

Comparative Connections

A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



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North Korea-South Korea Relations: Squeezing the Border

Looking back, it was a hostage to fortune to title our last quarterly review: “Things can only get better?” Even with that equivocating final question mark, this was too optimistic a take on relations between the two Koreas – which, as it turned out, not only failed to improve but deteriorated further in the first months of 2009. Nor was that an isolated trend. This was a quarter when a single event – or more exactly, the expectation of an event – dominated the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia more widely. Suspected since January, announced in February and awaited throughout March, despite all efforts to dissuade it North Korea’s long-anticipated *Taepodong* launched on April 5. This too evoked a broader context, and a seeming shift in Pyongyang. Even by the DPRK’s unfathomable logic, firing a big rocket – satellite or no – seemed a rude and perverse way to greet a new U.S. president avowedly committed to engagement with Washington’s foes. Yet, no fewer than four separate senior private U.S. delegations, visiting Pyongyang in unusually swift succession during the past quarter, heard the same uncompromising message. Even veteran visitors who fancied they had good contacts found the usual access denied and their hosts tough-minded: apparently just not interested in an opportunity for a fresh start offered by a radically different incumbent of the White House.

Not mending but building fences

Speculation on the reasons for this newly negative stance – paralleled by a reversion to hardline policies on the home front also, as in efforts to rein in markets (with mixed success) – is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that a North Korea disdaining even Barack Obama was *a fortiori* in no mood to mend fences with the conservative South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, whom DPRK media continued to insult as a traitor.

Indeed, speaking of fences, the North was more inclined to re-erect them. The quarter’s main inter-Korean event was March’s petty and self-defeating – but also calibrated and temporary – border restrictions imposed to protest routine annual joint U.S.–ROK military exercises. This harassment put in doubt the future of the joint Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). A more sinister twist, unresolved at this writing, was the arrest of a Hyundai Asan employee at the KIC on March 30. He is charged with inciting a DPRK worker to defect and has been denied access to his employer or the ROK authorities, much less a lawyer. Whatever the background, as with the earlier arrest of two U.S. journalists on the DPRK-China border, this looked very much as if North Korea might be taking hostages, so as to blunt what in any case looked unlikely to be an especially stern or effective reaction by its enemies to the rocket launch.

From bad to worse

The year began on a sour note. The DPRK's customary New Year joint editorial, carried in the Party, Army, and youth daily papers, accused Lee Myung-bak of being "steeped in pro-U.S. sycophancy and hostility toward fellow countrymen." Washington, by contrast, was spared such invective. For his part, Lee said his government would work calmly and flexibly to resolve the current stalemate in inter-Korean relations." That mild note cut no ice, as the tone from Pyongyang grew harsher – with predictable criticism, for instance, of Japanese Premier Aso Taro's visit to Seoul on Jan. 11 as an anti-communist confab.

A week later the DPRK moved the rhetoric up a level. On Jan. 17, an unnamed spokesman of the Korean Peoples Army (KPA) General Staff appeared on DPRK TV in full uniform: a rare event. Declaring that "a war ... can neither be averted nor avoided," the grim-faced officer threatened "the puppet military warhawks" with "a strong military retaliatory step to wipe them out." South Korea decided to say nothing, but put its forces on alert. This set the stage for almost daily diatribes, strong even by North Korea's usual standards.

Seoul becomes hawkish

This was perhaps not the most tactful moment for South Korea to name a noted hawk as its new unification minister. On Jan. 19 Kim Ha-joong – a career diplomat who spent six years as ROK ambassador in Beijing, reportedly seen as too soft by Lee MB – was replaced by Hyun In-taek, in a mini-reshuffle that also saw a new economic team appointed. Hyun, a political science professor, is seen as a hardliner and strong critic of the past "Sunshine" policy. He was also already a key adviser to Lee Myung-bak, known to be the architect of Lee's main policy switches on the North: making further aid conditional on denuclearization, and the so-called "Vision 3000" which offers to raise DPRK per capita income to \$3,000 if Kim Jong-il disarms. Predictably, *Minju Choson*, the DPRK government's daily paper, a week later criticized this appointment as an "outright challenge" and "open provocation" that will "push inter-Korean relations deeper into the abyss of confrontation and ruin."

Debate continues in Seoul and beyond over the wisdom or otherwise of Lee Myung-bak's new *nordpolitik*. No doubt the old "Sunshine" was too one-sided, and needed rebalancing. But over a decade it did bring the Koreas closer, so critics fear hard-won progress is now being lost in a slide back into the old Cold War antagonisms with no evident gain for Seoul.

