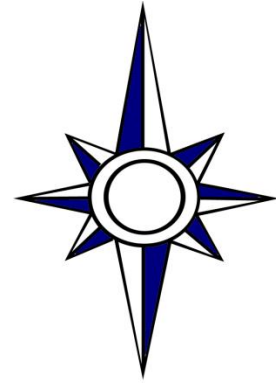


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



South Korea-North Korea Relations: From Snakes to Ladders?*

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Mid-2015 saw the two Koreas hit the headlines again, for the usual depressing reasons. To be exact, it was a hot August politically on the peninsula; with hostilities – mostly rhetorical, but shots were fired – cranked up to a degree not seen since the spring of 2013. Before that, three months of bickering during May through July destroyed the “late spring blossoms” which our previous report had foolishly thought to discern in bud. Having been thus wrongfooted (not for the first time), although hope springs eternal, caution seems advisable as to the prospects for and sustainability of the welcome new outbreak of peace which North and South Korea currently purport to have snatched from what so recently had looked like the brink of war.

June 15, August 15: nothing doing

At the outset of the period covered, there were hopes that North and South Korea might get their act together and jointly celebrate two significant dates. June 15 marked 15 years since the first ever North-South summit in Pyongyang, between the then leaders of the ROK and DPRK, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il, while Aug. 15 marked the 70th anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945 – and was also, of course, the date when the peninsula was ‘temporarily’ partitioned into North and South.

Perhaps predictably, nothing came of either plan. South Korea subcontracted negotiating with the North to “progressive” NGOs, reserving the right to approve or veto whatever they came up with. This rather odd way of doing things suggested a lukewarm attitude. The conservative governments of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye remain wary of celebrating the June 2000 summit, lest they seem to endorse the “Sunshine Policy” of their liberal opponents. It is unfortunate, not least for inter-Korean relations, that South Korea cannot achieve a degree of bipartisanship on such a fundamental issue. Not unreasonably, North Korea wants the South to explicitly recommit to the accords that it signed at both the 2000 and 2007 summits.

On this unpromising basis, inter-Korean talks were held in Shenyang, China in early May. But on June 12, the South’s committee said there would be no joint celebration of the summit anniversary – and blamed their own side: “The chief reason is the continued deterioration of inter-Korean relations under the South Korean government’s policies of military pressure and confrontation.” This echoed the North’s view: on June 1, the DPRK said it would be better to

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hold separate events, blaming the ROK's lukewarm stance and its insistence on only allowing non-political exchanges. Similar differences put paid to any con-celebrations on Aug. 15, by which time tensions were in any case rising as discussed below.

Human rights? How unsporting!

The collapse of June's plans still left a sporting chance elsewhere. Kim Jong Un's enthusiasm for sports was made clear last fall, when the DPRK sent a full squad to the Asian Games held in Incheon. As we reported at the time, three senior Northern leaders even came South for the closing ceremonies, leading to hopes (swiftly dashed) of a wider inter-Korean breakthrough.

If Incheon was a missed opportunity, two further such chances presented themselves in 2015 thanks to South Korea's unquenchable keenness to host international events of all kinds. First up was the Summer Universiade (world student games) in July (3-14), held this year in the southwestern city of Gwangju. North Korea had signaled that it would participate, intending to send 75 athletes and 33 officials. In April, it confirmed this when four officials came to the Jeolla capital to take part in the draw and a heads-of-delegations meeting. But in the end Team DPRK did not compete. Having missed two deadlines in early June to register for events, on June 19, the DPRK's Sports Federation emailed the organizers withdrawing from the games.

Their stated reason for this was the imminent opening in Seoul of a field office of the UN High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR), to collect data on abuses in the DPRK. The new office was duly inaugurated on June 23 by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. While angrily dismissing as always charges of human rights violations, ever since the plan for this office was announced last year North Korea had relentlessly [denounced](#) it as "a heinous anti-DPRK plot-breeding organization" and so on. (Pyongyang may not have noticed, but in his [speech](#) the High Commissioner also raised some issues about the ROK's record on rights and free speech – and gave Japan a kicking over the comfort women issue.)

Pyongyang may huff and puff, but its human rights situation is appalling. Yet at the risk of offending some readers for whom this issue is paramount, it is surely legitimate to ask two questions: what concrete good this new office will do, and why it had to be in Seoul. The answer to the latter is that Park Geun-hye was keen to host it, which raises a further question: what price *Trustpolitik*? Does President Park even have a joined-up North Korea policy?

All leaders, on all issues, must strategize and prioritize. Hosting this new office was bound to infuriate Pyongyang and set back inter-Korean relations overall. Park and her advisers must have thought of that, but deemed it the right thing to do nonetheless. As to usefulness, South Korea is of course where the vast majority of Northern defectors live. But collecting fresh testimony could surely be achieved just as well by visits, as the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) did, without the expense of an office. Or if the latter were indeed necessary, could it not have been put in Tokyo, say? Is there not perhaps an element of gesture politics in all this?

