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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

THE SOUND OF ONE HAND GIVING

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As in 2019–20, inter-Korean ties remained frozen, other than a rare lawsuit. Revelations that in 2018 Moon Jae-in’s government had pondered building the North a nuclear power plant caused a brief furor. Seoul’s propaganda balloon ban backfired, prompting widespread criticism—but no thanks from Pyongyang, which was also unimpressed by scaled-down US-ROK war games. North Korea tested its first ballistic missile in nearly a year, amid concerns of a new arms race; some analysts deemed the South culpable, too. Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong fired four verbal volleys, mostly insults. Another undetected defector highlighted failings in ROK border security. MOU Lee In-young was ubiquitous and loquacious, but scattergun in the causes he championed. Moon’s government remained reticent, or worse, regarding DPRK human rights abuses. With just a year left in office, and notwithstanding rare criticism of the North by ministers, Moon was expected to double down on engagement despite Pyongyang’s lack of reciprocity.

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Introduction

If the first four months of this year are any guide, and they probably are, 2021 is set to be another empty year in inter-Korean relations—like 2020 and 2019 before it, as chronicled exhaustively (and exhaustingly?) in the last half-dozen issues of *Comparative Connections*. Nonetheless, now as then a lot is happening and there is much to say. For while North Korea ignores or insults the South at every opportunity, President Moon Jae-in and his government mostly carry on as if it were still 2018, with a peace process on peninsula at some level still extant. None more so than the indefatigable minister of Unification (MOU), Lee In-young, they keep blowing on the embers of a fire which, in reality, went out more than two years ago.

The year began with both Korean leaders stating their positions plainly—just in time for the previous issue of this journal, which carried both statements. What was, and remains, a puzzle is that the Ministry of Unification (also MOU) somehow professed to find hope in Kim Jong Un's stance—even though he could not have been clearer in his rebuff, and the reasons for it. And thus it continued, as illustrated below. To adapt the Zen paradox, the inter-Korean situation currently might be likened to the sound of one hand giving—or trying to give, but actually outstretched alone in a void, eliciting not the slightest reciprocity.



Figure 1 A photo released by North Korean state media in February 2021 shows Kim Jong Un. Photo: KCNA via Reuters

Did Moon Plan a Nuclear Power Plant in the North?

For a week or so in late January, politics in Seoul was roiled by [allegations](#) that in 2018 the Moon government laid plans to build the North a

nuclear power plant. The truth is murky and remains contested, though the fuss quickly died down. This arose as a spinoff from another scandal concerning an ROK nuclear plant, shut ahead of schedule, whose economic viability was said to have been understated as Moon wished to phase out nuclear power. Ahead of an inquiry by the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI), some officials of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) slipped into their building at night and deleted 530 computer files. But a local broadcaster obtained a list of them, which includes 17 apparently about the Northern plan. Dating from May 2018, between the first and second Moon-Kim summits that year, these were stored in a folder named *pohjois*—which means North in Finnish.

A “shocking act benefiting the enemy,” thundered the conservative main opposition, whose latest name—they changed it four times in as many years—is the People Power Party (PPP). Such criticism was “intolerable,” retorted Moon’s ruling Democrats. All this now looks like a storm in a cooling rod. On Feb. 1 MOTIE published some restored files, which show that the idea was indeed raised, including a comparison of three different sites. Yet it was noted—how could it not be?—that the “uncertainties are extremely high,” given North Korea’s nuclear weapons activities. So this was wholly hypothetical: just one among many kites being flown at that heady moment when it seemed that full-scale North-South cooperation might take off.

There was no secret plan. Then again, it is not known what exactly was in the USB memory stick of potential joint economic projects that Moon gave to Kim in 2018.

Contrasting Ministries; Chicken and Egg

Among the institutions of the ROK government, for two ministries the DPRK is central: MOU and the Ministry of National Defence (MND). Both published weighty White Papers during this period (only in Korean, so far). Their remits are obviously different, and arguably conflicting. MOU’s Work Plan for 2021, issued on Jan. 21 and available in [English](#), gives the flavor. Full of lofty ideas for cooperation, it entirely fails to address the awkward fact that Pyongyang is not interested—which means it is not so much a plan as wishful thinking.

Such daydreaming is not a luxury the military can afford. A dovish president like Moon may insist that North Korea is no longer formally tagged as an enemy. But he can hardly prevent MND researchers from tallying the DPRK's burgeoning arsenal and the threat it poses.