Moreover, some policy decisions negate Lee's claim of goodwill toward the North; or more particularly, Seoul's claim to still support private humanitarian aid even while official ties remain frozen. For the past decade Jeju, the ROK's independent-minded sub-tropical island province, has every winter sent some 20,000 tons of its own produce – tangerines and carrots – to the DPRK. Much of this was centrally funded by the Unification Ministry (MOU), but not any more. In January, Jeju sent a much reduced shipment, as the Lee government refused to pay and withdrew the subsidy. Whatever one's politics, this just seems petty and mean.

Also needlessly negative was Seoul's veto in February of a journalist association's agreement, signed in Pyongyang last October, to share news content online with Northern counterparts. MOU claimed this might "undermine national security [and] public order." That is at once

ridiculous – need the South really fear the North’s risible propaganda? – and inconsistent. Two other ROK media bodies already have exchange accords with the DPRK, approved by the previous liberal administration in 2006 and 2007. The sky has not fallen in Seoul, yet.

The North tears up all past accords

Fathoming either Korean regime’s current motives and tactics is problematic. The North’s cranking of tension moved up another notch on Jan. 30, when its Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland (CPRF) roundly declared all past inter-Korean agreements “nullified.” Taken literally, that means not only the two summit accords of 2000 and 2007, to which Pyongyang constantly urges President Lee to recommit; but also their more far-reaching yet never implemented predecessor, the 1991 Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, Cooperation and Exchange, which Lee insists must also form a basis for future relations.

To some unease in Seoul, the CPRF singled out “points on the military boundary line in the West Sea” stipulated in the appendix of the 1991 accord referring to the Northern Limit Line (NLL), an issue that has been much rehearsed in these pages. The DPRK never formally accepted this UN-drawn post-Korean War *de facto* maritime boundary, the scene of brief but bloody naval skirmishes in 1999 and 2002. Fears that this presages renewed conflict have so far proved groundless. (Pyongyang is hardly likely to give advance notice of renewed provocations.)

The ROK kept its cool. Hours after the CPRF statement, President Lee said he is “waiting for North Korea to understand that the South will work with an open heart and compassion to help [it]. I believe South-North relations will improve before too long.” Others noted that the DPRK had no right unilaterally to abrogate bilateral agreements, although its readiness to do so inevitably raised wider questions as to the value or reliability of any paper it might deign to sign. The nuclear Six-Party Talks (6PT), currently still stalled, spring to mind.

Making nice: hot rods for sale

Yet inter-Korean ties have many levels and nuances. Even as the KPA was barking threats on TV, the first ROK government delegation since President Lee took office a year ago was visiting Pyongyang. Admittedly this was under 6PT auspices, and there was money in it. Hwang Joon-kook, South Korea’s deputy nuclear envoy, spent Jan. 15-20 in the North to examine 14,800 unused nuclear fuel rods at Yongbyon, with a view to buying them for the South’s own civilian nuclear power program. No decision seems to have been reached on that, but Hwang said his hosts were cooperative as long as he stuck to his brief. Political aspects were off-limits, and he was not allowed to visit the Foreign Ministry.

Down on the farm: the price of failure

South Koreans involved in dealing with the North must be glad (on this and all counts) not to live there, as they contemplate the fate of a key counterpart. As vice chairman of the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, Choe Sung-chol was North Korea’s point man on the South. At the October 2007 summit when Roh Moo-hyun visited Pyongyang, he was constantly at the then ROK president’s side. A year ago he disappeared, seemingly sacked for failing to predict or prevent

the eclipse of “Sunshine” in Seoul once Lee Myung-bak took over. Now he is said to be undergoing “severe revolutionary training” at a chicken farm in Hwanghae Province. It is possible to come back from being purged thus, but it is no fun and there are no guarantees.

A rocket is spotted

February saw even fiercer Northern rhetoric against the South, but also – more importantly – the emergence of the issue that was to dominate the DPRK’s relations with the outside world during the first quarter. Spy satellites first spotted a train carrying what appeared to be a *Taepodong-2* long-range missile leaving a munitions plant south of Pyongyang in late January. Despite suggestions that it might head for a new launch site recently completed and not yet used at Tongchang-dong in the northwest, near both the sea and (interestingly) the Chinese border, in fact it trundled to the tried and tested Musudan-ri site in the northeast.

Sometimes Pyongyang likes to tease what it calls the “reptile press.” On Feb. 16 (Kim Jong-il’s 67th birthday, celebrated with the usual pomp, flower shows, synchronized swimming displays and so on), the official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* disingenuously criticized the U.S. and others for the “vicious trick” of spreading rumors of a long-range missile test. Asserting that “space development is the independent right of the DPRK,” *KCNA* added coyly that “one will come to know later what will be launched in the DPRK.”

A satellite, they say

Not much later. On Feb. 24 *KCNA* published a statement by the Korean Committee of Space Technology. Following the “great success [of] putting [our] first experimental satellite *Kwangmyongsong-1* into orbit at one try in August 1998” – in fact a failure; no satellite was ever detected – KCST said it “envisages launching practical satellites for communications, prospecting natural resources and weather forecast ... essential for the economic development of the country [as part of] the first phase of the state long-term plan for space development.” More immediately: “The preparations for launching experimental communications satellite *Kwangmyongsong-2* by means of delivery rocket *Unha-2* are now making brisk headway.”

