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**NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

## STILL NOTHING DOING

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2019 was a bad year between the two Koreas, undoing advances made in 2018. North Korea eschewed contact with the South, while continuing with weapons tests, which the South finally protested in November. In a pattern of negativism, Pyongyang hosted (because it had to) a most unsporting inter-Korean soccer match. Both states were hit by swine fever, yet the North refused help from or to share data with the South. In a policy U-turn, Kim Jong Un told South Korea not to revive Mt. Kumgang tourism, but to come and take away its “shabby” and “ugly” facilities built there. Seoul’s stance on the North’s human rights attracted criticism. Yet President Moon Jae-in remained strangely upbeat. His New Year address reiterated a broad agenda for cooperation—whereas a big speech by Kim ignored the South completely. 2020 is unlikely to see any improvement.

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The final four months of 2019 saw no improvement in inter-Korean relations, continuing the pattern already set in the first two-thirds of the year. In stark and sad contrast to 2018's three summits and two meaty treaties, in 2019 Kim Jong Un stomped off the field and took his bat home, so everything which had begun so promisingly ground to a halt. Such a total U-turn can only mean 2018 was a sham: Kim used Moon Jae-in to get to Trump, then ditched him.

Yet Moon continued to exude an odd optimism. Like Dr. Pangloss in Voltaire's timeless satire *Candide*, insisting amid any disaster that "all is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds," South Korea's president seemed unfazed by Northern slings and arrows, including multiple tests of various new weapons systems threatening the ROK. Only in late November did Seoul at last formally protest, over an island artillery drill that it said violated the September 2018 inter-Korean military accord. Much else the South took in stride, with at best mild deprecation. It also showed quixotic persistence in its dogged efforts to send food aid, despite the North's repeated and explicit rejection of any such charity. At this writing, Seoul is still trying.

It is tempting, but inaccurate, to say that the last few months showed North Korea at its worst. The examples of petty spite—sometimes self-defeating—catalogued below pale beside the Kim regime's WMD threats, or its appalling gulags. Yet such recent actions as hosting inter-Korean soccer with no spectators or live feed allowed, noncooperation on swine fever, and threatening to tear down ROK-built (and owned) tourist facilities at Mt. Kumgang—more detail on all these, and more, below—bespeak a wilful nastiness which lacks any justification. For its part South Korea ended its backing for a UN resolution on the North's human rights, and for the first time ever sent two would-be defectors back to certain death. Overall, neither Korean government exactly came up smelling of roses as 2019 drew to a close.

### **Were They Abducted?**

The period under review began with an oldish bone of contention, resurrected. On Sept. 4 the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL) issued a preliminary report after investigating the "Ningbo 12," a dozen DPRK waitresses who defected en masse from China in 2016. Pyongyang has always maintained that

they were in effect kidnapped, under a deal between their manager—who got them on the plane by telling them they had been assigned new jobs in Malaysia—and the ROK spy agency, the National Intelligence Service (NIS). In July 2018 the manager, Heo Gang-il, seemed to confirm that version of events.

The IADL as such has little credibility. A communist front during the Cold War era, it is still reliably leftwing—note that North Korea's official lawyers' association is an affiliate. Visiting both Koreas, IADL's investigative team received full assistance from the DPRK, but ROK authorities refused co-operation, so they did not actually get to meet the women—who have remained out of the public spotlight, as is their right. In a rather strange move, the ROK authorities gave *Reuters* sight of documents from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which investigated the case and confirmed that all the women came to Seoul of their own free will. But the NHRC's report seems unlikely to be published, so many questions remain. Naturally Pyongyang made hay of IADL's report, renewing its demand for the 12 to be repatriated. Yet only one minor DPRK website featured this. The issue is no longer a potential deal-breaker between North and South, as it was when the story broke. Kim Jong Un now has other fish to fry to make Seoul squirm, like Mt. Kumgang.

### **Awkward Anniversary**

September also saw the last of this year's awkward one-year inter-Korean anniversaries, with Southern celebrations marred by the North's absence. The classic case was April's festivities at the DMZ, one year after the first Moon-Kim summit. Artistes from several nations took part, but not North Korea. The Moon government clutched at what straws it could. At a seminar in Seoul on Sept. 16 to mark a year since the two Koreas signed what is now styled their Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), Jeong Kyeong-doo, the ROK minister of national defense (MND), insisted that this accord does not leave South Korea vulnerable. That rang a little hollow, coming days after yet another DPRK missile test on Sept. 10. KCNA identified this as a "super-large multiple rocket launcher," adding that Kim again oversaw the launch, as he had on the MLR's first outing on Aug. 24. This time, two rockets flew some 330 km east across the peninsula. They could just as easily fly south; it is obvious whom these

advanced new short-range weapons—of several types—threaten.

Yet Seoul has been strangely unwilling to protest. When North Korea began these tests in May, the South was even reluctant to identify what it called “projectiles” as ballistic missiles (BMs), which are banned under UN sanctions. Latterly it does at least call a spade a spade. But still Seoul soft-pedalled its criticisms until Nov. 25, when the Korean People’s Army (KPA) conducted an artillery drill—again guided by Kim—on Changrin, an islet close to the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime border in the Yellow/West Sea. The next day, by its own account, the MND lodged a “strong complaint” at this violation of the CMA, using the inter-Korean military communication line. So at least that is still working.

### Unsporting

October brought what a year earlier would have been two happy inter-Korean encounters of a sporting kind. By chance, the two Koreas were drawn against one another in Group H of the second Asian qualifying round for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, hosted in Pyongyang. In vain did the (South) Korea Football Association (KFA) attempt to make the normal arrangements. All their enquiries, including about broadcasting and bringing a cheering squad, met a stony silence. Only at the last minute did the North admit the South’s team and staffers, but no ROK media or supporters. Not only was the match on Oct. 15 not broadcast, but the stands were virtually empty of spectators. Some intrepid diplomats, notably the Swedish ambassador, did their best to live-tweet the game; they were later reportedly warned to limit their use of social media, especially photographs. A physical and ill-tempered match—Southern players said they were lucky to emerge uninjured—yielded a 0-0 draw. The North provided a DVD to take home, but the video quality was so poor that KBS, the ROK state broadcaster, decided not to air it. Unsurprisingly, the KFA complained to asked the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), asking it to consider punishing North Korea for its uncooperative behavior.