Still the deed is done now, and for the DPRK to flounce away from a sports event may be a low price to pay. Two sports events in fact, for Pyongyang was also due to send a team to the [Military World Games](#) in Mungyeong, ROK in October (2-11). Mungyeong is [associated](#) with

Park Chung-hee, the dictator (1961-79) and father of Park Geun-hye, who was a teacher there in his youth. From there in 1939 he applied to join the Manchukuo Army (a goal that he later achieved), pledging allegiance to the Japanese emperor in his [own blood](#). So to have the KPA running around in Mungyeong could have raised interesting historical ironies, but it was not to be. On July 31, the KPA's athletic guidance committee informed the International Military Sports Council (CISM) that they were not coming, without giving any specific reason.

Dissing DJ's widow

Before late August's tensions, the beginning of that month saw an episode that once again raised questions about Kim Jong Un's motives and judgment. In a mostly bleak inter-Korean landscape, the temptation is to clutch at whatever straw can be found. One such, as noted in our last issue, was a possible return visit to Pyongyang by Lee Hee-ho, the former ROK first lady and widow of Kim Dae-jung who instituted the "Sunshine Policy" of engagement.

Lee is one of the few South Koreans who has met Kim Jong Un, if only briefly and formally, in December 2011 after his father Kim Jong Il's death. In a rare and wise concession, South Korea's hardline president at the time, Lee Myung-bak, allowed Lee and a small party to go to Pyongyang to offer condolences. That opened a line of contact, with regular exchanges of personal greetings on significant dates. A fresh visit had been planned for last year, but Lee's health (she is 92) rendered that impracticable. Last December Lee sent a wreath, as usual, on the anniversary of Kim Jong Il's death. Kim Jong Un replied on Christmas Eve, thanking her for the flowers and renewing his personal invitation to her to visit the North. Moreover, that letter was hand-delivered to Lee's aides in Kaesong by no less than Kim Yang Gon, North Korea's point man on the South. (His formal title is director of United Front Department of the DPRK's ruling Workers' Party [WPK].) Kim took the opportunity to state that "we desire better relations between the North and South."

All this set up certain expectations when Lee finally made the trip, flying into Pyongyang on Aug. 5 for a four-day visit. True, she holds no official position now, nor did she carry any message from the ROK government. (Perhaps President Park could or should have written a note, but caution is understandable given the poor state of inter-Korean relations.)

Yet in the event, for whatever reason, Kim Jong Un not only failed to meet his invited guest but in effect insulted her by fobbing her off with low-level interlocutors and dreary sites like the International Friendship Exhibition at Myohyangsan, a purgatory inflicted on any ordinary tourist. Gracious lady that she is, Lee put a brave face on all this, hugging Northern orphans as she delivered woolly hats and mufflers from a Southern NGO which she chairs, as well as \$258,000 worth of medicines donated by ROK pharmaceutical firms. But she must have been disappointed, as was South Korean public opinion. Why bother to invite a distinguished but frail old woman, only to stand her up? This makes no sense, as well as showing no manners.

The guns of August

And so to the main event. On Aug. 4, the day before Lee Hee-ho flew to Pyongyang, an ROK patrol in the western part of the DMZ close to Paju city set off a landmine blast; two young

sergeants lost legs. The DMZ is studded with as many as a million mines, mostly laid since the 1950-53 Korean War; many were air-dropped during periods of tension in the 1960s. Their precise locations are often unknown, and some may have shifted over time due to rain and other causes. Hence this was at first assumed to be a tragic accident. *Stars and Stripes* [noted](#) that “in the hours after the blasts, South Korean officials said there was no possibility of North Korean involvement, and recent heavy rains might have displaced the land mines.”

They soon changed their tune. On Aug. 10 the UN Command and Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported the results of their investigation. By their account, forensic evidence proved the three mines to be of DPRK provenance, laid within the past month on a known regular patrol route used by ROK troops near a gate into the DMZ on the southern side. As to how the KPA managed to sneak across the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) into the Southern half of the DMZ and place the mines, thick fog was adduced; it might also suggest a certain lack of vigilance.

Seoul’s reaction was swift and sharp. Maj. Gen. Koo Hong-mo, JCS director of operations, warned that “North Korea will pay a harsh price proportionate to [its] provocation ... our military will make [them] pay the equally pitiless penalty for their provocations.” Action followed within the day. For the first time since 2004 the South switched on its propaganda loudspeakers ranged along the west and central DMZ; blasting a [mix](#) of news, critique, and K-pop, which reportedly could be heard up to 12 miles inside the DPRK. Pyongyang naturally denied all responsibility for the mines, angrily denounced the loudspeaker broadcasts, and threatened to shoot at these and other ROK targets. Brushing this off, Seoul went ahead with the regular annual *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* (UFG) joint maneuvers with the US which kicked off Aug. 17.