Unha would appear to be the civilian guise – it is hardly a disguise – for *Taepodong*. As was widely observed, “missile or satellite?” is not really either/or: the technology is dual-use. So this was a double test, including of the reach of a potential DPRK long-range missile. Little by little Pyongyang revealed more: more considerate than with 1998’s *Taepodong-1* and also its July 2006 failed firing of a *Taepodong-2*, both of which flew without warning. (Though the same Western satellites that this time gave us almost daily progress reports – pictures, even – of the launch preparations must have seen those two precursors coming too; yet our governments chose for whatever reason to connive with the DPRK’s secrecy, and let public opinion be duly shocked. It is hard not to smell conspiracy here, especially in Tokyo.)

Thus, in March, the DPRK duly notified the proper authorities – the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) – of the date range (April 4-8) and coordinates for where the booster rockets were expected to fall: the first northwest of Japan, the second in mid-Pacific (in the event it fell 500 miles short).

A firework fizzles

Despite a chorus of pleas not to, North Korea duly fired its big rocket on April 5 – and failed, again. True, it flew some 2,000 miles, further than any previous DPRK missile. As in 1998, Pyongyang boasted of a triumph: a second satellite now circling the earth, warbling songs of the great generals Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. But as in 1998, no one else can see or hear it. The U.S. Northern Command said firmly that “no object entered orbit.” Rather, the second and third stages failed to separate, ditching instead into the Pacific with their payload.

World concern, always uneven, quickly fizzled too. Russian and Chinese reluctance made it unlikely that the UN Security Council will condemn severely, let alone impose sanctions (to little effect, as recent studies have unsurprisingly shown) as it did in July and October 2006 after North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests. Kim Jong-il may have given Barack Obama his first “3 a.m. moment;” to be exact the U.S. president was awakened at 4:30 in Prague to be told of the launch, which he conveniently factored into his speech on nuclear disarmament later that day. But whether the Dear Leader has gained his lasting attention is another matter, given the ongoing economic crisis and West Asia’s permanent arc of havoc: from Israel/ Palestine via Syria, Iraq and Iran through to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Compared to these, despite all Kim’s efforts North Korea remains a backburner sort of crisis – at least for now.

Much more than missiles

South Korea, naturally, was among those who from the start urged the North not to launch its rocket. In fact a *Taepodong-2* adds nothing directly to the DPRK’s threat to the ROK, which consists rather of heavy artillery (some chemical-tipped) targeted on Seoul, short-range missiles, and the massed ranks of the 1.2 million strong Korean People’s Army (KPA).

That multiple menace was spelled out in detail on Feb. 23, when South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) published its delayed 2008 biennial defense white paper (WP). For those further afield, MND noted that the KPA has completed deployment of a brand-new medium-range missile – not a *Taepodong* – said to be capable of reaching Guam. Little detail was given, so one wonders if this has been tested or how much it should be feared.

What’s in a name?

But for South Korea, it is hard to quarrel – although local liberals do – with MND’s verdict that North Korea constitutes an “immediate and grave threat.” (That seems to be the official English version, but at least one Seoul press source – the liberal daily *Hankyoreh* – renders it as “direct and serious”; which somehow sounds a shade less grave and immediate.)

Semantics matter here. Past center-left governments had conservatives up in arms when they proposed removing the tag “main enemy” from North Korea – though in fact this dates back no further than 1995. The 2004 MND WP called it an immediate threat, while the 2006 one used the adjective grave. So the new composite designation implicitly raises the threat level – but does not say “main enemy.” Though the ROK military had problems (understandably) adapting to the “Sunshine” era – is my foe my brother, suddenly? – Defense Minister Lee Sang-hee, asked last

September by the National Assembly Defense Committee if the next WP would revert to the phrase “main enemy” replied: “I don’t think its right for our society to relapse into the internal conflict which North Korea desires by using the expression ‘main enemy’ again.” If only Lee MB’s overall approach to the North displayed similar wisdom and calm.

Whatever name is used, the substance of the new WP gives ample ground for concern. The main and unanswerable criticism of the “Sunshine” decade is that it failed to induce the DPRK to decrease its menace even an iota. To the contrary, this has been further beefed up. True, the KPA’s huge arsenal is aging – some jets are half a century old – and fuel shortages limit flight and field training. But computer simulations may compensate, and one should not take too much comfort. For on the other hand, MND notes *inter alia* a new advanced *Chonmaho* tank, improved submarines, and new types of torpedo.