The second encounter went better, no doubt because it was international rather than bilateral—so the DPRK had no choice but to behave. The 2019 Youth and Junior Asian Weightlifting Championships in Pyongyang in late October (20-27), were a qualifying event for

the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Wary after the soccer debacle, South Korea was relieved to finally receive an invitation, albeit at just a few days’ notice. This time, the 65-strong ROK party included two journalists. A gushing [account](#) by the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) said that this “demonstrated the power of sport to unite people in friendly and peaceful competition.” Misleadingly, IWF also said that the ROK team “crossed the border” into the DPRK; in fact they flew in via Beijing, the normal route. Despite Southern fears, the North duly displayed the ROK’s proper name (*Taehan Minguk*), hoisted its flag (the *Taegukgi*) and played its national anthem—all normally anathema in the DPRK—when South Koreans won medals, as they did in five events including one gold. This may have caused the hosts some chagrin. All political ploys aside, weightlifting is one of North Korea’s strongest sports.



Figure 1 ROK triumph and DPRK dejection at the youth weightlifting competition in Pyongyang. Photo: Korea Herald

### Kumgangsan: Tear It All Down?

Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un had other pots to stir. On Oct. 23 the DPRK leader paid his first known visit to Mt. Kumgang (*Kumgangsan*). Specifically, not the fabled eponymous east coast mountain beauty spot as such, but rather the nearby resort facilities, built by Hyundai and other ROK firms in happier times for South Korean tourists. No fewer than 1.8 million made the trip—by sea at first, and later overland—during the Sunshine era (1998-2008). That all ended abruptly in July 2008 when a middle-aged female tourist was shot dead, apparently having taken a wrong turn. North Korea refused to apologise or let the South investigate. The conservative Lee Myung-bak, newly elected as ROK president and no fan of Sunshine, seized

the chance to suspend tourism—which is how matters have remained ever since.

KCNA’s list of the facilities Kim inspected shows how the resort had grown. “Kosong Port, Haegumgang Hotel, House of Culture, Kumgangsan Hotel, Kumgangsan Okryu Restaurant, Kumgang Pension Town, Kuryong Village, Onchon Village, Family Hotel, Onjong Pavilion No. 2, Kosong Port Golf Course, Kosong Port Immigration Office, etc. which were built by the south side...” But he was not impressed, calling it “just a hotchpotch with no national character at all...like makeshift tents in a disaster-stricken area or isolation wards...very backward in terms of architecture...shabby...unpleasant-looking.” And much more.

Kim has a point. Any facilities unused for over a decade (except for rare family reunions, as in August 2018, when the South hastily spruces them up) are going to look tatty. Some were not exactly beautiful in the first place. Moreover, South Korea later admitted that about 340 metal containers, used for offices and accommodation in the early days, are still cluttering up the place. But it was not prepared for what followed. Kim gave the order “to remove all the unpleasant-looking facilities of the south side with an agreement with the relevant unit of the south side and to build new modern service facilities our own way that go well with the natural scenery of Mount Kumgang.”

That is radical, to put it mildly. It is also unfeasible. The containers could and should go. A rather ugly floating hotel—the world’s first, in its day—built in Australia could be tugged away.



Figure 2 Kim Jong-un visits the resort complex at Diamond Mountain. Photo: KCNA via New York Times

But for the rest, this seems simply destructive. It is also a startling and troubling volte-face from Kim’s stance as expressed just months earlier. In his 2019 New Year address he said:

“...We are willing to resume the Kaesong Industrial Park and Mt Kumgang tourism without any precondition and in return for nothing, in consideration of the hard conditions of businesspersons of the south side who had advanced into the Kaesong Industrial Park and the desire of southern compatriots who are eager to visit the nation’s celebrated mountain.”

Not anymore. Kim has had a major rethink. Now he sees Mt. Kumgang as “our famous mountain” (ie the DPRK’s) rather than “a common property of the north and the south.” That in turn lead him to “sharp criticism of the very wrong, dependent policy of the predecessors who were going to rely on others when the country was not sufficient [sic] enough.” This can only mean his late father Kim Jong Il. The implied *lèse-majesté* is startling.

Is Kim serious? Conceptually, his rethink makes a kind of sense. Something needs to be done about *Kumgangsan*. It should not be an eyesore, nor lie idle. But narrow Northern chauvinism is a far cry from the pan-Korean dreams that drove Hyundai’s late founder, the legendary Chung Ju-yung—who was born nearby—to push this project. And given the huge disparity between the two Korean economies, relying on Southern money makes good business sense: the North is starved of capital. Moreover, Pyongyang shamelessly milked Hyundai for all it could get—then confiscated its assets. This is hardly dependence.

What makes no sense is Pyongyang’s explicit refusal to discuss any of this face to face. South Korea naturally asked for a meeting, but the North refused, insisting this can all be done by exchanging documents—presumably via fax. That is so obviously impractical as to give the game away. Basically, and very negatively, Kim’s main aim here seems to be to make life difficult for Moon Jae-in. Besides being an ingrate, he seems insouciant how this will play in the South—where in 2018 he had amassed considerable goodwill, all is now squandered.

And he may be bluffing. As of mid-January neither side has yielded, and everything at Mt. Kumgang seems to be still standing. Perhaps 2020 will bring a more constructive approach.

## Swinish Behavior

Elsewhere North Korea's negativity is simply self-defeating. Like other east Asian countries, notably Vietnam and China, both Koreas were hit in 2019 by outbreaks of African swine fever (ASF): harmless to humans but fatal to hogs, and highly contagious. Since animals and their ailments are no respecters of human-made barriers like the DMZ—wild boar have been seen swimming across, and storms may have washed infected soil and water downstream from North to South—it is sheer self-interest for the two Koreas to share information and cooperate in fighting ASF. But it is [not happening](#), even though the third Moon-Kim summit in September 2018 included an agreement to work together in such cases. And there is a precedent: back in 2007 the two Koreans cooperated to combat foot and mouth disease.

Pyongyang reported an outbreak of ASF in May. But it has given no details, ignoring Seoul's repeated entreaties and offers to help. In September, the NIS told lawmakers that ASF is now widespread in North Korea, wiping out the pig population in North Pyongan province on the northwestern border with China. That same month the virus spread to South Korea, where so far over 400,000 pigs have been culled, making a stream run [red](#) with blood and pork prices spike. (Much more so in the North, reportedly, where pork is the major source of protein.) While ROK authorities cannot be sure that their ASF originated north of the DMZ, even basic data on its incidence in the DPRK would help them hugely. None has been forthcoming.



