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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SUNSHINE 2.0: GOOD START— BUT HOW FAR CAN IT GO?

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This summer's flurry of inter-Korean activity has revived but hardly transcended the kinds of interaction already achieved a decade ago during the "Sunshine" era. There was the return of inter-Korean sports competition and several joint Korean teams competed at the 18th Asian Games in Indonesia. Family reunions in Kumgangsan also returned, which are ultimately a sad commentary on the restrictions placed on personal interactions. Transportation corridors were surveyed and there was talk about future modernization, although hopes of more robust utilization for commerce is hampered by existing sanctions imposed on the DPRK. Military exchanges showed promise with several rounds of talks, but not much action to show for it. With the third inter-Korean summit scheduled, both sides will likely try to find ways to further reduce border tensions while President Moon struggles with his role as mediator between the US and the DPRK.

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To begin, if I may, with a small toot on our collective trumpet. A year like this one, especially the action-packed recent months covered in this article, brings home the value of *Comparative Connections*. The global public will be broadly aware of changes in and around Korea, yet the full picture can be hard to grasp – depending, in part, who and where you are. For 80 million Koreans, April's North-South summit, at – of all places – Panmunjom in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which we covered in detail in our last issue, was probably the year's defining event. Its cleverly made-for-TV pageantry impressed many outside the peninsula too. But to most people on the planet, including all Americans, the really big deal was the extraordinary spectacle in Singapore in June – the first ever encounter between a North Korean supreme leader and an incumbent US president. That is covered elsewhere in this journal.

In the months since Donald Trump met Kim Jong Un, most mass media coverage has focused on US-DPRK relations, and on the nuclear issue central to that fragile new relationship. While such an emphasis is understandable, this is far from the whole story. The indispensable value (toot toot) of *Comparative Connections* is to remind us – this merits capitals – that There Is More Than One Thing Going On. This journal's bilateral focus makes it impossible to ignore other key relationships. Effective analysis begins with seeing and grasping the whole picture; the challenge then is to work out how it all fits together, in a rapidly developing situation.

So, I may briefly step beyond my own inter-Korean brief here. Kim Jong Un's unexpected diplomatic outreach this year has transformed not one but three of the Asia-Pacific's key bilateral relationships which this journal tracks. Mending fences with China after a long icy stretch was important in its own right; that too, of course, is covered elsewhere in this issue. And zeroing in on our own patch, the third – chronologically first as this was where it all started – much-changed relationship is the one between the two Koreas, our subject in this article.

Of course, all three bilaterals (and others) interact, adding further layers of complexity to ongoing processes whose ultimate outcome is far from clear. Unlike the almost content-free statement signed by Kim and Trump, which

unsurprisingly has delivered very little solid since, the two Koreas have accomplished much in the past four months toward implementing the many specific pledges stipulated in the Panmunjom Declaration. Commendable as that is, two big questions persist. First, Kim Jong Un's true intentions remain ambiguous. This summer's flurry of inter-Korean activity, described below, has essentially revived but hardly transcended the kinds of interaction already achieved a decade ago during the "Sunshine" era (1998–2007). On the granular detail of that earlier episode, *Comparative Connections'* archives and chronology may be the most comprehensive resource available in English. Toot toot.

Then there is Trump. The second question, posed in this article's title, is whether the ROK's new Sunshine 2.0 – the term is ours, not Seoul's – can survive, let alone thrive and progress, should Washington and Pyongyang stop smiling and start snarling again, as they well might. President Moon Jae-in's declared aim is to put South Korea back in the driver's seat; that is his metaphor, though North Korea sneers at it. Moon has achieved much, yet he might begin to feel more like a chauffeur with two tiresome passengers. He persuaded them to get into the limo, but now they are bickering – about the destination, how to get there, everything. Where this road-trip will end grows ever harder to figure; some scenarios are beyond apocalyptic.

So let us look back and enjoy while we can. The real summer in Korea broke heat records. Inter-Korean weather, by contrast, was nicely warm. As we noted last time, implementation of the Panmunjom Declaration began when the ink was barely dry. That pattern continued.

