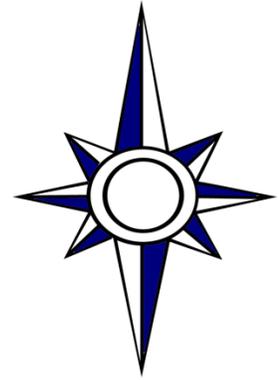


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



South Korea-North Korea Relations: Late Spring Blossoms?

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The first four months of 2015 were neither active nor positive for relations between South and North Korea. Initial hints on both sides of potential readiness for a summit, covered in our last issue, came to naught, being dissipated in recriminations over a drearily familiar list of obstacles. The North took umbrage, as it so often does, over everything from activists launching propaganda-laden balloons across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) – whom the South in practice began sometimes to try to deter, even while formally upholding their right to free expression – to this season’s regular annual joint US-ROK spring military exercises, *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle*, which began on March 2 and concluded on April 24.

While taking on board Joshua Stanton’s point (made on Twitter, but I can’t immediately trace it) to the effect that even a mutual slanging match is in some sense a form of dialogue, I dare say readers have better things to do than wade through a blow-by-blow account. Masochists or diehard verbal boxing fans know where to go find this stuff, although those in South Korea are still lamentably denied access to one side’s punches by the [recently upheld](#) ROK National Security Law – whose restrictions have also affected the present article, written in Seoul and hence perforce without the usual access to KCNA and other DPRK primary sources.

So we shall focus on the main events, such as they were, and also try to be forward-looking. Topics covered include the military exercises; a revealing memoir by Lee Myung-bak about his presidency (2008-13); and a potentially serious row about wages at the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last inter-Korean joint venture still in operation. Soap opera fans like episodes to finish with a cliff-hanger or a happy ending, and this time we can oblige with the latter. But never forget, this is only one episode. Hopes of a thaw as of early May could yet be dashed, as so often before. As ever, events for which there is no room in the main article are mentioned in the chronology, with hyperlinks provided for further reading.

Island practice

Whatever *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle* may do for allied military readiness, year after year they put a dampener on inter-Korean relations by giving Pyongyang an excuse to foam and froth. North Korea, being chronically mistrustful and assuming others share its own anything goes ethics (or lack thereof), may even believe its own propaganda; despite US and ROK insistence that these war games are purely defensive, they could be a prelude to invasion. Yet no enemy planning an attack would give notice of the date – the North is duly notified every year about these maneuvers. While it is ludicrous to see the brief desk-based *Key Resolve* as any kind of threat, *Foal Eagle* on the other hand is huge in scale and lasts nearly two months.

There is little Pyongyang can do about this except respond with salvos, verbally and literally. As usual a constant rhetorical barrage accused Seoul and Washington of plotting to overthrow the DPRK. Physical rockets were fired too – but not at anyone – throughout the period and indeed before. These were of various ranges and types, some apparently [new](#). Kim Jong Un’s need to prove himself as tough as his late father and grandfather presumably accounts for one innovation this year; on Feb. 21 the official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* reported him as guiding artillery units of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) in a “drill for striking and seizing island” (sic). This rather obviously and untactfully alludes to the shelling of the ROK’s Yeonpyeong Island in the West (Yellow) Sea in November 2010, with four fatalities.

A trickle of aid

South Korea, which steadfastly refuses to scale back these exercises as a bargaining chip, was doubtless not expecting any inter-Korean progress until after they concluded. For its own part, it made some small concessions in late January on the aid front; potentially more significant ones would follow three months later at the end of this tetrameter, as discussed below. Thus on Jan. 28, the Unification Ministry (MOU) announced a 90 million won (\$83,000) grant from its Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund (OKCF) to resume support for advanced training of DPRK doctors in Germany. Seoul had funded this program in 2007-08, but withdrew support during the presidency of Lee Myung-bak (2008-13). Next day, MOU said that the ROK will donate \$3.1 million to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to finance its next census of the DPRK, due in 2018 – a decade after the 2008 census, which South Korea also funded to the tune of \$2.3 million. Separately, Seoul will also spent \$2.9 million to support a jointly produced North-South “Big Dictionary of the Korean People’s Language.”

