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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

BACK TO DIPLOMACY IN 2017?

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South Korea's hardline response to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests earlier in the year, which led to a complete severing of all inter-Korean contact, meant there was effectively no relationship between the two Koreas in final months of 2016. With the stalemate in relations coupled with the political turmoil in both Washington and Seoul, Aidan Foster-Carter provides his analysis to help understand how we got here by looking back and, even more importantly, looking forward. While North Korea watches and waits, there is a worrying power vacuum in Seoul in the wake of "ChoiSunsil-gate." The next move largely depends on how South Korea responds to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye.
[Editors]

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Introduction

If its remit were taken literally, this could be a very short article. South Korea's hardline response to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests at the start of the year – severing all inter-Korean contacts and terminating the few remaining joint activities, notably the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) – meant that in the final four months of 2016, like the mid-year four months covered in our [last report](#), there was effectively no relationship between the two Koreas. In that sense there is nothing to say.

End of story? By no means. A cumulative serial publication like *Comparative Connections*, whose chronologies render it also a journal of record, has a responsibility to take the longer view; even, or especially, when politicians and others fail to do so. Hence, this is a good opportunity to look back, and especially forward. At a time of great uncertainty in Seoul and Washington – Pyongyang by contrast looks eminently [stable](#), for all its foes' frothing about "regime change" – one thing, we may venture, is for sure. The hard line that dominated policy toward North Korea during 2016 – epitomized by two new tranches of the toughest ever [sanctions](#), under UN Security Council Resolutions [2270](#) and [2321](#), intended to punish the DPRK's unprecedented pair of nuclear tests in a single year – will not endure unalloyed. 2017, or 2018 at the latest, will bring a return to diplomacy, not replacing pressure on Pyongyang, but complementing it. Sticks will continue, but we shall also see a revival of the too long neglected carrot.

At least three factors support this forecast. Two of them go beyond our specifically inter-Korean remit here, so let us simply state them. First: The stick alone is not working, and arguably will never work – not least because Beijing will not countenance any DPRK collapse. Second, China, which remains the key power in regard to North Korea, has consistently proposed a twin-track approach of pressure plus diplomacy – though it has been oddly slow to flesh out how a new diplomatic initiative might work by making concrete proposals. (Repeatedly calling on all sides to keep calm, while endlessly intoning a stale mantra about resuming the Six-Party Talks, is – with respect – an attitude, not a policy.)

The third and decisive factor is directly within this article's purview. By February 2018 at the latest, but probably sooner, South Korea will have a new president. All serious contenders to succeed the now beleaguered and impeached Park Geun-hye, on the

political right as well as the left, support some degree of re-engagement with North Korea. Thus, regardless of whether one reckons Park's latter-day switch to a hard line was better or worse than her earlier Trustpolitik, the fact is that ROK policy will soon change – perhaps drastically, depending on who occupies the Blue House for the next five years. Among the tasks of this article, therefore, is to examine the likely candidates and their approaches.

"ChoiSunsil-gate" and inter-Korean relations

"Events, dear boy; events." The comment famously [attributed](#) to Harold Macmillan (Britain's Prime Minister during 1957-63), when asked what leaders should fear most in politics, applies in spades to South Korea currently. The situation that takes center stage now was wholly unforeseen a mere four months ago, when we last wrote. Even then, in the medium term Park Geun-hye was on the way out. The ROK Constitution – which two-thirds of South Koreans believe needs [amending](#), according to a recent poll – mandates a single five-year presidential term. This tends to render every president, even those who accomplished more than Park, a lame duck as their term in office draws to a close. So in any case Park's successor was set to be elected on Dec. 20 this year, taking office Feb. 25, 2018.

That timetable is now likely to accelerate. This is not the place for a full account of the bizarre saga, still unfolding, which has brought Park Geun-hye to her present sorry plight. Readers of this journal no doubt already follow Korean affairs closely, but good brief summaries and backgrounders at various stages of this ongoing drama-cum-soap opera can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). In more depth, the Peterson Institute's essential *Witness to Transformation* [blog](#), normally focused on the other Korea, has seven instalments (at this writing) of incisive running commentary by UCSD's Stephan Haggard: the latest and the links are [here](#). Finally, for my money – only it's free, like *Comparative Connections* – one of the most insightful and thought-provoking as well as prolific commentators, albeit openly *engagé* and indeed *enragé*, is the anonymous TK at AskAKorean.com: see his successive takes [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and most recently [here](#). My own twopennorth is [here](#).

Our focus now is the inter-Korean angle, and mainly forward-looking. Yet it would be remiss not to report what this scandal has revealed, or alleged, about Park's past Nordpolitik and its tergiversations. As regular readers know from past articles, trying to follow and

explain Park Geun-hye's shifting stance on North Korea over time has vexed and flummoxed us. Logically prior to any evaluation, it has often been hard to tease out exactly what her aim or game was. Above all, her sudden embrace early in 2014 of an almost apocalyptic, adventist vision of unification as an imminent happy event (a [jackpot](#) or bonanza, no less) for Korea – meaning South Korea plus the Northern people – the DPRK authorities had no place in this – was hard to interpret. Was she just terminally fed up with Kim Jong Un, and with the foul insults hurled at her by DPRK media? That would be humanly understandable.