Figure 3 A wild boar infected by ASF was found over the DMZ. Photo: Yonhap

## Send Them Back

November saw North Korean human rights in the spotlight for two separate reasons, neither of which reflected well on South Korea. On Nov. 14, the ROK [withdrew](#) from a list of over 40 states which sponsor an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning human rights abuses in the DPRK. This is the first time Seoul has not been a co-sponsor since 2008. It did so, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([MOFA](#)), “in comprehensive consideration of the overall circumstances, such as the current situation on the Korean Peninsula.” But it did support the resolution, which passed the Third Committee without a formal vote.

This withdrawal was condemned as “baffling” by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in an open [letter](#) a month later, on Dec. 16. This was signed by 67 human rights-related NGOs and 10 individuals, who included both the current UN Special Rapporteur on DPRK human rights, Tomás Ojea Quintana, and his predecessor Marzuki Darusman. Accusing the ROK more broadly of “increasing disengagement with (sic) ongoing human rights violations by the ... DPRK,” the letter also cited a separate disquieting incident a week earlier.

On Nov. 7, for the first time ever, South Korea [repatriated](#) two would-be North Korean defectors—squid fishermen, whose boat had entered Southern waters—against their will. Bound and blindfolded, they were handed over at Panmunjom to almost certain death. No one might ever have known, had not a journalist photographed a text message on the phone of a senior Blue House aide. Facing fierce criticism from the opposition as well as human rights groups, the government defended its decision, saying both men were “heinous criminals” who confessed separately to murdering the captain and no fewer than 15 of their fellow crewmen. Even so, critics argued, they should have faced justice in the South, there being none in the North. As it was, they were denied due process: access to lawyers, a court hearing, or any right of appeal. Even if the facts are as officially stated, this leaves a bad taste and sets a worrying precedent.

## Kim's Predictable No-show

A prime example of the oddity of Moon's approach was seen in late November, when he hosted a [summit](#) for leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Busan. Nothing strange about that—except that for

some reason Moon was publicly very keen for Kim Jong Un to attend. For sure, the two Korean leaders should meet again, as Kim mendaciously promised they would a year ago. They have much to discuss. But why would you tack on a fourth North-South summit as a sideshow at some quite different jamboree?

Moreover, this could only ram home to the DPRK leader how much clout the ROK wields thanks to its economic prowess, in a region where, by contrast, Pyongyang's star, never bright, has waned. (Similarly, successive ROK presidents, Moon included, have seen fit to issue lofty vistas of cooperation from Berlin or Dresden, oblivious of how Germany's path to unification—the demise of the GDR—looks when viewed from Pyongyang.) Moon's idea that this would help get Kim some useful introductions was no less crass and patronizing. Kim does not need South Korea's assistance to make a global splash, as his deft diplomacy in 2018 showed.

Needless to say, Kim did not come to Busan. More surprisingly, Pyongyang explained why. An unusually enigmatic KCNA [commentary](#), quite different from its usual bluster, thanked Moon for “politely” and “earnestly” sending a personal letter of invitation to Kim. More embarrassingly, it disclosed that the South had made “full preparations of the highest level including escort and ceremonies” for Kim in Busan, and then frantically asked Pyongyang to send someone else if not Kim. But then the sarcasm kicked in. While “we...fully understand the distress and agony of President Moon Jae-in,” South Korea must realise this was not the right time or place: “We know well enough that the sentiment pervading the land of the south is not clean.” Cue a familiar litany of Seoul's perfidy in Pyongyang's eyes, castigating:

*the impure attempt of the south side to give impression that dialogue is going on between the top leaders of the north and the south although no settlement of the fundamental issues ... is being made, and to insert the north-south issue to the corner of the 'neo-southern policy' masterminded by it. How can the hand-shaking and photo-taking in the complicated international meeting of no great interest to us be compared with the historic moment when the top leaders of the north and the south held their joined hands high up on Mt Paektu, the sacred mountain of the nation.*

There was much more, including a typically wacky metaphor: “If children mulled over piling up eggs on a horn, it can be ascribable to their innocence.” No such excuse is granted to Moon (for [more](#) depth and detail, see my analysis for NK News on Nov. 22).

## 2020 Vision?

At this season it is our practice to look forward to the new year as well as back at the old one. A convenient peg for this is normally Kim Jong Un's New Year address: a custom of his grandfather Kim Il Sung which he restored, replacing the more anonymous Joint Editorial in major newspapers with which his father Kim Jong Il, who disliked speech-making, had used during his own 17-year reign. Appropriately for our purposes, Kim's address almost always has a good deal to say about inter-Korean relations.

This year was different, in two ways. First, Kim did not give a new year address as such. That would have been redundant, since days earlier he had delivered a marathon seven-hour [speech](#) at a big event: the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC) of the ruling Workers Party (WPK). Unusually long—four days, Dec. 28-31—this key meeting signalled both change and continuity. The change, as widely predicted (and doubtless discussed elsewhere in this issue), was Kim's formal abrogation of his two year moratorium on testing nuclear weapons and ICBMs. The continuity—or perhaps one should say, step back to the future—was an unrelenting emphasis on self-reliance and struggle that could have come straight from his grandfather's playbook. Having (for my sins) been reading DPRK rhetoric for half a century, I can testify that whole chunks of this could have been uttered unchanged in the 1960s, '70s, or '80s.

And on South Korea? Nothing. Not a word—except once, almost tangentially. Claiming that his testing moratorium had elicited no corresponding US concessions, Kim complained that:

*the US, far from responding ...with appropriate measures, conducted tens of big and small joint military drills which its president personally promised to stop and threatened [the DPRK] militarily through the shipment of ultra-modern warfare equipment into south Korea.*

That was all. On inter-Korean relations as such, Kim was completely silent. He did not even bother to criticize South Korea or Moon, but simply ignored them. It may be some small consolation that Moon was not the only one treated thus. So fixated was Kim on the US and his new domestic “arduous march” that he omitted the wider international arena entirely. No other country got a mention, including China and Russia, who give Kim valuable support diplomatically. This is quite peculiar, even for a regime as self-centered as the DPRK.