Or does that beg the question? Western analysis tends to assume DPRK original sin: North Korea threatens, so South Korea must defend itself. That may be true in a broad sense, but there is also a risk of chicken and egg—and things may look different from Pyongyang. The argument that in fact the causality is to some degree the other way round has been made twice recently. As Sangsoo Lee [put it](#): “South Korea’s significant improvements in its conventional force capabilities have driven North Korea to advance its strategic weapons and nuclear capability.” Ian Bowers and Henrik Hiim argued on similar lines, both in [brief](#) and at [length](#). Unsurprisingly, two senior ROK officers, Maj. Manseok Lee and Col. Dr. Hyeongpil Ham, weighed in to [rebut](#) that interpretation. They insist that, on the contrary, “South Korea’s conventional capabilities actually strengthen stability on the Korean Peninsula.”

Either way, two points deserve emphasis. First, there is a worrying risk of a new inter-Korean [arms race](#). Second, less noticed, Moon Jae-in’s talk and walk differ. The ludicrous canard that Moon is Pyongyang’s tool or dupe, loudly peddled on Seoul’s streets by ultra-rightists, is belied by soaring defense spending on his watch. His predecessor Park Geun-hye (president 2013–17) oversaw average yearly increases in the defense budget of 4.1%; under Moon that has risen to 7%. While seeking peace, Moon has by no means neglected deterrence.



Figure 2 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaking at the Eighth WPK Party Congress. Photo: AFP/The Straits Times

In Pyongyang they might put it differently. And they do. In his big speech to the Eighth WPK Party Congress in January, Kim Jong Un, in quite precise and moderate language, sought:

... an explanation for the chief executive [Moon]’s personal remarks that south Korea should accelerate its efforts for securing and developing latest military assets, that it would develop ballistic and cruise missiles with more precision and power and longer range than the existing ones, and that it had already developed ballistic missiles with the world’s heaviest warhead. [The south Korean authorities] should also provide a convincing explanation for the purpose and motive in their continued introduction of cutting-edge offensive equipment.

Double Standards?

On March 30, after the DPRK’s first missile test in nearly a year, Kim’s sister Kim Yo Jong took up this theme. She dug out some gushing comments by Moon when he watched a missile launch last July: “I felt really reassured to see the ultra-modern strategic weapons equipped with ... powerful destructive power.” Then she spoilt it by calling him a parrot. Sauce for the goose would have been a more appropriate avian metaphor. As she put it, sarcastically:

[So] the test-firing of ballistic missiles conducted by the Defence Science Institute of south Korea is for peace and dialogue in the Korean peninsula, but that conducted by the Academy of Defence Science of the DPRK is something undesirable that arouses serious concern among the people in the south and chills the atmosphere for dialogue.

She has a point. Sangsoo Kim looks on the bright side, reckoning that Pyongyang’s fear of Seoul’s military buildup might make it amenable to arms control talks. We shall see.

If North Korea has genuine concerns regarding the South’s missile development, by contrast its stale strictures against US-ROK joint exercises fail the John McEnroe test: they cannot be serious. In reality, since 2018 Pyongyang has gained a big win here. Thanks to Donald Trump and then COVID-19, the huge and arguably

threatening war games of yesteryear, *Team Spirit* and *Foal Eagle*, are no more. Yet the North shows no appreciation of this significant scaling down. This year's spring Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) exercise, held in March, was wholly desk-and computer-based, with no outdoor drills at all. Despite this, Kim Yo Jong – busy this year, with four separate comments in as many months—went into full attack mode, saying scale is not the issue: “we are not taken in by their nonsense coating mad dog with sheepskin.” But the KPA too has exercises, as all armies must. This maximalist demand for South Korea to stage no maneuvers whatsoever is tantamount to saying the North has no serious interest in dialogue—which we knew already.

Swimming to Freedom, Undetected

South Korea may boast cutting-edge missiles, but in more mundane security it has problems. For the third time in as many issues of this journal, a defector has demonstrated that crossing the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), while not for the faint-hearted, can be easier than it should be.



Figure 3 South Korean soldiers patrolling the demilitarized zone, where a North Korean gymnast was allegedly able to defect undetected in April. Photo: Ed Jones/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

We covered the two earlier incidents at the time. The first involved a redefector, from South to North (it does happen, though not often). A certain Kim, who was facing rape charges, cut fences, crawled through a culvert, and swam across the Han river to get home to Kaesong—which a paranoid Kim Jong Un promptly put into lockdown, for fear he had brought in the coronavirus (he hadn't). In 2017 Kim had reached Seoul by the very same route.

