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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

PYONGYANG SHUNS AND SNARLS; SEOUL SEEMS IN DENIAL

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North Korea continued to freeze out the South over the summer months. Kim Jong Un did meet Moon Jae-in once, very briefly, but only on the sidelines of his third summit (also brief) with Donald Trump at Panmunjom on June 30. He also sent his sister, Kim Yo Jong, to the same venue with a wreath and condolences for a former ROK first lady – but with no message for Moon, whom in August DPRK media derided as “an impudent guy.” Meanwhile Pyongyang was deaf to Seoul’s entreaties on all fronts, including their agreed joint teams for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. It also reverted to missile tests, specifically of new short-range weapons that could target the South. Despite all this Moon remained publicly upbeat. John Bolton’s departure from the White House may improve prospects, if Trump now offers some sanctions relief. But as this shows, inter-Korean relations are now (by Kim’s choice) subordinate to US-DPRK ties, not important in their own right.

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Introduction

“For those looking for signs of revival in inter-Korean relations, I have nothing for you. Seoul is still out in the cold.” That [tweet](#) by Christopher [Green](#) of the [International Crisis Group](#) is a crisply accurate summary of the state of play – or rather, no play – on the peninsula as of mid-September. Indeed this has been the position throughout 2019, as our [previous](#) article detailed in May. Back then, some optimists still spoke as if the North-South détente that had seemed to blossom so fast and fully in 2018 – three summits in one year! – was still alive in 2019. Yet Pyongyang had already backtracked on all fronts, and in April Kim Jong Un criticized Moon Jae-in for “meddling.” Four months later, not only has the freeze deepened, but Pyongyang has even stooped to insulting Moon – if not yet so crudely as the foul bile it hurled at his two conservative predecessors, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye.

Our task this month is therefore melancholy. We take the opportunity to not only record but also reflect; especially, asking whether the Moon administration’s relentlessly upbeat spin on almost everything that happens – or fails to happen – is warranted, or wise. As ever, even in a lean four months like these in mid-2019, the Chronology offers much more detail – supported by referencing via hyperlinks – than is feasible in the main text. Please do read that too!

Spy chiefs meet, but just to say hello

We begin with an event, not publicly confirmed, that occurred just before the period covered in this update – but not reported till August, hence its inclusion here. In August, *Yonhap* cited a government source, anonymous as usual, confirming that the two Koreas’ spy chiefs had held a secret meeting in April. It seems this was no more than a courtesy call – presumably at Panmunjom, though this was not revealed – so that Suh Hoon, director of the ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS) could meet his new DPRK counterpart, Jang Kum Chol. Jang was unknown until April, when DPRK media reported his appointment as a director at the Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK). Pyongyang has not confirmed that his specific position is head of the WPK’s United Front Department (UFD), as the NIS claims, but this seems plausible. Jang appeared for the first time accompanying Kim

Jong Un on June 30 when the North Korean leader met President Trump, along with President Moon, at Panmunjom. As UFD chief Jang succeeds Kim Yong Chol, whose originally inter-Korean focus in this post was overshadowed during the past two years by his additional remit as Pyongyang’s lead negotiator with the US. Kim was removed from that role and demoted after the failure of the second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi in February.



Figure 1 Moon Jae-in escorts Donald Trump to his meeting with Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom on June 30, 2019. Photo: Washington Times

In any bilateral relationship, including (or perhaps especially) when they appear publicly fraught, there is always the hope that more might be going on behind the scenes. This appears to be one such instance. Might there be others? The ROK government regularly refers to various matters as being under discussion with Pyongyang, although no talks are visible. One hopes this is true, although sometimes the suspicion must be that they are whistling in the wind, as discussed below.

Bad sports

The inter-Korean cooperation that burgeoned last year kicked off in the sports arena, when North Korea belatedly invited itself to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in February 2018 and the two Koreas hastily assembled a joint team in women’s ice hockey. Sports exchanges continued that year, and further joint teams were formed for a few events at the Asian Games held in Indonesia. In November, the two sides agreed to field unified squads in four sports – women’s field hockey, women’s basketball, judo and rowing – at the 2020 Summer Olympics to be held in Tokyo. As recently as February, as discussed in our last article, both Koreas’ sports ministers went to Lausanne in Switzerland to gain the approval of the International Olympic

Committee (IOC) for this, and for a joint bid to co-host the 2032 Summer Olympics.

The latter was always a very long shot. It will now be even longer, as the North has de facto reneged on the more immediate and practical issue of the 2020 Olympics. In May, on Chinese television, DPRK Vice Sports Minister Won Kil U reaffirmed North Korea's commitment to joint teams in Tokyo, if less than fulsomely: "We have a willingness to do (it), holding hands with South Korea." Yet on May 23, the deadline for the women's hockey qualifying event in Ireland, Seoul had no option but to submit an entry for the ROK alone, having had no reply from Pyongyang to its many entreaties to arrange joint training and other practicalities.

The same day, coincidentally, the organizers [appealed](#) to the DPRK to participate in the world swimming championships to be held in Gwangju, ROK in July. Gwangju's mayor pleaded: "1.5 million [Gwangju] citizens ... are sincerely expecting North Korea's participation in the World Championships. North Korea presence is crucial for the success of this event as the motto of the competition is 'Dive into Peace'." This too fell on deaf ears: the North did not show, nor even have the courtesy to reply. Diving into peace is clearly not Pyongyang's thing.