Things heated up on Aug. 20. Here *Comparative Connections*’ day by day chronology is not enough. We need an hour by hour account, which an Asan Institute [paper](#) handily offers:

It began with a North Korean artillery fire on August 20th 3:52pm (0652 GMT) when a single 14.5 mm shell hit an uninhabited hillside in Jung-myeon, Yeoncheon County of Gyeonggi Province....Twenty minutes later (at approximately 4:12pm), two rounds of shells were fired from a 76.2mm direct fire weapon aimed at a location near the first target but 700 meters south of the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). At about 4:50pm, the Blue House National Security Chief Kim Kwan-jin receives a letter from the Director of the United Front Department Kim Yang-gon stating that South Korea’s resumption of broadcasts through its loudspeakers aimed at North Korea is tantamount to a “declaration of war” but that North Korea is willing to resolve the current situation and “open a way out for the improvement of the relationship.” According to the South Korean Ministry of National Defense, the General Staff Department of the North Korean People’s Army issued a statement at about the same time via a border telephone channel stating that they would initiate “military action if the South does not stop its anti-Pyongyang psychological broadcasting and remove all facilities in 48 hours from 5pm.” At 5:04pm, the South Korean military responded with “dozens of rounds of a 155mm self-propelled gun as warning shots” aimed at an uninhabited location 500 meters north of the MDL. At 5:10pm, the South Korean military issues an evacuation order for approximately 2,000 residents of Yeoncheon, Paju, Gimpo, and Kanghwado. At 5:40pm, the South Korean military raises its security posture to the highest level of readiness. At 6 PM, the Blue House convenes an emergency National Security Council meeting under the direction of President Park. Geun-hye.

Nor did the day end there, at least not in Pyongyang. That night Kim Jong Un convened an “emergency enlarged meeting” of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) – although *KCNA*’s [photos](#) show only 15 men around a table, the CMC’s normal complement – and declared a “semi-state of war” from the next day.

As in previous Korean crises, the Seoul street appeared wholly unfazed. There was no bulk buying of instant noodles or other emergency supplies. Some dryly noted a contrast with the panic seen during a brief outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) earlier this year, when many South Koreans wore masks and quite unnecessarily avoided going out. On Aug. 24, Seoul’s share index, the Kospi, hit a two-year low, but that reflected worries about the Chinese economy, not fears of the KPA. In the “Keep Calm and Carry On” camp, Andrei Lankov [called](#) the whole thing a “diplomatic ballet” (but if so, who was the choreographer?). Buttressing this view, the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) operated normally throughout the crisis, with Southern managers and goods daily going back and forth across the DMZ. Indeed, on Aug. 17, surely within earshot of the South’s loudspeakers, which by then had been blaring for a week, North and South resolved a long-running row over pay rates in the KIC; this is discussed below. Interesting timing. Meanwhile, in a civilian exchange of a kind rare now, 83 South Korean teenagers happened to be in Pyongyang for a soccer tournament. Nothing bad happened to them, the atmosphere was normal, and a 70,000-strong home crowd roared encouragement when their compatriots scored a goal against China.

Back on the border, having thus cranked up tensions, North Korea then eased them, offering talks shortly before its 48 hour deadline expired. This was some relief, as was the very senior level of each side’s negotiators. The North sent not only Kim Yang Gon, its long-time point man on South Korea (his formal title is secretary of the United Front Department of the WPK Central Committee), but also Hwang Pyong So, Kim Jong Un’s right-hand man. Both men had come South briefly last October for the Incheon Asiad closing ceremony. Their Southern interlocutors were Hong Yong-pyo, who has had little chance to make an impact since being appointed as minister of unification earlier this year, and more importantly, President Park’s national security adviser, Kim Kwan-jin. Ex-general Kim’s hardline reputation in his former post as defense minister prompted a Northern [video](#) two years ago of an effigy of him being torn apart by KPA attack dogs while his picture was used for pistol practice. One shooter is quoted as calling Kim “such a bastard and defective human being, he doesn’t even deserve to be our target.”

Presumably the dialogue at Panmunjom was more polite, if not necessarily less tough. In a bizarrely dysfunctional format, these marathon talks (43 hours in all) ran through most of one night, all of the next, and well into a third. Starting at 6pm on Saturday Aug. 22, they finally concluded at past 1am on Tuesday Aug. 25. This is hardly conducive to mental alertness or clear thinking. Nor was it just the four negotiators and their aides who got no sleep. The talks were livecast to Seoul and Pyongyang, so Park Geun-hye and her staff (and no doubt Kim Jong Un and his) were watching and steering them in real time. This has some advantages: everyone knows the state of play, with no further reporting up and back required. But it is also highly constrictive, especially at sticking points. Reportedly, about a dozen “restroom breaks” were taken so that problems could be thrashed out away from the leaderly gazes.