Then in November a North Korean presented himself to ROK troops unaware of his presence, heat sensors having failed. A pro gymnast, he had cleared two 10-foot barbed-wire fences.

The latest arrival, who showed up on the east coast in February, came by sea. Not in a boat, but swimming for six hours in diving suit and flippers. He too was undetected at first, though this time the fault was human rather than technical: military CCTV caught him 10 times, but the first eight went unnoticed. He had also crawled through a drain which the military did not even have a record of. The major-general in charge of eastern border security was dismissed.

In all three cases, ROK media waxed [indignant](#) at the security lapses. They have a point, yet there may also be an element of re-fighting the last war here. For sure the DPRK remains a potent threat, but its form has changed. Rather than tanks rolling South as in 1950, the main menace now is missiles. Still, if a defector can sneak in undetected, then so might armed infiltrators. But that too seems rather last-century: the last big cases, both involving submarines, were in [1996](#) and [1998](#). Alternative modes of entry exist: two agents [caught](#) in 2010, tasked with killing the high-level defector Hwang Jang-yop, had posed as defectors and flown in from Thailand. Nowadays, KPA saboteurs are likelier to sit safely at computers in the North, wreaking cyber-harm. But no doubt vigilance at the border remains essential.

Banning Balloons Backfires

One issue that bubbled away throughout the period was the Moon government's decision to ban the launching of propaganda balloons into North Korea across the DMZ. Passed into law in December and effective from March 30, this was attacked on free speech grounds. Critics included not only the activist groups affected, and their mostly conservative political allies in Seoul and Washington, but also more neutral observers such as Human Rights Watch.

Embarrassingly for Seoul, the UN Special Rapporteur for DPRK human rights, Tomas Ojea Quintana, voiced concern about the ban in his latest report issued on March 1, ahead of that month's UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva—where the ROK declined to sponsor the annual resolution criticizing Pyongyang. In an odd twist, *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, quoted MOU as denying that Quintana

specifically criticized the leaflet ban. But he most certainly did. Here is the paragraph in question (full links are in the Chronology):

32. The Special Rapporteur engaged with the Government of the Republic of Korea on its decision to conduct business inspections of civil society organizations and the revision of the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act. The revision to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act prohibited the flying of balloons and leaflets, broadcasting by loudspeakers and installation of visual materials along the military demarcation line, punishing these with possible imprisonment to up to three years. The Special Rapporteur expressed concern that the revised law limits many activities of escapees and civil society organizations, and such limits may not comply with international human rights law, and recommended a review of the legislation.

Also notable was who did *not* comment. Pyongyang uttered not a word of acknowledgment, much less gratitude. Kim Jong Un did not deign to mention Moon’s efforts in his Congress speech in January. By contrast his sister weighed in fiercely when, as was inevitable, the ban was defied equally inevitably by Park Sang-hak of Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), the most militant—and [controversial](#)—balloon sender. Though media reports queried whether Park’s latest leaflets, launched in late April, ever reached the North given wind conditions, Kim Yo Jong not only slammed this “intolerable provocation” but blamed “the south Korean authorities,” who she said “winked at the reckless acts ... giving silent approval to the human scum’s wild moves ...” She must know that is unfair, and will doubtless be unmoved that police swiftly raided Park’s premises. With Pyongyang resolutely unimpressed by Seoul’s efforts on the leafletting issue, one might ask whether such appeasement—and the backlash it caused—was wise or worthwhile. Even if Moon does not mull this, his successor as president a year hence surely will, at least if the right regains the Blue House, a prospect looking less remote since the PPP’s sweeping [victories](#) in mayoral by-elections in Seoul and Busan on April 7.



Figure 4 Park Sang-hak, leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea holds a leaflet criticizing North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Photo: Yonhap

MOU Lee: Energy—but Efficacy?

Lee In-young, appointed minister of Unification last July, remained indefatigable. Few if any of his predecessors have been quite so energetic. As the chronology enumerates, barely a day passed without Lee offering some proposal or other. Yet enthusiasm does not equal efficacy: the quality of these ideas was variable. And at least twice his ministry had to intervene, to “clarify” his more controversial comments.