### Keeping the Faith

After a whole year of being cold-shouldered by Kim, Moon appeared unfazed by this latest twist. In a striking asymmetry, his own New Year’s [address](#), delivered on Jan. 7, had much to say about inter-Korean relations. We reproduce the relevant section as an appendix below. Without repeating that here, what is striking is how Moon continues to keep the faith despite all the slings and arrows. Admitting “it is regrettable that we’ve not been able to make further progress in inter-Korean cooperation over the past year,” Moon nonetheless reiterated all his familiar themes: relinking roads and railways, reviving the Kaesong and Mt. Kumgang joint ventures (no mention of the unresolved row about the latter), turning the DMZ into a peace zone, and so on, while renewing his invitation to Kim to visit Seoul.

In a further notable asymmetry, despite all Pyongyang’s attacks and insults, Moon uttered no criticism of North Korea’s behavior, except indirectly: “a show of force and threats are not helpful to anyone.” Remarkably, he also failed to mention denuclearization. While implicitly admitting problems, his solution just seems to be more of the same: “This is the time when—more than ever before—we desperately need faith in peace and national unity.”

Amen, but is this really enough? In some ways, Moon’s stance is admirable. Patently sincere and steadfast, he seems determined to turn the other cheek and keep smiling, no matter what North Korea does. Yet this approach also has three large downsides. First, it is ineffectual. After a whole year in which Pyongyang has consistently rebuffed Seoul in every way and at every turn, it is past time for policy makers to rethink their playbook: it isn’t working. But the second downside is that they deny this. All too often Moon and his administration carry on as if

the peace process launched in 2018 is a work in progress, when patently it is now defunct.

Third, this makes South Korea look weak. If nothing must be allowed to upset the North, that has baleful consequences. These include making light (until recently) of tests of new weapons that directly threaten the ROK; relaxing pressure on the DPRK over its appalling human rights abuses; silence on denuclearization; and so on. But why? No one is impressed: certainly not Kim, but also two other vital constituencies. The ROK’s allies can only wonder what Moon’s true priorities are and how committed he really is to the sanctions that his predecessors urged them to sign up to. (Admittedly, as discussed elsewhere, neither of the two key allies is helping their case: Japan with its sanctions on South Korea—although Moon is not blameless either—and the US under its current mercurial leader, who *inter alia* is seriously undermining the alliance with absurdly large burden-sharing demands for US forces in Korea.)

Above all, what do South Koreans think of Moon and his policies? We shall know on Apr. 15, when the contrast between the two Koreas will be vividly on display. North Korea’s quasi-monarchy will mark the Day of the Sun, Kim Il Sung’s birthday, with its usual ceremonial pomp—and perhaps a big bang of some kind. The same day, South Koreans will get to choose who governs them, voting in four-yearly parliamentary elections. Moon himself still has over two years to serve: his single five-year term (running again is forbidden) ends in May 2022.

That time limit tends to make all ROK presidents lame ducks toward the end: more so if they face a hostile legislature, though the National Assembly wields little real power. So far Moon has lacked a [majority](#), unless his Democrats (DP) ally with other progressive parties to pass legislation. After three years an incumbent government might expect a backlash; but with the rightwing opposition in some [disarray](#), the outcome is as yet hard to call. North Korea is not the main issue, which as everywhere tends to be the economy. Also, South Koreans’ views on the North are complex, conflicted, and various. Many were enthused by 2018’s advances in inter-Korean relations, but the subsequent impasse has not produced a widespread backlash.

That could change. While Moon in his New Year address urged the North to join in marking 20 years since the first ever inter-Korean summit in June 2000—prediction: they won't—that is preceded by a much grimmer 10-year anniversary. On March 26, 2010, the ROK corvette *Cheonan* mysteriously [sank](#) with 46 lives lost, mostly young conscripts who drowned while asleep in their bunks. The DPRK has always denied responsibility, but few believe them. Today, any fresh Pyongyang provocation is likelier to be in the realm of WMD, aimed — in every sense—at Washington. If, however, North Korea were to do anything injurious to the South before April 15, it could seal the election outcome. That would be perverse of Kim, since Moon Jae-in is a patsy for him to deal with compared to the hardliners of the main opposition Liberty Korea Party. An LKP-controlled Parliament would make life difficult for Moon and Kim on all fronts, including “nordpolitik.”

Overall, on the Korean peninsula, as in much of the world, 2020 brings an air of foreboding. No one knows yet what exactly Kim Jong Un will do, nor how Donald Trump might react. (Recent [revelations](#) that in 2017, having belatedly learned how close Seoul lies to the DMZ, Trump bizarrely said (twice) “They have to move,” scarcely inspire confidence.) Whatever happens, and despite Moon's best efforts, South Korea looks likely to remain sidelined if—as must be feared—Kim and Trump square off for a dismaying reprise of 2017's “fire and fury.”

The English edition of the center-right *JoongAng Ilbo*, Seoul's leading daily, reported the president's New Year address under the apt [headline](#): “Moon keeps the faith in engagement of Kim.” If nothing improves, the inevitable question will be: Are faith-based policies enough?

#### **Appendix: Excerpt from President Moon Jae-in's New Year's Address**

Fellow Koreans,

We are now at a time when we must show endurance for the sake of peace on the Korean Peninsula. This is the time when—more than ever before—we desperately need faith in peace and national unity.

For us, peace on the Korean Peninsula is not a matter of choice but the path we must take while overcoming all difficulties.

Following the inauguration of my Administration, expectations and hope for peace have risen as never before. The dark clouds of war that hovered over the Korean Peninsula until 2017 have cleared, and peace has now become a more attainable goal. However, it is regrettable that we've not been able to make further progress in inter-Korean cooperation over the past year.

It is true that as dialogue between North Korea and the United States began in earnest, both the South and North put those talks ahead of everything else. The expectations were that if the talks were successful, the door for inter-Korean cooperation would open up more quickly and broadly. The momentum for North Korea-U.S. dialogue should continue; a show of force and threats are not helpful to anyone. My Administration will also do all it can to promote dialogue between the two sides.

However, there are now concerns that inter-Korean relations themselves could suffer a setback amid the stalemate in the talks between North Korea and the United States. In addition to efforts to promote the success of the dialogue, the need to find realistic ways to further advance inter-Korean cooperation has become all the more urgent.

Internationally coordinated solutions are required to adhere to the three principles for peace on the Korean Peninsula: zero tolerance for war, mutual security guarantees and common prosperity. Still, there are things that can be accomplished through inter-Korean cooperation. I propose that South and North Korea put their heads together and have earnest discussions.

The two Koreas not only share a border but also represent a “community of life” where coexistence is imperative. I also propose that cooperation in the border area be started for the common safety of the 80 million Koreans. I believe that Chairman Kim Jong Un has the same determination.