Lee MB spills the beans

Speaking of Lee Myung-bak. For a man who was ubiquitous locally and indeed globally (for instance as a leading light in founding and hosting the G20) during the five years he occupied the Blue House, Lee kept a very low profile since his term ended just over two years ago. That changed in early February with the publication of a blockbuster 800 page [memoir](#) of his period as president. This certainly won him fresh attention, but little [praise](#). Instead, Lee was widely criticized, not only for gratuitous jabs at his successor Park Geun-hye – although both are conservatives from the same party, they were rivals and remain unreconciled – but also for some wildly indiscreet, if tantalizing, revelations of behind-the-scenes inter-Korean contacts.

Lee [claims](#) North Korea sought a summit no less than [five times](#) on his watch. All foundered because Pyongyang demanded payment: 500,000 tons of rice for a resumption of dialogue, or a cool [\\$10 billion](#) for a summit meeting. (To be fair, the latter would have been investment in a new development bank rather than fungible cash to fund more yachts or missiles.) With gross irresponsibility, he also revealed tidbits that will hardly encourage North Korea to trust the South going forward – although since Pyongyang itself [did the dirty](#) in 2011 by spilling its own beans about secret inter-Korean talks, it is in no position to protest. Not that that stopped *Rodong Sinmun* from excoriating Lee as a “lying bastard,” and much more in similar vein.

Specifically, Lee cites one secret Northern emissary to the South who he says was executed for returning empty-handed. Another is [quoted](#) as fearing the same fate, yet surely by naming him Lee only puts the poor chap further at risk (which is why he shall go unnamed here). Nor can it help ROK-PRC relations to quote ex-Chinese premier Wen Jiabao as hinting strongly, if elliptically, that Kim Jong Un will not survive in the long-term. For the Korea-watcher this is all [fascinating](#) stuff; yet as with Wikileaks *et al*, it is grossly irresponsible. A former head of state should know better, so why did he do it? Perhaps he chafes at being seen merely as a hardliner who extinguished Sunshine, and wanted the full [record](#) known. Yet it is hard to see how Lee has served either his country or himself by this politically-posthumous intervention.

Kaesong: a new row about wages

As readers doubtless know, the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), located just north of the DMZ near the eponymous city (Korea's capital during the Koryo era, from 919 CE to 1394) within commuting distance of Seoul, is the last inter-Korean joint venture from the Sunshine era still in existence. A brief reminder of its background and history may be helpful. Conceived in happier times, it was intended to grow much larger than its current scale. The late Chung Juyung, visionary northern-born founder of the former Hyundai conglomerate (dispersed since his death), had already built a successful tourist resort at Mount Kumgang in southeast North Korea. That would later be mothballed in 2008 after a Southern tourist was shot dead there; the Lee Myung-bak administration, perhaps glad of the opportunity, suspended tours.

In 2003 Chung persuaded Kim Jong Il to also permit a joint manufacturing park. He rejected the first offer of Sinuiju – far away on the border with China – as too distant to be profitable, but would have settled for Haeju port in southwestern DPRK. As Lim Dong-won, the *eminence grise* of Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, emphasizes in a [memoir](#) which should be more widely read, the South was astonished – and Kim's generals appalled – when the dear leader unexpectedly turned a key part of the front line into a potential front door by offering Kaesong: the best possible site for the South, logistically and politically. This gives the lie to hawkish critics who claim that Sunshine consisted entirely of ROK concessions. Kim Jong Il took a big risk, one which, unfortunately, his son may now be seeking to row back from.

Opened in 2004, the KIC grew steadily if modestly over the next decade. By June 2014, 123 ROK SMEs were employing 53,000-odd DPRK workers – much larger numbers had been envisaged, perhaps unrealistically – and cumulative output had reached \$2.3 billion. Textiles predominate (73 firms); others include machinery (24), electronics (13), and chemicals (9).

Though some rows occurred, until 2013 both Koreas tacitly ring-fenced the KIC from their wider tensions. Despite fears in Seoul, North Korea has never used the hundreds of Southern managers and technicians who work in the KIC as hostages. From May 2010, South Korea banned trade and investment with the North, in retaliation for the fatal sinking of the corvette *Cheonan* in March that year (for which the North continues to deny responsibility). But it exempted the KIC, which thereafter comprised virtually all North-South trade. This might therefore have been expected to contract, but in fact it hit a record \$1.971 billion in 2012.