Brief encounters

June did see two high level North-South interactions, yet both were brief and insubstantial. Lee Hee-ho, widow of Kim Dae-jung and a noted activist in her own right, died on June 10 aged 96. Lee accompanied Kim to Pyongyang in 2000 for the first North-South summit, and had also returned since. In December 2011, she was one of the few South Koreans allowed by the conservative Lee Myung-bak administration to go to Pyongyang for Kim Jong Il's funeral – which made her one of the first to meet Kim Jong Un. The latter invited her to visit again, only to [diss](#) her by not showing up when she made the trip in 2015, aged 92 and despite health problems. Indeed, Lee met nobody senior, and was fobbed off with a standard tourist itinerary rather than the honor and respect she deserved. Despite these insults, her death could not go unmarked. On June 12, Kim sent his sister Kim Yo Jong to Panmunjom to deliver a wreath and letter of condolence – but no message for Moon Jae-in. Yo Jong – who as of September seems to have

been further [promoted](#) in the WKP hierarchy – met Moon's national security adviser Chung Eui-yong, for just 15 minutes. And that was all. Pyongyang media publicized this occasion, a fact which some in Seoul drew hope from.



Figure 2 At Panmunjom, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong delivers a wreath and letter of condolence from the DPRK leader over the death of Kim Dae-jung's widow. Photo: Hankyoreh

Shorter still was the fourth meeting between Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae-in, less than three weeks later and again at Panmunjom. This was little more than a handshake and a few words, for Moon was in effect a bit-player on his own turf – even though technically he was the host. We refer of course to the third Kim-Trump summit, itself very brief (an hour) and discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Comparative Connections*. Here, as always, Moon was a tireless facilitator; without him, there would be no Kim-Trump relationship for both to brag about. Yet as so often, he got scant thanks. In April, Kim had mocked his efforts as "meddling," and on June 30, he was not part of the main event. ([Media](#) who reported a "trilateral" meeting got it wrong.) Yet despite what some might consider the indignity of his position, Moon remained unflinchingly upbeat. On July 2, he told his Cabinet that the Kim-Trump meeting was a "de facto declaration of an end to hostile relations and the beginning of a full-fledged peace era." We consider below the wider pros and cons of such Panglossian optimism.

'Impudent guy'

This optimism also pervaded Moon's big [speech](#) on Aug. 15 – Liberation Day from Japanese rule in 1945, and a public holiday in both Koreas. Judging from this and other works, notably a long reflective [article](#) for a German newspaper published in May, the ROK president – or

whoever pens these for him – has quite a flair for the big picture and ‘the vision thing.’ In May and again in August he painted a bold vision of the peace and prosperity attainable on the peninsula, if only North and South join hands, bury the hatchet and work together.

Last year Kim Jong Un echoed such flowery sentiments, though never in depth or detail. Kim and Moon also signed two meaty accords, at Panmunjom and in Pyongyang, which seemed to take a real step towards those sunlit uplands. That was then. Subsequent events suggest that Kim never meant a word of it, but was just using Moon to get to Trump. That achieved, Moon and South Korea have been discarded. And now, not content with mocking the go-between as a meddler rather than thanking him, Pyongyang has sunk to nasty insults. A day after Moon’s speech, the official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* published a [reply](#) by the inaptly-named Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRC), under the headline: “S. Korean Chief Executive Blasted for His Anti-DPRK Remarks.” Here it is in full, so you can get the flavor. Readers are urged to first read Moon’s [speech](#), or at least the parts on inter-Korean relations, and ponder whether this in any sense warrants such an intemperate riposte:

S. Korean Chief Executive Blasted for His Anti-DPRK Remarks

Pyongyang, August 16 (KCNA) -- A spokesperson for the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country made public a statement on Aug. 16.

Its full text is as follows:

There is a proverb that the mountains have brought forth a mouse.

This is an appropriate comment on the “liberation day commemorative speech” by the south Korean chief executive.

In the speech, he failed to put forward any proper measures against the insult by the Japanese islanders and any ways to overcome the worsening economic situation, but only played with words. So, his speech deserves the comments “foolish commemorative speech” and “citation of spiritual slogans”.

What can not but be pointed out is that he said the dialogue atmosphere was not marred despite

some recent “worrisome acts” of north Korea and that things have changed from that in the past when the Korean Peninsula vibrated owing to a single “provocation” by north Korea – the reckless remarks which had nothing to do with the “liberation day.”

He meant that south Korea is making efforts to maintain the prevailing dialogue climate, build a peace economy through the north-south cooperation and establish a peace-keeping mechanism in the Korean Peninsula – remarks that make the boiled head of a cow provoke a side-splitting laughter.

Even at this moment, there go on in south Korea joint military exercises against the DPRK. Does he have any face to talk about dialogue atmosphere, peaceful economy and peace-keeping mechanism.

The joint military exercises are now at their full swing and their keynotes are “annihilating” the main force of our army within 90 days, removing the weapons of mass destruction and “stabilizing the life of inhabitants”. And what’s more, there go on the counter-strike drills. His open talk about “dialogue” between the north and the south under such situation raises a question as to whether he has proper thinking faculty.

He is, indeed, an impudent guy rare to be found.

He often calls for peace. Then is he going to make an excuse that the drones and fighters being purchased from the U.S. are just for spreading agrochemicals and for circus flights?

How can he explain the “mid-term defence plan” aiming at developing and securing the capabilities of precision guided weapon, electromagnetic impulse shell, multi-purpose large transport ship, etc. whose missions are to strike the entire region of the northern half of the Republic.

What is clear is that all of them are aimed at destroying the DPRK.

He may utter such to save his damaged face before the south Koreans. But how dare can he let out such remarks and how is going to give an account of it to us. (sic)

A sure thing is that the south Korean chief executive is so funny man as he just reads what was written by his juniors.

He used to get shocked into fright even at the sound of a sporting gun in the north. Yet, he, wearing a still look on his face, bluffs that he would help north Korea opt for economy and prosperity, not nukes. It is obvious that he is overcome with fright.

The implementation of the historic Panmunjom declaration is now at a deadlock and the power for the north-south dialogue is divested. This is the natural outcome of the wayward acts of the south Korean chief executive.

The south Korean authorities are snooping about to fish in troubled waters in the future DPRK-U.S. dialogue, dreaming that the phase of dialogue would naturally arrive after the joint military exercises just as the natural change of the time of the year. He had better drop that senseless lingering attachment.

