after N.K. threats.” MOU stressed that it is trying to make such “tension-causing acts”—meaning the leafleteers, not Pyongyang—illegal. The ministry added that the leaflets were also a pain to locals, causing litter, as they

mostly land in the South anyway. These were not mere words. Seoul also began harassing activist groups by reviewing their registration and more, prompting [criticism](#) from those [affected](#), plus politicians and human rights [watchdogs](#).

This emollient (not to say craven) response cut no ice with the North, which blasted right back next day with another, even ruder, [statement](#), this time by an unnamed spokesman of the United Front Department of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea. Besides contemptuously dismissing Seoul’s excuses, this in effect admitted that Pyongyang had it all planned: “We do not hide that we have had long in mind decisive measures to fundamentally remove all provocations from the south and to completely shut down and remove all the contact leverage with the south side ... We are about to start the work that can hurt the south side soon to make it suffer from annoyance.” This is reproduced as Appendix I, so readers can see the tone for themselves and judge what hopes it offers for any kind of future engagement.

Meanwhile the regime whipped up one of its campaigns. Article after article, in both domestic media and those for external consumption, carried reports of students, workers, et al, at various locations angrily denouncing the “human scum” and threatening dire retribution. (Appendix 2 lists those published on KCNA – there were many more in other media – and the chronology quotes from some of the more significant ones.) All this went on for over a week, steadily building—but to what? South Koreans took comfort in the thought that, if the North really planned to attack, it would hardly scream its intentions in advance.

On June 13 things became clearer when Kim Yo Jong issued another statement. This included vague threats—“the right to taking the next action against the enemy will be entrusted to the General Staff of our army”—but also a specific warning: “Before long, a tragic scene of the useless north-south joint liaison office completely collapsed would be seen.” Sure enough, on June 16 the Kaesong liaison office—built with some \$14 million of South Korean taxpayers’ money, and opened barely 21 months earlier with great fanfare as a 24/7 point of contact—was blown up. (It was unoccupied, due to coronavirus concerns.) Pictures showed that the blast also seriously damaged the adjacent

and larger management building of the idled Kaesong Industrial Complex, blowing out most of its windows.



Figure 1 North Korea blows up an inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

What to make of such extraordinary behavior? The ROK's official [statement](#), striking a note more of sorrow than anger, said that this "abandons the hopes of everyone who wanted the development of inter-Korean relations and peace settlement in the Korean Peninsula ... [All] responsibility of this situation lies in the North." Perhaps clutching at straws, and in no way condoning such wanton violence, at least there was no loss of life—unlike the *Cheonan* [a decade ago](#), the last time Pyongyang felt it needed to convey to Seoul its vehement anger and sense of betrayal. This time it contented itself with symbolic aggression. Progress?

The North was not quite done yet. On June 17 Kim Yo Jong let fly at Moon again, this time directly and with both barrels; the headline read "Honeyed Words of Impudent Man Are Disgusting." This at last prompted a sharp riposte from the Blue House, as did Pyongyang's revelation that Moon had secretly offered to send special envoys to defuse the crisis. North Korea's wider agitation continued, this time with a new new tack—if hardly consistent. Angry at being leafleted, it would riposte by leafleting the South right back, so there! Pictures showed images of Moon Jae-in in an ashtray, smudged with cigarette butts. Millions of these were going to be launched across the DMZ, they warned—but it never happened. In late June North Korea called off the campaign as suddenly as it had begun—as shown in Appendix 2.



Figure 2 A photo of anti-South Korea leaflets featuring President Moon Jae-in covered with cigarette butts and dirt, taken from the Korean Central News Agency website. Photo: KCNA via Yonhap

This writer has endeavored to analyze these strange goings-on elsewhere. One thing is clear. The leaflets issue, regarding which there are genuine [concerns](#), was not the real point but just a pretext. Reading the successive DPRK statements, especially that of June 5 (Appendix 1), makes it clear that Pyongyang planned all this in advance.

Mission accomplished, one assumes—though what mission exactly remains a mystery. Or perhaps not. The liaison office explosion prompted South Korea's Unification Minister, Kim Yeon-chul, to offer his resignation—which President Moon promptly accepted. As I wrote [elsewhere](#), "why a Southern minister should take the rap for an unprovoked act of aggression by Pyongyang is a mystery." Moon may have thought this was the moment for a policy reset, with new personnel; that would be understandable. Time for a fresh approach?

Not a bit of it. Instead, Moon decided to [double down](#) with more of the same. The new MOU, Lee In-young, hitherto parliamentary leader of the ruling Democratic Party (DP), is a former activist who in the 1980s led a radical student body, Chondaehyop, widely seen as pro-North. This prompted sharp but fascinating [exchanges](#) at his confirmation hearing with Thae Yong-ho: the former DPRK diplomat, now a lawmaker for the conservative opposition party (itself recently renamed as People's Power in yet another rebranding). Some, this [writer](#) included, found Lee rather evasive; [others](#) thought it all a storm in a teacup. Lee took office on July 27.

In a wider reshuffle, Park Jie-won was a surprise choice to head the National Intelligence Service



[illegible]

## Redefector Brings in Virus Shock! (Allegedly)

On July 26 KCNA [reported](#) “an emergency event” in Kaesong. A week earlier, a “runaway” (kinder than “human scum”) who had fled South three years before came home, once again “illegally crossing the demarcation line.” This time he brought something with him: “the vicious virus.” Or maybe he didn’t: KCNA admitted that several checkups were inconclusive. Nonetheless, the full might of the state and party swung into rapid action.