Record trade, but not as we know it

After a sharp dip in 2013 for reasons described in the next paragraph, in 2014 inter-Korean trade more than doubled year-on-year (up 106.5 percent) to another record total of \$2.33 billion in 2014, 99.8 percent of which was Kaesong. While not gainsaying that recovery, one should note the highly specialized and perhaps somewhat colonial nature of this trade. Very different from normal inter-state bilateral commerce, which is the aggregate of many separate transactions by different actors, North-South trade since 2010 (but not before) has essentially been a single processing-on-commission (POC) operation – raw materials and machinery enter the KIC from South Korea, to which finished goods are then exported and in some cases re-exported to third markets. Nothing wrong with that, but for several reasons one would hope for the return and expansion of more broadly-based and diverse commerce before too long.

In 2013, North Korea smashed the ring-fence around Kaesong. During a fierce but otherwise rhetorical campaign of threats that spring, words became deeds when the North – giving no meaningful reason – withdrew its entire workforce in April, closing the zone for five months. The new Park Geun-hye government handled this challenge patiently and adroitly. The KIC reopened in September the same year, with the North notionally accepting a revamped joint management structure meant to prevent any recurrence of such unilateralism. However, the new subcommittee meetings were often postponed and soon ceased to meet altogether as North Korea dragged its feet on key issues like allowing Internet and mobile phone use.

Late last year, it became clear that Pyongyang was pursuing a different agenda. On Dec. 8 it told the zone's management committee that a DPRK Parliamentary Standing Committee had revised 13 out of 49 clauses in the law governing the KIC. Most affect pay, including a rise in overtime rates and abolition of a ceiling on wage increases of 5 percent annually. When the South formally protested this unilateralism on Dec. 16, the North refused to accept the fax. Its line is that national sovereignty applies, thus its own relevant bureau will set wages henceforth. On Feb. 26 it duly did that, ordering a 5.18 percent wage increase to be paid to all workers from March.

Southern comment noted that this was implemented a day after the new China-South Korea free trade agreement (FTA) exempted over 300 KIC-made products from tariffs. The actual hike of 5.18 percent is modest, raising basic monthly pay from US\$70.35 to US\$74 and total earnings including overtime by US\$8.60 to US\$164 on average (the DPRK state takes a large cut). But for the South, principle is what is at stake. On March 10, MOU warned that it will take “strong administrative and legal means” unless the North agrees to return to setting wages jointly. Such retaliation could include pulling Southern firms out of the KIC altogether, although that would carry further risks. In January, it was belatedly learned that under other unilateral revisions, notified to the South in September, the DPRK – stung, one might surmise, by the long limbo of the Mount Kumgang tourist zone – now reserves the right to demand reparations, seize properties, and even detain Southern businessmen if they decide to close up shop in Kaesong.

So far neither government has backed down, and the firms invested in the KIC are caught in the middle. Seoul has ordered them not to pay the increase on pain of punishment, and most but not all have complied. April 10 was expected to be a crunch date, when March's wages fell due for payment; but in fact the two sides kept talking, though with no settlement so far. In a separate

issue, after a rent-free first decade, future land use fees at the KIC must now be agreed. The North's demand for \$10 per *pyong* (3.3 sq meters) is unacceptable, being far above what much better foreign direct investment (FDI) destinations cost: Hanoi, for instance, charges only \$2.80.

All this is dismaying, to say the least. The North's unilateralism in effect puts up a cynical finger to the South's laborious efforts to devise a genuinely shared management structure. It also undercuts Seoul's odd delusion, still part of official policy, that "internationalizing" the KIC would somehow make it work better. The delusion is double – the KIC for various reasons is intrinsically unattractive to non-Korean FDI, and there is no reason to suppose Pyongyang would behave better even if foreigners came. On that score, whatever Kim Jong Un's game is with the KIC, he appears insouciant that such conduct will surely deter any investors who might have been mulling investing in the 20-odd new special economic zones the DPRK has opened in the past two years. Unsurprisingly, these have few if any takers so far.

How will this end? Hopes of a wider inter-Korean thaw as of early May suggest that this row is surely soluble, if the will is there. Yet for both sides a principle is at stake – sovereignty for the North, joint management and sticking to agreements for the South – so it may not be easy for either to back down. Those of us who view the KIC as the last faint hope of a better, win-win way for the two Koreas to relate can only hope that some compromise will be found.