Among all conceivable explanations for this volte-face, no one had entertained [shamanism](#). Yet that is now on the cards. Choi Sun-sil – the cult leader's daughter whose sway over Park (like her father's) has been compared to [Rasputin](#), yet who had no official position nor security clearance – appears to have been heavily involved in policy on North Korea, as in many other areas. I summarized some key allegations in an earlier [article](#); three are worth singling out. When Park met her predecessor (and sometime rival) Lee Myung-bak for a briefing in December 2012, soon after her election but before she took office, Choi seems to have [drafted](#) her script and told her what to ask. The answers included revelations of secret inter-Korean contacts which Choi, as a civilian, had no business knowing about.

Second, computer [evidence](#) suggests Choi wrote or redrafted parts of Park's March 2014 Dresden Declaration, including the idea – bound to be anathema to Pyongyang – of the East German city, and the German mode of unification, as a model for Korea. This overture – Trustpolitik's last gasp; the North summarily rejected it – was hard to reconcile with the aforementioned unilateral emphasis on unification which thereafter would increasingly dominate Park's approach.

The third and most striking allegation is that this new theme arose not from fresh intelligence analysis or professional advice from policy makers, but because Choi had prophesied that reunification was imminent within a year or two. That notion is also said to have influenced [specific decisions](#), such as closing Kaesong and resuming propaganda broadcasts across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). All this remains to be proven, but the circumstantial evidence is strong. Perhaps trying to [decode](#) Park Geun-hye's Nordpolitik was a wild goose chase all along; we should rather have been seeking to fathom her secret Svengali, Ms Choi.

A worrying power vacuum in Seoul

Looking ahead, two big issues loom: who will succeed Park, and how soon. Taking the latter first – Park's Dec. 9 impeachment by the National Assembly – the overwhelming margin (234 votes to 56) means that almost half of her own conservative Saenuri Party must have joined the three opposition parties in rejecting her – leaves her fate with the Constitutional Court (CC), which has up to 180 days (meaning it could in principle take until early June) to decide whether to endorse her impeachment or reinstate her. The verdict must be endorsed by six of the nine justices – two of whom, complicating matters, are soon to retire; one at end-January and another in mid-March.

That circumstance, plus the fact that almost all the judges were conservative appointees, means there can be no certainty that Park's impeachment will be upheld. If she does return to office, the fear is that the massive but hitherto laudably peaceful protests held every Saturday since Oct. 29 in Seoul and across the nation – which organizers have pledged will continue until she actually leaves office – may erupt into anger and violence. Most observers reckon that, in what is inevitably a political as well as a judicial verdict, the CC will take note that the nation has already passed judgment. Demonstrations aside, Park's support has plummeted to 4-5 percent; her authority is irretrievably shattered. In harsh words that arguably run ahead of the CC and any other judicial proceedings, but which accurately reflect near-universal sentiments, even the conservative *JoongAng Ilbo*, South Korea's leading daily, on Dec. 30 [listed](#) its first item in a "year of bad news" as "A President disgraced and despised." This went so far as to claim that Korean democracy "was hijacked by a psychologically fragile president with shockingly few democratic or constitutional scruples –and with a sensibility rooted in the Asiatic (sic) court of her father" – the latter of course being Park Chung-hee, dictator from 1961 to 1979.

For inter-Korean ties, the main if obvious implication is that Park's downfall and impeachment have created a leadership limbo, likely to last several months, which cannot but weaken South Korea. Park herself remains in the Blue House in [isolation](#), which it seems is nothing new for her. But under the Constitution her duties since Dec. 9 have passed to the prime minister, Hwang Kyo-ahn, an unpopular ex-prosecutor and Park loyalist, arguably ill-equipped to bear the weight of a role he never expected to have thrust upon him (indeed, Park had even nominated a successor at an earlier stage of

the crisis, but the opposition rebuffed this). Duyeon Kim, in her useful recent [analysis](#) in PacNet #94, is no doubt formally correct to say there is no power vacuum in Seoul, in the sense that everyone's responsibilities are laid down. Yet she admits there are "questions ... about the acting president's competency and the extent of his powers", as well as how emergency response command chains would work in any crisis. Fortunately North Korea has so far confined its reactions – more on which below – to verbal gloating.

How long this limbo will last depends on the CC. With no fewer than 13 specific charges to consider (though it has grouped them under five heads), the Court at first suggested it would take its [time](#) – but on Dec. 30, Chief Justice Park Han-chul [promised](#) a "speedy and fair" trial. It is he who retires at the end of January; could it possibly be [that](#) speedy? At all events, if the CC upholds Park's impeachment then a presidential election to choose her successor must be held within 60 days. "Within" suggests it might be sooner, though elections could hardly be organized in less than a month.

After Park, who? – and what?

Putting all this together, South Korea could conceivably have a new president by the time our next update is written in early May, and probably will before the one after that in September. Barring any new Constitutional amendment that might permit a second term, the man elected – no women are in the frame, this time – will, like Park, have five years at the helm; i.e., through 2022. How will he tackle North Korea? To answer this concretely requires looking at the main likely contenders.