Behind the lines

Especially unsettling is the claim that KPA special forces, already the world’s largest, have been boosted by a further 50 percent and now number 180,000 – bigger than most nations’ entire armed forces. North Korea has learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, apparently deciding to compensate for its lack of high-tech hardware by a new focus on guerrilla warfare. MND policy planner Shin Won-sik put it thus: “Their aim appears to be to blur the line between friend and foe once a conflict erupts ... North Korea deems it very important to be able to quickly cause disarray among its enemies.”

Shin paints the conventional scenario of lightly equipped special forces infiltrating the South to strike U.S. and ROK troops from behind. But Iraq and Afghanistan also hold implications for any DPRK collapse, if it led to outside intervention. Many assume, perhaps rightly, that a hungry, oppressed northern populace would welcome South Korean, U.S., or Chinese troops as liberators. Yet after decades of brainwashing, the KPA may not see it that way or give up that easily. Like Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong-il surely has a Plan B. Relatedly, a Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) study published on Jan. 28 estimated that up to 460,000 soldiers – three times the U.S. total in Iraq – may be needed to stabilize North Korea if it collapses and an insurgency erupts. CFR reckons South Korea and the U.S. could not handle this alone.

To ram home the point, the MND WP lists the North’s arsenal. This includes 40 kg of plutonium, 5,000 tons of chemical weapons, and 300 munitions factories. There are 600 *Scud* and 100 *Rodong* missiles, plus 5,200 multiple rocket launchers (300 more than before). Cyberwarfare capacity has strengthened, and many trans-DMZ tunnels remain undiscovered. The overall potential for mischief, to put it mildly, hardly bears thinking about.

War talk

But to return from apocalyptic endgames to the thankfully only verbal fire and brimstone of everyday DPRK rhetoric, this reached fever pitch in February. To take one example, on Feb. 13 *Rodong Sinmun* thundered: “If the Lee Myung-bak group intrudes even one inch into our divine territorial waters, priding itself on the groundless, unreasonable Northern Limit Line, our patience will explode with the anger of justice, and we will thoroughly crush the warmongers

into the raw waters of the Yellow Sea.” But in fact the waters lay undisturbed, and the main impact of such barking was to ensure a robust response and some frank talking from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on her first visit to the region in mid-February.

In March, Pyongyang tried another tack. Having long shunned the UN Command (UNC), at the DPRK’s request the first UNC general-level meeting in almost seven years was held at Panmunjom on March 2. It lasted barely half an hour with North Korea insisting that the U.S. and ROK cancel their joint annual drills *Key Resolve* and *Foal Eagle (KR/FE)*, scheduled for March 9-20. It reiterated this demand at a second meeting on March 6, adding – as it had also warned a day earlier – that it could not guarantee the safety of ROK civilian aircraft in or near its airspace if the *KR/FE* war games went ahead as scheduled. Korean Air and Asiana, plus some foreign airlines, immediately rerouted flights that usually pass over DPRK waters. Seoul called this threat “inhuman”, and the ICAO issued a protest (drafted by the ROK).

Border games

Every year the DPRK lambastes every routine US-ROK exercise as a prelude to invasion. But this time Pyongyang went beyond words to deeds, albeit more annoying than menacing. On March 9, as *KR/FE* got under way, it suspended its last military telephone link with the South. This is used to notify cross-border traffic, so over 500 South Koreans were stranded in the KIC and a handful in the mothballed Kumgang tourist zone. The border reopened next day; but with the telephone line still suspended, lists of those crossing had to be laboriously hand-written and delivered. On March 13 they shut it again, marooning 730 South Koreans, three Chinese and an Australian in Kaesong. The border was reopened partially on March 16 and fully on March 17, only for restrictions to be imposed again on March 20. From March 21 traffic got back to normal, albeit still at the much reduced flows imposed by the North back in December.

Curtains for Kaesong?

DPRK rhetoric may sound out of control, but when it comes to action this harassment was as usual carefully calibrated. It nonetheless caused great inconvenience, above all to the 100-odd small ROK firms who have taken the plunge and invested in the KIC. Most are already suffering from the global economic downturn, so the last thing they need is North Korea making life even tougher for them. (As we noted last quarter, since December it already severely cut the number of South Koreans allowed to stay in Kaesong.) Actions like this can only stoke concern as to whether the KIC is truly viable. Northern hardliners reportedly fear it as a Trojan horse for capitalism, while the Lee government seems lukewarm at best.

All this is very bad news for Hyundai Asan, which runs the KIC as well as the Mt. Kumgang tourist zone, still shuttered after nine months since the KPA killed a straying middle-aged female tourist there last July. Even before March’s border blues, CEO Cho Kun-shik, an ex-MOU vice minister, had warned in February that “we are now reaching a critical situation. Unless the [Mt. Kumgang] tours resume by April, it will be difficult for us to stay afloat.” The suspension has cost Hyundai Asan, which has halved its workforce since July and lost over \$72 million in revenue. If its other project at Kaesong is jeopardized too, the Hyundai group founder Chung Ju-yung’s dream of business promoting reunification – a noble and feasible ideal, which Lee

Myung-bak (himself a former Hyundai CEO) had in the past appeared to endorse – may be dashed. That does not seem in either Korean state’s real interest.