There is a broad spectrum here. No one could demur when Lee urged the North and South to cooperate in practical areas like forestry and public health, as they agreed in 2018. Equally uncontentious was his plea in February that they should reconvene and finish their joint Korean language dictionary, long in the works and 80% complete.

More questionable, also in February and not for the first time, was his backing for individual tourism to the North. As we have argued, this daft idea is a complete non-starter for a myriad reasons, not the least being that Kim Jong Un has explicitly dismissed it. Yet for Lee this is “the best way to break boundaries” and help restore “national homogeneity.” Another time he endorsed the idea of joint cheering squads from the two Koreas sharing a train to the Beijing Olympics, quite inconceivable in current circumstances. More generally, as with his ministry’s work plan discussed above, one has to ask what is the point and effect of constantly endorsing ideas which may be good in principle, but failing to note that they stand no chance of being implemented?

There is also a real risk of wishful thinking. In late April Lee was [unfazed](#) by Kim Yo Jong insulting his president: “Though they are using harsh rhetoric ... they are, in their own way, controlling the level of intensity ... to explore the possibility for talks.” And the North’s resumption of missile launches? This was not a “high-intensity provocation.” Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss—all is for the best, in this best of all possible worlds—comes to mind.

Then we have human rights—or do we? Sadly, and shamefully, when liberal governments in Seoul seek to engage with Pyongyang, the DPRK’s human rights abuses get downplayed. While understanding the diplomatic delicacies involved, this results—as with the leafleting ban—in stances which hardly burnish the ROK’s image as a beacon of rights and democracy.

In February, four defectors filed a complaint against Lee In-young for criminal defamation, after he queried whether defector testimonies of abuses “reflect reality or are just a one-sided story.” His embarrassed ministry hastily clarified: “The Unification Ministry and its minister believe that the testimonies of defectors are valuable records that let our government and the international community know about the human rights situation in North Korea.”

This is not an isolated case. A law passed under Park Geun-hye in 2016 tasked MOU with creating a center to compile records on DPRK human rights. Since then 3,000 defectors have been interviewed, but no report has yet been published. Asked why, in April an MOU official echoed minister Lee’s skepticism, claiming they need more time, better data, and a way to check the “consistency (of testimonies) and verify their credibility.” That will not wash. A different arm of the ROK government, the Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU) – formerly under MOU but no longer – has no problem compiling and issuing a grim, meaty, lengthy annual White Paper on North Korean human rights, every year since 1996. The 2020 [edition](#) runs to 642 pages. What MOU lacks is not evidence, but will.

In another case of damage limitation, in a February interview with the *Financial Times* Lee seemed to suggest that international sanctions are to blame for North Korea’s humanitarian crisis. Again his ministry had to clarify that he did not mean this was the sole cause, only that

after five years we should review whether these tough measures are achieving their declared goal of denuclearization. Put like that, the proposition is not unreasonable. Even so, it is not a good look if the ministry keeps having to extricate the minister’s foot from his mouth.

On April 29, Lee called the first half of 2021 “a golden opportunity and the most optimal time for the South, the North and the US to move together toward the Korean Peninsula peace progress” (sic, as per *Yonhap*). With just a few weeks left, the gold is hardly shining bright. Energy and optimism are virtues, but peace on the peninsula will be a long haul requiring thought, strategy, and realism. Indiscriminate cheer-leading is not enough.



Figure 5 Unification Minister Lee In-young speaks during a meeting of the inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation council at the government complex in Seoul on Jan. 14, 2021. Photo: Yonhap

Pyongyang Sues in a Seoul Court

Perhaps the most unusual and interesting inter-Korean development in this period was in the judicial realm. On April 6 a Seoul court rejected a suit brought by two North Korean entities, and a South Korean acting for them, for compensation from four ROK firms regarding a zinc consignment worth 5.3 billion won (\$4.7 million) allegedly unpaid for. This dates back in 2010 when such commerce was possible, though the suit was only filed in 2019. This is the first time DPRK companies have sued in ROK courts, though there are precedents involving inheritance [claims](#) by private citizens. The defendants insisted they had paid, via a Chinese intermediary. The court ruled there was insufficient evidence of a contract. Even if the North had won, current sanctions would have prevented the funds from being transferred.

Is the Southern Worm Turning?