What was this all about? Seoul confirmed the defection, which is interesting in itself on several fronts. Such cases are rare but not unique: there have been at least [29](#), maybe more. Also rare is crossing the DMZ directly, as opposed to going the long way round via China. What may be unique, and a comment on both sides' border security (or lack thereof), is that the 24-year-old Kim returned the same way he had arrived: by swimming to/from Ganghwa island, whose drainage ditches are, or were, [unmonitored](#). He did show up in Southern surveillance footage, but that only came to [light](#) after the North announced his arrival. An ROK general has been relieved of his command; his KPA counterparts probably face a harsher fate.



Figure 4 Who knew it was this easy! A North Korean defector is believed to have gone through the drain in Ganghwa County, Incheon to escape. Photo: [Korea JoongAng Daily](#)

Kim was reportedly a [rape](#) suspect in Seoul, but South Korean authorities doubt that he had the coronavirus. In a thoughtful [commentary](#), Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein noted how convenient this tall tale was. North Korea's long and porous northern border with China is a far likelier source of infection. But easier to blame South Korea, demonizing it as a source of danger—rather than of help, as Moon's government would wish. "COVID-19 Cases Increase In S. Korea" is a headline DPRK media lazily and mendaciously [used](#) 18 separate times between March and June this year, with nary a hint of the actual ups and downs, much less the overall success (fingers crossed) of the ROK's battle against the virus. On a slightly more positive note, recently Pyongyang seems to be accepting small amounts of virus-related aid from Southern NGOs, while still officially spurning Seoul or any outside assistance.

### Much Ado A-Barter Nothing

With South Korea's new North-focused security team in post for little over a month, it would be premature to judge its performance. Our next issue, published in January, will be a better time for such an appraisal. Still, the first straws in the wind are not encouraging. Quite apart from North Korea's lack of interest (to put it mildly), one may wonder whether "more of the same" is the best way. Moreover, the clock is ticking. With just five years to make a mark, most ROK presidents become lame ducks as their term draws to a close. However unfairly, in Pyongyang they may already have given up on Moon and be wondering who they will have to deal with next come May 2022.

Meanwhile, Moon keeps trying. But the lofty agreements and big hopes of 2018 have given

way to scrabbling around for loopholes, real or imaginary, in the sanctions regime. Our last issue looked at one of these, the idea of individual tourism to Mount Kumgang, and judging it a seriously daft idea, on five separate grounds. Yet this fantasy remains an avowed policy goal for Seoul, recently [endorsed](#) by new MOU Lee In-young.

Now we have the barter deal that never was. On Aug. 12 Yonhap deemed this worthy of one of its News Focus [backgrounders](#), headlined: "Push to barter S. Korean sugar for NK liquor raises both hopes, concerns." In June, a farmers' NGO, Unification Nonghyup, inked a deal with two DPRK entities to barter Southern sugar for Northern liquor, candy, and other items. Worth all of 150 million won (around \$127,000), this hardly warranted the excitement it generated, even before MOU [nixed](#) it on Aug. 24, after belatedly learning from the NIS that one of the Northern firms was under sanctions. Incompetence and lack of coordination aside, the idea that little loopholes could ever be a royal road to resumed inter-Korean cooperation makes no sense.

It also risks friction with Washington, which the likes of Lee are all too happy to stoke. This transcends our strictly inter-Korean remit, but the idea that the US is a major obstacle to inter-Korean relations, though almost an article of faith among South Korean "progressives" – Park Jie-won has [banged](#) this drum, which may be why he got the NIS job—is a nationalist red herring. As noted above, nine unanimous [votes](#) of the UN Security Council (UNSC) between 2006 and 2017 have sanctioned the DPRK. This effort may be US-led, but it has wide assent. Visiting five European nations in 2018 during the inter-Korean thaw, Moon got no support for easing sanctions—absent serious steps by Pyongyang toward denuclearization. Looking for loopholes in the sanctions regime sends all the wrong signals to the international community. With Kim Jong Un hostile anyway, it's a real mystery why Seoul persists with this approach.

### Nature Unites Korea—In Destruction

The most recent inter-Korean phenomena have been natural events, not manmade. Weather is no respecter of the DMZ, and late summer brought unprecedented extremes. After the longest ever summer monsoon rains, the peninsula was buffeted by back-to-back typhoons. These brought destruction and loss of

life to South and North alike: much worse in the latter, given its greater poverty and concomitant lesser resilience.

Sticking to our inter-Korean remit, there are several implications. First: South Korea is keen to help, but Kim Jong Un on Aug. 13 rejected any outside assistance, claiming speciously that this risked bringing in the coronavirus. Several further typhoons later, as of mid-Sept. he was still sticking to that stance. Second, in direct breach of a North-South accord signed in 2009, North Korea [four times](#)—twice in July, then again on Aug. 3 and 10—released [water](#) from its Hwanggang dam on the Imjin river without warning, causing flood damage downstream in the South. Visiting one affected site, President Moon called the North's action “regrettable”; one could think of stronger words.

Third, the question arises whether this latest body-blow, on top of the harm caused by COVID-19 (or rather the DPRK's efforts to keep it out: closing its borders and stifling trade), all in the context of pressure from UN sanctions, might prompt Kim Jong Un to consider a real change of course. He hinted as much on Sept. 8 in the wake of Typhoon Maysak (and with Haishen yet to strike), contemplating the wreckage in the Komdok mining area in the northeast:

“[Due] to the unexpected damage by typhoon we are faced with the situation in which we cannot help but change the direction of our struggle after comprehensively considering the year-end tasks that were under way with the nation-wide efforts.”

Even before that, on Aug. 19 North Korea unexpectedly announced that the next full WPK Congress will be held in January (of all inhospitable seasons in northern Korea). It was not due until May, a far more clement time of year. With talk even then of a new five-year plan, the implicit aim seemed to be to deflect attention from the imminent and hitherto much-hyped 75th Party Founding anniversary on Oct. 10, which may have all too little to celebrate, and to concentrate on making a fresh start in the New Year.