Held hostage

As the quarter ended, North Korea again used Kaesong to raise the stakes and temperature. On March 30 it detained an engineer working for Hyundai Asan at the KIC. He has not been named, nor at this writing (over a week later) has any ROK authority been allowed to see him, in direct defiance of the KIC’s regulations. He is accused of criticizing the socialist regime and urging a DPRK female worker to defect. (The man is single, so one wonders if romance – strictly banned, but most Southerners at the KIC are male, most Northern workers are female, and all are human – was involved.)

Whatever the facts of the case, given the detention days earlier of two U.S. journalists at the DPRK-China border, the suspicion is that it suits Pyongyang to hold a few hostages; in case anyone overreacted to its rocket launch – as they did not, thankfully, despite loose talk of shooting it down – or perhaps just for general bargaining power. Yet this drives another nail in Sunshine’s coffin, to mix metaphors. With neocons ascendant in both Korean capitals, and the North also preoccupied with a probable political succession process, inter-Korean relations may yet get even worse before they get better. We can only hope that NGO and private-level contacts, which continue – some are detailed in the chronology – can keep the flame of dialogue alive, until their rulers come to their senses.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations January-March 2009

Jan. 1, 2009: The DPRK’s New Year joint editorial accuses ROK President Lee Myung-bak of being “steeped in pro-U.S. sycophancy and hostility towards fellow countrymen.”

Jan. 2, 2009: President Lee says in his New Year address that he “will work calmly and flexibly to resolve the current stalemate in inter-Korean relations.” He calls on the North to abandon its “outdated practice” of trying to fan tension between conservatives and liberals in the South.

Jan. 2, 2009: *Choson Sinbo*, the daily paper of pro-North Koreans in Japan, says that the North will continue a hard line toward the South unless Seoul changes its stance, “no matter how [the Lee government] rehearses kind but hollow words.”

Jan. 3, 2009: In a telephone call to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, himself a former ROK foreign minister, President Lee asks the UN to help improve inter-Korean relations.

Jan. 5, 2009: ROK government unofficially confirms that the DPRK’s point man on the South, Choe Song-chul, was sacked in March 2008. Some name his replacement as Yu Yong-sun (68), who is the former leader of North Korea’s Buddhist federation.

Jan. 5, 2009: South Korea’s Unification Ministry (MOU) reports that 2,809 North Korean defectors entered the South in 2008, up 10 percent from 2007. The flow slowed with tighter

Chinese border controls for the Olympics; thus 1,700 arrived in the first half-year and 1,100 in the second. Of the total of 15,057 Northern defectors since 1953, who for decades were a tiny trickle, over half have come in the last four years alone.

Jan. 5, 2009: MOU says that on Dec. 31 it signed a contract to build a day-care center at the Kaesong IC. The \$685,000 facility will take 200 children and is due for completion in 2009.

Jan. 5, 2009: A boat chartered by the the Korea Peasants League leaves Jeju island for several ROK west coast ports to collect 174 tons of rice aid for the DPRK, including 60 tons donated by the radical Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU).

Jan. 7, 2009: MOU says the North has begun enforcing a ban on mobile phones and in-car GPS receivers for South Koreans in the Kaesong complex. Hitherto border authorities had let Southern drivers enter if these were switched off, but now they are being turned away.

Jan. 8, 2009: Park Sang-hak, who leads Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), says his group will henceforth send DPRK rather than U.S. currency with its balloon-borne leaflets into the North, since the regime arrests those found in possession of dollars. It is not clear how FFNK can obtain North Korean won without breaking both Korean states' laws.

Jan. 9, 2009: Former ROK Foreign Minister Song Min-soon, now a lawmaker of the main opposition Democratic Party, cites South Korea's single-term presidency as a major obstacle to consistent dialogue with the North. He proposes establishing a pan-national consultative body to handle inter-Korean issues, to build bipartisan policy continuity.

Jan. 11, 2009: In the DPRK's first direct comment this year on President Lee, the weekly *Tongil Shinbo* blamed him for deteriorating inter-Korean relations. It insisted that "a change must come from South Korea by sweeping out the entire group of traitors."

Jan. 11, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun*, daily paper of the North's ruling Workers Party of Korea (WPK), denounces the Japanese Prime Minister Aso Taro's visit to Seoul as collusion by anti-communist forces in both countries.

Jan. 11, 2009: Seoul sources claim that Choe Song-chul, who escorted then ROK President Roh Moo-hyun at his summit with DPRK leader Kim Jong-il in Oct. 2007, is undergoing severe "revolutionary training" at a chicken farm in Hwanghae Province.