Sport: joint teams at the Asian Games

Let us begin with the easier stuff, as the two Koreas themselves did, namely sport. Without downplaying the significance of North Korea's last-minute decision to join the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, fully analyzed in our last issue, inter-Korean sports cooperation in various forms and forums is not new. Indeed, it has a long (if sporadic) history, as veteran readers of this journal will recall. Moreover, it poses no great logistical or security issues. In this regard, the past four months resembled the "Sunshine" decade, albeit more concentrated, with several teams crossing the DMZ in each direction. In July, ROK basketball players flew to

Pyongyang in two military planes – some 100 people made the trip, including officials and press – to play together for the fourth time, although the last occasion was as long ago as 2003. “Together” is *le mot juste*. Besides and before the North faced off against the South (no national flags were on display), they also fielded mixed teams named “Peace” and “Prosperity.” Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon led the Seoul delegation, perhaps in hopes that Kim Jong Un, a known basketball fan – remember Dennis Rodman – would show up, but he did not.

In mid-August, a 64-strong team of DPRK trade unionists came south to play [soccer](#) friendlies with their ROK counterparts. Historically this too was the fourth event of its kind, after earlier encounters in 1999 (Pyongyang), 2007 (Changwon, ROK) and 2015 (Pyongyang again – a rare such event under Park Geun-hye, before inter-Korean ties froze totally in 2016). Changwon – South Korea’s ninth city, west of Busan – also hosted the world shooting championships this September. A 22-strong DPRK squad participated, bagging two silver and two bronze medals.

The Northern shooters flew to Changwon direct from Indonesia, where they competed in the Asian Games in Jakarta and Palembang Aug. 18–Sept. 2. Building on the pan-Korean women’s ice hockey squad hastily formed for Pyeongchang, this 18th Asiad saw joint Korean teams in three sports and six [events](#): women’s basketball, men’s and women’s dragon boat racing, and three lightweight rowing events (men’s four, men’s eight and women’s double sculls). Lightweight here is a technical term, but metaphorically too it is apt – in the sense of rather marginal. Although they marched together in the opening and closing ceremonies, as at Pyeongchang the two Koreas mostly competed as separate states. Both performed creditably – South Korea finished third in the medals [table](#) behind China and Japan, while North Korea placed tenth. And ‘Korea’ came in at 28th – unified [teams](#) took gold in the women’s dragon boat, silver in women’s basketball, and a couple of bronzes in rowing. All this is laudable, but hardly lifts the spirits or takes the peninsula forward as happened back in 1991 when ‘Korea’ [won](#) the women’s doubles at the world table tennis championships in Chiba, Japan – a one-off which sadly did not lead to sustained collaboration. Many athletes in this year’s joint teams were not even born in 1991. In this as in

other areas of inter-Korean endeavor, the \$64,000 question is whether we see cumulative progress or not. Often, alas, the answer is negative.

Family reunions: same old sad show

That also applies to another event revived this summer – reunions of separated families. Here again the two sides have long experience of organizing such events. The first was held in 1985, though regular yet still all too infrequent reunions began only in this century. The pattern was set long ago, and persists despite blatant [inadequacies](#) and asymmetries. The venue nowadays is always North Korea’s Mount Kumgang resort, rather than alternating between North and South – let alone the ancestral villages that mean so much in Korean culture. Kumgangsan has its own issues. In happier times Hyundai and other Southern companies poured in money to develop the area as a venue for Southern tourists. No fewer than 1.8 million visited – at first by boat, later overland – during the decade from 1998 until July 2008, when one such visitor was shot dead after straying and then-ROK President Lee Myung-bak suspended the program.

A decade later, suspended it remains and the facilities are [decaying](#) badly. South Korea had to send in repair squads weeks before the latest reunions were held in late August; no doubt at its own expense, even though in 2010 the North retaliated for the ending of Southern tourism by formally confiscating Hyundai’s and other ROK [assets](#) in the zone, worth almost half a billion dollars (\$443 million). Whether the new inter-Korean thaw allows such issues to be raised is unclear; but if they are not, then how is this progress? And yet *malgré tout* Hyun Jeong-eun, chairwoman of the rump Hyundai Group, now a shadow of its former might – crown jewels Hyundai Auto and the world’s largest shipbuilder Hyundai Heavy Industries were spun off long ago – is upbeat. Although Hyundai Asan – the division dealing with North Korea – has bled red ink for a decade, Hyun [said](#) after a visit to Kumgangsan to mark the 15th anniversary of her husband’s [suicide](#) that she expects tourism to resume this year. That sounds optimistic, despite a fulsome – not to say bizarre – [tribute](#) on the DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* on Aug. 2 (coinciding with Hyun’s visit), which quoted the late Kim Jong Il as having called Hyundai his “first love.” (If this is

how they treat a lover, what do they do to enemies?)