Truly fresh, or just the same old stale wine in tarted-up bottles? So far Kim Jong Un's vaunted concern for economic development has hardly been bold. Decades after China and Vietnam embraced markets, North Korea is still taking

baby steps, often reversed. If there is one good reason for Moon Jae-in's otherwise puzzling persistence in the face of continual rebuffs, it is perhaps the idea that if and when Kim comes to his senses and decides to turn over a new leaf, South Korea will be there to lend a helping hand. That is not mere nationalist sentimentality, but sound geopolitics. It is in the ROK's national interest to try to regain some of the clout it once had in Pyongyang by virtue of trade, but which the past decade has seen ceded to China.

Yet even if that comes to pass, which is a big if, condoning so much petulant behavior hardly sets up a healthy basis for future inter-Korean relations. As so often before, we shall see.

**Appendix 1:** [Statement](#) of Spokesman for the United Front Department of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, 5 June 2020

Pyongyang, June 5 (KCNA) -- A spokesman of the United Front Department of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea published a statement on Friday.

The statement reads:

Today, our people are feeling towering rage and disgust towards the act of scattering anti-DPRK leaflets by the "defectors from the north" and the south Korean authorities' connivance at it.

Though it is wise to avoid things filthy, it is hard to contain fury towards mongrel dogs which dare faulted the dignity of our supreme leadership and went out of control to fly dirty trash to our sacred area.

Reflecting the enagement of our people, Kim Yo Jong, first vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, issued a statement on June 4 giving a very meaningful warning to those human scum and the south Korean authorities who left the thing to take its own course to properly understand the gravity and catastrophic aftereffect of the situation and to do what they should do.

However, the attitude of the southern neighbor towards this is quite extraordinary.

The south side seems to be used to give a favorable interpretation of dreams. First, it construed the statement as a threat to it and then foolishly analyzed that it is a hidden message proposing the south side to come out for exchange and cooperation first. With time it, saying that though leaflets were scattered ten times last year and three times this year the north side has called the recent one into particular question, has a pipe dream that the north seems to hope for dialogue and negotiations.

What stunned us is that a spokesperson for the "Ministry of Unification" made a senseless remark that the leaflet-scattering should be stopped as most of the leaflets scattered by the "defectors from the north" fall in the area of the south side to pollute the ecological environment in the area of the south side along the Military Demarcation Line and have bad impact on the life and living conditions of the inhabitants.

The south side has gone so impudent as to claim that it has long taken a measure for preventing the leaflet-scattering to fundamentally defuse tension along the line where both sides stand in confrontation and that an efficient plan for improving the system was under examination in a bid to give impression that the inglorious incident happened by mistake.

Nowhere can there be found even slight regret or a will not to take useless acts of escalating tension again.

We clearly know that it is not just a drunken frenzy of a man, being unaware of the fact that the recent incident amounts to the serious abrogation of the historic declaration and agreements made before the nation and a thoughtless act of stoking hostility and tension.

Before caviling at others, they should read each word and phrase of the statement, recalling that it was a warning issued by the first vice department director looking after the affairs with south Korea.

If they fall short of understanding its meaning, they must be ignorant imbeciles and if they feign ignorance, they must be the meanest bastards.

First Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong Friday gave instructions to the field in charge of the affairs with south Korea to start examination for the technical implementation of the content mentioned in the statement.



It was May 31 when the anti-DPRK leaflets were openly flown but the nonstop disposal of dirty rubbish from the south side has exhausted us so much as to come to a clearer conclusion that enemies are enemies after all.

We do not hide that we have had long in mind decisive measures to fundamentally remove all provocations from the south and to completely shut down and remove all the contact leverage with the south side.

As the first thing, we will definitely withdraw the idling north-south joint liaison office housed in the Kaesong Industrial Zone to be followed by effectuation of various measures which we had already implied.

The south Korean authorities are belatedly making a little more advanced excuses, claiming they are reviewing a bill for stopping leaflet-scattering. Then does it mean that they signed the agreement in the military field on halting all the hostile acts in the areas along the Military Demarcation Line with no definite guarantees like such a bill.

Then even though we start things that can be annoyance to the south in the area bordering it, it will be left with no words until the bill is adopted and put into effect.

We are about to start the work that can hurt the south side soon to make it suffer from annoyance.

Our determination is to follow as far as the evil cycle of the confrontation leads while facing the situation squarely, because our path is always straight.

The south willing to pull down a tower which is hard to build is now keen on turning nightmare into a reality. So will there be any need to stop it.

It is our stand that it is better to remove and break things which would finally be removed and broken. -  
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## **Appendix 2: All KCNA Items on North-South Relations, 2020 so far (January 1 through Sept.10)**

*Reverse chronological order, most recent items first. Nothing new has appeared since July 7.*

Source: <http://kcna.kp/kcna.user.home.retrieveHomeInfoList.kcmsf>, section “North-South”  
(nb: KCNA does not give unique hyperlinks for either separate pages or individual articles)

The list below comprises every item under this heading during the period. It illustrates two points: Pyongyang’s hyperbolic language (non-KCNA media were even more lurid), and the intensity of June’s anti-South campaign. After just six items in the first five months of 2020, the month of June – more exactly, the period June 4-24 – saw the total jump to 40. Thereafter the onslaught stopped as suddenly as it had started: a single item in July, and silence since.