The fact that talks were ongoing did not immediately defuse tensions on the ground. Each side accused the other of bad faith in mustering forces while negotiating. The South claimed that 50 of the KPA's 70 submarines had left their bases and amphibious landing craft had been forward deployed. Six ROK fighter jets were recalled from training in Alaska. Further afield, reports (and some pictures) suggested that China was massing troops on its border with North Korea. With classic Sinocentrism, one Chinese paper [suggested](#) darkly that all this was a plot – whose, was not specified – to keep President Park away from Beijing in early September.

Back at Panmunjom, these exhausting talks – President Park burst a [capillary](#) in her eye, and even Kim Kwan-jin was wilting visibly by the end – finally produced an agreement. Succinct yet substantial, this bears reproducing in full. Unusually, the semi-official South Korean news agency *Yonhap* simply carried *KCNA*'s published version of the English [text](#):

- The north and the south agreed to hold talks between their authorities in Pyongyang or Seoul at an early date to improve the north-south ties and have multi-faceted dialogue and negotiations in the future.
- The north side expressed regret over the recent mine explosion that occurred in the south side's area of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), wounding soldiers of the south side.
- The south side will stop all loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts along the MDL from 12:00, August 25 unless an abnormal case occurs.
- The north side will lift the semi-war state at that time.
- The north and the south agreed to arrange reunions of separated families and relatives from the north and the south on the occasion of the Harvest Moon Day this year and continue to hold such reunions in the future, too and to have a Red Cross working contact for it early in September.
- The north and the south agreed to vitalize NGO exchanges in various fields.

Seoul wins big?

On the face of it this is a big win for Seoul. Pyongyang appears to have accepted the ROK's longstanding agenda – family reunions both now and on a sustained basis, NGO exchanges, further high-level talks – while gaining none of its own demands, such as lifting sanctions and resumption of tourism to Mount Kumgang. The South also got what it regards as an apology for the landmine incident. Even its sole concession in return, silencing the loudspeakers, was hedged by reserving the right to switch them on again if the North plays up (to paraphrase).

Most, but not quite all, comment interpreted this favorably. It has certainly worked wonders for Park Geu-hye's recently lackluster approval rating, boosting this by up to 15 points and prompting talk of a "[second wind](#)" as she began – on the very day of the six-point accord, Aug. 25 – the latter half of her single five-year presidential term. The editor of this journal [spoke of](#)

South Korea playing hardball; the North blinked. Stephan Haggard of UCSD, who writes the indispensable *Witness to Transformation* [blog](#) with the Peterson Institute's Marcus Noland and was in Seoul during the crisis, offered running commentary in a valuable series of [posts](#) and concluded this was "a North Korean stand-down." CSIS and Georgetown's Victor Cha knew why: the [loudspeakers](#) "terrified" Kim Jong Un. Contrariwise, Joshua Stanton of the *parti pris* but challenging [blog](#) *One Free Korea* [reckoned](#) nothing was resolved: "The limited, incremental war will resume, only at a time and place more to Pyongyang's advantage."

And what of the North? Unusually in that land of monolithic ideology, its two negotiators offered contrasting views. Hwang Pyong So did what domestic politics doubtless demanded: going on TV to [say](#) the South had been taught a harsh lesson on how tensions can escalate if it "fabricates a groundless case." Other DPRK comment insisted they had made no apology. With more than an echo of recent debates about the nuances of Abe's Shinzo's apology (or was it?) for Japan's past crimes, linguists who parsed the various words in Korean tended to agree. By contrast, Kim Yang Gon offered a much more upbeat [take](#), blaming no one and speaking of "an epochal phase for turning misfortune into blessings in the North-South relations."

In a further twist, Kim Jong Un convened the enlarged CMC again on Aug. 28. This time it was [visibly](#) enlarged: hundreds of mainly military officials in a hall, being harangued by their Leader. *KCNA* reported that some CMC members were changed, i.e., sacked; no names are known as yet. Kim's tone was ambivalent: he attributed the peaceful outcome to "tremendous military muscle" rather than negotiations, but he specifically endorsed the six-point accord. This must all have been a big and stressful test for him, with cross-currents and murky depths on which we can but speculate. For instance, perhaps not all his advisers thought the mines a good idea. Maybe this was even an unauthorized initiative by someone at the front over-eager to show their mettle and loyalty, leaving Pyongyang to pick up the pieces. Heads may roll.