They can clearly see what we feel now, i.e. we have nothing to talk any more with the south Korean authorities nor have any idea to sit with them again.

In a sense comment is superfluous. By adopting this tone, North Korea makes clear not only its disagreement but its utter contempt for the leader whom less than a year ago Kim Jong Un purported to treat as an equal partner in dialogue. Let us consider the substance first. It is true that joint US-ROK military exercises continue, yet these have been markedly scaled down. North Korea can hardly expect the South to ditch its founding alliance entirely, nor to disarm unilaterally while the North continues to test missiles (see below). One can argue chicken and egg ad infinitum, but all neutral observers stress how much Seoul (and indeed Washington) have conceded, with Pyongyang giving little in return. Equally unconvincing is the faux rage with which the CPRC attacks even the mild remonstrations that no ROK leader could avoid making, given the volleys of missiles the DPRK had been testing lately. Far from “reckless,” Moon’s whole approach – to a fault, critics would say – echoes a rediscovered World War Two slogan which has become a buzzword in the UK: “Keep Calm And Carry On.”

Notable too is how Pyongyang specifically sneers at the idea of “build[ing] a peace

economy through the north-south cooperation.” This longstanding theme of Moon’s has been revived in the context of the ROK’s worsening relations with Japan, discussed elsewhere in this issue. On Aug. 5, Moon went so far as to tell his Cabinet that “the Korean economy can catch up with Japan’s quickly if a peace economy is achieved on the peninsula through inter-Korean economic cooperation.” Whether or not the boiled head of a cow is capable of laughter, that view does seem a [stretch](#) both economically and politically, as I have argued [elsewhere](#). But it ill behooves Pyongyang – which last year was urging economic cooperation, and now berates Seoul for failing to implement accords on economic cooperation (while refusing to allow that UN sanctions are the reason) – to sneer at the idea of a ‘peace economy’ as such.

As to the tone, not for the first time one wonders if those who publish this stuff know or care how it makes the DPRK look. In similar vein, as the new US-ROK summer exercises kicked off on Aug. 11, a director general at the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) [mocked](#) the renaming of these maneuvers in blunt language: “Shit, though hard and dry, still stinks even if it is wrapped in a flowered cloth.” That was even [circulated](#), S-word and all, by the DPRK mission to the United Nations. This too is worth [reading](#) in full, as the whole tone is deeply undiplomatic: sheer puerile name-calling, and in poor English too. (“It already went wrong for Chongwadae to have a sound sleep at daybreak as it notoriously keeps security in good orders.” As we say in England, yer what?). More edifyingly, students of protocol may wonder why MFA rather than CPRC is commenting on South Korea, given that both Koreas formally agree that Korea is one country; so the other, whatever it is, is not foreign.

Missiles: more, newer, better

One baleful feature of the period under review is that Pyongyang ended its moratorium on missile testing. Twice in May, then in a veritable flurry on [eight](#) separate occasions (as of Sept.15) since July 25, North Korea tested a variety of short range ballistic missiles (SRBM) and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), many seemingly new. In many cases Kim Jong Un was present, described by DPRK media as guiding and applauding the launches. *38North* has a full and excellent [account](#) of this worrying trend. The worry is not shared by President Trump, for

whom anything that can't reach the continental US is apparently "routine stuff." He could not be more wrong. Not only does such complacency alarm allies like South Korea and Japan, where US troops and bases are also in the firing line, but actually the 'stuff' is by no means routine. All indications are that the DPRK is successfully developing a range of sophisticated new weapons, specifically designed to evade missile defense systems such as THAAD, whose installation in the ROK by Park Geun-hye caused wide-ranging controversy.

Bilaterally, as we noted last time the ROK military was at first reluctant – unlike everyone else – to call the first launches in May ballistic missiles; presumably for political reasons, as that would mean admitting a breach of UN sanctions which ban BM testing. 'Projectiles' was the preferred word in Seoul. Since July the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) have overcome such squeamishness, as the extent of the threat has become clearer: it now calls a BM a BM. Yet Seoul (contra Pyongyang's criticisms) remains rather mild in its comments. What Moon on Aug. 15 called "a series of worrying actions" could be put much more strongly than that.

Cyberattacks: the great unspoken

Downplaying is one thing, silence another. In earlier articles here we more than once noted North Korea's constant cyberattacks on the South, and the latter's reluctance to complain – with ROK tech experts saying they were told not to spoil the peace process by raising this. A *Yonhap* [headline](#) in July 2018 embodied the contradiction: "N. Korean hackers suspected of continuing attacks amid friendly inter-Korean relations." Last year's inter-Korean accords, including the military one signed in September, did not mention the cyber domain.

In that context, the latest UN Panel of Experts (PoE) report on implementation of sanctions – and how Pyongyang gets around them – offers further evidence. Widely leaked in August ahead of its publication on Sept. 5, and focused on hacks designed to raise money (theft, in a word) rather than the direct DOS assaults that Seoul also fends off daily, this found the ROK to be the main single target of cyberattacks, in ten out of 35 incidents being probed. In such a situation official silence is hard to comprehend, while the attempted silencing of those who want to reveal the ugly truth is unconscionable. Both may, and should, become untenable.

Dr Pangloss proclaims peace in Korea

This links to a wider problem. While respecting the Moon administration's efforts for peace, there is a note of Dr Pangloss: the character in Voltaire's *Candide* who invariably claimed, even in dire adversity, that everything was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The risk here is that the urge to be unfailingly optimistic may lead to situations being misjudged, or at least misrepresented. Consider President Moon's comments in his August 15 speech: "In spite of a series of worrying actions taken by North Korea recently, the momentum for dialogue remains unshaken – which is a significant result of my government's peace process on the Korean Peninsula. Compared to the past when the whole Peninsula experienced turbulence whenever North Korea engaged in a provocation, the situation has definitely changed."