April saw two rare exceptions to South Korea's usual indulgence of the North. Introducing MOU's annual White Paper in April, Lee In-young struck an unusually robust note. "North Korea's destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office in June and the lethal shooting of a South Korean citizen at the west sea in September were intolerable incidents that shocked South Koreans hoping for peace." On the liaison office, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong weighed in too. Pyongyang "must not only apologize ... but also promise to make sure something like this would never happen again." And they must pay for the damage: "Since it was national property, there must be compensation."

Is the worm turning? Have Moon and his government finally tired of turning the other cheek so Pyongyang can slap that one as well? Probably not. For Lee, we already noted the overall tenor of his interventions. As for Chung, he was talking in the relaxed, informal milieu of a journalists' club, letting his hair down, and perhaps his guard. Even so, he made excuses for the DPRK's inexcusable behavior. Despite deploring Kim Yo Jong's latest squib and earlier Northern insults as "senseless," "nasty," and "unbearable," he added: "But if you look closely, I think they also reflect [Pyongyang's] desperation ... We should keep in mind: If they really think they are strong, would they use these expressions?"

As I wrote [elsewhere](#): "Yes, they would! They did it all before to Moon's predecessors, only nastier, calling Park Geun-hye a [whore](#), or [cartooning](#) Lee Myung-bak as a rat being [stabbed](#) to death." We covered those vile episodes at the time. Pleading mitigation is misguided: this is just a nasty regime, being nasty. They switch it on and off, regardless of others' actions.

Prospects

Moon Jae-in seems unlikely to [change](#) his engagement approach, despite its failure to bear lasting fruit. Speaking of lasting, Moon himself is running out of time. The ROK electoral clock is relentless. A president gets only five years, with no second term, and Moon has had four of his. His successor is due to be elected next March 9 and take office on May 9, 2022.

What impact will this closing window have? It may well be one reason for Kim Jong Un's

disdain. As his father Kim Jong Il learnt the hard way over a decade ago, the risk in doing a deal with an ROK president about to leave office is that his successor may fail to honor it. In 2008 the incoming Lee Myung-bak largely ignored the joint economic cooperation projects agreed in 2007 by his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun. Kim Jong Un may feel it prudent to wait and see who comes next. Besides, sizing up the Biden administration is his priority right now.

But it could go the other way. After how Kim has treated Moon, no future ROK president will be so amenable. If Kim grasps that, the coming months may see some last-ditch outreach to Seoul, if only to try to drive a wedge between it and Washington. There are those in Moon's circle, not least MOU Lee, whose yearning for inter-Korean progress (or a simulacrum of it) burns deeply. Cooler heads will not jeopardize the US-ROK alliance, but if Kim is smart he might yet make mischief by playing on the dreams that some in Seoul still harbor.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY – APRIL 2021

Jan. 1, 2021: Instead of Kim Jong Un’s customary substantial New Year address, DPRK media [carry](#) a very short hand-written letter from the leader. Kim offers greetings, thanks people for their trust in “difficult times,” and promises to “work hard to bring earlier the new era in which the ideals and desires of our people will come true.”

Jan. 1, 2021: Although North Korea cut all inter-Korean communication links in June, the United Nations Command (UNC) [confirms](#) that its direct telephone line at Panmunjom to the KPA remains operational. It delivered 86 messages in 2020, plus line checks twice daily.

Jan. 4, 2021: In his New Year address, South Korea’s Minister of Unification (MOU) Lee In-young [says](#) Seoul is expecting a “positive message of dialogue and cooperation” from Pyongyang in the near future. (As of May he is still waiting.)

Jan. 4, 2021: Osaka-based media NGO *Asiapress* [publishes](#) what it claims is a secret document from September in which Kim Jong Un launches a campaign to extirpate ROK linguistic usages, as part of a “policy for inciting hatred among the domestic population towards South Korea.” *Asiapress* says it has more DPRK documents in this vein.

Jan. 5, 2021: Eighth Congress of North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party (WPK) opens in Pyongyang, unannounced; this is not reported until Jan. 6. Kim Jong Un makes an opening [speech](#). He also [commences](#) a marathon report, which will last nine hours and take two days. Few details are initially provided.

Jan. 6, 2021: Congress continues, and so [does](#) Kim Jong Un’s report.

Jan. 7, 2021: Congress continues. Kim Jong Un finally [concludes](#) his report.