For the ROK's fractured conservatives – as long anticipated, Saenuri [split](#) on Dec. 27 – the problem is not just being tarnished by Park Geun-hye, but their [lack](#) of any convincing contender to succeed her. Hence the odd situation that their front-runner and only plausible standard-bearer is someone who has not even declared his candidacy and who previously served a liberal administration. South Koreans, fed up with their existing politicians, have a habit of pining for a white knight outsider. That yearning has pitchforked none other than Ban Ki-moon into the role of the Right's only hope. Having only just retired after a decade as UN Secretary-General, Ban is due to return home on Jan. 12. By the time this issue of *Comparative Connections* is published, he may well have thrown his hat into the ring.

On past form, Ban is more centrist than rightist, and by inclination a would-be peacemaker. In his UN role he tried several times to go to North Korea. In May 2015 he was due to visit Kaesong, only for the North to call this [off](#) without explanation. Pyongyang has not taken kindly to Ban's presidential hopes, calling him *inter alia* a "wicked [stooge](#) of the US," a "chameleonic political [profiteer](#)" and "[oil eel](#)." On past form, such colorful invective does not preclude dialogue were Ban to become president.

Arrayed against Ban is a phalanx of liberal wannabes. At *Witness to Transformation*, PIIE's Kent Boydston has helpfully [listed](#) the six leading presidential hopefuls – the other five are all liberals – and their positions on North Korea. Three of the five liberals he rates as "very pro-engagement oriented" and the other two as moderately so. The former include the two left-of-center front-runners. One is a blunt-talking rising star, occasionally called Korea's Donald [Trump](#) – although Bernie Sanders is a more accurate comparison. Lee Jae-myung, who is mayor of Seongnam – a satellite city southeast of Seoul – wants Park Geun-hye behind bars and the *chaebol* (conglomerates) broken up. He would meet Kim Jong Un unconditionally, and on Jan. 3 [warned](#) South Koreans to brace for a possible withdrawal of US forces (USFK). Such messages evidently resonate; between October and December Lee's popularity in opinion polls more than [tripled](#) from 5 to 18 percent, putting him in third place.

Yet in any primary to be held by Minjoo (Democrats), the main opposition party, the abrasive Lee can hardly defeat the smoother, if scarcely less radical figure who currently leads in all polls and who ran Park Geun-hye a [close race](#) in 2012. Moon Jae-in, chief of staff to the late Roh Moo-hyun (president 2003-08) whom he accompanied to Pyongyang for the second inter-Korean summit in 2007, remains firmly wedded to the sunshine approach. His program in 2012 included creating an economic [union](#), no less, with the North. Having consistently maintained this stance in the years [since](#), in a recent [interview](#) (the original, in Korean, is [here](#)) he threw down several gauntlets, not least to Washington. As doubtless discussed in the US-Korea and China-Korea articles in this issue, Moon demanded that a final decision on the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system deployment be left to the next ROK administration – whereas in US eyes this is already a done [deal](#), to be installed within 8-10 months. The alliance looks set to be tested.

On the inter-Korean front, Moon insisted that the Kaesong complex, widely seen as dead and buried, "has

to be resumed immediately.” Strikingly, asked which country he would visit first if elected, he replied: “I can answer that without any hesitation. I will visit North Korea first. But before doing so, I will provide sufficient explanation to the US, Japan, and China on why I have to.”

All this could hardly be a more radical rupture from current ROK policy, whose hard line for now continues unabated. On Jan. 5, a government source [said](#) that a new inquiry into DPRK human rights abuses will begin next week. That area is an Achilles’ heel for the sunshine brigade, since engaging Pyongyang has tended to come at the price of soft-peddalling such evils. In October a [furor](#) erupted, briefly, when a memoir by former Foreign Minister Song Min-song [claimed](#) that in 2007 Seoul even consulted Pyongyang over which way to vote in an upcoming UN resolution on North Korean human rights (it eventually abstained), and that Moon was a key intermediary in this communication. Rather feebly Moon claimed not to remember, but this charge seems to have done him no lasting damage. Interestingly, Song also claimed that he and the Foreign Ministry were initially kept out of the loop about Roh Moo-hyun’s plans for a second inter-Korean summit that same year, for fear they would demand close coordination with Washington and prioritization of the nuclear issue.

So who will win? As of early January there are still many imponderables. A first-past-the-post voting system rewards unity and penalizes division. Kim Dae-jung, the onlie begetter of sunshine for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize, only scraped into the Blue House in 1997 – at his fourth attempt; he had already retired once – by allying with one regional conservative party (led by Park Chung-hee’s right hand man Kim Jong-pil, still with us today), and because a breakaway from the main rightwing party split the conservative vote. With both conservatives and liberals each currently fielding two parties, tactical alliances are likely in the months ahead. Here again Ban Ki-moon is key. Since Saenuri split, [two](#) different conservative parties are now courting him. Alternatively he might join forces with Ahn Cheol-soo, another former white knight who a year ago quit Minjoo to form the People’s Party (PP).