Jan. 14, 2009: ROK Unification Minister Kim Ha-joong says Kim Jong-il appears to be in full command in the North, and that recent photos released by Pyongyang seem genuine.

Jan. 15, 2009: *Yonhap* says Kim Jong-il has chosen his third son Kim Jong-un as his successor. A day earlier, a Japanese daily claimed number one son Kim Jong-nam has been chosen.

Jan. 16, 2009: The ROK island province of Jeju starts shipping to the North a much reduced shipment of 300 tons of tangerines and 1,000 tons of carrots, worth some \$400,000.

Jan. 17, 2009: A spokesman of the Korean Peoples Army (KPA) General Staff appears on DPRK TV in full uniform and declares that “a war ... can neither be averted nor avoided.”

Jan. 18, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun* dismisses as “rhetoric” an MOU report saying the ministry will focus on resuming inter-Korean dialogue this year. The WPK daily notes the absence of an explicit pledge to implement the 2000 and 2007 summit accords, as Pyongyang demands.

Jan. 19, 2009: Hyun In-taek replaces Kim Ha-joong as ROK unification minister.

Jan. 19, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun* warns what it calls “the Lee Myung-bak group” that “our guns and bayonets ... are aimed at their throats.”

Jan. 20, 2009: Hwang Joon-kook, South Korea’s deputy nuclear envoy, returns from a five-day trip to the North under the 6PT. His brief was to examine 14,800 unused nuclear fuel rods at Yongbyon with a view to buying them.

Jan. 22, 2009: The Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) says the DPRK regime is unlikely to collapse despite uncertainties over Kim Jong-il’s health and growing social distress.

Jan. 23, 2009: President Lee says his top priority is securing peace and reconciliation with the North, while the military is to “maintain a perfect defense posture” and counter any aggression.

Jan. 23, 2009: The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva closely questions DPRK officials about claims of child labor and other abuses, made by Northern defectors in Seoul and NGOs supporting them who had briefed the UN committee ahead of the meeting.

Jan. 25, 2009: *Minju Choson*, the DPRK government daily paper, criticizes the choice of Hyun In-taek, as the new ROK unification minister as an “outright challenge” and “open provocation” that will “push inter-Korean relations deeper into the abyss of confrontation and ruin.”

Jan. 26, 2009: *Minju Choson* criticizes ongoing ROK military exercise as war preparation.

Jan. 30, 2009: The DPRK’s Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland (CPRF) declares that all past inter-Korean agreements are now “nullified.”

Jan. 30, 2009: Hours after the CPRF statement, ROK President Lee says he is “waiting for North Korea to understand that the South will work with an open heart and compassion to help the North. I believe the South-North relationship will improve before too long.”

Feb. 1, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun* warns that “escalated tension ... may lead to an uncontrollable and unavoidable military conflict and war.” The ROK Defense Ministry (MND) reports that the KPA is on its regular winter exercises, but with no “noticeably unusual” features.

Feb. 2, 2009: The KPA General Staff warns “the Lee Myung-bak group of traitors” that the DPRK will never give up its nuclear weapons unless the U.S does likewise in South Korea.

Feb. 3, 2009: DPRK media say that Kim Jong-il sent a New Year card to the UN secretary general, mentioning him last in a long list and not naming him.

Feb. 4, 2009: Defense sources in Seoul confirm that a *Taepodong-2* long-range missile, seen leaving a factory south of Pyongyang by train in late January, is now at the North's main testing ground at Musudan-ri in the northeast.

Feb. 4, 2009: The ROK government rejects a journalist association's agreement, signed in Pyongyang last October, to share news content online with Northern counterparts.

Feb. 4, 2009: Hyundai Asan says it is "desperate" to resume tours to Mt. Kumgang.

Feb. 8, 2009: Some 20 Southern NGOs report a recent meeting in Shenyang, China with the North's National Reconciliation Council (NRC). They agree to continue aid, even as official ROK assistance remains suspended. Projects include hospital modernization, a soybean milk plant, and greenhouses to grow strawberries in winter.

Feb. 9, 2009: President Lee tells South Koreans that "you do not need to worry too much" about the North's recent threats.

Feb. 11, 2009: The official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* issues a rare report of a military reshuffle. KPA Vice Marshal Kim Yong-chun becomes defense minister, while a little-known general, Ri Yong-ho, is appointed chief of the KPA General Staff. The previous defense minister, Kim Il-chol, has apparently been demoted to vice minister.

Feb. 12, 2009: Won Sei-hoon, appointed head of the ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS) in January, says Seoul needs to "beef up an early warning system to cope with any moves by North Korea" as well as "fully prepare for any terror and international crimes."

Feb. 13, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun* says western inter-Korean sea border "can no longer work" It calls the Northern Limit Line (NLL) "thoroughly unfair and sheer robbery" and a "ghost border."