But back to the reunions. Held on Aug. 20–26, these were the first in three years; the hiatus being mainly due to inter-Korean bad blood in the Park Geun-hye era. They were the 20th of their kind, so by now the routine is familiar; everyone knows the rules. There are two rounds, each lasting three days. First, 100 South Koreans (or slightly fewer as some usually drop out due to ill-health), chosen by lottery, meet such relatives as Pyongyang has managed to trace after lists of names have been exchanged. Then in turn 100 North Koreans – how these are chosen is not known – meet their Southern relatives. These one-off encounters for now very elderly persons who have not met for at least 65 years are televised live, with heart-rending scenes before the families get the privacy they should surely be afforded throughout. All too soon they must say tearful goodbyes, never to meet again or even be allowed any further contact by letter, telephone or email. President Moon Jae-in, himself the son of wartime refugees from the North, [said](#) on Aug. 20 that such reunions should be far more frequent – over half of the original Southern applicants have now died, having never met their long-lost relatives even once – with visits and letters permitted. How far his government is actively pushing for this is unclear. Indeed, at this writing no further reunions appear to be scheduled, even though this would be a relatively easy concession for the North to make.

'Ningbo 12': delinkage, drama

One tangential matter, however, saw progress. A further reason for the almost three-year gap between reunions was that North Korea was linking their resumption to a separate issue – the return of 12 female employees of a DPRK restaurant in Ningbo, China, who came to the ROK in 2016 and whom the North insists were kidnapped in a plot by South Korea's spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Pyongyang has evidently dropped that conditionality, while continuing to demand the women's return. Recent months saw dramatic developments apparently supporting the North's version of events, hitherto widely scorned. In [interviews](#) in May, the restaurant's former manager, Heo Kang-il, confirmed his NIS ties (though he claims the agency deceived him) and insisted the women did not know their destination was Seoul.

In July the UN special rapporteur, Tomas Ojea Quintana, having interviewed Heo and four of the women, [called](#) them "victims" of, at least, "deceit" and said that Seoul must investigate. Some human rights activists [criticized](#) Quintana's intervention. Other sources added a [twist](#) to Heo's story, claiming it was not the NIS but South Korean defense intelligence whodunit. All this creates a quandary for Moon Jae-in, who inherited the issue – the group arrived during Park Geun-hye's presidency – and fears it could jeopardize his wider overtures to the North. On Sept. 12, it was reported that all the women now have ROK [passports](#); lawyers argued that denying them this violated their rights. With most of the women understandably media-shy for fear of harming relatives in the North, how this murky affair will end is far from clear.

Transports of delight?

To sum up so far. Revived sporting ties and family reunions are both good to see, yet neither is new as such nor takes inter-Korean relations very far forward. Transport links, a third major topic of recent North-South discussion, are altogether more substantial, at least potentially. This too is not strictly new. As we detailed at the time, the "Sunshine" era saw both road and rail links across the DMZ reconnected and rebuilt (guess who paid). Usage was a different matter. The two roads – a western corridor to Kaesong, and an eastern one to Kumgang – both had a fair amount of crossborder traffic, albeit one-way (i.e. South Koreans came and went; North Koreans didn't go anywhere), until Lee Myung-bak halted Kumgang tourism in July 2008 and Park Geun-hye closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in February 2016. The railway lines, by contrast, languished. The DPRK only permitted trains to travel as far as the KIC, but most Southern SMEs invested there found road transport more convenient and economical.

Hopes were thus raised when the Koreas scheduled back-to-back talks about railway and road cooperation, on June 26 and 28 respectively. The results of both meetings further heightened expectations. Agreements to conduct joint surveys of existing infrastructure went way beyond crossborder links alone, literally and metaphorically. The western (Gyeonggui) railway line was to be inspected along its entire length, from Kaesong to Pyongyang, then all the way up to the northwestern border city of Sinuiju, facing

Dandong in China across the Yalu River. The less important east coast (Donghae) line too would be examined *in toto*, from Kumgangsan all the way up to Tumen on the Russian border. The joint press [statement](#) explicitly says that the remit is not only reconnection but modernization, “at a high level.” Given the known decrepit condition of most DPRK infrastructure, this would be a major and costly commitment. With [roads](#) it was the same story, if less ambitious at first – surveying the western corridor as far as Pyongyang, and in the east up to Wonsan. (In a separate earlier development, on June 7 South Korea finally succeeded in becoming a full member of the Warsaw-based Organization for Cooperation between Railways (abbreviated OSJD), originally a communist-era coordination body. Pyongyang had long vetoed Seoul’s membership, but significantly did not this time.)