Win-win at Kaesong

Paradoxically, even as tensions were rising along the DMZ, nearby the two Koreas managed to settle a long-running row. As outlined in the last issue of *Comparative Connections*, last year Pyongyang arrogated to itself the right to set wages at the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last functioning North-South joint venture; and in February decreed a pay increase for its 53,000-odd workers, slightly above the agreed ceiling of 5 percent annually. Seoul protested at this unilateralism, and told its 123 firms in the KIC not to pay the extra; some ignored that. After dragging on for months, the dispute was suddenly settled on Aug. 17. North Korea accepted the 5 percent maximum, but the South agreed to recalculate its basis and include bonuses; so honor was satisfied for both sides. Why it took so long to reach such an obvious win-win solution is unclear. An ROK official noted, however, that there is still far to go to resolve other management issues at the KIC, such as ensuring a stable supply of labor – firms are keen to recruit more – and mobile phone and Internet access.

Excelsior? Or snakes and ladders?

It remains to assess the prospects for what one fervently hopes will prove to be a fresh and sustained episode of inter-Korean dialogue. As of early September the signals were mixed. On

the positive side, arrangements for family reunions are proceeding smoothly. A date has been fixed, albeit later than the South hoped: Oct. 20-26, nearly a month after *Chuseok*, the Korean harvest festival which this year falls on Sept. 26-29 and would perhaps have been too soon to organize. Candidate selection is under way: by computer in the South, no doubt less randomly in the North. The usual venue, the Hyundai-built Mount Kumgang resort on the DPRK's south-eastern coast, is being dusted off; these days it mostly languishes unused, ever since July 2008 when Seoul suspended tours after a straying tourist was shot by the KPA.

But there are still no guarantees. Readers will recall that two years ago Pyongyang cruelly [cancelled](#) such reunions at four days' notice, accusing Seoul of poisoning the atmosphere for dialogue. Ominously, Northern media are issuing a steady drumbeat of warnings in similar vein. On Sept. 6 *Minju Joson*, daily paper of the DPRK Cabinet, accused "the chief executive of south Korea" of "reckless remarks throwing a wet blanket over the improvement of the north-south relations in a foreign country... Chongwadae [the Blue House, the residence and office of the ROK president], Administration and the ruling party of south Korea vie with each other to mislead public opinion by hurting the DPRK." Averring poetically that "muddy spring will have muddy streams," the paper warned that "the hard-won north-south agreement may be an empty paper owing to the confrontation moves of the south Korean authorities." Other *KCNA* headlines from early September sound a similar note, as in this sample:

- S. Korean Authorities Urged Not to Behave Contrary to Hard-won Atmosphere of Improving Inter-Korean Relations (Sept. 2)
- S. Korean Authorities Denounced for Creating Complexity in North-South Relations (Sept. 3)
- *Rodong Sinmun* Urges S. Korea Not to Do Foul Behavior (Sept. 5)
- North-South Agreement May Be Empty Paper Owing to Confrontation Moves of S. Korea: *Minju Joson* (Sept. 6)

Note especially the phrase "in a foreign country." As discussed elsewhere in this issue, President Park's Sept. 2-4 visit to China for its military parade on the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II – or as Beijing puts it (dutifully [quoted](#) by Seoul) "China's victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression" – made waves in several directions, including across the Pacific. For our purposes, although Kim Jong Un has only himself to blame for the parlous slide in DPRK-PRC relations, it must have been galling for North Korea to see Xi Jinping treat Park as a special guest, close to him on the podium in Tiananmen Square (where Kim Il Sung once stood by Mao Zedong, as ROK media gleefully pointed out); whereas its own envoy Choe Ryong Hae – who did not even get to meet Xi, so far as is [known](#) – was placed far away, at almost the very end of a long row of lesser dignitaries.

This was humiliation enough, so did Park really have to rub it in? The Sept. 3 *KCNA* article cited above seethed with fury. This merits quoting at some length, bad English and all:

The south Korean chief executive who set on [sic] her foreign trip on Sept. 2 falsified the truth about the recent situation ... She went the lengths [sic] of mentioning the "constructive role"

played by someone, a seriously insult [sic] to the DPRK, and sophism devoid of elementary political awareness.... [Park] let loose ill words while making eyes at others during her foreign trip. This clearly proves that she pursues north-south confrontation in reliance on someone ... She should also clearly remember that the force promoting the improvement of the north-south ties and preserving peace on the peninsula are [sic] the Korean nation itself, not outsiders. If the south Korean authorities persist in utterances seriously rattling the nerves of the dialogue partner while peddling the internal issue of the nation abroad, the north-south relations cannot but suffer from the repetition of the evil cycle of confrontation.