Feb. 14, 2009: The DPRK *Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS)* attacks the ROK government's veto of a recent inter-Korean journalists' agreement (see Feb. 4).

Feb. 15, 2009: At a meeting to celebrate Kim Jong-il's 67th birthday next day, Kim Yong-nam, president of the SPA Presidium, warns that the DPRK will "punish the group of traitors with decisive actions" It is rare for the North's titular head of state to utter such menaces.

Feb. 18, 2009: A spokesman for the KPA General Staff tells *KCNA* that the Army is fully ready for an all-out confrontation with "the Lee Myung-bak group of traitors."

Feb. 18, 2009: ROK Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan says the DPRK's anticipated missile test is the more worrying given its nuclear capability. This combination "will have a very serious impact on the world's peace and security."

Feb. 19, 2009: Hours before Hillary Clinton arrives in Seoul on her first visit as secretary of state, *KCNA* warns that “The political and military confrontation between the north and the south has reached such an extreme phase that there is neither way nor hope to put it under control.” The same day, *KCNA* blasts upcoming routine U.S.-ROK military exercises as a “war preparation maneuver,” warning both countries that they will “pay a high price.”

Feb. 19, 2009: ROK Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Kim Thae-young warns that the DPRK may attempt a border provocation, but said his and U.S. forces are fully prepared.

Feb. 19, 2009: MOU forecasts that North Korea’s food supply will fall 1.17 million tons short of demand this year, despite an improved grain harvest of 4.31 million tons in 2008. It reports that since late last year the North has tightened social control.

Feb. 19-20, 2009: Both Koreas, along with the other four partners in the Six-Party Talks, meet in Moscow for a session of the 6PT working group on peace and security in northeast Asia.

Feb. 20, 2009: ROK Defense Minister Lee Sang-hee says Seoul would “clearly respond to any preemptive artillery or missile attack by North Korea,” including striking the bases from which any such attack was launched.

Feb. 21, 2009: The North’s CPRF accuses Lee Myung-bak of “maliciously defaming the dignity of socialism,” apparently by telling supporters that the DPRK “would be better off without socialism if it means they have to worry about three meals a day for their people.”

Feb. 22, 2009: MOU reports that inter-Korean trade in January fell year on year for a fifth consecutive month. It totaled \$113 million, down from \$140 million in Jan. 2008.

Feb. 23, 2009: MND’s delayed 2008 defense white paper terms the KPA an “immediate and grave threat.”

Feb. 24, 2009: The DPRK’s Committee of Space Technology announces that it is preparing to launch an “experimental communications satellite.” ROK Foreign Minister Yu says this would contravene UNSC resolution 1718.

Feb. 24, 2009: South Korea accuses the North of false allegations and time-wasting at the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. The DPRK delegate says that the UN Command (UNC) in the ROK is just a cover for the US, and calls for its dissolution.

Feb. 25, 2009: NIS chief Won Sei-hoon (see Feb. 12) says that another father-to-son power transfer in North Korea appears possible. He adds that Kim Jong-il is fully in charge, but has not wholly recovered from his suspected stroke last year.

Feb. 27, 2009: Ahead of the 90th anniversary of the March First rising against Japanese rule in 1919, conservative and progressive ROK churches issue a rare joint “3.1 Declaration of Korean Churches for Peace and Unification”, in hope of breaking the inter-Korean impasse. They call for

1 percent of the South's budget to go as aid to the North. That would almost triple the present budget of some \$700 million, much of which this year may remain unspent.

Feb. 28, 2009: The KPA's self-described chief of "the military working group of the DPRK side in the area under the control of the North and South in the Eastern and Western regions" sends a notice to the ROK, warning of countermeasures against alleged provocations by U.S. troops along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL).

March 1, 2009: North Korea marks Independence Movement Day (see Feb. 27) by renewing threats against South Korea, the U.S. and Japan, threatening "merciless punishment."

March 1, 2009: President Lee calls on North Korea to abandon its planned satellite launch. If it does, "The doors to unconditional dialogue remain wide open even now. The South and the North must talk at the earliest date possible."

March 2, 2009: At the first UNC general-level meeting in almost seven years at Panmunjom, North Korea demands that the U.S. and ROK cancel their joint annual drills *Key Resolve and Foal Eagle (KR/FE)*, scheduled for March 9-20. The meeting lasts barely half an hour.

March 3, 2009: *Minju Joson* says the peninsula is a "powder keg of Northeast Asia." It calls *KR/FE* "a serious military threat to our republic and also an extremely dangerous fire play aimed at provoking a new war."

March 3, 2009: At the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, South Korea urges the North to improve its human rights record. The North blasts these "impertinent remarks," saying they "instigate confrontation and hatred."