Late spring blossoms

Just when it seemed that the unresolved Kaesong row would mark an anxious end to a mostly depressing four months, in the final fortnight of the period under review relations began to improve a little. It is always nice to end on an uplifting note, and unexpectedly we can do that. From late April, the ROK government eased some restrictions on contact and aid. NGOs et al were quick to take advantage of this, but it remains to be seen how the DPRK will respond.

Seoul's timing here may reflect two factors: a new unification minister, and waiting for *Foal Eagle* to end. President Park nominated Hong Yong-pyo, hitherto her Blue House secretary for unification issues, as minister on Feb. 17. The National Assembly confirmed him in that post on March 13. Hong shone amid Park's often dire personnel picks – she has just lost yet another prime minister – having no worse skeleton in his closet than a little [self-plagiarism](#) of his Oxford D Phil thesis and [book](#): on Syngman Rhee's unification policy, since you ask.

An academic like the man he replaced, Ryoo Kihl-jae, the paradox is that Hong has a hawkish reputation whereas Ryoo was the architect of Park's vaunted (if little practiced) Trustpolitik. Opinion in Seoul is that Ryoo was blocked and frustrated by the Blue House's prioritization at all times and costs of the security dimension, which stymied his desire to build bridges with the North. It is early days yet for Hong – if not for Park, who has less than three years left in office – but as of early May there seems a fresh will in Seoul to move things forward.

The new momentum began on April 27 when MOU approved the first fertilizer aid to North Korea since sanctions were imposed in May 2010. The amount was minute: 15 tons, a far cry from the 300,000 tons sent annually during the Sunshine era. The bearer was Ace Gyeongnam, charitable arm of Ace Bed Co, one of South Korea's [dominant](#) furniture makers. Its founder, Ahn

Yoo-su, was born in Sariwon, capital of North Hwanghae province, on the Reunification Highway from Kaesong to Pyongyang. According to defector-turned-[analyst](#) Jang Jin-sung, who is also from Sariwon (at one point in his perilous escape from North Korea he claimed to be Ahn's [nephew](#)), the streets of their native city are asphalted thanks to Ahn's generosity. The fertilizer is part of a 200 million won (\$186,000) greenhouse project in Sariwon, and Ahn personally joined the convoy that drove North on April 28 and returned on May 2.

Seoul eases the reins

A few days later MOU chose May Day – a public holiday in both Koreas – to announce wider initiatives. Seoul will now actively encourage civic groups and local governments to organize cultural, historical, and sporting events for the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan this August. The ministry described this as a clarification, [saying](#), “We decided to issue a government statement on private interchange efforts because there have been demands for inter-Korean exchange from the civilian community since the joint military exercises with the US ended, and it was decided that we needed to make the government's position clear.” But for NGOs, who have endured two years of puzzled frustration at the Park administration's reluctance hitherto to practice what it preached, this clearly represented an easing of policy.

Provincial governments were quick to take advantage of their new freedom. Veteran readers will recall that local-level relations were a vital and often creative aspect of the Sunshine era. The range of activity is illustrated by the four (so far) provinces that have announced plans to pick up where they were forced to leave off in 2010 or earlier, or promote new cooperation.

Gyeonggi (greater Seoul) will restart three projects: preserving *hanok* (traditional houses) in Kaesong, a tree nursery, and anti-malaria measures. The last is sheer self-interest. Mosquitoes are no respecters of the DMZ, and Southern (including [USFK](#)) malaria cases fell sharply near the border in 2007-08 when joint North-South spraying was undertaken. North Jeolla plans to resume farming and livestock aid, while South Jeolla in the southwest will send seaweed and rice to poor mothers and children in North Hamgyong in the far and impoverished northeast.

Busan will focus on logistics, specifically an existing program – somehow permitted, despite clearly breaching the May 2010 sanctions rules – to ship Russian coal via the DPRK's Rajin, Asia's most northerly ice-free port. 45,000 tons came last November, and a further 140,000 tons are due by May 9, destined for steelmaker Posco and electricity generator Kepco. In fact neither consignment is for Busan – the first unloaded at Pohang further up the east coast, while the imminent larger one is headed for three ROK west coast ports. So maybe Busan wants in.