### **Since June (July through Sept. 10)**

Director General of Department of U.S. Affairs of DPRK Foreign Ministry Issues Statement (2020.07.07)

### **June**

South Korean Military Warned against Imprudent Acts (2020.06.24)

South Korean Authorities Urged to Take Responsibility for Destroying Inter-Korean Relations (2020.06.22)

S. Korean Bodies Urge Authorities to Stop Hostile Acts (2020.06.22)

KCNA Report on Planned Distribution of Leaflets against Enemy (2020.06.22)

Leaflet-scattering against South Will Not Be Bound to Any Agreement and Principle (2020.06.21)

Preparations for Distributing Leaflets towards South Pushed forward (2020.06.20)  
 S. Korean Authorities Deserve Punishment: KCNA Commentary (2020.06.19)  
 We Will Never Sit Face to Face with S. Korean Authorities: Director of United Front Department of WPK Central Committee (2020.06.17)  
 Honeyed Words of Impudent Man Are Disgusting: First Vice Department Director Kim Yo Jong of WPK Central Committee (2020.06.17)  
 KCNA Commentary on Height of Impudence (2020.06.17)  
 S. Korean Authorities Plead for Accepting Special Envoys (2020.06.17)  
 Our Army Will Provide Sure Military Guarantee for All External and Internal Measures of Party and Government: Spokesman for KPA General Staff (2020.06.17)  
 Nothing Can ever Calm down Enraged People (2020.06.17)  
 Ominous Prelude to Total Catastrophe of North-South Relations (2020.06.17)  
 Implementation of North-South Agreement Urged in S. Korea (2020.06.16)  
 North-South Joint Liaison Office Completely Ruined (2020.06.16)  
 Our Army Is Fully Ready to Go into Action: KPA General Staff (2020.06.16)  
 Crucial Measures of DPRK Supported (2020.06.15)  
 First Vice Department Director of WPK Central Committee Issues Statement (2020.06.13)  
 South Korean Military Stages Joint Naval Drill (2020.06.13)  
 Press Statement by Director-General of Department of U.S. Affairs of Foreign Ministry of DPRK (2020.06.13)  
 North-South Ties Have Reached Uncontrollable Phase: Director of United Front Department of WPK Central Committee (2020.06.12)  
 Chongryon Officials Assail Perfidious Act of S. Korean Authorities (2020.06.12)  
 Koreans in China Blast S. Korean Authorities (2020.06.12)  
 Koreans in China Accuse S. Korean Authorities of Hostile Act against DPRK (2020.06.11)  
 Act of Perfidy of S. Korean Authorities Blasted by Chongryon Vice-Chairman (2020.06.11)  
 National Harmony and Confrontation Can Not Go Together: GAKC Vice Chairman (2020.06.10)  
 Women's Union Officials and Members Hold Protest Rally (2020.06.09)  
 Spokesman for Zhongnan Regional Association in China Issues Statement (2020.06.09)  
 KCNA Report on Cutting off All North-South Communication Lines (2020.06.09)  
 Protest Demonstration Staged by Youth and Students in DPRK (2020.06.08)  
 Agricultural Workers' Rally Condemns Anti-DPRK Acts of S. Korean Authorities and "Defectors from North" (2020.06.08)  
 Harshes Punishment Will Follow Treason: KCNA Commentary (2020.06.08)  
 Anti-DPRK Acts of S. Korean Authorities and "Defectors from North" Accused by Workers in DPRK (2020.06.07)  
 KCNA Commentary Warns S. Korean Conservative Media against Slandering DPRK (2020.06.07)  
 Anti-DPRK Acts of S. Korean Authorities and "Defectors from North" Accused by Youth (2020.06.07)  
 Zeal for Retaliation against Confrontation Maniacs Mounts among People in DPRK (2020.06.07)  
 S. Korean Authorities' Anti-DPRK Move under Fire (2020.06.06)  
 Statement of Spokesman for United Front Department of C.C., WPK (2020.06.05)  
 Kim Yo Jong Rebukes S. Korean Authorities for Conniving at Anti-DPRK Hostile Act of "Defectors from North" (2020.06.04)

#### **Before June (January-May)**

Spokesperson for Ministry of People's Armed Forces of DPRK Blames S. Korean Military for Its Reckless Military Provocation (2020.05.08)  
 KCNA Commentary Censures S. Korean Ministry of Unification for Being Engrossed in "Unification by Absorption" (2020.04.11)  
 KCNA Commentary Blames S. Korean Conservatives for Raising "North Wind" (2020.03.05)  
 First Vice-department Director of WPK Central Committee Kim Yo Jong Blasts Chongwadae's Foolish Way of Thinking (2020.03.03)  
 KCNA Commentary Denounces Conservatives of S. Korea for Escalating Confrontation with Fellow Countrymen (2020.02.29)  
 Statement Issued by Advisor of DPRK Foreign Ministry (2020.01.11)

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## MAY – AUGUST 2020

**May 1, 2020:** After a three-week absence prompted speculation that he was ill or dead, Kim Jong Un (KJU) [reappears](#). Flanked by most of the top DPRK leadership, he [cuts](#) a ribbon to open the Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory, some 50 miles north of Pyongyang. NK News [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 Northern gunfire struck a border guardpost at Cheorwon in the central part of the peninsula, leaving four bullet holes. Following procedure, the ROK Army 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, South Korea's quasi-official news agency, cites an unnamed Blue House official as [denying](#) that KJU has undergone any kind of medical procedure.

**May 4, 2020:** ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) Pyongyang has not yet offered any explanation for yesterday's gunfire incident at the Demilitarized Zone (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:** ROK Minister of Unification (MOU) [visits](#) the DMZ. Kim Yeon-chul's trip to Panmunjom is to assess preparations for planned resumption of tourism, 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 – and taken off the case. He becomes chief of the Capital Defense Command. The [report](#) does not state who will replace him on the North Korea beat at MND.

**May 10, 2020:** In a "[special address](#)" on the third anniversary of his inauguration, President Moon [suggests](#) quarantine cooperation as a way to revive inter-Korean relations, as this would not breach international sanctions. He admits that "North Korea is not responding"—but blames this on "difficulties" due to COVID-19.