A joint hosting of the 2032 Summer Olympics will serve as a golden opportunity to show to the world that the two Koreas consist of one nation and to make a leap forward together. It is an agreement between the leaders of the two Koreas as well as a promise to the international

community as our intention to co-host has already been forwarded to the IOC.

I hope that we will be able to come together through continuous sports exchanges so that a joint hosting will be realized without fail. I am looking forward to talented North Korean athletes participating in the 1st East Asian Weightlifting Championships and ITTF 2020 World Team Table Tennis Championships, both of which will take place in South Korea this year. We should also continue consultations over athletes from both Koreas marching in together at the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo and the formation of a single unified team.

If South and North Korea identify realistic ways to implement projects to reconnect inter-Korean railroads and roads, it will not only lead to international cooperation but also provide a big boost to the resumption of inter-Korean tourism and the revitalization of North Korea's tourism.

The idea of transforming the Demilitarized Zone into an international peace zone was proposed in a bid to guarantee mutual security for the two Koreas, both institutionally and realistically, and to gain international support. The two Koreas have already jointly registered ssireum on the representative list of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The DMZ's value is enormous and relates to ecology, history, peace and reconciliation between the South and North. Jointly registering the DMZ on the list of UNESCO World Heritage is something we can start right away. I am looking forward to a positive response from North Korea.

The path we intend to follow through peace is ultimately a peace-driven economy. The peace economy will usher in an era where division no longer acts as an obstacle to peace and prosperity so that both Koreas as well as neighboring countries can thrive together.

I am willing to meet time and again and constantly engage in dialogue. Efforts to resume operation of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex and Geumgangsán tourism will also continue. Looking back upon the agreements that were not kept last year and reflecting on the reasons for the people's expectations not being met, we will continue to move forward by taking one step or even a half of one step.

This meaningful year marks the 20th anniversary of the June 15 South-North Joint Declaration. I hope that the two Koreas will work together so that conditions for Chairman Kim Jong Un's reciprocal visit to the South can be put in place as soon as possible in addition to the hosting of joint events to solidify our commitment to peaceful reunification.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER – DECEMBER 2019

**Sept. 4, 2019:** The left-leaning International Association of Democratic Lawyers ([IADL](#)) [claims](#) that 12 North Korean waitresses who defected en masse to the South from China in 2016 were in effect abducted. Visiting both Koreas, the IADL's investigative team received full assistance from the DPRK; but ROK authorities refused co-operation, so they did not actually meet the women. IADL's full [report](#) is later published on Sept. 30.

**Sept. 5, 2019:** Ahead of the first anniversary of the opening of a permanent inter-Korean liaison office at Kaesong on Sept. 14, the ROK Ministry of Unification (MOU) [confirms](#) that once again the two sides' co-heads will skip their supposedly weekly meeting. They have not met since the second US-DPRK summit in Hanoi in February.

**Sept. 5, 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?”

**Sept. 6, 2019:** Under the headline “KCNA Commentary Urges S. [sic] Korean Military Warmongers to Behave Themselves,” the official DPRK news agency [savages](#) the ROK's deployment of two further F-35A fighter jets as allegedly part of a military build-up for a pre-emptive attack. It adds: “They generate a handshake of peace in public but behind the scene, grind a sword for confrontation and war. This is an unpardonable act of perfidy.”

**Sept. 6, 2019:** MOU now [says](#) that the 50,000 tons of rice which South Korea offered in June as food aid to the North via the UN World Food Program (WFP) is unlikely to be delivered this month as planned, since it remains unclear whether Pyongyang will accept it. (See also Aug. 23 in the previous issue of *Comparative Connections*, and below.)

**Sept. 10, 2019:** Hours after First Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui expressed readiness to resume denuclearization talks with the US, North Korea [test-fires](#) what South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) call two “short-range projectiles.” Launched from Kaechon, 80 km north of Pyongyang, these fly east for 330 km across the peninsula at a maximum altitude of 50–60 km, presumably landing in the East Sea. This is the tenth such launch this year. In response, the ROK holds an emergency National Security Council (NSC) meeting.

**Sept. 10, 2019:** Reuters [reports](#) that the ROK National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) found no foul play in the 2016 defection of 12 DPRK waitresses, contrary to claims that they were abducted (see Sept. 4). The agency was shown relevant NHRC documents, but was told that the full report is unlikely to be published.

**Sept. 11, 2019:** KCNA [describes](#) the weapons system tested yesterday as being a “super-large multiple rocket launcher.” Kim Jong Un again oversees the launch, as he did the first time on Aug. 24, and says its capabilities have been “finally verified in terms of combat operation.”

**Sept. 12, 2019:** In a pep talk to ROK army frontline troops just before the Chuseok (harvest festival) holiday, Minister of National Defense (MND) Jeong Kyeong-doo [calls](#) for “vigilance and intense drills to keep peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

**Sept. 13, 2019:** ROK President Moon Jae-in—himself born to Northern parents—[says](#) that he regrets “slow progress” in implementing last year's agreement to hold regular inter-Korean family reunions. Yet he is oddly even-handed: “It's wrong that governments in both the South and North have not given them even a chance for such a long time.” In fact only one of the two Korean governments—not the one he heads—is currently blocking such contacts.

**Sept. 13, 2019:** The same day, Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [tells](#) a group of families with relatives in the North that family reunions will be Seoul's top priority if inter-Korean dialogue resumes. The group has met annually for Chuseok at Imjingak, a park close to the DMZ, since 1970. A year ago the two Koreas agreed to set up a permanent family reunion center, promote video reunions and allow the exchange of letters. None of this has happened.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** MOU [says](#) Seoul is trying to talk to Pyongyang about two upcoming sports fixtures upcoming there: a soccer World Cup qualifier on Oct. 15—the two Koreas have been drawn against each other—and an international junior weightlifting event (Oct. 20–27). North Korea has not yet invited the South to the latter, and has not replied regarding the former.

**Sept. 16, 2019:** Speaking at a seminar in Seoul for the first anniversary of the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), and days after North Korea's latest missile test (see Sept. 11), Defense Minister Jeong Kyeong-doo [insists](#) that the CMA in no way renders South Korea vulnerable. On the contrary, “the Sept. 19 agreement can be successfully implemented only based upon our military's strong power and water-tight readiness posture.”

**Sept. 18, 2019:** [Meari](#), a Korean-language DPRK website for external audiences, [renews](#) the demand that 12 former restaurant workers in China who defected in 2016 be repatriated. It cites the recent findings of the IADL enquiry (see Sept. 4 and Sept. 10, above).