One hopes other provinces will resume past activities, like Jeju which used to send fruit – and once a planeload of 300 Christians, who held an impromptu service in Pyongyang's Koryo hotel when they were stopped from going to church. That is the kind of unplanned grassroots encounter any sensible ROK government should encourage. An especially poignant case is Gangwon province, which is divided by the DMZ. Past cooperation included releasing Southern salmon fry into Northern rivers, and joint forestry cooperation and tree pest control in this mountainous region. (With spot-on timing, an academic [paper](#) just out summarizes past inter-Korean forestry cooperation from 1998-2012; one trusts that there will be a sequel to write.)

Separately, Kim Dae-jung's widow Lee Hi-ho is expected to go North this month. She has an invitation from Kim Jong Un, whom she met at his father's obsequies in 2011 in Pyongyang; almost the only South Korean yet to have done so. In December, she was invited to the third anniversary commemorations of Kim Jong Il's death, but ill-health (she is 92) prevented this. The hope in Seoul – placing much weight on a redoubtable but very elderly lady – is that such a visit may be an ice-breaker, paving the way for renewed dialogue or even a third summit.

Most recently at this writing, on May 4, the ROK Unification Ministry approved a meeting by Southern civic groups with their Northern counterparts to discuss possible joint celebrations of two significant dates. Not only is mid-August the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from the Japanese yoke in 1945, but before that June 15 will mark 15 years since the Joint Declaration which concluded the first North-South summit in 2000. Celebrating the latter is more contentious in South Korea, where many of those now in power are critics of Sunshine. A five-strong Southern delegation was due to fly to Shenyang in northeast China for two days of talks on May 5-6. MOU emphasized that so far it has only permitted this planning meeting, and would decide later whether to approve any concrete events suggested as a result.

Despite that slightly depressing note of caution – over-hesitancy has been a hallmark of the Park Geun-hye administration's Nordpolitik – in early May, inter-Korean relations seemed to be moving in a positive direction for the first time in many months, although the pay row in Kaesong remains to be settled. Yet as ever, excessive optimism would be a triumph of hope over experience. The political weather on the peninsula can change very sharply, from sunny to stormy and vice versa. Kim Jong Un remains unpredictable, as in his baffling last-minute decision to pull out of a relatively risk-free chance to debut on the global stage in Moscow's own celebrations of 1945 on May 9. For that matter, Park Geun-hye can be hard to read too.

But perhaps either or both has noticed that current policies are not bringing them any benefit, so they might cautiously dare to try something new. Japan-bashing comes naturally on both sides of the DMZ, thus 1945 is an easy place to start. The hard part will come after August's commemorations are over; we shall see then if the two sides are yet ready to tackle thornier issues. By that point Park Geun-hye will be more than halfway through her single five-year presidential term, so for her the clock is ticking remorselessly – quite an incentive. Kim Jong Un faces no such constraints. If he and the DPRK can match his grandfather's longevity, he could still be around half a century hence in 2065 (although Wen Jiabao, among others, begs to differ as discussed above). For pessimists the fear is that Park may already have left things too late, and conversely that Kim has given up on her and will instead await what he hopes will be a more amenable successor – though he has no guarantee of that. Watch this space.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations January – April 2015

Note: The writing of this chronology was completed in Seoul. Unfortunately therefore it was impossible this time to insert hyperlinks to original DPRK media sources, since the ROK bans all access to these. Readers who are as annoyed as the writer is about this unnecessary and indefensible censorship are urged to communicate their views to the appropriate authorities.

Jan. 1, 2015: Kim Jong Un says in his New Year [address](#): "... it is possible to resume the suspended high-level contacts and hold sectoral talks if the south Korean authorities are sincere in their stand towards improving inter-Korean relations ... And there is no reason why we should not hold a summit meeting if the atmosphere and environment for it are created."

Jan. 2, 2015: President Park [tells](#) a meeting of top officials that "unification is not idealism or a dream"; she says her government "will try its utmost on practical preparations needed for tangible and real [unification] to be realized." ROK officials cautiously assess the DPRK's offer as positive.

Jan. 5, 2015: South Korea's Unification Ministry (MOU) says it allowed a private aid group to send 20 tons of [sweet potatoes](#) for children in Sinuiju, DPRK, the first unprocessed crop sent since Park Geun-hye took office. The ROK government fears that raw crops might be diverted to the Korean People's Army (KPA).

Jan. 6, 2015: ROK Defense Ministry (MND)'s biennial defense White Paper [claims](#) *inter alia* that the KPA has grown by 10,000, and its cyber-forces (mainly targeting the South) have doubled to 6,000. It retains the designation of North Korea as main enemy, reintroduced in 2012, and also formally acknowledges the North's nuclear weapons for the first time.