As Ahn has found and Ban is finding, stars can wax and wane rapidly. In late September, almost 60 percent of those polled said they liked Ban, but by the end of December almost as many [disliked](#) him. That fall is due to allegations of [corruption](#), which Ban hotly [denies](#). Were such charges to stick, they could sink Ban’s hopes. But equally they might come to nothing and Ban may

bounce back. As of now he has some catching up to do. Whereas Ban and Moon were once neck and neck, all the most recent [polls](#) put Moon comfortably ahead. [Two](#) separate polls suggest that in a hypothetical two-horse race, Ban would be beaten not only by Moon but also (albeit narrowly) by Lee Jae-myung.

What’s the Korean for “We’re not in Kansas any more”? Or “this is not your mother’s Korea”? For sure it is no longer Park Geun-hye’s Korea, in any sense. No contender to succeed her is proposing to continue her Nordpolitik, or anything like it. While North Korea is rarely a major issue as such in South Korean elections, this time voters look likely to elect a leader who will break radically with the hardline approach of the past decade. Others in this journal must mull how that prospect will affect the ROK’s relations with other powers: Japan, China, and above all the US – itself unpredictable after Jan. 20, when the once unimaginable will happen and the words “president” and “Trump” become conjoined. With national assertiveness on the rise everywhere, South Korea is no exception. The key issue then becomes who will square up to whom, and about what. Interesting times indeed.

North Korea: watching and waiting

And North Korea? On Dec. 17, Kim Jong Un, still only 32, entered his sixth year at the helm, longer than Park Geun-hye will ever have, even if her five-year term is not cut short. As the *Washington Post* [noted](#), many skeptics confidently predicted that the young greenhorn Kim would never last that long. Ironicly, one leading doom-monger was none other than Park Geun-hye, especially this year. On Aug. 22, based on supposed growing desertions by Northern elites – in fact, the sole confirmed case is Thae Yong Ho, formerly No. 2 at the DPRK Embassy in London, although others may be lying low – Park spoke of “serious cracks” in the Northern regime. Now the boot is on the other foot; like it or not, the North is the Korea whose government looks stable. The *Post* quotes Su Mi Terry, ex-CIA, who reckons Kim Jong Un could rule for another 50 years. Collapse? Bah humbug. Those who still cling to that shibboleth, as I long did, need to retool – or show how their faith is more than wishful thinking.

As for how the North views the South now – well Christmas came early. Unsurprisingly, DRPK media coverage on Park Geun-hye’s troubles, which began swiftly in late-October and has kept a running commentary ever since, is in effect one long gloat. Given Pyongyang’s warmed worldview, rarely indeed does their dark fairytale come so startlingly true. The hacks at

Rodong Sinmun, who *a priori* reach for the cliché book with headlines like “Dictator doomed” even when all is well in South Korea, are having a field day. The quality of the North’s coverage of Parks crisis has varied widely, but rarely if ever have the Northern people been told so much about events in the South. The spectacle of mass protests against a government – in the South you can do that? – must give pause for thought.

On Oct. 31, its fifth straight day of covering Park’s travails, the Party daily offered the North’s first official [commentary](#), in the name of its editorial board. “Top secret information, such as North-South secret military meetings, was discussed in (Choi Sun-sil’s) secret office.... Incidents that drove inter-Korean relations to extremes – such as the resumption of loudspeakers and shutdown of the Kaesong Industrial Complex – were the results of Choi’s ‘orders’ ... the ‘Unification is Bonanza,’ or ‘Dresden Initiative’ were designed or ratified from Choi’s unenlightened brain. Can it be more absurd and ridiculous than this?” Rarely does the writer concur with *Rodong Shinmun*, but (with the important proviso of *sub judice* – we wait for proof) it is difficult to dissent from that assessment. Calling Choi a “mindless shaman,” the editorial concluded, “The tide of history is now in the hands of South Koreans and how they will fulfill their duties and responsibilities.” Hard to quarrel with that, either.

Sadly but predictably, most Northern commentary has been cruder. As can be seen by entering “Park Geun-hye” in the invaluable [KCNA Watch](#)’s search engine, the typical format is to quote some South Korean source, real or fictitious, criticizing this or that. This “reportage” is interspersed with regular commentary, mostly drawn from the ever-colorful Pyongyang insult dictionary and thus of limited analytical value. This includes some choice phrases, e.g., the [headline](#) “Useless Wriggling” on Dec. 25 (about Saenuri; again, arguably accurate). But more are clunkier, like this *KCNA* headline from Dec. 31: “Rodong Sinmun Ridicules Puppet Group’s Efforts to Prolong Their Dirty Remaining Days.”

So much for words, what about deeds? On the policy front, thus far, the North seems content to watch and wait. One should not tempt fate, but while Pyongyang’s rhetoric is as strident as ever, so far Kim Jong Un has refrained from taking advantage of the South’s weakness by physical provocations. He may well be pondering the larger challenge of a Trump presidency. One problem both Koreas share, like the rest of the world, is to try to fathom which of Trump’s many conflicting and often acerbic comments might actually become US policy. Drawing an interesting parallel, the

well-known political scientist (and sunshine advocate) Moon Chung-in has [suggested](#) that Trump’s challenge to the ROK is no worse than Richard Nixon’s Guam doctrine almost half a century ago, and should be handled the same way: “by reinforcing our defense capabilities and improving our relationship with North Korea.” Moon also warned that “the U.S.-led world order should no longer be regarded as absolute.”