We already noted that "worrying actions" is an understatement. Two further comments. In truth, inter-Korean dialogue has entirely halted; so what "momentum" now exists, and how can it be called "unshaken"? And what is that last sentence saying exactly? It seems to be a boast of stiff upper lip; yes, the North is provoking, but we're not losing our nerve. Yet apart from the real but limited CBMs at Panmunjom and elsewhere in the DMZ, discussed in our last article, the DPRK threat is undiminished; indeed, on the missile front it is growing by leaps and bounds. For that matter, in fairness, stripped of its insults the gist of the CPRC's Aug. 16 statement is that the South Korean military threat to the North is also undiminished. So what precisely has "definitely changed" on the peninsula? Not much, in all honesty.

This misleading optimism also colors specific issues. Readers of *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, might form the impression that inter-Korean dialogue is not dead. This trimester, as last, the agency issued regular updates on matters where in truth less is going on than meets the eye. Earlier this year it was video family reunions. Report after report detailed the decision, the buying of equipment, its distribution across the country, application to the UN for exemption from sanctions, and so on. Rarely if at all mentioned was that all this effort was in vain. North Korea was in no mood to accept this kit, so the hopes of separated families to see their long-lost loved ones – even

on an unhuggable screen – would be dashed yet again.

This time it is rice aid. Since at least June South Korea has been offering 50,000 tons of rice to the North, via the UN World Food Program (WFP). Successive reports have suggested that this is a work in progress, even though Pyongyang has consistently criticized Seoul for putting “non-core and secondary” humanitarian assistance ahead of resolving fundamental problems. Not until September did Seoul start to admit that in fact this aid may not be delivered at all.

Other cases can be found in the Chronology. Time and again, the default position of the Blue House and the Unification Ministry (MOU) is that discussions are under way on this or that; for instance, sports cooperation or a visit by ROK investors to their facilities at Kaesong. Yet it is quite unclear what is really happening – except that nothing is happening.

In sum, and I do not say this often or lightly or happily. At this moment, if you want to know what is happening between the two Koreas, then frankly Pyongyang’s barbed comments and sneers give a more accurate picture than the pollyannas in Seoul. *Pace* President Moon, there is no momentum any more; it has stalled. To kick-start the peace process requires, as a first step, being honest about the true state of play, not going through the motions or pretending.

Tragedy, comedy

Two specific incidents – one partly comic, the other wholly tragic – merit highlighting. In August, South Koreans were shocked by the fate of a Northern defector and her six-year-old son, who seem to have starved to death in their Seoul apartment, unnoticed for two months. This prompted much heart-searching as to how no safety net prevented such a tragedy.

Earlier, a report in June of a familiar kind – North Korean fishing boat found drifting in Southern waters, escorted into port, crew asked if they want to defect, two decide to stay – turned out to be much more intriguing, and not a little alarming. Far from drifting, this tiny vessel (1.8 tons), having set out from North Hamgyong in the northeastern DPRK, entered Southern waters and remained there undetected for four days, before cheekily sailing into the east coast port of Samcheok, again wholly

unchallenged. It was a passing civilian on the quay who found them, when they hailed him and asked to use his phone; one had an aunt in Seoul.

Heads rolled when the official cover-up was swiftly exposed as a pack of lies, and with it the fragility of South Korea’s defenses and vigilance. What if the Northern boat people had been armed KPA commandos, as in past incidents? Yet who they really were remains unclear. As the daily *JoongAng Ilbo* [reported](#), locals in Samcheok noted several puzzles. The boat had no fishing tackle. It carried plenty of food, but no cutlery to eat it. The crew wore neatly pressed clothes, and three were clean-shaven; they didn’t look to have just spent nearly a week at sea in an open boat. And after sailing all that distance, why did two return to the North? The two who remained will have some questions to answer, once the NIS is through with them.

Prospects: back on track?

Finally, where do inter-Korean relations go from here? They might conceivably improve, if only as a dependent variable. Trump’s ouster of John Bolton as his national security adviser suggests that the US President is now minded to cut deals than threaten war, as he initially did on North Korea in 2017. If US-DPRK dialogue resumes this fall, and if that leads to Pyongyang winning some relief from economic sanctions, that could in principle unblock the economic side of inter-Korean cooperation; road and rail reconnection and modernization, resumption of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tourism, and more.

But is the will still there? The CPRC was unequivocal: “We have nothing to talk any more with the south Korean authorities nor have any idea to sit with them again.” Not that it is hard for Pyongyang to break a promise. As for Seoul, will the Moon administration wait patiently and turn the other cheek, even after those insults? Morally noble perhaps; but as we have seen also problematic. As parliamentary elections next April draw nearer, Moon and his party will be judged on results delivered. On the Northern front, they badly need early 2020 to resemble 2018, not 2019. It might, just; but at this stage there can be no guarantees.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2019

May 4, 2019: Ending a 17-month moratorium on such testing, North Korea fires a volley of projectiles into the East Sea from Hodo-ri, near Wonsan. Kim Jong Un [presides](#). After some initial [confusion](#) in Seoul, observers [conclude](#) that these involved two types of large-caliber multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and a new short-range ballistic missile (SRBM).

May 6, 2019: Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, South Korea's presidential office) releases an English [text](#) of “The Greatness of the Ordinary”: a long op-ed by President Moon Jae-in for the German daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which [publishes](#) it on May 9. With unfortunate timing, this includes a claim that “the sounds of gunfire have disappeared in the air, on the sea and on the ground around the Korean Peninsula.”

May 8, 2019: *Yonhap*, the ROK's quasi-official news agency, [reports](#) that the UN Command (UNC) has approved partial opening of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ, the de facto inter-Korean border) for two hiking trails, in Cheorwon and Paju. A third “peace trail,” in Goseong on the east coast, was opened on April 27 to mark the anniversary of 2018's Panmunjom Summit. (All this is on the South's side of the border; there is no North Korean involvement.)

May 8, 2019: Exactly one month after his confirmation as the new ROK Unification Minister (MOU), Kim Yeon-chul makes his first [visit](#) to North Korea – if only as far as the joint liaison office at Kaesong. Briefly meeting DPRK officials stationed there, he exchanges pleasantries but does not discuss any substantive issues, such as missiles or food aid.