**May 11, 2020:** Blue House spokesman [insists](#) it is too early to rule out a fresh inter-Korean summit this year, even though "truly, it seems difficult at the moment."

**May 13, 2020:** ROK JCS [says](#) it now has "decisive" evidence (which it does not reveal) that May 3 cross-border firing by the DPRK was accidental.

**May 13, 2020:** Yonhap [reports](#) that MOU's latest annual who's who in North Korea lists, among other changes, a new chief of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB), the DPRK's military intelligence agency. [Rim Kwang Il](#), an army general, replaced Jang Kil Song last December. MOU notes high turnover rates during the past year: almost 80% for the WPK Politburo, and 82% for the State Affairs Commission (SAC).

**May 18, 2020:** MND [denies](#) and deplores media claims that protests by Pyongyang prompted cancellation of a biannual inter-service maritime live fire drill, due to be held this week off Uljin on the east coast. The ministry insists that adverse weather was the real reason.

**May 19, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it expects North Korea to face an overall grain shortage of 860,000 tons this year.

**May 20, 2020:** Yonhap [reports](#) that MOU has launched a “Fake News Response” [page](#) on its website, the first ROK ministry to do so, a result of worries that rumor and speculation “could cause confusion and instability in society and financial markets.” Two early targets are YouTube videos, claiming that facemasks are abundant in North Korea though scarce in the South, and that a Southern factory is sending the North a million masks a day.

**May 20, 2020:** Approaching the tenth anniversary of the “May 24 measures”—a ban on most North-South trade imposed by Seoul in 2010, in reprisal for the sinking of the *Cheonan* that March—MOU [says](#) these have “virtually lost ... effect” and pose no obstacle to inter-Korean exchanges. It [reiterates](#) this next day, claiming past administrations had eroded the sanctions through exemptions; but declines comment on whether they might be lifted entirely.

**May 21, 2020:** Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [says](#) the May 24 measures will remain in force.

**May 22, 2020:** With KJU unseen for three weeks since his re-emergence on May Day, MOU [says](#): “The relevant authorities are keeping a close watch”—while noting that such absences are not unusual.

**May 24, 2020:** Kim [reappears](#). KCNA [reports](#) that he guided “the Fourth Enlarged Meeting of the Seventh Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)” —presumably a day earlier, on May 23. Topics discussed included “new policies for further increasing ... nuclear war deterrence.”

**May 25, 2020:** ROK Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA) [announces](#) a year-long comprehensive survey, the first, of the DMZ; presumably on the Southern side only, below the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). A 55-person panel will look for archaeological relics, flora, and fauna at 40 sites. No North Korean involvement is mentioned.

**May 26, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it wants to revise the South-North Exchange and Cooperation Law, enacted in 1990, to make cooperation easier. Ideas include allowing municipalities to have their own dealings with the North, and loosening reporting and permission rules for a range of inter-Korean contacts. (See also June 1.)

**May 27, 2020:** MOU [says](#) South Korea will give \$4.9 million over five years to a project by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). The goal is “improving North Korean people's understanding of international principles on statistics and usability of data as part of efforts to enhance the country's sustainable development capacity.”

**May 28, 2020:** Citing coronavirus concerns and chilly relations, MOU [says](#) South Korea will mark next month's 20th anniversary of the first North-South summit on its own, without North Korea. This is not new; there has been no joint celebration since 2009.

**June 1, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it wants to revise the South-North Exchange and Cooperation Act to make it easier for North Korean firms to do business in the South.

**June 2, 2020:** An optimistic MOU [says](#) that in hopes the North will respond, it will prepare for inter-Korean relations in the post-coronavirus age, citing the east coast rail project.

**June 4, 2020:** In a sharply worded [statement](#), her second aimed at Seoul this year, Kim Yo Jong attacks “human scum” who send leaflets by balloon into North Korea, warning that “the south Korean authorities will be forced to pay a dear price if they let this situation go on.”

**June 4, 2020:** Responding within hours, MOU does not criticize Kim Yo Jong's diatribe but [says](#) it is working on plans to legislate a ban on cross-border leafleteering. Such activity, it adds, causes tensions, creates litter and endangers residents in border areas.



**June 5, 2020:** Unnamed “spokesman of the United Front Department of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea” (UFD, CC, WPK) [warns](#), among other threats and insults, that “we are about to start the work that can hurt the south side soon.” (See Appendix 1.)

**June 6–22, 2020:** DPRK media – domestic and external– launch blitzkrieg of attacks echoing and amplifying Kim Yo Jong’s. Dozens of such articles appear over the next fortnight. Typical headlines include “[Unpardonable Hostile Act](#)” and “[No mercy for the filthy scum](#).”

**June 9, 2020:** KCNA [reports](#) that, following a Party review decreeing that “work towards the south should thoroughly turn into the one against enemy,” as a first step all North–South communication lines will be severed at noon that day. It itemizes these as “ ... the north–south joint liaison office, the East and West Seas communication lines between the militaries of the north and the south, the inter–Korean trial communication line and the hotline between the office building of the Central Committee of the WPK and the Chongwadae [Blue House]”.

**June 9, 2020:** South Korea [confirms](#) that the North is no longer picking up the phone on both civilian and [military](#) hotlines. Test calls are normally scheduled for 9 am and 4 pm daily.

**June 11, 2020:** Blue House [warns](#) that it will “thoroughly crack down” on cross-border leafleteering, saying this violates both domestic ROK law and inter-Korean agreements. The same day, MOU files criminal charges against two leaflet-sending groups.

**June 12, 2020:** Jang Kum Chol, director of the UFD of the WPK CC, [warns](#) that, in KCNA’s headline, “North–South Ties Have Reached Uncontrollable Phase.” Jang concludes: “From now, time will be, indeed, regretful and painful for the south Korean authorities.”