In this uncertain and rapidly changing situation, small wonder if Kim Jong Un chooses to sit tight and wait and see on two fronts: for what Trump may do and (our concern here) who succeeds Park Geun-hye, and what they might offer him. Otherwise there is very little to report from Pyongyang these past four months, beyond a great deal of gloating. For the record we should note Kim’s latest New Year address, but also beware of over-interpreting it. Others may detect hidden nuances, but to our eyes this was the usual boilerplate, on inter-Korean relations as elsewhere. But judge for yourself. As usual, the US National Committee on North Korea (NCNK) has kindly made the [full text](#) available. Here is the relevant passage, toward the end and accounting for about 18 percent of Kim’s speech overall:

Last year, in reflection of the national desire for reunification and the requirements of the times, we put forward the Juche-oriented line and policy of reunification at the Seventh Congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea and made strenuous efforts to this end. However, the south Korean authorities turned a deaf ear to our patriotic appeal and ignored our sincere proposal. Instead, they clung to their sanctions-and-pressure schemes against the DPRK and persisted in clamouring for a war against it, thus driving inter-Korean relations towards the worst catastrophe.

Last year, south Korea witnessed a massive anti-“government” struggle spreading far and wide to shake the reactionary ruling machinery to its foundations. This resistance involving all south Korean people, which left an indelible mark in the history of their struggle, was an outburst of pent-up grudge and indignation against the conservative regime that had been resorting to fascist dictatorship, anti-popular policy, sycophantic and traitorous acts and confrontation with their compatriots.

This year we will mark the 45th anniversary of the historic July 4 Joint Statement and the 10th anniversary of the October 4 Declaration. This year we should open up a broad avenue to independent reunification through a concerted effort of the whole nation.

Positive measures should be taken to improve inter-Korean relations, avoid acute military confrontation and remove the danger of war between north and south.

The improvement of inter-Korean relations is the starting-point for peace and reunification, and it is a pressing demand of the whole nation. Any politician, if he or she remains a passive onlooker to the current deadlock between the two sides, can neither claim to be fully discharging his or her responsibility and role for the nation nor enjoy public support. Every manner of abuses and slanders aimed at offending the other party and inciting confrontation cannot be justified on any account, and an immediate stop should be put to the malicious smear campaign and other acts of hostility towards the DPRK, all designed for the overthrow of its system and any other "change."

We are consistent in our stand to safeguard the security of the compatriots and peace of the country without fighting with the fellow countrymen. The south Korean authorities should not aggravate the situation by finding fault with our exercise of the right to self-defence thoughtlessly, but respond positively to our sincere efforts to prevent military conflict between north and south and ease the tension.

They should also discontinue arms buildup and war games.

The whole nation should pool their will and efforts to usher in a heyday of the nationwide reunification movement.

All the Korean people in the north, in the south and abroad should achieve solidarity, make concerted efforts and unite on the principle of subordinating everything to national reunification, the common cause of the nation, and revitalize the reunification movement on a nationwide scale. They should promote active contact and exchange with each other irrespective of differences in their ideologies and systems, regions and ideals, and classes and social strata, and hold a pan-national, grand meeting for reunification involving all the political parties and organizations including the authorities in the north and south, as well as the compatriots of all strata at home and abroad. We will readily join hands with anyone who prioritizes the fundamental interests of the nation and is desirous of improving inter-Korean relations.

It is necessary to frustrate the challenges of the anti-reunification forces at home and abroad who go against the aspiration of the nation for reunification.

We must put an end to the moves for aggression and intervention by the foreign forces including the United States that is occupying south Korea and tries to realize the strategy for achieving hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, and wage a dynamic pan-national struggle to thwart the moves of the traitorous and sycophantic anti-reunification forces like Park Geun Hye who, failing to see clearly who is the real arch-enemy of the nation, is trying to find a way out in confrontation with the fellow countrymen.

Well aware of the will of the Korean nation to reunify their country, the United States must no longer cling to the scheme of whipping up national estrangement by inciting the anti-reunification forces in south Korea to confrontation with the fellow countrymen and war. It must make a courageous decision to roll back its anachronistic policy hostile towards the DPRK. The international community that values independence and justice should oppose the moves of the United States and its vassal forces aimed at wrecking peace on the Korean peninsula and checking its reunification, and the neighbouring countries should act in favour of our nation's aspiration and efforts for reunification.

All the fellow countrymen in the north, in the south and abroad should do something to make this year a meaningful year of a new phase in independent reunification by stepping up a nationwide grand march towards reunification through the concerted effort of the nation.