May 9, 2019: Effectively confirming that its test moratorium is over, the DPRK [launches](#) two more apparent SRBMs from Kusong-ri, north of Pyongyang. Again Kim Jong Un is [present](#). The Blue House calls this “very worrisome” and unhelpful for efforts to reduce tensions.

May 9, 2019: Interviewed by the *Korean Broadcasting Service (KBS)* just after Pyongyang's latest missile launch, President Moon [says](#): “I'd like to warn North Korea that if such behavior ... is repeated, it could make the current dialogue and negotiation phase difficult.”

May 9, 2019: [Data](#) from South Korea's Ministry of Unification (MOU) show that inter-Korean contacts – measured by permissions the ministry grants to South Koreans to go North – are falling. From 6,689 in 2018 (full year), the number declined to 617 in 2019 so far.

May 10, 2019: Regarding potential ROK food aid to the DPRK in the light of the latter's recent missile tests, MOU deputy spokesperson [insists](#): “There is no change in [the Moon administration's] position that it is necessary to provide humanitarian assistance to the North from a humanitarian and compatriots' perspective.” However, “the government plans to sufficiently collect opinions from the public in the process.” (See also May 12.)

May 12, 2019: *Yonhap* [quotes](#) an unnamed military official as saying the ROK is still not in a position to confirm whether what the DPRK fired on May 9 were ballistic missiles, as almost all other expert sources – including the Pentagon – are claiming.

May 12, 2019: Korean-language DPRK propaganda website [Meari](#) (Echo) [criticizes](#) the South's emphasis on aiding the North: “It would be a deception of the public sentiment ... to make a fuss as if a few humanitarian projects, which are far from the demands of the nation, would lead to big progress in inter-Korean relations ... while putting fundamental issues ... on the back burner.” It urges Seoul to focus on implementing summit agreements instead.

May 12, 2019: [DPRK Today](#), a China-based North Korean website, [urges](#) South Korea to reopen the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), abruptly shut by then-President Park Geun-hye in 2016. It claims that this “is not an issue that needs Washington's approval. The South is giving an excuse for foreign forces to intervene in cooperative projects.”

May 12, 2019: Won Hyung-joon, a South Korean violinist and orchestra director, and Kim Song Mi, a China-based North Korean soprano, give a joint [concert](#) in Shanghai. Won is a long-time advocate of inter-Korean musical [cooperation](#); this was his individual initiative. The duo had been due to perform together in Jeju last December, but that event was cancelled.

May 13, 2019: MND spokesperson [says](#) that Seoul “will continue to beef up [its missile defense] capabilities aimed at effectively fending off threats from all directions.” She also reveals that military communication channels with the North are operating normally. Another anonymous ROKG source confirms to *Yonhap* that the inter-Korean military hotlines are in use twice a day: “But exchanges of opinions via those hotlines on how to implement the inter-Korean military pact have come to a halt, which I believe will be temporary.”

May 13, 2019: Poll commissioned by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), a state think-tank in Seoul, [finds](#) that for the first time since polling began in 2016 more than half of South Koreans (51.4 percent) say their government should pursue dialogue with North Korea. Yet although those regarding the North as a trustworthy partner rose from 8.8 percent in 2017 to 33.5 percent now, a larger proportion (39.2 percent) still distrust the Kim regime.

May 14, 2019: Radio Pyongyang [says](#) South Korea has no right to criticize what it calls a “normal ... strike drill” (see May 4). This launch “was not a violation of a promise as it was neither ... an intermediate range missile nor an intercontinental ballistic missile.” It calls Seoul’s (actually rather mild) remonstrations “a shameless complaint from the ones who lost the right to talk ... by recklessly infringing upon the North-South military agreement, sticking to secret hostile acts with the US.”

May 15, 2019: MOU [rebuffs](#) any [suggestion](#) that falling market prices for rice in North Korea mean that its food situation is not so serious after all, saying “We recognize the [assessment](#) compiled by the World Food Programme ([WFP](#)) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as official and objective indicators.” The two UN bodies’ latest report, published on May 3, claims that (in WFP’s own [headline](#)) “After worst harvest in ten years, 10 million people in DPRK face imminent food shortages.”

May 17, 2019: MOU announces two [decisions](#). South Korea is to donate \$8 million via UN agencies for projects supporting nutrition and health of children and pregnant women in North Korea. It will also, at the ninth time of asking, allow Southern companies invested at Kaesong to visit the shuttered KIC, to check on the condition of their equipment and property there....

May 20, 2019: Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [says](#) “discussions are under way” with North Korea for Southern investors in the KIC to visit Kaesong (see May 17). He gives no details. As of mid-September no such visit has yet taken place. (See also July 4.)

May 20, 2019: North Korean website [Uriminzokkiri](#) [criticizes](#) South Korea for its recent bilateral working group talks with the US. Falsely calling that meeting “secret,” it says this proves that Seoul has “yet to break away from a policy of dependence on foreign forces.”

May 23, 2019: South Korea [submits](#) on the deadline its roster alone for the International Hockey Federation (FIH) Women's Hockey Series Finals in Ireland: a qualifying event for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. In February the two Koreas agreed to field joint teams in qualifiers for women's field hockey, women's basketball, judo and rowing. Despite this, North Korea has ignored all the South's requests to arrange joint training and other practicalities.

May 24, 2019: Rebutting a [report](#) by Radio Free Asia (RFA) that North Korea has sold off equipment belonging to South Korean companies at the KIC, *Yonhap* [quotes](#) an unnamed official of one such investor as saying that ROK officials who visited Kaesong last year to set up the inter-Korean liaison office there found factory buildings locked and sealed. (But see also Aug. 9, below.)