For once Pyongyang arguably has a point. The mere fact and striking symbolism of Park Geun-hye's China visit should surely have been triumph enough for Seoul. Also, having just defused a serious confrontation on the peninsula, and being about to embark on potentially the most hopeful inter-Korean peace process since Park was elected in 2012, a degree of tact and restraint toward the ever-prickly North at this time would surely have been advisable.

Evidently the ROK president and her advisers do not see it that way. Instead we got [headlines](#) like "Park talks unification in Shanghai." The *JoongAng Ilbo* cited her as saying that "she will start actual preparation for the unification of the two Koreas, urging China to play a crucial role to bring about meaningful changes from the North," noting that she used "the phrase "in the nearest future" for the very first time." Similarly, *Yonhap* [had](#) her telling journalists on the plane back to Seoul that South Korea "would cooperate with China for a peaceful unification ... Various discussions could begin as soon as possible." Even more alarmingly from North Korea's point of view, the Chinese press too has started reporting such statements. "S. Korea's Park urges DPRK to abandon policy line of simultaneous nuke, economic development" is not the kind of headline this writer can recall seeing on [Xinhua](#) before.

Meanwhile, a fortnight after Aug. 25's six-point agreement there was no sign yet of moves toward either the high-level talks or the civilian contacts mentioned in that accord. On Sept. 11 ROK Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo told the National Assembly that there is scope for "many types of civilian inter-Korean exchanges," despite the May 24 sanctions which ban trade with and investment in the North. Hong added that Seoul supports such exchanges, and blamed the fact that they are "lackluster" on the North. On the May 24 measures themselves, Hong said they will not be lifted "until the North makes a sincere apology for the [*Cheonan*] incident." Given Pyongyang's continued denial of responsibility for sinking the *Cheonan* in 2010, and how swiftly it backtracked on its "regret" for the recent landmine incident, this means sanctions will stay. Hence one of the key items that one would expect to arise in any serious effort to make a fresh start in North-South relations is ruled out *a priori*.

Hope springs eternal, or as the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci famously said: "Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will. (Then again, he died in Mussolini's jails.) It is possible, and devoutly to be wished, that the two Koreas really are about to turn over a new leaf in their relations. But on past form, if Seoul continues to bang on about unification (and now publicly invite China as a partner in that endeavor), while remaining inflexible on issues like sanctions which are high on Pyongyang's agenda, then we may see just one more one-off set of family reunions in October – but little or nothing else in terms of a wider thaw or more exchanges.

In an image we have used before, inter-Korean relations these days resemble the board game snakes and ladders: an alternation of tiny steps forward (up the ladder) are long knocked back again (down the snake), meaning there is little or no cumulative progress. August was an unusually dramatic example of a snake morphing into a potential ladder. Yet even if the latter proves sturdy, the sad truth is that the Koreans are breaking no fresh ground, but merely getting a little way back toward the wide-ranging engagement they had before 2008. It remains far from clear whether Park Geun-hye or Kim Jong Un yet have each other's measure, or if either of them has a viable strategic vision on how to move things forward. Absent that, snakes and ladders will remain the name of the game on the peninsula. That is a depressing prospect.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations May – August 2015

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: Official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* [proclaims](#) DPRK support for a planned peace march from Pyongyang to Seoul, organized by US-based *ad hoc* group [Women Cross DMZ](#). The 30 international participants include the feminist Gloria Steinem and two Nobel Peace Prize laureates.

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 South Koreans arrested in March are [interviewed](#) (separately) by *CNN*. Missionary Kim Kuk-gi (61) and businessman Choe Chun-gil (56) confess to being spies (ROK's National Intelligence Service [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 given local authorities a green light.

May 4, 2015: ROK government [approves](#) a meeting by Southern civic groups with their Northern counterparts to discuss joint events marking the 15th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 and the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945.

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*.

May 6, 2015: Hwang Joon-kook, ROK special representative for Korean Peninsula peace and security affairs, [tells](#) reporters in Washington that the other five participant states in the Six-Party Talks are "pushing for unconditional exploratory talks" with North Korea.

May 7, 2015: Gyeonggi Provincial Police Agency says it [arrested](#) a 28 year old man for posting dozens of pro-DPRK articles online between December 2011 and April 2013. 20 fellow-members of Corean Alliance, a civic group dubbed “anti-state” by the ROK government, demonstrate in front of Suwon police station, claiming the arrest stifles free speech.

May 7, 2015: South Korea [rejects](#) as “inappropriate” a call by the North to lift economic sanctions as a precondition for inter-Korean dialogue.

May 8, 2015: Meeting in Shenyang, the two Koreas [agree](#) to push for joint events to mark the 15th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit in June and the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan's colonial rule in August. No details are given. Seoul is represented by NGOs; the ROK government will review and must approve any concrete proposals.