Jan. 6, 2015: MOU says it will release funds from the official Inter-Korean [Cooperation](#) Fund (IKCF) for private aid to North Korea. 13 NGOs will share some 3 billion won (\$2.7 million) for 17 health, farming, and livestock projects in the North. This is the first such aid Seoul has allowed since imposing sanctions in May 2010 after the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

Jan. 6, 2015: South Korean daily *JoongAng Daily* [reports](#) a claim that the key DPRK leader Hwang Pyong So is of South Korean origin. His father Hwang Pil-gu was a communist who went North, returned as a spy, was arrested in 1959, killed himself in jail in 1985, and is buried in his home area Gochang in North Jeolla. Interviews with South Korean relatives appear to confirm the family tree, although other sources are skeptical of any connection.

Jan. 6, 2015: Campaign for Helping North Korea in Direct Way (sic), a group led by defector Lee Min-bok, [launches](#) 20 balloons across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). They carry 600,000 leaflets that denounce the DPRK regime for causing extreme poverty. MOU says it has no power to prevent this. However, the same day a district court at Uijeongbu, north of Seoul, rules that the government may legally restrain leaflet launches if these put the lives of ROK citizens at risk. It thus [dismisses](#) Lee's suit claiming that official attempts to restrain him had caused him psychological damage.

Jan. 7, 2015: Following the Uijeongbu court ruling (see Jan. 6), both South Korea's two main parties [call on](#) the government to review its stand on cross-border leaflet launches. The liberal opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD)'s Heo Young-il says these should be "actively restrained"; the conservative ruling Saenuri party's Kim Young-woo says: "The state has a duty to protect the lives and property of its people ... The government should make a careful and suitable judgment."

Jan. 7, 2015: North Korea's official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* [castigates](#) the latest leaflet balloon launch as a "reckless act" and a "blatant challenge," out of step with the North's "goodwill and generosity." It again demands that Seoul prevent such activities.

Jan. 16, 2015: Lee Min-bok (see Jan. 6 above) [says](#) that in response to a government request "we're not going to excessively spread anti-North Korea leaflets for the time being."

Jan. 18, 2015: Famed North Korean defector Shin Dong-hyuk, subject of the book *Escape From Camp 14*, [apologizes](#) for several inaccuracies in his account of his tribulations.

Jan. 28, 2015: MOU [announces](#) a 90 million won (\$83,000) grant from the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund to resume support for training DPRK doctors in Germany. The ROK had funded this program in 2007 and 2008, but withdrew support under Lee Myung-bak.

Jan. 29, 2015: MOU [says](#) the ROK will give \$3.1 million to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) to finance its next census of the DPRK, in 2018 – a decade after the 2008 census, which South Korea also funded to the tune of \$2.3 million. It will also spend \$2.9 million to support a jointly produced North-South "Big Dictionary of the Korean People's Language."

Jan. 29, 2015: *Rodong Sinmun*, daily paper of the ruling Workers Party (WPK), repeats a demand by the North's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) that South Korea must scrap its "May 24 measures" (sanctions) as a precondition for dialogue.

Feb. 2, 2015: Lee Myung-bak [publishes](#) *President's Time*, an 800 page memoir about his presidency (2008-13). Much trailed ahead of publication, it reveals several secret dealings with North Korea. Critics fear this will harm future diplomacy and inter-Korean relations.

Feb. 11, 2015: *Rodong Sinmun* [savages](#) Lee Myung-bak over his recent memoir: "No wonder ... the lying bastard is so forgetful, his brain capacity is known to be less than 2 megabytes". (This reprises an old pun: Lee MB also means 2 megabytes, i.e., not much processing power.)

Feb. 11, 2015: South Korea's Red Cross (KNRC) [says](#) the North refused its offer to provide 25 tons of powdered milk for infants. A 20 ton aid package was sent in 2009.

Feb. 18, 2015: Kim Jong Un presides over an enlarged [meeting](#) of the Politburo of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). Several speeches warn against "shortcomings," including "abuse of power, bureaucratism, irregularities and corruption." Official mention of the last is thought to be unprecedented, though the reality is widespread in today's North Korea

Feb. 21, 2015: DPRK media report Kim Jong Un as guiding artillery units of the KPA in a "drill for striking and seizing island" (sic). This appears based of the shelling of the ROK's Yeonpyeong in November 2010, which killed four. There is a specific warning against firing towards the North Korean littoral, no doubt with an eye to upcoming US-ROK war games.