**Sept. 18, 2019:** MOU [says](#) South Korea has notified North Korea of two more confirmed cases of African swine fever (ASF) at farms near the DMZ, stressing the need for quarantine cooperation, Pyongyang, which reported its own first ASF case in May, has not replied.

**Sept. 18, 2019:** Contra media [claims](#) that North Korea has deployed MLRs or other weapons systems on Hambak—an islet in the West (Yellow) Sea only 20 km from South Korea's much larger Ganghwa island—the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [insists](#) that “not a single attack weapon exists on the island.” Some ROK maps erroneously [give](#) Hambak as ROK territory; MND says this will be corrected.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it is “reviewing a comprehensive plan on the peaceful use of the DMZ.” This will include President Moon's idea, put to the UN General Assembly yesterday, to transform it into a peace zone by opening international offices there, including the UN's. However the ministry says it is too early to discuss such schemes with North Korea.

**Sept. 25, 2019:** Pyongyang's propaganda website Meari [slams](#) Seoul for expressing the hope that a US–DPRK meeting would improve inter-Korean relations, calling this “an abominable behavior of subordination to an outside force.”

**Sept. 30, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it expects the ROK flag (*Taegukgi*) to fly in Pyongyang on Oct. 15 as international norms dictate, when the two Koreas play a FIFA World Cup soccer qualifying match. North Korea is still ignoring the South's efforts to make concrete arrangements, including its [request](#) to send a cheering squad.

**Oct. 2, 2019:** *Rodong Sinmun*, the DPRK's leading paper and organ of its ruling Workers' Party (WPK), [says](#): “The South Korean authorities have been passing the buck for the current stalemate in the North–South relations.” It accuses Seoul of “betrayal behaviors” and “very impure words and actions that reverse black and white.”

**Oct. 7, 2019:** With the inter-Korean soccer derby in Pyongyang barely a week away, and North Korea still refusing to discuss whether Southern fans can attend, MOU [admits](#) that the prospects for this happening “appear to be not easy from a physical perspective.”

**Oct. 8, 2019:** The DPRK website Uriminzokkiri [attacks](#) “south Korea's leader on a US tour” (it does not name Moon Jae-in) for “behav[ing] indecently in a servile attitude” by yielding to Washington's “coercion” to buy more US-made arms.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** MOU [calls](#) it “disappointing” that North Korea is still blanking the South's urgent and repeated requests to discuss issues like sending fans and live broadcasting of the inter-Korean soccer match, now imminent. Some might have used stronger language.

**Oct. 11, 2019:** ROK military helicopters [spray](#) disinfectant over the DMZ, after a wild boar infected by ASF was found dead there. Seoul first duly consulted the UN Command and also notified Pyongyang, which still refuses to co-operate in combating this shared epidemic.

**Oct. 14, 2019:** South Korea's three major terrestrial TV networks—KBS, MBC and SBS—[say](#) that tomorrow's inter-Korean soccer match will not be broadcast live, as arrangements “fell apart.” North Korea has still not replied to the South's request to send a cheering squad, tantamount to refusal.

**Oct. 15, 2019:** The inter-Korean Group H World Cup qualifier takes place in a virtually empty Kim Il Sung Stadium in Pyongyang. North Korea, which refused to admit South Korean fans, gave no advance warning that there would be no spectators at all. Headlined as a “chippy” game by Yonhap—four yellow cards, two each—this ends in a scoreless draw. In the absence of live broadcasting, the Swedish Ambassador [provides](#) glimpses and commentary on [Twitter](#).

**Oct. 15, 2019:** MOU [says](#) North Korea has promised to provide a DVD of the inter-Korean soccer match before the Southern team leaves tomorrow. It duly does so, but the video quality is so poor that KBS decides not to air it.

**Oct. 15, 2019:** MOU [says](#) the DPRK has officially invited the ROK to the 2019 Asian Youth & Junior Weightlifting Championships, an Olympic qualifying event upcoming in Pyongyang on Oct. 20-27. The 65-strong South Korean contingent will include two journalists.

**Oct. 18, 2019:** The ROK's Korea Football Association (KFA) [says](#) it has asked the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) to consider punishing North Korea for its uncooperativeness, in breach of AFC rules, regarding arrangements for Oct.16's inter-Korean soccer match.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** The militant defector group Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK) [says](#) it sent 500,000 leaflets across the DMZ by balloon on Oct. 20, criticising the DPRK for holding the inter-Korean soccer match behind closed doors. The cargo also included 2,000 one-dollar bills, 1,000 USB drives and 500 booklets. The Moon government disapproves of such antics.

**Oct. 21, 2019:** North Korea [denies](#) still holding South Koreans from an aircraft hijacking in 1969, calling this charge a “stereotyped anti-DPRK political plot pursued by hostile forces.” Pyongyang insists that the 11 (out of 50) who were not returned chose to stay in the North. It further claims that nobody in North Korea has been “forcibly detained against his or her will.”

**Oct. 22, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it will permit South Korean municipal authorities to pursue their own aid projects with the North, rather than them having to partner with NGOs as currently.

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Two North Korean websites, Meari and Uriminzokkiri, [attack](#) various South Korean plans to conduct missile tests and develop new weapons: “Reckless military schemes will not go unnoticed. (We) will make them regret to the backbone” (sic).

**Oct. 22, 2019:** Yonhap [reports](#) that according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) data, South Korea is North Korea's largest aid donor this year, giving \$9 million to WFP. This is almost 30 percent of the total donations of \$30.55 million.

**Oct. 23, 2019:** KCNA [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un has inspected Mount Kumgang: presumably on Oct. 22. This is his first known visit. Criticising the mothballed resort's South Korean-built facilities as shabby and unpleasant-looking, he orders their removal, by “agreement with the relevant unit of the south side.” In a major policy U-turn, he insists that Kumgangsan is “our [the DPRK's] famous mountain” rather than “a common property of the north and the south.”

**Oct. 25, 2019:** After hearing nothing for two days, MOU [says](#) North Korea has notified it of Kim's order on Mt. Kumgang, and proposes to discuss this by exchanging documents.

**Oct. 27, 2019:** Jeju provincial government [announces](#) another inter-Korean soccer match. The two Koreas have been drawn in the same group, with Vietnam and Myanmar, for the third round of the Asian qualifiers for women's soccer for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. All matches will take place on the ROK island during Feb. 3-9, 2020.