May 8, 2015: DPRK [issues](#) an “emergency special warning,” threatening to attack ROK speedboats that it claims have been violating its territorial waters in the West (Yellow) Sea several times daily for the past week.

May 9, 2015: Rep. Yoon Sang-hyun, President Park Geun-hye's special envoy to Russia's VE day commemorations, exchanges [pleasantries](#) with Kim Yong Nam, North Korea's titular head of state, at the parade in Moscow. Kim Jong Un had been expected to attend, but did not.

May 11, 2015: *Rodong Sinmun* [announces](#) the death of Korean People's Army (KPA) Gen. Kim Kyok Sik. As commander of the KPA's Fourth Corps based in Hwanghae Province in 2010, Kim is regarded in Seoul as having masterminded that year's two fatal attacks: the torpedoing of the corvette *Cheonan* in March, and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island in November.

May 13, 2015: South Korea's NIS [claims](#) that the North's Minister of People's Armed Forces (MPAF), Hyon Yong Chol, was executed by anti-aircraft machine gun fire circa April 30 at a military school in Pyongyang for insubordination to Kim Jong Un.

May 20, 2015: At one day's notice and without explanation, North Korea [cancels](#) a planned visit to the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) by UN Secretary General (and former ROK Foreign Minister) Ban Ki-Moon, who is visiting Seoul.

May 24, 2015: “Women Cross DMZ” [enter](#) South Korea by land from the North, using a bus through the western crossing from Kaesong rather than walking via Panmunjom as they had initially hoped. Allegations of naiveté toward the DPRK give them a mixed reception in Seoul, and later Washington, although they also had [some defenders](#).

May 29, 2015: DPRK's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), in a tone which (as often) is at odds with its name, [attacks](#) a planned new UN office in Seoul to monitor human rights in the North as an “unpardonable provocation” and “open declaration of war.” It vows that “As soon as that anti-North base is set up in the South, it will be our very first target with merciless retribution.”

June 2, 2015: *Yonhap* [reports](#) that the two Koreas have failed to agree on joint events for the 15th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit on June 15.

June 4, 2015: Vice Transportation Minister Yeo Hyung-koo [says](#) a DPRK veto has blocked ROK's application to join the Moscow-based Organization for Cooperation between Railways (OSJD), even though Seoul recently hosted an OSJD event. The organization may revise its rules so that unanimity is not required. Pyongyang did the same last time Seoul tried, in 2003.

June 12, 2015: South Korean NGO committee that held talks with North Korea on anniversary events for the 2000 Summit [blames](#) the ROK government for their collapse.

June 16, 2015: KCNA [claims](#) that North Korea is suffering its worst drought in 100 years. Some observers doubt if things are quite that bad.

June 22, 2015: Organizers of the upcoming Gwangju Universiade (world student games) [say](#) North Korea sent an email on June 19 withdrawing its participation for political reasons; namely the imminent opening in Seoul of a UN office to monitor human rights in the DPRK.

June 23, 2015: The aforementioned new UN human rights field office in Seoul is officially [inaugurated](#) by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein.

July 6, 2015: After further talks in Kaesong, the Kim Dae-Jung Peace Center [announces](#) that former ROK First Lady Lee Hee-Ho will visit Pyongyang on Aug. 5-8, traveling by air.

July 14, 2015: ROK Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo [says](#) the DPRK's denuclearization is not an "absolute prerequisite" for better inter-Korean ties and more exchanges, provided Pyongyang makes the right choice to walk on the path in that direction.

July 17, 2015: Bank of Korea (BOK), the ROK central bank, [issues](#) its annual report and estimates on the DPRK economy, which it reckons grew by 1.0 percent last year.

July 17, 2015: The ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) that, in a telephone call that day via the west coast hotline, it has for the first time invited the DPRK to join the 33 countries due to attend the multilateral Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD) in September. MND suggests that the Ministry of People's Armed Forces (MPAF) send a vice-minister.

July 20, 2015: North Korea [rejects](#) the South's two recent contact suggestions, saying the atmosphere is not ripe given Southern hostility. Its Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) is scathing about the SDD saying, "It is loathsome on its own that South Korea is hosting talks on security."

July 23, 2015: At North Korea's invitation, Southern NGOs go to Kaesong to discuss joint Aug. 15 events. Failing to agree anything concrete, they decide to meet again on July 31.

July 30, 2015: North Korea cancels the talks due in Kaesong next day on joint Liberation Day celebrations, [asking](#) rhetorically: “Will a joint event on Aug. 15 be possible amid a confrontation among kindred...?” This ends any prospect of organizing such events.

Aug. 2, 2015: MND [says](#) that on July 31 the KPA athletic guidance committee informed the International Military Sports Council (CISM) that the DPRK will not after all participate in the Military World Games to be held in Mungyeong, ROK on Oct. 2-11. No reason is given.