Leaving aside the tendentious but predictable misconstrual of what is really driving the anti-Park movement, every theme and proposal here has been made before. The danger is that Kim, or those who advise him (if he listens), may interpret Park Geun-hye's downfall as confirming North Korea's warped worldview. Part of Park's tragedy is that even her initial Trustpolitik, intensely cautious, never took the trouble or risk to find out what a new, young, and insecure ruler in Pyongyang might actually want or be up for. Economic development is one clear answer, which Moon Jae-in will seek to build on if he is elected. Without naivety, and learning from the errors and disappointments of the sunshine era, it is possible to visualize South Korea finding a way – daring and heterodox, perhaps; patient and subtle, certainly – to hook the Northern fish, make it bite, catch it, and reel it in. Existing policy is not working; we need to think outside the box. If any good can come of South Korea's tawdry political crisis, it may be the election of fresh leadership prepared to try something new to cut the North Korea knot once and for all. Watch this space.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2016

Sept. 1, 2016: *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, [reports](#) “a source” (unidentified) as claiming that a diplomat engaged in trade activities at the DPRK Consulate General in Vladivostok defected to Seoul in August, bringing his family and “huge holdings of foreign currency.” No such defection is subsequently confirmed, as of Jan. 2017. Several other similar claims emanating from Seoul of recent diplomatic defections remain unsubstantiated.

Sept. 3, 2016: In his first [interview](#), conducted by telephone, the ex-restaurant manager of the ‘Ningbo 13’ – North Korean restaurant workers in China, who came to Seoul *en masse* in April – named as a Mr Heo aged 36, tells the *Hankyoreh* that he never expected Seoul to publicize their defection, and says repeatedly that “time will bring everything to light.”

Sept. 4, 2016: A poll commissioned by the ROK Unification Ministry (MOU) [finds](#) that, for the first time since Aug. 15, critics of President Park’s approach to North Korea (46.9 percent of those polled) outnumber her supporters, albeit narrowly (45.9 percent).

Sept. 4, 2016: ROK’s North Korean Human Rights [Act](#) (NKHRA), passed March 3, 2016 by the National Assembly, takes [effect](#). *Inter alia* this makes provision to “collect, record and preserve details of crimes against humanity committed by Kim [Jong Un] and his aides.” To that end, later in September a new Center for North Korean Human Rights Records (CNKHRR) is established.

Sept. 6, 2016: At a joint press conference with President Barack Obama after their bilateral meeting in Vientiane, Laos, ROK President Park [says](#) that “unification will offer the opportunity to the North Korean people of equal treatment.”

Sept. 7, 2016: *Yonhap* reports that 894 DPRK [defectors](#) reached the ROK during January-August, up 15 per cent from 777 in the first eight months of 2015. The agency forecasts that the cumulative total since 1953 will surpass 30,000 this year. Arrivals peaked in 2009, but have slowed since 2011 under Kim Jong Un as border controls were tightened.

Sept. 7, 2016: Central Committee of North Korea’s Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League proposes a meeting of young Koreans from both North and South to discuss unification. Seoul [rejects](#) this the next day, calling it “sheer propaganda.”

Sept. 7, 2016: Days after Pyongyang media and the [UN](#) report severe flood damage in the DPRK’s northeast, with at least 60 dead, MOU [says](#) Seoul has received no request for aid.

Sept. 7, 2016: Ryoo Kihl-jae, architect of Trustpolitik and Park Geun-hye’s first Unification Minister (2013-15), tells [Chatham House](#) that unification “should happen peacefully and gradually ... through the accrual of mutually beneficial and reciprocal cooperation between South and North Korea.” Ryoo was let go in Feb. 2015, as Park embraced a more unilateral view of unification.

Sept. 8, 2016: Attending the Seoul Defence Dialogue (SDD), Ahmet Uzumcu, Director General of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), [says](#) North Korea should join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) without delay; adding that he has for years written many letters to Pyongyang on this, but never even received a reply.

Sept. 9, 2016: DPRK conducts its fifth [nuclear test](#) since 2006 and its second this year. Pyongyang media exult; Seoul, and the rest of the world, sharply condemn this.

Sept. 11, 2016: A dozen South Korean security and nuclear experts [launch](#) a new think-tank to discuss how the ROK could be armed with nuclear weapons.

Sept. 11, 2016: *Yonhap* [quotes](#) “a military source” as claiming, in lurid tones more usually associated with the North, that South Korea “has already developed a plan to annihilate ... Pyongyang through intensive bombing in case the North shows any signs of a nuclear attack the North’s capital city will be reduced to ashes and removed from the map.”

Sept. 12, 2016: At a fractious two-hour meeting with heads of the three main political parties – “Leaders snarl at each other at the Blue House” is the *JoongAng Daily’s* [headline](#) – Park rejects a proposal by the new Minjoo Party chairwoman, Choo Mi-ae, that she send a special envoy to Pyongyang. Park Jie-won, acting head of the People’s Party, says that unlike Park’s government and her ruling Saenuri Party, the two liberal opposition parties believe that “sanctions and dialogue must be implemented simultaneously.” They also oppose the planned deployment on ROK soil of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile defense system.

Sept. 19, 2016: MOU [says](#) that in the light of North Korea’s recent nuclear test, the chances of South Korea offering Pyongyang flood aid, even if asked, are low.