**Oct. 28, 2019:** Following North Korea's demand that the South remove all its facilities from the Mount Kumgang resort, Seoul [offers](#) to hold talks about the future of tourism there.

**Oct. 29, 2019:** South Korea [adds](#) that it is prepared to discuss the safety of individual tourists to Mount Kumgang with the North. (This is an olive branch: individual, as opposed to group tourism would not breach sanctions). Rebuffing Seoul's offer of talks, Pyongyang perversely [insists](#) that the issue be dealt with by exchanging documents rather than meeting face to face.

**Oct. 30, 2019:** MOU [reiterates](#) that a face to face meeting is needed to discuss Kumgangs.

**Oct. 31, 2019:** The Blue House (Cheong Wa Dae, the ROK presidential office cum residence) [announces](#) that Kim Jong Un sent condolences for the death on Oct. 29 of President Moon Jae-in's 92 year old mother, Kang Han-ok, who fled North Korea during the Korean War. Kim's message was delivered via Panmunjom.

**Nov. 6, 2019:** MOU [discloses](#) that 828 North Koreans defected to the South in 2019 so far (January-October), suggesting the full-year figure will be close to 2018's 1,137. Numbers have fallen since Kim Jong Un took power. The cumulative total is not large, around 32,000.

**Nov. 7, 2019:** MOU [admits](#) that for the first time, South Korea repatriated would-be Northern defectors against their will. Two squid fishermen in their 20s were handed over at Panmunjom, five days after the ROK Navy seized their boat in the East Sea following a two-day chase. On Seoul's account, both men confessed in separate interrogations to killing their captain and 15 crew members. The ROK therefore treated them as "heinous criminals" fleeing justice. It had no plan to disclose any of this; only a journalist's [vigilance](#) brought it to light.

**Nov. 8, 2019:** After yesterday's deportations, South Korea also [returns](#) their fishing boat to North Korea. The 15-meter, 20-ton vessel was handed over at the East Sea maritime border.

**Nov. 11, 2019:** Twenty ROK human rights groups [condemn](#) the Nov. 7 deportations, calling it a "shameful decision" that violated due process and the suspects' right to justice. MOU [refutes](#) such criticisms. It does not comment on media reports that the decision to deport came from the Blue House National Security Office, without consulting either the NIS or MOU.

**Nov. 11, 2019:** DPRK media [lambast](#) the US and ROK over their burden-sharing talks. Washington wants to quintuple the amount Seoul pays to host US forces in Korea (USFK). *DPRK Today* calls the US "a shameless robber group bent on extorting an astronomical amount of taxpayers' money from south Korea ... It is stupid that South Korean authorities are ready to give all it has, while lauding such a robber as a savior and blood ally."

**Nov. 11, 2019:** Though not publicized until Nov. 15, Pyongyang sends Seoul an [ultimatum](#) (their word) threatening to "unilaterally [pull] down" Southern facilities at Mt. Kumgang unless the South removes them on the North's terms.

**Nov. 12, 2019:** The New York-based NGO Human Rights Watch [condemns](#) the ROK's Nov. 7 deportations as "illegal under international law."

**Nov. 12, 2019:** Seoul Metropolitan Government becomes the first local authority permitted (by South Korea) to independently pursue aid projects in North Korea. Whether the DPRK will allow this is another question. On Nov. 21, MOU [extends](#) the same permission to Incheon city and Gyeonggi province, which abut and surround Seoul respectively.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** For the first time in a decade, the ROK is not among some 40 states that [sponsor](#) an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning human rights abuses in the DPRK. It does however support the resolution, which is passed without a formal vote.

**Nov. 14, 2019:** ROK Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [meets](#) Hyun Jeong-un, chairperson of Hyundai Group. They discuss how to resolve the Mt. Kumgang issue.

**Nov. 15, 2019:** KCNA and other DPRK media carry an [article](#) headlined: “Mt. Kumgang Is Not Common Property of North and South.” Uncompromising in content and sneering in tone, it reiterates the threat “to demolish without trace the south side's facilities that sprawled out only to mar the beautiful scenery.” It concludes: “There is no room for south Korea to find its place there [at Kumgangsan].”

**Nov. 15, 2019:** Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [says](#) it is in touch with the ROK government regarding the Nov. 7 repatriation of two DPRK would-be defectors. OHCHR clarifies that this is not a formal investigation. The same day, MOU [insists](#) there is no doubt that the two deportees were murderers. Each separately admitted their crimes, while DPRK authorities corroborated the broad picture.

**Nov. 18, 2019:** 21 years to the day after Hyundai Asan launched South Korean tourism to Mt. Kumgang, Seoul [urges](#) Pyongyang to come to the table and hold talks on the future of the resort, rather than issue ultimatums while insisting on communicating only via documents.

**Nov. 21, 2019:** Pyongyang politely, if also sarcastically, [declines](#) Moon Jae-in's invitation for Kim to attend the upcoming ROK-ASEAN summit in Busan. A KCNA commentary says that such a visit would be inappropriate, giving several cogent reasons.

**Nov. 25, 2019:** MND [says](#) that North Korea conducted artillery firing drills on Changrin, an islet just north of the NLL, in violation of 2018s inter-Korean military agreement. The same day KCNA [reports](#) an inspection visit to Changrin by Kim, including an order to fire. Contra some press reports, neither side states exactly when this happened (but see next item).

**Nov. 26, 2019:** The ROK uses the inter-Korean military hotline to [make](#) a “strong complaint” about the KPA's recent coastal artillery drill, whose date it now gives as Nov. 23, the ninth anniversary of the DPRK's shelling of nearby Yeonpyeong, which killed four South Koreans.

**Nov. 26, 2019:** MOU [says](#) the two Koreas remain “far apart” on the Mt. Kumgang issue.

**Nov. 27, 2019:** A propos Kumgangsan, the DPRK propaganda website *Uriminzokkiri* [says](#) “It is our unwavering will to remove all the South's unpleasant-looking facilities that have been spoiling the landscape of this famous mountain and turn it into a ... modern international cultural, tourist zone.” Other DPRK media carry similar articles.

**Nov. 27, 2019:** MOU [says](#) South Korea is closely watching developments at Jangjon on the DPRK's east coast. Previously a military port, from 1998 it became the main harbor used by ROK ships bringing tourists to Mt. Kumgang. A Seoul newspaper claims it is now reverting to a naval base. That would dash hopes of resuming Kumgangsan tourism as a joint venture.