May 26–27, 2019: In apparent reaction to the ROK's latest offer of aid (see May 17), though without citing that specifically, two second-tier DPRK websites, [Tongil Sinbo](#) and [DPRK Today](#), reiterate Pyongyang's position (see May 12) that humanitarian issues are “non-core and secondary.” They accuse Seoul of wanting to “show off ... and manipulate public opinion rather than improving inter-Korean relations.”

May 27, 2019: Citing “multiple” ROK government sources, the conservative Seoul daily *Dong-A Ilbo* [claims](#) that in January Seoul offered rice and other aid for Pyongyang to reopen the KIC and Mount Kumgang tourist resort. The North refused, demanding cash instead – which would breach UN sanctions. The South then offered twice as much rice (amount unspecified), but was again rebuffed. MOU [denies](#) this story, calling it “not true at all.”

May 28, 2019: The DPRK website [Uriminzokkiri denounces](#) South Korea's plan to buy *SM-2 Block IIIB* ship-to-air missiles and related equipment from the US, adding: “There is actually no end if we are to list all the sneaky acts done by the south Korean military that destroy the peace mood on the peninsula and heighten tensions.”

May 29, 2019: *Yonhap* [quotes](#) DPRK Vice Sports Minister Won Kil U as reaffirming, in a Chinese TV interview (date and channel unspecified), the North's readiness to form a joint team for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics: “We have a willingness to do (it), holding hands with South Korea.” That would need planning; but Pyongyang is not replying to Seoul's messages.

May 31, 2019: A propos an outbreak of highly contagious African swine fever in the northern DPRK, MOU [says](#): “We will soon launch discussions with North Korea through the joint liaison office.”

June 3, 2019: MOU [says](#) Pyongyang has not [replied](#) to its offer to jointly fight African swine fever. Nor has it even officially informed Seoul of its new outbreak, despite an inter-Korean agreement in November to share information on contagious diseases.

June 10, 2019: Speaking in Helsinki at the start of a visit to three Nordic nations, President Moon [sounds](#) upbeat: “I believe that we will be able to resume ...dialogue between the two Koreas and between the US and North Korea in the near future.”

June 11, 2019: Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [report](#) that the ROK Navy towed a DPRK fishing boat, found drifting with engine trouble in Southern waters in the East Sea, back into Northern waters, having ascertained that all six crew wished to go home. Pyongyang used the inter-Korean military hotline to request their rescue and repatriation.

June 11, 2019: [Choson Sinbo](#), a newspaper published by pro-DPRK Koreans in Japan, [urges](#) Seoul to “make a courageous decision to take practical action, not just words, in tackling the current stalemate in lockstep with North Korean compatriots.” If it does this, “there will be an answer from the North.”

June 11, 2019: [Minju Joson](#), daily paper of the DPRK Cabinet, [calls](#) the recent meeting in Seoul between ROK Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo and acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan a “clear manifestation of the ambition [to] militarily crush” North Korea.

June 11, 2019: ROK [sends](#) the \$8 million it pledged for aid to the DPRK (see May 17) to two UN agencies. WFP receives \$4.5 million and UNICEF \$3.5 million.

June 12, 2019: At Panmunjom, Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [delivers](#) a wreath and letter of condolence from the DPRK leader over the [death](#) of Kim Dae-jung's widow, Lee Hee-ho, who died on June 10 aged 96. There is no [message](#) for Moon Jae-in. DPRK media publicize all this, which [some](#) in Seoul see as encouraging.

June 12, 2019: Speaking in Oslo, President Moon [says](#): “I think it's desirable (for me) to meet Chairman Kim Jong Un, if possible” before US President Donald Trump visits Seoul at the end of June. He adds: “I am calling for an early meeting between Chairman Kim and President Trump.”

June 14, 2019: DPRK website [Uriminzokkiri denounces Ulchi Taegeuk](#) – the ROK’s new scaled-down civilian-military [drill](#), held from May 27-30 – as “a provocative military exercise explicitly targeting us as the main enemy.”

June 14, 2019: Suh Ho, who in May replaced Chun Hae-sung as vice unification minister, pays his first [visit](#) to the inter-Korean liaison office at Kaesong (he is its co-head ex officio). He meets ROK staff there, but not his DPRK counterpart Jon Jong Su, since Pyongyang once again cancels the supposedly weekly meeting of co-heads; none has been held since February.

June 15, 2019: DPRK media use the 19th anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit (which is not being celebrated jointly) to [praise](#) that event. They also laud 2018’s Kim-Moon summits as “milestones for peace, prosperity and unification.”

June 15, 2019: *Yonhap* [reports](#) that a North Korean fishing boat with four crew was “found adrift in South Korean waters off the east coast,” having “drifted [South] due to an engine problem”. This account later turns out to be [falsified](#). See also June 17, 18 and 20 below.

June 17, 2019: Seoul’s military [vows](#) to tighten vigilance, amid criticism that a DPRK fishing boat had entered ROK waters undetected (see June 15). Still claiming the vessel was “found adrift”, the JCS says that while overall coastal and maritime defense operations had proceeded “normally”, its radar operation system has “elements that need to be complemented.”

June 18, 2019: MOU [says](#) two of the four DPRK boat people, who wanted to go home, were returned via Panmunjom today. The other two expressed a wish to defect. In further details, it is now revealed that the tiny (1.8 ton) wooden boat was first spotted by a civilian, “quite close to a seawall” near the ROK port of Samcheok. But it is still claimed to have been adrift.

June 18, 2019: *Yonhap* [says](#), the Blue House “publicly tone[s] down its expectations for an early inter-Korean summit.” With China’s Xi Jinping now headed for Pyongyang, this is an admission that President Moon’s professed hopes last week (see June 12) are unrealistic.

June 20, 2019: ROK Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo [apologizes](#), after the embarrassing truth emerges of military failure and cover-up. The small DPRK boat (see above) had neither drifted South nor been apprehended at sea. Actually it crossed the maritime border, spent three days in Southern waters, then entered and tied up in the South’s Samcheok port, where its crew hailed a passing civilian – all of this entirely undetected and unchallenged.