March 4, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun* warns that: "Should the enemies invade even 0.001 mm into our territory, we will mobilize all our potential and deal retaliatory strikes that will be a hundred times and a thousand times more powerful."

March 4, 2009: ROK Unification Minister Hyun In-taek says the North's missile launch is not imminent. He tells the North to stop insulting President Lee, and says there will be no early resumption of government-level rice and fertilizer aid suspended last year after a decade.

March 4, 2009: President Lee says, "It appears from Chairman Kim's recent activities that there are no serious obstacles for him to continue ruling North Korea, and I think it is better to have a stabilized North Korean regime at this point in time for inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation."

March 5, 2009: The DPRK warns that it cannot guarantee the safety of ROK civilian aircraft in or near its airspace if the *KR/FE* war games go ahead.

March 5, 2009: Lighthouse Foundation, a Seoul-based NGO, says it will break ground on a rehabilitation center for the disabled in Pyongyang in May. Costing \$3.2 million, the five story building will be ready by 2011.

March 6, 2009: KPA and UNC generals meet again at Panmunjom (see March 2). The DPRK repeats its threat to South Korean passenger airplanes if *KR/FE* goes ahead.

March 7, 2009: *Minju Joson* attacks the new ROK defense white paper (see Feb. 23): “It is the United States and the South Korean puppet government who are creating the immediate and grave threat to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula.”

March 8, 2009: North Korea holds its general election as scheduled, claiming the usual 100 percent yes vote for the 687 candidates (all unopposed). 316 SPA members are new, but contrary to prior rumors they include no son of Kim Jong-il.

March 8, 2009: On International Women’s Day, *Rodong Sinmun* claims that North Korean women live a happy life in the warm care and love of Kim Jong-il. By contrast, “traitor Lee Myung-bak’s misrule” has plunged their Southern sisters into “misery and pain.”

March 9, 2009: To protest the US-ROK war games starting the same day (see March 2), North Korea suspends its last military telephone link with the South.

March 10, 2009: *Rodong Sinmun* claims the DPRK has “capability and modern military and technical means strong enough to neutralize” the vaunted “superiority” of US and ROK forces.

March 10, 2009: North Korea reopens border crossings after a day’s closure.

March 12, 2009: Military sources in Seoul claim that Gen. Kim Kyok-sik, replaced by Ri Yong-ho in February as chief of the KPA General Staff, was transferred to head the KPA’s 4th Army Corps, whose mission includes guarding the marine border in the West/Yellow Sea.

March 13, 2009: The North shuts the border again, this time stranding 730 South Koreans, three Chinese and an Australian; almost all in the Kaesong IC.

March 14, 2009: The CPRF says: “The Lee Myung-bak government, if it really is interested in inter-Korean dialogue, must apologize before the entire Korean nation for ruining relations with its anti-DPRK confrontational scheme and driving us to the brink of war.”

March 16, 2009: The North partly reopens DMZ crossings, and fully on March 17. Despite this, doubts are aired in Seoul as to the KIC’s viability if subject to such arbitrary threats.

March 16, 2009: South Korea’s foreign minister says Seoul would not object if the U.S. were to resume direct talks with North Korea on its missile programs, as in the Clinton era.

March 20, 2009: The North again imposes border restrictions, despite saying it will reinstate the military hotline now that the US-ROK military exercises are over.

March 20, 2009: The CPRF says North Korea will not talk to South Korea or the U.S. until they stop accusing it of being a human rights violator. The same day, the ROK says it will co-sponsor the latest annual UN resolution criticizing the DPRK’s human rights record.

March 21, 2009: North Korea reopens the inter-Korean military communication line around 8 a.m., and later faxes a letter of approval for border traffic. Normal service gradually resumes.

March 26, 2009: UNHRC passes a resolution criticizing North Korea's human rights abuses. The vote is 26-6 with 15 abstentions.

March 30, 2009: North Korea detains a Southern employee of Hyundai Asan at the KIC. The unnamed engineer is accused of criticizing the socialist regime and urging a DPRK female worker to defect.

March 30, 2009: The CPRF warns that if the ROK joins the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) "over our plan to launch a rocket," this would be tantamount to a declaration of war. Seoul has said it is contemplating this. It has been an observer in the PSI since 2005.

March 30, 2009: Pyongyang slams UNHCR resolution on North Korean human rights (see March 26) as "peppered with lies and fabrications."

March 31, 2009: Seoul demands access to its citizen detained in Kaesong.

March 31, 2009: Meeting in the Hague, foreign ministers of South Korea, the U.S., and Japan reaffirm their consensus that if North Korea goes ahead with a rocket launch, it should be taken up at the U.N. Security Council.

Apr. 5, 2009: The DPRK finally launches its long-expected three-stage rocket. It claims a successful satellite launch, but the U.S. and South Korea dispute this. The ROK, with many other states, criticizes Pyongyang's act as provocative and calls for punishment.