All this would be a definite advance on the “Sunshine” era, and a major step forward. However, although the ROK government has already budgeted for such works next year, as of now it is uncertain how far or fast this can go. Here as in almost any potential new or revived economic cooperation, sanctions imposed on the DPRK – mostly by the UN Security Council (UNSC), but also bilateral measures by the US and in some cases the ROK itself – are a major obstacle, which did not exist during the original “Sunshine” period. Such problems have already, dare one say, caused at least one temporary derailment – though not the UNSC but another notional UN agency was responsible. On Aug. 30, Seoul media [reported](#) that plans to send a train into the North – for how better to inspect the whole length of the DPRK’s western railway line? – on Aug. 23, had been blocked by the UN Command (UNC), which under the 1953 Armistice controls passage across the DMZ. In practice that means Washington, so this was interpreted as a warning to Seoul not to go so fast. Strictly the UNC only asked for more information and notice, so the ROK could have reapplied; but it seems not to have done so. Although at least some other survey work (not requiring transgressive trains) has [proceeded](#), clearly such problems will have to be fully ironed out if transport modernization plans are to go forward in any substantial way.



Figure 1 Officials of South and North Korea check the condition of tracks at Kamho Station in the North. Photo: Unification Ministry

The same applies *a fortiori* to wider economic cooperation, most forms of which are illegal now under UNSC sanctions, which would therefore need revision or (more likely) granting of exemptions. For this reason, transport aside, the only other such topic discussed was [forestry](#), seen as innocuous and indeed ‘green’ (here too there had been cooperation before during the “Sunshine” period). By contrast, even when as discussed below the two Koreas opened a joint liaison office located in the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) on Sept. 14, the ROK government made it very clear – including to disgruntled businesses formerly invested there – that there was at this time no question of the KIC itself reopening. Nonetheless, throughout the summer local media reported *chaebols*, banks and other companies setting up task forces to examine and be ready for any prospective new business opportunities in North Korea. This preparation indicates skepticism in ROK business circles – not known for their idealism – that the sanctions which categorically forbid almost all such activities will endure indefinitely.

Military talks: hotlines, and more?

One undeniable shortcoming of the original “Sunshine” policy was that security concerns were hardly addressed, much less tackled. Indeed, it was during this period that North Korea tested its first nuclear device, in 2006. Against that backdrop and all that has happened since, it was good that the Panmunjom Declaration devoted one of its three main sections to such issues. *Inter alia* this called for regular military talks, which were duly held several times. What they have achieved is less clear, other than reconnecting military hotlines

– two terrestrial, across the western and eastern sectors of the DMZ, and one in the West (Yellow) Sea, the scene of several fatal skirmishes over the years. Repairing the eastern hotline, damaged on the DPRK side by flooding some years ago, required obtaining an exemption from UNSC sanctions so the South could send in fuel, vehicles and other necessary items.

Beyond this, all is vague. Unlike in other areas like transport or high-level talks, MOU seems not to issue press releases, which suggests a lack of accord. Several kites have been flown regarding the agenda. In July, military talks were said to have reached “broad agreement” in three areas: disarming the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom, reducing the number of guard posts in the DMZ, and excavating MIA remains there. But there was no joint statement. The latest military talks, on Sept. 13, reportedly discussed “operational arms control” to reduce the risk of accidental skirmishes, and a peace zone for joint fishing in the West Sea – an idea first floated at the inter-Korean summit in 2007, but like most of its provisions never implemented after Lee Myung-bak took over in 2008. The most radical rumor, mentioned by South Korea’s prime minister yet denied by the ROK Defense Ministry (MND), was a suggestion that KPA heavy artillery be pulled back 30-40 km from the front line, so Seoul would no longer be within range. That would certainly signal a genuine will for peace in Pyongyang, but on past form nothing so drastic would ever be done without a *quid pro quo*. To be sure, military issues are sensitive and take time. Or maybe something big has been agreed, but is under wraps so that Kim and Moon can produce it with a dramatic flourish at their third summit in Pyongyang on Sept. 18-20.

Permanent liaison

On the eve of that third summit, and as agreed at the first one, the two Koreas took a big step forward by opening a permanent liaison office at Kaesong on Sept. 14. Headed by the ROK vice-minister of unification and a DPRK official of comparable rank, this has 15-20 resident staff from each side. The South Koreans are billeted there, though Kaesong is a relatively short commute from Seoul. The new office will be operational around the clock, enabling instant communication between the two sides. It will be interesting to see how this works out in practice. The opening had been expected earlier, in August; but it was delayed, seemingly again

because Washington did not want Seoul to press ahead at a time when its own peace process with Pyongyang was experiencing turbulence. In another indication of the need to tread carefully, South Korea at first said it would apply to the UNSC for exemptions to send supplies (such as fuel) for the liaison office, but in the event decided it was not obliged to do so.