June 20, 2019: In a wide-ranging [interview](#), Vice Unification Minister Suh Ho says: “I think we need to find an exquisite procedure (sic) with regard to resumption of the Kaesong complex and Mount Kumgang tours in the process of denuclearization.”

June 22, 2019: ROK Coast Guard and Navy [see off](#) a small DPRK fishing boat that had entered Southern waters northeast of Dokdo. The North Korean Navy had requested its rescue via a military hotline, but the crew insisted their engine was working.

June 25, 2019: Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), a group of defectors and their supporters, [says](#) it marked the 69th anniversary of the outbreak of the 1950-53 Korean War by launching 20 propaganda balloons across the DMZ from Incheon, west of Seoul.

June 26, 2019: In a joint written interview with *Yonhap* and six foreign news agencies, Moon Jae-in [anticipates](#) the two Koreas exchanging military information and observing each other’s exercises – if existing confidence-building accords are fully implemented.

June 27, 2019: In the same group interview, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [suggests](#) that the KIC and the Mount Kumgang resort could be reopened even before sanctions relief, so as to advance denuclearization.

June 30, 2019: Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un [meet](#) for the first time since September 2018, at Panmunjom. They shake hands and speak briefly as Moon escorts Donald Trump to his slightly longer (50 minutes) third meeting with Kim, in which Moon does not participate.

July 2, 2019: President Moon [tells](#) his Cabinet that the Kim-Trump meeting at Panmunjom on June 30 was a “de facto declaration of an end to hostile relations and the beginning of a full-fledged peace era,” even though no new accord was signed.

July 3, 2019: Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) it has sacked the commander of the ROK Army’s 8th Corps, referred two other senior military commanders to a disciplinary committee, and issued a warning to the JCS Chairman over the Samcheok boat incident.

July 4, 2019: More than a month after Seoul agreed to let its investors visit the KIC (see May 17, above), MOU [says](#) that “North Korea is a little passive on this in the current situation.” Pressed further, the ministry clarifies that Pyongyang has not replied at all.

July 4, 2019: President Moon’s approval rating [reaches](#) 52.4%, a seven-month high.

July 8, 2019: MOU [says](#) North Korea has not responded to an invitation to participate in the world’s largest swimming event: the biennial International Swimming Federation (FINA, in French), this year hosted by Gwangju and Yeosu cities in southwestern South Korea, which runs July 12–28.

July 9, 2019: Apologizing again for the Samcheok boat incident, ROK Defense Minister Jeong [says](#) he has asked President Moon to decide whether to fire him. He keeps his job.

July 9, 2019: MOU [rebuffs](#) as “absolutely not true” a claim by the *Chosun Ilbo* that government support for civic groups’ projects to help Northern defectors’ settlement has been halved. On the contrary, it “has been rather steadily on the rise”: from 383 million won (\$324,300) in 2015 to 430 million won in 2017, 500 million won in 2018 and 522 million won in 2019.

July 22, 2019: FFNK does it again (see June 25). The defector activist group [reveals](#) that on July 20 it launched 20 balloons carrying 500,000 leaflets, 2,000 dollar bills, 1,000 USB drives and 500 booklets across the DMZ from Yeoncheon, north of Seoul.

July 22, 2019: Opening what *Yonhap* calls “an exposition on the seas around North Korea,” Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [calls](#) for progress in stalled inter-Korean maritime cooperation, such as a joint fishing area: “If we can seize this opportunity and connect the seas of the South and North, the destiny of the Korean Peninsula will dramatically change.”

July 24, 2019: MOU [reveals](#) that North Korea is refusing to accept the South’s offer (made via the UN WFP) of 50,000 tons of rice, citing upcoming joint US–ROK military exercises.

July 25, 2019: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [report](#) that the DPRK has launched two SRBMs, seemingly of a new type, from a presumed mobile launcher on Hodo Peninsula near Wonsan. They flew for some 690 and 430 km. Seoul [expresses](#) “strong concerns.”

July 26, 2019: Seoul [announces](#) that the third and last new hiking trail along the southern side of the DMZ, starting from Paju and including a demolished guardpost, will open on Aug. 10.)

Aug. 1, 2019: Korean People’s Army (KPA) soldier [crosses](#) the DMZ by swimming in the Imjin river near Paju to defect to South Korea.

Aug. 2, 2019: (South) Korea Football Association (KFA) [says](#) its Northern counterpart has told the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) it will host an inter-Korean soccer match in Pyongyang on Oct. 15.

Aug. 5, 2019: US–ROK joint military exercises commence. Scaled down and renamed from the [former](#) *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* summer maneuvers ([cancelled](#) in 2018), these [comprise](#) four days of “crisis management staff training” (Aug. 5–8), followed by a 10-day “Combined Command Post [Training](#)” (Aug. 11–20).” Both are largely computer simulations, rather than mobilization of actual troops and equipment.

Aug. 5, 2019: As ROK relations with Japan deteriorate after Tokyo imposes trade sanctions, President Moon [tells](#) his Cabinet that “the Korean economy can catch up with Japan’s quickly if a peace economy is achieved on the peninsula through inter-Korean economic cooperation.”

Aug. 5, 2019: MOU [says](#) that on July 24 South Korea proposed working-level talks with the North about forming unified teams for the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics in four sports, as agreed in February. Its spokesman adds that “discussions are under way”, but inter-Korean sports exchanges “have shown little progress due to the North's passive attitude.” Separately, the ministry says that the North has rejected a proposal by a South Korean civic group to hold a joint Liberation Day event on Aug. 15, to mark the end of Japanese occupation in 1945.

Aug. 9, 2019: Radio Free Asia (RFA) again [claims](#) North Korea is selling products pilfered from South Korean companies that invested in Kaesong, citing a large batch of rice cookers sent to China. (See also May 24.)