**June 13, 2020:** Kwon Jong Gun, director-general of the Department of US Affairs in the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), warns South Koreans not to “poke their noses into” US–North Korea relations or the nuclear issue. Among other colorful images, he calls the South “long forsaken like a good-for-nothing cucumber stalk thrown into swill”, and “preemies [sic] ... burping after drinking a still water.” More analytically: “We are not what we were two years ago.”

**June 13, 2020:** Kim Yo Jong issues [statement](#). Extracts: “I feel it is high time to surely break with the south Korean authorities. We will soon take a next action ... Before long, a tragic scene of the useless north–south joint liaison office completely collapsed would be seen ... Rubbish must be thrown into dustbin.”

**June 15, 2020:** In [two speeches](#) on the 20th anniversary of the first North–South summit, President Moon regrets that “inter–Korean relations have not progressed in a straight line” and urges Pyongyang “not to close the window on talks.” Still, “We will usher in an era, without fail, when South and North Korea band together and cooperate for peace and prosperity.”

**June 16, 2020:** Under headline “Our Army Is Fully Ready to Go into Action: KPA General Staff,” KCNA [reports](#) that North Korea’s military is, inter alia, “studying an action plan for taking measures to make the army advance again into the zones that had been demilitarized under the north–south agreement.”

**June 16, 2020:** North Korea [destroys](#) joint liaison office in Kaesong with “a terrific explosion,” [citing](#) “the mindset of the enraged people to surely force human scum and those, who have sheltered the scum, to pay dearly for their crimes.” An adjacent building, once the management office for the Kaesong Industrial Complex, also appears seriously damaged.

**June 17, 2020:** KPA General Staff [says](#) troops will reoccupy Kaesong and Kumgang former joint venture zones. “Civil police posts” withdrawn from the DMZ will be “set up again,” front line artillery units will be reinforced, and “all kinds of regular military exercises in the areas close to the boundary” will resume.

**June 17, 2020:** Pyongyang [reveals](#) and spurns a secret Southern offer on June 15 to send special envoys North. Kim Yo Jong “flatly reject[s] the tactless and sinister proposal.”

**June 17, 2020:** In her longest (almost 2,000 words) and rudest—even she calls it “a bomb of words” —[diatribe](#) yet, headlined “Honeyed Words of Impudent Man Are Disgusting,” Kim Yo Jong flays Moon’s June 15 speeches as “a string of shameless and impudent words full of incoherence”, and calls it “sickening” to hear this “spate of flunkeyist jargon.”

**June 17, 2020:** UFD's Jang Kum Chol [weighs in](#): "We have no idea to sit together with the authorities of the south side who evoke only disgust and nasty feelings. [There] will be neither exchange nor cooperation with the [South] in the future. And there will be no word to be exchanged. It is our stand that we had better regard everything that happened between the north and the south as an empty dream. ... [The] enemy is the enemy, after all."

**June 17, 2020:** Blue House [calls](#) Kim Yo Jong's attack "rude" and "senseless": "We won't tolerate any more of North Korea's indiscreet rhetoric and act." It also condemns the North's disclosure of its special envoy proposal as a breach of "basic etiquette."

**June 19, 2020:** Blue House [announces](#) that Moon has accepted Kim Yeon-chul's resignation as Minister of Unification, [offered](#) two days earlier.

**June 19, 2020:** A propos defector activists, MOU [vows](#): "In close cooperation with the police and local authorities, the government will beef up its crackdown, including the response on the ground." One such group, Keunsaem, [says](#) it is temporarily suspending plans to send plastic bottles containing rice to North Korea from Gangwha island on June 21.

**June 20, 2020:** Pyongyang [threatens](#) to send "leaflets of punishment" south, launched by students: "The south Korean authorities will face really horrible time." It reiterates this threat on June [21](#) and [22](#), claiming to have printed 12 million leaflets—[images](#) show Moon Jae-in's face in an ash-tray, smeared with fag-ends and dirt—and that 3,000 balloons are ready. In the event nothing happens.

**June 20, 2020:** MOU [responds](#): "It is very regrettable that North Korea unveiled via a media outlet its plan to send massive anti-South Korea leaflets (sic), and we demand its immediate halt."

**June 21, 2020:** North Korea keeps sending small groups of troops to border sentry posts for bush clearance and road maintenance, according to anonymous official source [quoted](#) by Yonhap. It adds, there is no sign of military preparations, which would require at least platoon-level movements.

**June 23, 2020:** At what KCNA [calls](#) "a preliminary meeting of the Fifth Session of the Seventh Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea," chaired by Kim Jong Un, the CMC suspends the KPA General Staff's "plans of military action toward the south". North Korea's campaign thus ends as suddenly as it began. (See Appendix 2)

**June 23, 2020:** Park Sang-hak, leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea, [claims](#) his group defied tight police surveillance to fly leaflets into the North. ROK authorities doubt that any got there, given wind conditions. MOU warns Park he will face "strict measures." On June 26 police [search](#) his office; he refuses them entry to his house.

**June 25, 2020:** [Speaking](#) at Seoul Air Base on the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, President Moon [urges](#) North Korea to "boldly embark on an endeavor to end the most sorrowful war in world history"—while warning that "our military has strength to ward off any threat." Saying that inter-Korean competition is over, Moon notes that South Korea's GDP is over 50 times the North's and its trade is 400 times larger.

**June 25, 2020:** MOU [calls](#) Kim's suspension of military plans "positive behavior." It adds that DPRK media have "withdrawn articles critical of South Korea en masse" (this seems to mean they added no new ones; the old ones remain up). ROK military sources say the North has begun removing propaganda loudspeakers it installed just days before near the DMZ.