What next?

Comparative Connections is above all a journal of record which looks back. Yet it would be perverse not to speculate at least briefly what the third Moon-Kim summit may bring. Their first meeting set a detailed agenda, much of it since implemented as discussed above. 2018’s second summit, a surprise one at Panmunjom again on May 26, seems to have been an *ad hoc* meeting requested by Kim at a wobbly moment in the US-DPRK process after Trump briefly cancelled their Singapore confab – only to reinstate it almost immediately.

No doubt Kim and Moon will reaffirm the Pyongyang Declaration. They are also expected to announce a formal end to the Korean War in some form, though to have legal force this would need to involve all signatories to the Armistice, including the UN (or the US on its behalf) and China. As mentioned above, the two Koreas may also take concrete bilateral military steps to reduce border tensions. Beyond that lie hurdles, not least the sanctions regime which currently thwarts the sort of economic co-operation Moon Jae-in has long dreamed of. What leeway he can get from the UN, or the US, on this front is yet to be tested.

All diplomacy includes unpublicized elements. Smiling in public, Moon Jae-in should also be robust in private. Given doubts as to North Korea’s sincerity, based on both its past record of deceit and Kim Jong Un’s refusal to get specific on denuclearization, Moon is entitled to press for more meaningful steps – some very close to home. On July 5, Yonhap carried a telling if paradoxical (and oddly little noticed) headline: “N. Korean hackers suspected of continuing attacks amid friendly inter-Korean relations.” The article quoted local cybersecurity experts as stating that DPRK hacking of ROK entities is continuing unabated, despite the Panmunjom Declaration’s pledge to cease all hostile acts. However, in the new climate of peace they are reluctant to publicize it for fear of rocking the boat. That is both disgraceful and perverse – it

risks rendering détente a sham. While not all problems can be solved at once, there is no conceivable reason to go easy here. Ceasing all hostile acts must mean what it says. Far from covering up behavior that is criminal as well as hostile, Seoul should call Kim out to show it means business and will not be taken advantage of as happened in the past. If that seems a negative note to end on, this kind of sharp detail is the touchstone whereby we shall see if North Korea has really changed, or not; and whether Kim Jong Un is truly sincere, or not.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2018

May 1, 2018: ROK Unification Minister (MOU) Cho Myoung-gyon [reports](#) Kim Jong Un as saying that President Moon Jae-in's proposal to exchange liaison offices in Seoul and Pyongyang could be discussed. Cho adds that Kim's grip on power is firm, and he has a "strong will" for economic development.

May 1, 2018: As agreed at April 27's North-South summit, South Korea [begins](#) dismantling its propaganda loudspeakers along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The South's Ministry of National Defense (MND) says the North began doing the same earlier that day.

May 1, 2018: In a half-hour phone call to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, President Moon [asks](#) the UN to endorse the Pyongyang Declaration issued after the April 27 summit, and to play a role in verifying North Korea's commitment to denuclearization and peace.

May 3, 2018: At the world table tennis [championships](#) in Halmstad, Sweden, the two Koreas, due to face off in the women's quarter finals, instead gain permission to form a [joint team](#). Korea advances to the semi-finals, but is defeated by Japan to take the [bronze](#).

May 3, 2018: South Korean pollster [Realmeter](#) reports that in the week since the summit Moon Jae-In's popularity [surged](#) eight points to 78.3 percent, a record for any ROK leader after almost a year in post. (Moon took office on May 10, 2017; he still has four more years.)

May 7, 2018: The Blue House, South Korea's presidential office, [says](#) Moon and Kim will at last use their new hotline once the date of Kim's summit with Donald Trump is fixed. (So far as is publicly known, this does not happen; indeed, as of Sept. 9 the much-touted hotline has apparently yet to be used at all by the two leaders.)

May 7, 2018: Seoul [reveals](#) that at their summit on April 27 Moon handed Kim a USB stick containing a detailed blueprint for how the South could help rebuild the Northern economy, including new power plants and much more.

May 8, 2018: South Korea's Foreign Ministry (MOFA) says the North is proposing a new international [air route](#), connecting – albeit not directly – the flight information regions (FIR) of their major airports – Sunan near Pyongyang, and Incheon for Seoul.