Aug. 4, 2015: A [landmine](#) blast maims two ROK sergeants on a routine patrol in the DMZ.

Aug. 5, 2015: Ex-ROK First Lady Lee Hee-ho, widow of Kim Dae-jung and an 18-strong delegation [fly](#) to Pyongyang, on an aircraft provided by an ROK low-cost carrier.

Aug. 8, 2015: Lee Hee-ho and her party [return](#) from Pyongyang, having not been able to meet either her nominal host Kim Jong Un or any other senior figures.

Aug. 10, 2015: UN Command (UNC) [accuses](#) North Korea of recently laying the mines that exploded on Aug. 4. Vowing “pitiless” but proportionate retaliation, the same day South Korea [reactivates](#) propaganda loudspeakers along the DMZ, silent since 2004.

Aug. 11, 2015: Headline in the Seoul daily *Korea Herald* [declares](#) that “All inter-Korean liberation events scrapped.” (In fact, as the article shows, despite several proposals nothing concrete had yet been organized.)

Aug. 17, 2015: Annual joint US-ROK military exercise *Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG)* [begins](#) as scheduled.

Aug. 17, 2015: After almost six months of dispute the two Koreas finally [agree](#) on wages at the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). The North accepts the existing 5 percent ceiling on annual pay hikes, but the South agrees to recalculate this to include bonuses.

Aug. 19, 2015: *KCNA* headline, supposedly quoting the (not previously known) DPRK Joint National Organization of Working People, [avers](#): “Park Geun Hye Should Be Buried in Cemetery as Soon as Possible.” The article concludes: “No matter how glittering make-up she may put [sic], it is too late to prevent the foul smell from reeking off from her body interwoven with sycophancy, treachery, confrontation and hostility. What she should do for the nation is to leave Chongwadae, the doghouse of the US, shut her unshapely mouth and get her crime-ridden body buried in the ceremony [sic] at an early date.”

Aug. 20, 2015: KPA [fires](#) four artillery rounds across the DMZ. An hour later the ROKA ripostes with 29 rounds. KPA General Staff Department warns that it will launch military action unless the South stops psywar broadcasts and removes all facilities within 48 hours of 5:00pm today. 2,000 residents of Southern border areas in Yeoncheon, Paju, Gimpo, and Kanghwado are told to evacuate. The ROK military raises its security posture to the highest level of readiness.

Aug. 20, 2015: Kim Jong Un [convenes](#) an enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). This declares a "semi-war state."

Aug. 21, 2015: Despite tensions, 83 South Koreans are in Pyongyang for a youth [soccer](#) tournament also involving China and Brazil. Seoul says it does not regard them as at risk.

Aug. 22, 2015: Before its 48 hour deadline expires, the DPRK suggests talks instead. High-level negotiators from both sides meet at Panmunjom. The meeting breaks up at [4:15am](#).

Aug. 23, 2015: Unnamed ROK military official [tells](#) *Yonhap* that two-thirds of the DPRK submarine fleet (50 out of 70) has put to sea, current location unknown. The same source says the KPA has doubled its artillery troops on the border, with the command to be combat ready.

Aug. 25, 2015: After marathon talks, haggard negotiators announce around 2:00am that a six-point [accord](#) has been reached. Family reunions will resume, as will other talks and NGO contacts. The South will switch off its loudspeakers, and the North lift its state of semi-war.

Aug. 28, 2015: Gallup poll taken on Aug. 25-27 [finds](#) that President Park's approval rating shot up by 15 percentage points since last week to 49 percent, its highest this year.

Aug. 28, 2015: President Park for the first time [attends](#) the joint ROK-US Integrated Firepower Exercise live-fire drill in Pocheon near the DMZ, the eighth of its kind. Its scenario is that the KPA fires on a South Korean guard post, prompting massive retaliation by ROK and US forces.

Aug. 28, 2015: Kim Jong Un again [convenes](#) a (much) enlarged WPK CMC. In somewhat ambivalent remarks he praises the KPA's "military muscle" but endorses Aug. 25's accord. Membership changes to the CMC are reported, but no names named.

Aug. 29, 2015: South Korea's Red Cross [proposes](#) talks at Panmunjom on Sept. 7 to arrange family reunions. North Korea promptly [agrees](#) on Aug. 30.

Aug. 30, 2015: DPRK media [report](#) Kim Jong Un sent a condolence message on the third anniversary of the death of Unification Church founder Moon Sun-myung to his family.

Sept. 2-4, 2015: President Park [visits](#) Beijing for China's military parade marking VJ day.

Sept. 5, 2015: *KCNA* headline [reads](#) "Rodong Sinmun Urges S. Korea Not to Do Foul Behavior." The WPK daily warns ROK rightwing media not to spoil the mood for dialogue.