**June 30, 2020:** In rare criticism, Moon Chung-in, one of President Moon's most dovish and influential long-time advisers, [calls](#) on Pyongyang to explain its demolition of the liaison office. Built with 17 billion won (\$14.2 million) of ROK taxpayers' money, this was "a symbol of inter-Korean reconciliation and peace," so "it is hard for our people to accept that the North unilaterally blew it up like a show."

**July 1, 2020:** Because of COVID-19, the number of North Korean defectors reaching the South in the second quarter was a [record low](#), according to MOU. Just 12 arrived, compared to 135 in the first quarter and 320 in Q2 last year. The annual flow has steadily declined in the Kim Jong Un era, from 2,400 in 2010 to 1,407 in 2019.

**July 3, 2020:** Moon [reshuffles](#) several senior security and diplomatic [positions](#). Lee In-young, parliamentary leader of the ruling Democrats (DP), becomes Unification Minister. Park Jie-won, another politician, will lead the National Intelligence Service. Suh Hoon moves from heading the NIS to be Moon's National Security Advisor. The previous NSA, Chung Eui-yong, becomes a special adviser, as does Im Jong-seok, Moon's former chief of staff. All four new appointees are well [connected](#) in Pyongyang.

**July 7, 2020:** Two elderly former POWs whom the DPRK did not repatriate in 1953—they only escaped half a century later—[win](#) a landmark, if symbolic, legal case. Seoul Central District Court orders North Korea and Kim Jong Un to pay each man 21 million won (\$17,550) for 33 months of forced labor during 1953–56. This is the first time an ROK court has acknowledged its formal jurisdiction over North Korea and issued a compensation order.

**July 8, 2020:** In another largely symbolic case, South Korean lawyer files [suit](#) against Kim Yo Jong and Gen. Pak Jong Chon, CGS of the KPA, over last month's office demolition. Prosecutors duly open an enquiry on July 16. Plaintiff Lee Kyung-jae notes that under DPRK criminal law, intentional destruction of state property can be punished with life imprisonment.

**July 16, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it has approved 16 projects by NGOs to aid in the first half of this year. Two are coronavirus-related. It does not name the organizations involved.

**July 16, 2020:** Jeong Se-hyun, former Unification Minister and current executive vice chair of the presidential National Unification Advisory Council (NUAC), [calls](#) on the next MOU to dissolve the joint US-ROK working group that coordinates policies on North Korea: "Why on earth did such a thing as the explosion of the joint liaison office take place? It's because the working group held back inter-Korean relations every single step of the way."

**July 16, 2020:** Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), an ROK state think tank, [says](#) Kim Jong Un made only 19 public appearances in the first half of 2020. During 2017–19 he averaged 40–50 in the equivalent period. KINU attributes this to COVID-related caution.

**July 19, 2020:** An aide to Im Jong-seok (see July 3) [says](#) Im is keen to promote cooperation between cities in North and South Korea, via a nonprofit foundation he heads.

**July 20, 2020:** Both MOU and the nominee to head it, Lee In-young, [aver](#) that suing North Korea for blowing up the joint liaison office is not a viable way to proceed.

**July 21, 2020:** MOU nominee Lee [suggests](#) that "humanitarian areas related to eating, suffering and things that people want to see before they die" (i.e. family reunions and visits) are fit matters for inter-Korean cooperation without any need to consult Washington.

**July 23, 2020:** Lee faces [lively](#) and robust confirmation [hearing](#). Ex-DPRK diplomat Thae Yong-ho presses him on whether he was pro-Pyongyang in his youth. Lee is confirmed as the new MOU, taking up his post on July 27.

**July 25, 2020:** An emergency enlarged meeting of the WPK CC Politburo is [called](#), after a "runaway" (defector) who illicitly returned home to Kaesong on July 18 is suspected of having "the vicious virus." KJU orders a lockdown of Kaesong and other measures, to avert "a deadly and destructive disaster." The lockdown is lifted three weeks later.

**July 27, 2020:** South Korea [acknowledges](#) that a defector did swim back into North Korea around July 18 from Ganghwa island, as claimed by North Korea. It [adds](#) that there is no evidence he has COVID-19. Other [reports](#) name him as Kim, aged 24, and claim he was facing charges of raping a fellow defector.

**July 28, 2020:** Park Jie-won starts work as South Korea's new spy chief, a day after his National Assembly confirmation [hearing](#). He was grilled about his role in transferring \$450 million to North Korea around the June 2000 summit, for which he was later jailed.

**July 30, 2020:** UN special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, Tomas Ojea Quintana, [tells](#) MOU that its planned inspection of defector activist groups should not undermine efforts to improve the DPRK rights situation.

**Aug. 3, 2020:** MOU [denies](#) that its upcoming audit of civic groups affiliated to it targets defectors, insisting that its criteria are strictly performance-based.

**Aug. 5, 2020:** MOU is [reportedly](#) reviewing a proposed inter-Korean barter deal. Unification Nonghyup, an ROK farmers' group, signed a 150 million won (\$126,710) deal in June with two DPRK companies to swap 167 tons of Southern sugar for Northern liquors, candies, teas et al. Unification Minister Lee had voiced support for such small-scale barter.

**Aug. 7, 2020:** After heavy rains, MND [says](#) it is looking out for North Korean mines which might have been swept out of the DMZ into South Korea. Some just look like wooden boxes.

**Aug. 11, 2020:** ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [say](#) that amid heavy rainfall, floodgates of North Korea's Hwanggang Dam on the Imjin river remain partly open. Four times recently the North has [discharged](#) water from the dam without warning, contravening a 2009 accord reached after a similar incident caused flash floods which drowned six South Korean campers. On Aug. 5 Seoul [urged](#) Pyongyang to give due notice, to no response.

**Aug. 12, 2020:** Yonhap [weighs](#) pros and cons of proposed barter deal (Aug. 5, and Aug. 24). It could put North-South ties back on track – or fall foul of international sanctions and US disapproval.