May 8, 2018: Hyundai Group – rump of the former *chaebol*, no longer connected to the now much larger Hyundai Motor – announces a new [task force](#), headed by its chairwoman Hyun Jeong-eun, to prepare for economic projects with North Korea – especially tourism to Mount Kumgang and Kaesong, suspended since 2008. Affiliate Hyundai Asan ran those businesses, but has struggled financially since their suspension.

May 9, 2018: A propos what it calls "Kim's alarming trip" to meet Xi Jinping again, the center-right Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* editorializes: "The denuclearization game on the Korean Peninsula is like treading on thin ice. Once you stumble, everything falls." In the same issue, by contrast, the *JoongAng*'s influential owner, Hong Seok-hyun, a former ROK ambassador in Washington, has a [column](#) entitled: "My hopes for North Korea," which *inter alia* commends Kim Jong Un for his confidence, dignity and courtesy to Moon Jae-in.

May 11, 2018: MOU says it is trying to verify media reports that 12 North Korean waitresses – hereafter the 'Ningbo 12' – who arrived from China in 2016 may not all have defected voluntarily. Confirming what Pyongyang has long alleged, their manager [claims](#) he made a deal with the ROK's spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS). (See also July 10.)

May 12, 2018: A [press release](#) from the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) invites journalists from China, Russia, the US, the UK, and “south Korea” (sic), in that order, to witness the dismantling of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site later this month. MFA explains that space precludes letting more countries attend. Japan is a notable omission. (See also May 24.)

May 12, 2018: Defying the ROK government’s urging, a week after police and local residents blocked their previous attempt, the activist NGO Fighters for a Free North Korea [launches](#) helium balloons towards the DPRK, carrying anti-Kim tracts and with banners reading “Do not be fooled by Kim Jong Un’s fake dialogue offer.”

May 12, 2018: *Yonhap*, South Korea’s quasi-official news agency, [claims](#) that North Korea halved the size of the Korean People’s Army (KPA)’s annual tank firing contest that was held last week. Kim Jong Un had attended in 2016 and 2017, but not this year.

May 16, 2018: Pyongyang abruptly cancels inter-Korean high-level talks due that very day, lambasting US-ROK *Max Thunder* military exercises as “provocative.” The official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) [cites](#) “the prevailing seriously awful situation that a mad-cap north-targeted war and confrontation racket are being kicked up in south Korea.” Further cancellations and diatribes follow during the ensuing week or so, but then cease.

May 24, 2018: After a lengthy trek by train and bus from Wonsan to the DPRK’s remote northeast, selected foreign journalists – but no experts – witness big [explosions](#) which their hosts claim constitute the destruction of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site. (See also May 12.)

May 26, 2018: Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un hold a surprise [second summit](#) a month after the first; again at Panmunjom but this time on the Northern side, and two days after President Trump ‘cancels’ his own upcoming summit with Kim. Its swift reinstatement suggests that Kim asked Moon to mediate, and that he did so successfully.

May 28, 2018: A motion supporting the Panmunjom Declaration fails to pass in the ROK National Assembly. According to local [media](#), the ruling Democratic Party (DP) agreed to postpone seeking formal parliamentary ratification, but the opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) reneged on an earlier agreement that it would support a more limited resolution.

June 12, 2018: Chairman Kim Jong Un and President Donald Trump meet in Singapore.

June 13, 2018: Local elections in South Korea are a [landslide](#) for President Moon’s ruling liberal Democratic Party. On a 60 percent turnout, the highest ever, the DP wins the mayoral race in seven of eight major cities and the governorship in seven of nine provinces. The opposition LKP’s tally of these major posts is slashed from eight to just two.

June 14, 2018: North and South Korea hold their first high-level military [talks](#) – originally set for May, but Pyongyang cancelled – in over a decade (since Dec. 2007) in the Northern sector of Panmunjom. KPA Lt. Gen. An Ik San quips that ROK Maj. Gen. Kim Do-gyun is the first South Korean in uniform ever to cross the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). They [agree](#) to fully restore all inter-Korean military hotlines, and discuss much else.

June 17, 2018: Citing unnamed ROKG sources, *Yonhap* [claims](#) that at the recent military talks the South proposed that the Korean People’s Army (KPA) move its long-range artillery – thought to number over 14,000 pieces, including 5,500 multiple rocket launchers – back 30-40 km from the DMZ. It does not record the North’s reaction. MND later denies that Seoul made any such proposal (but see June 25).