Feb. 23, 2015: At an enlarged [meeting](#) of the WPK Central Military Commission (CMC), Kim Jong Un *inter alia* “clarifie[s] the methods of fighting a war with the US imperialists.”

Feb. 24, 2015: Combined Forces Command (CFC) announces the schedule for this spring’s two regular US-ROK joint military maneuvers. Both will begin on March 2. The computer-based [Key Resolve](#) ends on March 13, while the far larger and longer field training exercise [Foil Eagle](#), which mobilizes 200,000 South Korean and 3,700 US forces, will continue until April 24.

March 2, 2015: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [report](#) that North Korea launched two presumed short-range ballistic missiles from Nampo on its west coast into the East Sea (Sea of Japan); meaning they overflew the DPRK from coast to coast.

March 5, 2015: A pro-North activist, Kim Ki-jong, [slashes](#) US Ambassador Mark Lippert at a forum in Seoul, wounding him bloodily in the face and arm. Serious injury is narrowly avoided. DPRK media applaud the attack as a “knife shower of justice.”

March 10, 2015: Seoul press reports [quote](#) Chung Chong-wook, vice chairman of the ROK’s Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation (PCUP), as telling a forum that PCUP has “a team dedicated to non-consensual unification” of Korea, implying a regime change agenda. Two days later Chung denies that any such team exists and says he was misunderstood.

March 13, 2015: US-ROK *Key Resolve* computer-based exercise [concludes](#).

March 13, 2015: ROK National Assembly [confirms](#) Hong Yong-pyo as the new Minister of Unification. He was previously Blue House senior secretary with the same portfolio.

March 17, 2015: Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries [says](#) the (South) Korea Maritime Institute will soon sign an agreement with the FAO for a joint study on pisciculture in North Korea. FAO plans to raise \$26.5 million to build new fish farms there.

March 19, 2015: In Hanoi, ROK parliamentary speaker Chung Ui-hwa urges President Truong Tan Sang to invite Kim Jong Un to Vietnam “at the earliest date possible” so he can learn from Vietnam’s *Doi Moi* reforms. Sang replies that DPRK titular head of state Kim Yong Nam visited in 2012, and “listened attentively” when briefed on the reform program.

March 24, 2015: Puncturing the party line in both Seoul and Washington, Kim Moo-sung – chairman of the South’s ruling Saenuri Party and a likely presidential contender in 2017 – [tells](#) students in Busan that after three tests North Korea should be viewed as a nuclear power.

March 26, 2015: On the fifth anniversary of the sinking of the *Cheonan*, President Park [says](#) she “hopes North Korea abandons its reckless provocations and belief that nuclear weapons can protect the country,” but does not directly accuse Pyongyang of responsibility. Ignoring that nuance, on March 29 the North accuses Park of inciting North-South confrontation.

March 27, 2015: A year after President Park’s Dresden Declaration, South Korea [says](#) it still hopes the North will respond in some form to the proposals therein.

April 1, 2015: MOU [says](#) it will formally instruct ROK firms invested in the Kaesong IC not to pay the wage increase imposed by the DPRK.

April 3, 2015: Blue House [says](#) Brig. Gen. Shin In-seop, former deputy commander of the ROK military cybercommand, will take up the new post of Presidential secretary for cybersecurity, created principally to combat North Korean cyber-attacks.

April 7, 2015: Officials from both Koreas hold their first direct meeting about the Kaesong pay dispute at the eponymous industrial complex (KIC). Despite [talk](#) of “positive signs,” no concrete progress is made.

April 9, 2015: ROK police [prevent](#) activist Park Hang-sak from launching balloons across the DMZ carrying copies of the film *The Interview*.

April 9, 2015: The South’s Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo [vows](#) to “work harder to open a channel of dialogue” with the North. He also calls for more joint projects.

April 10, 2015: A four-strong [delegation](#) headed by Jang Jong-nam, vice president of the DPRK National University Sports Federation, [flies](#) into Seoul via Beijing to take part in the Heads of Delegation (HoD) meeting and draw for the 2015 Summer Universiade (world student games) to be held in Gwangju, ROK in July (3-14). The Northern delegates fly home on April 14.