**Nov. 30, 2019:** ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) it will build a memorial for the fallen near Arrowhead Ridge in the DMZ—the site of a major Korea War battle—in Cheorwon, 90 km northeast of Seoul. South Korea recently completed an eight-month dig in the area, retrieving 2,030 pieces of bones from 260 soldiers on both sides. They also removed over 450 land mines, some 5,700 unexploded shells and 35 tons of scrap iron. This was meant to be a joint endeavor, but North Korea pulled out.

**Dec. 2, 2019:** ROK Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [admits](#) that some facilities at Mount Kumgang need repair, and that about 340 containers lie abandoned there. He neither confirms nor denies a media [report](#) that Seoul has accepted Pyongyang's demand to remove such items.

**Dec. 4, 2019:** Park Won-soon, mayor of Seoul and a political ally of Moon Jae-in, [tells](#) the inaugural Seoul Peace Conference that “the most important task in establishing reconciliation and integration in Northeast Asia is to realize a 'peace community,' and the Seoul-Pyongyang co-hosting of the 2032 Olympics will provide a precious opportunity to accomplish the goal.” Meanwhile in the real world, North Korea is refusing to discuss fielding some joint teams—as it had earlier agreed to do—with the South at the Tokyo Olympics, now just months away.

**Dec. 6, 2019:** MOU [announces](#) that South Korea will donate \$5 million to the World Health Organization (WHO), to improve healthcare for mothers and babies in North Korea. Seoul had supported this project until 2014, when it was suspended as inter-Korean ties worsened.

**Dec. 10, 2019:** MOU [says](#) it expects WHO to launch an ROK-aided program in the DPRK (see Dec. 6 above) as early as this year.

**Dec. 12, 2019:** MOU [announces](#) that despite the current North-South stalemate, the budget of its Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund (IKCF) will increase by 9 percent next year to 1.2 billion won (\$1 billion). That includes 489 billion won for economic projects and 127.5 billion won for co-operation in forestry. The ministry says this allocation reflects “our will to improve relations”: a quasi-admission that these funds may not actually get spent any time soon.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Citing “government sources,” Yonhap [reports](#) that Seoul is preparing to assist the North in fighting swine fever—despite the North’s non-reply to its several offers of help. MOU’s preparations include calling a meeting with civilian experts and NGOs.

**Dec. 13, 2019:** Hours before the deadline, the KFA [says](#) it is withdrawing its bid to host the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup in soccer. Urged on by FIFA’s President, Gianni Infantino, the two Koreas had planned a joint bid, but the freeze in North-South ties has thwarted this.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Human Rights Watch (HRW) publishes a [letter](#) to President Moon Jae-in from 67 human rights-related NGOs, criticising the ROK for “increasing disengagement with (sic) ongoing human rights violations by the...DPRK.” This cites the Nov. 7 repatriation of two would-be defectors, as well as Seoul’s “baffl[ing]” decision a week later not to sponsor the annual UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on North Korea’s human rights situation. The letter is also signed by ten individuals, including both the current UN Special [Rapporteur](#) on DPRK human rights, Tomás Ojea Quintana, and his predecessor Marzuki Darusman.

**Dec. 16, 2019:** Reuters [reports](#) that China and Russia have circulated a joint draft resolution to the UN Security Council (UNSC) proposing relaxation of a range of sanctions against the DPRK, including exemptions for inter-Korean rail and road co-operation projects.

**Dec. 17, 2019:** MOU [says](#) the ROK will continue to try to give the DPRK 50,000 tons of rice via the UN World Food Program (WFP), despite Pyongyang’s repeated rejection of this plan (first mooted in June). The budget for this, almost \$35 million, will be rolled over to 2020.

**Dec. 18, 2019:** A propos moves to ease some sanctions on North Korea (see Dec. 16 above), MOU [emphasises](#) that “the inter-Korean railway connection project is ... a non-commercial public infrastructure project.” However, Seoul does not formally endorse the proposal by Beijing and Seoul as such.

**Dec. 19, 2019:** ROK Vice Unification Minister [Suh Ho visits](#) the inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong, to be briefed on the past year’s work and plans for 2020. That will not have taken long, for the office is practically idle. Suh has not met with his DPRK counterpart and co-head since the US-DPRK summit in Hanoi collapsed in February.

**Dec. 20, 2019:** MOU [rejects](#) as “fake news” claims by a defector body in Seoul that the two Northern fishermen repatriated last month (see Nov. 7) were not murderers, as the ROK government claimed, but brokers who tried to help their 16 fellow crew members defect.

**Dec. 23, 2019:** South Korea’s inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Promotion Council (IKECPC) [approves](#) aid worth 2 billion won (\$1.72 million), to be sent via the Red Cross to assist North Korean villages hit by typhoons earlier this year. Yonhap admits it is unclear whether or not Pyongyang will accept Seoul’s assistance.

**Dec. 25, 2019:** In melancholy Christmas news, Yonhap [tallies](#) statistics on South Koreans who registered with MOU and the ROK Red Cross in the hope of meeting their relatives in North Korea. Of 133,365 who signed up since 1988, only 52,997 were still alive at end-November. With 63.4 percent of the survivors aged 80 or more, this attrition by mortality will continue.

**Dec. 25, 2019:** An online poll by Seoul Metropolitan Government [finds](#) that 74.2 percent of residents of the ROK capital (in a sample of 2,000) believe that the two Koreas should be reunified. That percentage is the same as last year. But 17 percent also reckon reunification is impossible; whereas 25.6 percent anticipate it in 20 years, while 20.2 percent say 30 years. On inter-Korean ties, a perhaps surprising 39.5 percent expect relations to improve in the next five years; 12.4 percent say they will worsen, while most (48.2 percent) expect no change.

**Dec. 27, 2019:** ROK Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul [calls](#) on the US and DPRK to first pursue “an interim deal as a stepping stone to a final agreement,” in order to keep nuclear dialogue alive.

**Dec. 28-31, 2019:** North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) holds a major [meeting](#): the 5th Plenary of the 7th Central Committee (CC). Kim Jong Un gives a wide-ranging and hard-line speech, lasting seven hours. (In view of this, Kim does not deliver his customary New Year address.) Personnel changes are announced, while others apparently go [unannounced](#).

**Dec. 31, 2019:** MOU [says](#) that with official North-South ties deadlocked, it will encourage members of separated families to pursue private contacts with their Northern kin. This includes offering government financial support for meetings in third countries.