**Aug. 12, 2020:** Yonhap [reports](#) that the UN has granted a sanctions waiver for the ROK's Gyeonggi provincial government to provide a greenhouse system and related materials, worth \$368,000, for a nutrition project in the DPRK's Nampo city and South Pyongan province. It is not stated whether Pyongyang will accept this aid.

**Aug. 12, 2020:** MOU [launches](#) a rare inspection of 25 NGOs registered with it, with more to follow. 13 are run by North Korean defectors. The same day, Seoul Administrative Court accepts a plea by Keunsaem, one of two groups whose operating license the ministry revoked in July, to suspend that decision. Legal proceedings will continue.

**Aug. 18, 2020:** Joint US-ROK military drills, scaled down and largely computer-based this year, [kick off](#) two days late after a Korean participant tested positive for COVID-19. They end on Aug. 28.

**Aug. 18, 2020:** Meeting with US Ambassador Harry Harris, Unification Minister Lee [calls](#) for upgrading the allies' joint forum on North Korea policy to "Working Group Version 2.0." [Critics](#) suggest this is actually a downgrade, since the goal is more autonomy for Seoul to follow its own path with Pyongyang – regardless of Washington.

**Aug. 19, 2020:** North Korea unexpectedly [announces](#) that the "Eighth Congress of the WPK will be convened in January, Juche 110(2021)." It was not due until May, a milder season.

**Aug. 20, 2020:** National Intelligence Service (NIS) [tells](#) lawmakers that Kim Jong Un, though still absolute leader, has partially delegated authority to his sister Kim Yo Jong, whom it calls the "de facto No. 2," and two pairs of senior economic and military figures. One aim, it suggests, is to "relieve stress ... and avert culpability in the event of policy failure."

**Aug. 21, 2020:** MOU Lee [calls](#) for inter-Korean cooperation against "disasters and catastrophes that have no boundaries," also pledging "concrete plans ... in three areas: health, prevention of infections and climate." In a separate meeting, he tells firms invested in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) that he will "actively seek ways to resume" its operations.

**Aug. 21, 2020:** MOU [reveals](#) that Seoul has approved plans by two unnamed NGOs to send coronavirus-related items, such as masks and protective clothing, to North Korea. The consignments are worth 180 and 300 million won (respectively \$151,000 and \$253,000).

**Aug. 24, 2020:** ROK lawmakers [inform](#) media that the barter deal will not go ahead, saying Vice Unification Minister Suh Ho told the National Assembly's Intelligence Committee that one of the DPRK partners is under sanctions. MOU, however, [denies](#) that the project has been [scrapped](#). (See also Aug. 5 and Aug. 12, above.)

**Aug. 25, 2020:** In a report to lawmakers, MOU [says](#) a "triple whammy" – sanctions, COVID-19, and floods – is slowing the DPRK economy, jeopardizing targets set for October's 75th Party founding anniversary. The Ministry vowed to keep pushing for humanitarian inter-Korea cooperation, and to seek opportunities for "small-scale trading".



**Aug. 25, 2020:** ROK Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo [tells](#) lawmakers that Kim Yo Jong, though formally a WPK CC first vice departmental director, appears to be overseeing North Korea's strategy toward South Korea and the US.

**Sept. 1, 2020:** Meeting with Japan's Ambassador in Seoul, Koji Tomita, MOU Lee [asks](#) Tokyo to support efforts to improve inter-Korean ties, as this will be "very beneficial for Japan as well."

**Sept. 1, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it has requested a 3.5% increase in its budget for inter-Korean co-operation next year, to 1.24 trillion won (\$1.05 billion). Even though relations are stalled, the plan is to earmark more for hypothetical joint action against disease and natural disasters.

**Sept. 2, 2020:** National Security Adviser Suh Hoon [clarifies](#) that the ROK-US working group forum on North Korea is "basically ... useful," and critics are misinformed. Seoul and Washington are consulting on how to improve it, by "adjusting the aspects of it being misunderstood and excessively functioning" (sic).

**Sept. 3, 2020:** Meeting Shin Hee-yong, the new head of the ROK Red Cross, MOU Lee [says](#) he hopes the two Koreas "can kick off video reunions over the Chuseok holiday" (the Korean harvest festival, this year falling on Oct. 1). This seems optimistic: North Korea has never accepted video equipment which Seoul paid for, and obtained a UN sanctions [waiver](#) as long ago as March 2019.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** MOU [says](#) it may redeem funds from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) if there is no progress by end-2020. In June 2019 Seoul announced plans to send 50,000 tons of rice aid, and gave WFP \$11.6 million to cover costs—but Pyongyang rejected the offer.

**Sept. 3, 2020:** At the annual Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD), ex-USFK commander Gen. Vincent Brooks [predicts](#) that North Korea will hold off re-engaging with the South until 2021, when the election campaign for Moon Jae-in's successor may give it more leverage.

**Sept. 4, 2020:** NK News [reports](#) that in late August a court in Incheon acquitted a lawyer who had brought back North Korean books and newspapers after attending a business forum in Pyongyang in November 2018. The judge ruled that since MOU had approved his trip, the defendant could legally possess such items – otherwise banned under the National Security Law (NSL)—for personal research use.

**Sept. 5, 2020:** Pyongyang [vows](#) "severe punishment" for officials in Wonsan, accusing them of failing to prepare for Typhoon Maysak which struck the east coast of both Koreas on Sept. 2. An unspecified incident in the port city caused dozens of casualties.

**Sept. 7, 2020:** Typhoon Haishen, the tenth this season, batters the eastern ROK and Japan's Kyushu region. Landing at Ulsan, it temporarily knocks out power to [Hyundai's](#) main auto plant. It then passes along the [DPRK's](#) east coast, already hard-hit by Typhoon Maysak.