April 10, 2015: [Uriminzokkiri](#), a DPRK website based in China, [threatens](#) to “bombard (South Korea) with blows of fire” if leaflet launches continue: “Our patience is wearing thin.”

April 13, 2015: Kim Yoon-suk, secretary general of the Gwangju Universiade Organizing Committee (GUOC), [says](#) there will be no unified Korean team at the games.

April 13, 2015: Referring to the April 20 deadline set by North Korea, MOU [says](#) it will not be restrained by any specific timetable in seeking to resolve the Kaesong wages row.

April 15, 2015: MOU [says](#) that on April 16-17 a second consignment of Russian bituminous [coal](#), 140,000 tons in all, will travel by rail across the border from Khasan in Russia to North Korea’s Rajin port city, and be shipped thence to three west coast ports in South Korea. The buyers are steelmaker Posco and power generator Kepco. Full delivery is expected by May 9. The first such consignment of 40,500 tons arrived in Ulsan last November.

April 20, 2015: After meeting with Northern officials in the KIC, a representative of South Korean businesses invested there [says](#) the North has extended its deadline for payment of March’s wages from today until April 24. None of the firms has yet paid.

April 20, 2015: MND [says](#) it will [raise](#) defense spending during the 2016-20 quinquennium by 8.7 trillion won (\$8.03 billion) more than it had planned. The extra will go on enhancing pre-emptive strike and air defense capabilities, based on an assessment that North Korea has made significant progress in its ability to miniaturize nuclear warheads to fit atop missiles.

April 24, 2015: This year's *Foal Eagle* joint US-ROK military maneuvers are concluded.

April 27, 2015: MOU [approves](#) the first fertilizer aid to North Korea since 2010, a modest 15 tons, as part of a greenhouse project in Sariwon by Ace Gyeongam (see also April 28).

April 28, 2015: A convoy of Ace Gyeongam trucks [drives](#) North to deliver aid materials. The ROK government says it is not planning to resume large-scale food or fertilizer assistance.

April 30, 2015: MOU's 2015 white paper on unification [reports](#) that inter-Korean trade more than doubled year-on-year in 2014 to reach a record \$2.343 billion. (2013 saw a slump due to the lengthy closure of the Kaesong IC, which accounts for almost 100 percent of trade.)

May 1, 2015: South Korea [says](#) it will promote civilian exchange with and increase aid to the North. Seoul hopes for joint projects in areas such as culture, history, and sports.

May 2, 2015: KCNA [announces](#) the DPRK's official support for a May 24 peace march from Pyongyang to Seoul, organized by the US-based [Women Cross DMZ](#). Two Nobel Peace Prize laureates are among the participants. The ROK government had already said it will let the group enter the South via the DMZ, if the DPRK allows passage. The march has some [critics](#).

May 2, 2015: KCNA reports that [Joo Won-moon](#), a 21 year old South Korean living (with permanent US residence) in Tenafly, NJ and studying at New York University, entered the DPRK illegally by crossing the Yalu River from China on April 22 and is under arrest. On May 4 Joo [tells](#) CNN he wanted to be arrested, hoping this will assist inter-Korean peace.

May 3, 2015: Two middle-aged South Koreans arrested in March are [interviewed](#) (separately) by CNN, who were invited to Pyongyang without being told [why](#). Missionary Kim Kuk-gi (61) and businessman Choe Chun-gil (56) confess to being spies (the ROK NIS denies this), praise Kim Jong Un for treating them well, and say their own government has disowned them.

May 3, 2015: Three ROK provinces and Busan city announce [plans](#) to resume suspended aid to or cooperation with the DPRK, now that Seoul has give local authorities a green light.

May 4, 2015: The ROK government [approves](#) a meeting by Southern civic groups with their Northern counterparts, to discuss joint events marking the 70th anniversary of liberation from Japan in 1945. A five-strong delegation flies to Shenyang, China and holds talks there on May 5-6. The outcome is not known at this writing.

May 4, 2015: In a 6-3 decision, the ROK Constitutional Court [upholds](#) the National Security Law (NSL)'s comprehensive ban on anti-state activities. It rejects a suit brought by a certain Song, charged under the NSL because Kim Il Sung's memoirs were found on his computer hard drive. The dissenting judges argued that purpose matters rather than possession *per se*.