June 22, 2018: Meeting at Mount Kumgang in the southeastern DPRK, the two Koreas’ Red Cross organizations [agree](#) to hold separated family reunions – the first such since Oct. 2015 – there on August 20-26. They will also hold further meetings to discuss humanitarian issues.

June 25, 2018: ROK Premier Lee Nak-yon [says](#) that asking the DPRK to move its heavy artillery back from the DMZ is under discussion in Seoul, but is not yet a formal proposal.

June 25, 2018: At their first working-level (between colonels) military talks since 2011, held in Paju, the two Koreas [discuss](#) restoration of military hotlines. In 2010 a forest fire in the North destroyed the line in the eastern sector; the western one is in better shape.

June 26, 2018: Two Koreas hold talks at Panmunjom on railway cooperation. The three-strong delegations are led by ROK Vice Transport Minister Kim Jeong-ryeol and DPRK Vice Railways Minister Kim Yun Hyok. They [agree](#) to conduct a joint study on modernizing cross-border railways; starting on July 24 with the northern section of the Seou-Sinuiju west coast line, and thereafter proceeding to the east coast Kumgangsan-Sinuiju line.

June 28, 2018 [MOU's English web [page](#) erroneously gives the date as June 26]

The two Koreas hold talks at Panmunjom on road cooperation. A detailed joint statement agrees to modernize both eastern (Donghae) and western (Gyeongui) corridors, from Goseong as far as Wonsan and from Kaesong to Pyongyang respectively. Joint research teams will be formed, and joint surveys will begin in early August.

July 1, 2018: South Korea's MND says communications between the two Koreas' navies have been restored for the first time since May 2008. At 9:00 an ROKN boat off Yeonpyeong Island (shelled by KPA artillery in 2010, among other clashes) contacted a nearby DPRK patrol vessel, which responded immediately.

July 3-6, 2018: 100 South Korean [basketball](#) players, officials and press, led by Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon, fly to Pyongyang in two ROK military planes. On July 4-5 they play four friendlies (Kim Jong Un does not show up) and have talks on sporting cooperation. Cho also holds talks with Kim Yong Chol. The visitors fly home on July 6.

July 3, 2018: ROK Red Cross [says](#) the two Koreas have exchanged lists of candidates for August's family reunions. The South sent 250 names, the North 200. The final 100 from each side will be chosen on July 25, based on their health and whether relatives have been located.

July 4, 2018: Two Koreas meet at Panmunjom to discuss [forestry](#) cooperation. A four-point joint press release envisages working together in areas including modernization of tree nurseries, agroforestry, fighting forest fires, controlling erosion, and scientific exchanges. A site visit is planned for mid-July, and a working group will be set up to implement all of this.

July 6, 2018: MOU [announces](#) that a 22-strong team of officials and workers will enter the North on July 9 to start repairing facilities at Mount Kumgang.

July 10, 2018: United Nations special rapporteur on North Korea, Tomás Ojea Quintana, whose usual beat is DPRK human rights abuses, [calls](#) for an investigation into how the 'Ningbo 12' came to South Korea, saying at least some were unwitting or unwilling.

July 14, 2018: Kyodo [reports](#) that the UN Security Council permitted a sanctions exemption for South Korea to send 51 banned items – including fuel, optical cables, buses and trucks – to North Korea for use in restoring military hotlines.

July 17, 2018: Media [report](#) that the two Koreas have fully restored their military hotline in the western sector.

July 20, 2018: In its annual estimate of DPRK macroeconomic data (Pyongyang publishes no regular figures), the Bank of Korea, the ROK central bank, [reports](#) that North Korean GDP fell 3.5 percent in 2007, its worst result for 20 years. BoK attributes this to tighter sanctions.

July 31, 2018: Two Koreas again hold high-level military talks at Panmunjom. No joint statement follows, but some media claim that "[broad agreement](#)" has been reached on areas such as disarming the Joint Security Area (JSA), and fewer guardposts in the DMZ.

Aug. 5, 2018: In a series of articles on inter-Korean issues, the *Korea Herald* highlights the project to compile a comprehensive joint [dictionary](#). Launched in 2005, this met 25 times in the ensuing decade but has been suspended since 2016. With this year's thaw, the South side has faxed the North to try to arrange a meeting, but has yet to hear back.

Aug. 10-12, 2018: A 64-strong team of DPRK trade unionists visits Seoul to play friendly [soccer](#) games against their ROK counterparts. This is the fourth such event; the first was in Pyongyang in 1999, then Changwon (ROK) in 2007, then Pyongyang again in 2015.