Sept. 20, 2016: In the DPRK’s second major test of a rocket engine this year (the [first](#) was on April 9), Kim Jong Un [watches](#) what *KCNA* calls a “ground jet test of a new type of high-power engine of a carrier rocket for the geo-stationary satellite.”

Sept. 22, 2016: In seeming response to recent reports from Seoul of contingency plans to “decapitate” the DPRK leadership (see Sept. 11, above), a statement by the Korean People’s Army

(KPA) General Staff [warns](#) that “the nuclear warheads fired by the KPA as punishment will completely reduce to ashes Seoul, the center of confrontation with compatriots where Chongwadae [the Blue House, the ROK presidential office and residence] is located and reactionary ruling machines are concentrated.” Furthermore “the KPA will sweep Guam, the base of provocations, from the surface of the earth.”

Sept. 28, 2016: Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo attends the opening [ceremony](#) of the Center for North Korean Human Rights Records (CNKHRR).

Sept. 29, 2016: Suh Doo-hyun, head of the new CNKHRR, [says](#) the center is considering probing the DPRK’s rights violations in third countries, including its labor export practices.

Oct. 2, 2016: Nam Kyung-pil, governor of Gyeonggi Province (which surrounds Seoul), who is – or was – seen as a potential conservative candidate for the ROK presidency, [tells](#) *Yonhap* that in the face of North Korea’s growing nuclear threats, the South too should prepare to acquire nuclear weapons.

Oct. 9, 2016: Citing MOU data, *Yonhap* [reports](#) that 1,036 North Koreans entered the South in January-September this year, taking the cumulative total since 1953 to 29,830.

Oct. 13, 2016: Visiting Seoul, the US Special Envoy for DPRK Human Rights Issues Robert King [says](#) Washington hopes to sanction more North Koreans for rights abuses.

Oct. 13, 2016: South Korea’s NGO Council for Cooperation with North Korea (KNCCCK) [says](#) the 54 bodies it represents have together collected \$187,000 for flood aid to the North. They send this to the International Committee of the Red Cross (IRC), as their own government now bans direct contact.

Oct. 24, 2016: *JTBC*, a South Korean cable TV network, [claims](#) it has computer evidence showing that Choi Sun-sil – a long-time confidante of President Park Geun-hye, with no official post or

security clearance – had advance drafts of Park’s major speeches and edited some of them.

Oct. 25, 2016: President Park [admits](#) and apologizes for having Choi review some of her speeches, but says she did this “with pure intent.” Most reactions criticize this explanation as unsatisfactory.

Oct. 26, 2016: Responding to – if not exactly denying – media claims that Choi Sun-sil was involved in drafting President Park’s March 2014 Dresden Declarations and in last February’s decision to shut the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), MOU [insists](#) that the former’s contents came from relevant ministries, while the KIC closure was made for security reasons.

Oct. 27, 2016: The *Hankyoreh*, South Korea’s main left-leaning daily, [repeats](#) the charge that Choi Sun-sil meddled in North Korea policy, including the KIC closure and also the Jan. 7 decision to resume propaganda broadcasts by loudspeaker across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Oct. 27, 2016: With unusual speed (the norm is 2-3 days’ delay in reporting ROK domestic events), *Rodong Sinmun*, daily paper of the DPRK’s ruling Workers’ Party, [reports](#) that “Park Geun-hye and her party face the worst political crisis ever ... The current ‘government’ faces de-facto collapse”

Oct. 29, 2016: In the first of what will become weekly rallies every Saturday, thousands of protesters in Seoul and elsewhere [demonstrate](#), peacefully, calling for President Park Geun-hye to step down.

Oct. 31, 2016: *Rodong Sinmun* offers the North’s first official [commentary](#) on the Choi Sun-sil scandal, Calling Choi a “mindless shaman,” the paper’s editorial board concludes: “The tide of history is now in the hands of South Koreans and how they will fulfill their duties and responsibilities.”

Nov. 4, 2016: In a second televised [apology](#), a tearful Park Geun-hye says she let her guard drop as regards Choi: “These latest developments are all my fault and were caused by my carelessness.”

Nov. 13, 2016: *KCNA* [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un [inspected](#) KPA units on Kali – said to be a new base created at Kim’s direction – and the larger Jangjae, two islets in the West (Yellow) Sea close to the ROK-held Yeonpyeong island. As usual no date is given, but this presumably was the previous day, Nov. 12. Kim’s instructions included that these front-line soldiers “should be provided with lots of ideological pabulum.” More ominously, he also “approved the newly worked out combat document of the plan for firepower strike at Yonphyong [the DPRK spelling] Island.”

Nov. 23, 2016: North Korea holds an army-people solidarity [rally](#) marking the sixth anniversary of the shelling of the South’s Yeonpyeong Island. The venue is the locality from whence the KPA’s 4th Army Corps fired: Kangryong County in South Hwanghae province.

Nov. 28, 2016: MOU [says](#) it will conduct a pilot survey on 10 recent Northern defectors to gather data on DPRK human rights abuses.

Nov. 30, 2016: Almost three months after North Korea’s latest nuclear test, the UN Security Council – unanimously, as always – [passes](#) Resolution [2321](#), condemning this and further tightening sanctions.