Aug. 11, 2019: A director general at the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs [mocks](#) and insults “the south Korean authorities” for changing the name of US-ROK joint exercises, using startlingly undiplomatic language: “Shit, though hard and dry, still stinks even if it is wrapped in a flowered cloth.”

Aug. 12 2019: [Refuting](#) Pyongyang's criticisms of the US-ROK exercise, MOU says this is “not a field training aimed at the North, but a joint command post drill intended to prepare for the transfer of wartime operational control (from Washington to Seoul) ... It is not a violation of North-South military agreements.” The North's comments do “not help advance inter-Korean relations at all.”

Aug. 13, 2019: *Yonhap* [cites](#) an unnamed “government source” as confirming that the two Koreas' spy chiefs met secretly in April. National Intelligence Service (NIS) Director Suh Hoon met Jang Kum Chol, who Seoul says replaced Kim Yong Chol as head of the WPK United Front Department (UFD) after the failure of the second US-DPRK summit.

Aug. 13, 2019: Seoul police [reveal](#) that the bodies of a North Korean defector mother and son were found in their apartment on July 31. They may have starved to death two months earlier. This prompts an outpouring of [concern](#) as to how no safety net prevented such a tragedy.

Aug. 13, 2019: Citing a leaked text of the latest report of the UN Panel of Experts set up to monitor implementation of sanctions on the DPRK, *AP* [reports](#) that the ROK was the main victim (ten cases) of 35 DPRK cyberattacks, thought to have netted Pyongyang up to \$2 billion in total. (The [report](#) is officially [published](#) on Sept. 5; see section 57, page 26.)

Aug. 15, 2019: In a [speech](#) on Liberation Day (from Japan in 1945: a public holiday in both Koreas), President Moon renews his call to North Korea to build shared prosperity on the peninsula. But he also refers to “worrying actions,” and adds: “If there is dissatisfaction, it too should be raised and discussed at the negotiating table.”

Aug. 16, 2019: North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRC) [reacts](#) to Moon's Aug. 15 speech with derision and insults. Calling “the south Korean chief executive” “an impudent guy rare to be found,” the CPRC says: “[W]e have nothing to talk any more with the south Korean authorities nor have any idea to sit with them again.”

Aug. 16, 2019: [Calling](#) Pyongyang's insults against President Moon (see above) “a rude act” that “crossed the line”, MOU says, rather mildly: “We express deep regret over North Korea's slander made one day after Liberation Day, the nation's biggest celebratory day.”

Aug. 16, 2019: North Korea [launches](#) two SRBMs from [Tongchon](#) in Kangwon province, the closest site yet this year to the DMZ and South Korea. Once again Kim Jong Un presides; As *KCNA* [puts](#) it, “Juche shells were fired in the presence of the Supreme Leader.”

Aug. 19, 2019: DPRK media [insult](#) Park Jie-won, a veteran ROK politician heavily involved in the late Kim Dae-jung's ‘Sunshine’ policy, as “a tramp and dirty man” who “wagged his ill-smelling tongue.” Park had criticized the North's Aug. 16 missile launch as (*inter alia*) irreverent to the memory of the late Chung Ju-yung, founder of the Hyundai conglomerate and a major funder of ‘Sunshine,’ who was born near Tongchon.

Aug. 20, 2019: Minister of Unification Kim Yeon-chul [restates](#) the Moon administration's commitment to building a 'peace economy' on the peninsula, despite Pyongyang [scorning](#) this notion as "remarks that make the boiled head of a cow provoke a side-splitting laughter."

Aug. 21, 2019: *Rodong Sinmun* [lambastes](#) the joint US-ROK exercises as "an open hostility to and unpardonable military provocation against the DPRK" and "a saber-rattling for making a preemptive attack on the DPRK from A to Z."

Aug. 22, 2019: KCNA weighs in on the US-ROK negotiations over cost-sharing for USFK. It [attacks](#) Washington as "greedy" and "gangster-like," and also Seoul for being "servile."

Aug. 23, 2019: MOU [says](#) it still hopes to send 50,000 tons of rice to North Korea via the UN World Food Programme (WFP) by end-September, despite Pyongyang's reported refusal to accept aid from the South.

Aug. 23, 2019: Quoting an unnamed official, *Yonhap* [says](#) South Korea is mulling whether to invite North Korea to the 8th vice-minister level Seoul Defense Dialogue (SDD), to be held on Sept. 4-6. In the event it decides [not](#) to.

Aug. 24, 2019: North Korea [test-fires](#) what the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [presume](#) to be two more SRBMs, this time from [Sondok](#), south of Hamhung on the east coast. They travel some 235 miles, in the seventh such test in less than a month. A day later, DPRK media [report](#) this as being a "newly developed super-large multiple rocket launcher" system (MRLS), once again under Kim Jong Un's personal guidance.

Aug. 26, 2019: MOU [says](#) Pyongyang has not replied to its offer to return the body of a presumed North Korean, found in the Imjin river at Paju near the DMZ in Aug. 14.

Aug. 26, 2019: Ahead of the DPRK parliament's rare second session this year, MOU [calls](#) that "a good opportunity for it to announce inside and out its policy direction or an evaluation on the businesses it has carried out." This turns out to be quite mistaken (see Aug. 29).

Aug. 27, 2019: MOU [admits](#) that while "it would be great to hold joint events", South Korea will mark the first anniversary on Sept. 19 of the Pyongyang inter-Korean summit without North Korea's participation. Nor has the North been notified of the South's planned events.

Aug. 29, 2019: DPRK Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) [holds](#) a rare second session. Belying expectations in Seoul of fresh policy announcements (see Aug. 26), this is mainly devoted to constitutional changes further cementing Kim Jong Un's position as chief of the executive branch, as well as head of everything else.

Sept. 05, 2019: In Vladivostok to attend the [5th Eastern Economic Forum](#), DPRK Vice-Premier Ri Yong Nam [urges](#) Seoul to "implement issues specified in the [Pyongyang] joint declaration and Panmunjom declaration." Otherwise, "how can [inter-Korean talks] happen?"