Aug. 13, 2018: Fourth round of high-level talks is [held](#) at Panmunjom, in the Northern half. The two Koreas reaffirm the Panmunjom Declaration, and confirm that a third summit this year will be held in Pyongyang in September.

Aug. 18 – Sept. 2, 2018: While mainly competing separately, North and South Korea field [combined teams](#) in six events (mostly aquatic) at the Asian Games hosted by Jakarta and Pelambang, Indonesia. ‘Korea’ wins four medals, including [gold](#) in the women’s dragon boat.

Aug. 20-26, 2018: Amid many understandably emotional [scenes](#), two rounds of [reunions](#) of separated families, the first such since Oct. 2015, are held at Mount Kumgang resort.

Aug. 22, 2018: Reigniting a debate that has flared on and off since 1995, [Yonhap claims](#) that South Korea is again considering no longer calling North Korea its ‘main enemy’ in the next ROK defense white paper, due later this year.

Aug. 28, 2018: MND [says](#) it is requesting a budget of 46.7 trillion won (\$42 billion) for 2019. If approved this will be an 8.2 per cent increase, the highest hike in a decade. The ROK defense budget is already larger than the DPRK’s entire national income.

Sept. 5, 2018: President Moon’s special envoy, his national security adviser Chung Eui-yong, [flies](#) to Pyongyang heading a five-strong delegation (the same quintet as on [March 5-6](#)). They meet Kim Jong Un, who *inter alia* reaffirms his commitment to denuclearization amid warm words for Moon and for Donald Trump. The delegation flies [home](#) to Seoul the same evening and immediately reports back to Moon, at 21:44 local time.

Sept. 6, 2018: Chung Eui-yong [announces](#) that Moon Jae-in will visit Pyongyang on Sept. 18-20 for his third summit with Kim Jong Un. (Earlier [speculation](#) had predicted Sept. 12-13.)

Sept. 7, 2018: MOU spokesman Baik Tae-hyun [says](#) the two Koreas have reached agreement on all aspects of the planned inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong. A later report [confirms](#) that this will start work (24/7) on Sept. 14, with 15-20 staff drawn from each side.

Sept. 7, 2018: South Korea’s foreign ministry (MOFA) [reports](#) that on Sept. 6 the two Korean states wrote jointly to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to request that the Panmunjom Declaration, signed at April 27’s summit, be circulated as an official UN document.

Sept. 7, 2018: Blue House [says](#) that on Sept. 11 Moon’s government will submit a bill to the National Assembly to formally ratify April’s Panmunjom Declaration. (Previous efforts to that end have failed; see May 28, above. See also Sept. 10, below.)

Sept. 9, 2018: In Pyongyang, parades and mass displays mark the [70th anniversary](#) of the DPRK’s foundation. No ICBMs appear in the military [parade](#), while the mass games stress economic development and conclude with a giant video of April’s Kim-Moon summit.

Sept. 10, 2018: Citing “multiple sources,” the center-right *JoongAng Ilbo*, Seoul’s leading daily, [claims](#) that the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) have completed a report comparing the two Koreas’ military strengths, which Moon Jae-in ordered ahead of the Pyongyang summit.

Sept. 10, 2018: Floor leaders of South Korea’s three largest political parties reach an [accord](#) that the National Assembly will debate ratification of April’s Panmunjom Declaration after the forthcoming third Moon-Kim summit. The government submits a [motion](#) on Sept. 11.

Sept. 11, 2018: In Vladivostok for the Eastern Economic Forum, ROK Prime Minister Lee Nak-yon [envisioned](#) “a new avenue opening for three-way cooperation among South and North Korea and Russia.”

Sept. 13, 2018: Working-level military talks are held at Panmunjom, lasting [17 hours](#). As usual no press statement is released. [Yonhap reports](#) that the two sides wrapped up a military agreement, which Kim and Moon will announce at their summit in Pyongyang next week.

Sept. 13, 2018: Seoul press reports [hint](#) at disquiet in the Blue House that North Korea has not yet responded to the South's urgent request for a working-level meeting to fine-tune the practical details of President Moon's summit visit to Pyongyang, now imminent. Logistics and security alike remain to be sorted out. (See next day)

Sept. 14, 2018: Working-level talks at Panmunjom [finalize](#) details of the impending summit. Moon will fly to Pyongyang on Sept. 18 with an almost 200-strong entourage, including business leaders. An ROK advance party will head North overland on Sept. 16.

Sept. 14, 2018: North and South Korea [open](#) their new permanent liaison office at Kaesong.