Dec. 2, 2016: South Korea follows UNSCR 2321 by [tightening](#) bilateral sanctions on North Korea. Seoul’s measures, mainly blacklisting entities which do no business with the ROK anyway, are described by Kim Kwang-jin, a prominent defector economist, as “largely symbolic.”

Dec. 9, 2016: The ROK National Assembly overwhelmingly [passes](#) a bill to impeach President Park, on five counts of violating the Constitution and eight of criminal violations. Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn, a Park appointee, is at once [sworn in](#) as acting resident.

Dec. 11, 2016: DPRK media report and picture Kim Jong Un, “with a broad smile,” [guiding](#) a special operations drill whose target appears to be a mock-up of the Blue House in Seoul.

Dec. 12, 2016: Constitutional Court [warns](#) that Park's impeachment trial will take time (up to 180 days are allowed).

Dec. 17, 2016: Kim Jong Un, and all North Korea, [marks](#) the fifth anniversary of his father Kim Jong Il's death.

Dec. 24, 2016: *Rodong Sinmun* [reports](#) that on Dec. 23 the DPRK Measure Council (sic) for Human Rights in South Korea published a report listing "the worst ten of many crimes committed by the south Korean Park Geun Hye regime of traitors in 2016". These include "the thrice-cursed group abduction" (aka the Ningbo 13) and other unconvincing or scattergun examples. (Readers in the ROK, where it remains illegal to access DPRK media sources directly, should be able to read it [here](#).) Two days later the *Pyongyang Times* [covers](#) this in better English; the publishing body is now named as the DPRK Association for Protection of Human Rights in South Korea.

Dec. 27, 2016: *Yonhap* blows its own trumpet. Under the [headline](#) "*Yonhap News* key source of outside info for N. Korean diplomats: N.K. diplomat", the ROK news agency quotes diplomat-defector Thae Yong Ho: "The first website North Korea[n] diplomats open on their computers is *Yonhap News*."

Dec. 28, 2016: In a signed [article](#) headlined "Stupid tricks" but quite analytical overall, the *Pyongyang Times* (misspelling Hwang Kyo-ahn as Hwan) declares that "the ever-growing massive candlelit protest actions in south Korea demand the overall resignation of the incumbent cabinet."

Dec. 30, 2016: Chief Justice of the ROK Constitutional Court Park Han-chul pledges a "speedy and fair" impeachment trial. Justice Park's own term on the bench ends on Jan. 31.

Dec. 30, 2016: Radio Pyongyang again broadcasts [mystery number sequences](#) in the small hours, starting at 0115 Seoul time. Introduced by the announcer as "review works in math lessons of the remote education university for No. 27 expedition agents," these might be coded

instructions to spies, as was the case in the past. This is the 20th such broadcast since June 24; they had previously lapsed after June 2000's North-South summit. Alternatively, *Yonhap* [suggests](#) that this "may be some sort of psychological strategy aimed at sparking internal confusion within South Korea."

Dec. 31, 2016: Citing MOU's and its own data, *Yonhap* [says](#) that Kim Jong Un's field guidance visits, which peaked in 2013, fell from 153 in 2015 to 132 in 2016. His most frequent companion last year was Jo Yong Won, a vice director of the WPKs Central Committee. Jo accompanied Kim 47 times, more often than the better-known Hwang Pyong So (40 occasions).

Dec. 31, 2016: Reverting to its usual hyperbole, under the headline "Dictator's doom unavoidable" the *Pyongyang Times* [castigates](#) "Park Geun Hye's vicious dictatorship, which can be found nowhere else in the international political arena [and] generated the gargantuan ... scandal shaking the world."

Dec. 31, 2016: *Rodong Sinmun* [condemns](#) "traitor Hwang Kyo An, puppet prime minister of south Korea" for urging "decisive retaliation against any provocation of the north" while recently visiting a front-line unit: "Such reckless muscle flexing is unpardonable. The fellow countrymen will surely mete out a stern punishment to those quislings."

Jan. 1, 2017: Kim Jong Un delivers his usual New Year [Address](#). Inter-Korean issues occupy about one-fifth of this, all DPRK standard rhetoric with no new proposals. South Korea swiftly [criticizes](#) the speech, urging Pyongyang to stop provocations and insults and to embrace denuclearization.

Jan. 1, 2017: Emerging briefly from seclusion, Park Geun-hye takes [tea](#) with the press in the Blue House. She denies any wrongdoing, calling the accusations against her "fabrication and falsehood."

Jan. 5, 2017: Citing an unnamed defense ministry (MND) source, *CMN* [claims](#) the ROK is speeding up

the creation of a “decapitation unit” which in the event of hostilities would take out the top DPRK military leadership, including Kim Jong Un. Originally slated for 2019, it will now be ready this year.

Jan. 5, 2017: *Rodong Sinmun* carries a signed [article](#), moderate in tone and general in scope, headlined “Improvement of North-south Relations Is Starting Point of Peace and Reunification.”

Jan. 5, 2017: In a new tack, Park Geun-hye’s lawyers [claim](#) that the weekly mass protests against her are pro-Pyongyang. Press reaction is derisive: the *JoongAng* [calls](#) this “some serious self-deception.”