Jan. 8, 2021: *Reuters* [reports](#) that ROK prosecutors have indicted Kim Ryen Hi for violating the National Security Act (NSA). Kim, a North Korean woman aged 51 who claims she was tricked into defecting, has kept trying to be sent back to the DPRK, including turning herself in as a spy. Her lawyer comments: “It would invite international ridicule if you charge someone who is only fighting to go back home with threatening national security for sharing her daughter’s letters on Facebook.”

Jan. 9, 2021: *Rodong Sinmun*, the WPK daily, [publishes](#) a 13,500 word summary (not the full text) of Kim’s nine hour speech to the Eighth Congress. This is hardline on all fronts, including South Korea. (See the previous [issue](#) of *Comparative Connections*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp 89–104, for the full text [Appendix 1] and analysis of Kim’s comments on the South.)

Jan. 9, 2021: Reacting—if hardly responding—to Kim Jong Un’s strictures, the Unification Ministry (MOU) [reiterates](#) the ROK’s commitment to implementing inter-Korean agreements.

Jan. 11, 2021: In his New Year address, ROK President Moon Jae-in [renews](#) his call for the two Koreas to work together: “Our determination to meet at any time and any place and talk even in a contact-free manner remains unchanged. The two Koreas should jointly fulfill all the agreements made together to date.”

Jan. 13, 2021: DPRK media [publish](#) a statement by Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong, attacking speculation in Seoul about the North holding a military parade. She concludes: “The southerners are a truly weird group hard to understand. They are the idiot and top the world’s list in misbehavior as they are only keen on things provoking world laughter.”

Jan. 13, 2021: Despite harsh words from both brother and sister Kims, *Yonhap*, the quasi-official ROK news agency, [quotes](#) an upbeat assessment of the prospects for inter-Korean relations by an unnamed “top official” of MOU: “There were some strong words but their remarks seemed toned-down ... The North appears to be leaving many possibilities open.”

Jan. 14, 2021: With similar optimism, MOU’s analysis report also [contrives](#) to read the WPK Congress as signaling room for improvement in inter-Korean relations.

Jan. 18, 2021: Insisting that ROK-US military exercises “are regular ... and defensive in nature,” President Moon [says](#) that if Pyongyang has concerns, they can be discussed at the joint military committee. The two Koreas agreed to create this in 2018, but it has never met.

Jan. 19, 2021: ROK Cabinet [approves](#) various revisions to the South-North Exchange and Cooperation Act. These include compensation for those affected if an inter-Korean project is suspended: seen as a belated response to the South’s abrupt closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in 2016. Also, if MOU rejects an application to visit North Korea, it must henceforth state its reasons. The revision bill will go to the National Assembly.

Jan. 19, 2021: South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) [reiterates](#) its readiness to discuss any issues with the North. Spokesperson Boo Seung-chan denies that 2018’s accord has been all but nullified: “Since the pact was signed, the two Koreas have not taken hostile acts against each other at the agreed-upon buffer zones, and the military situation in border areas has been managed in a stable manner.”

Jan. 20, 2021: President Moon [nominates](#) Chung Eui-yong as foreign minister, replacing Kang Kyung-wha, who has held the post—the first woman to do so—throughout Moon’s term. No reason is given. In December, Kang incurred Kim Yo Jong’s wrath for doubting North Korea’s claim to be free of COVID-19. As director of the National Security Office in the Blue House during 2017-20, Chung played a key role as an emissary and go-between to Pyongyang and Washington.

Jan. 20, 2021: MOU [reveals](#) a sharp fall in the number of DPRK defectors reaching the ROK. 2020’s total was just 229, down from 1,047 in 2019 and 1,137 in 2018. Most (135) arrived in the first quarter, reflecting the impact of the DPRK’s border closure against the coronavirus. The cumulative total of former North Koreans in the South is a relatively modest 33,752.

Jan. 21, 2021: MOU [publishes](#) its Work Plan for 2021. Its professed goals are “to make progress toward denuclearization and establishing a peace regime by pursuing the peace process [...]; form a community of life and safety on the Korean Peninsula for coexistence and peace; promote inter-Korean exchange and cooperation; transform the DMZ into an international peace zone and realize greater peace in border regions; and institutionalize inter-Korean relations and lay the foundation for implementing sustainable policy.”

Jan. 25, 2021: Sources in Seoul [reveal](#) that Ryu Hyun-woo (a variant Romanization is Ryu Hyon U), formerly the acting DPRK ambassador to Kuwait, defected in September 2019 and has since been living in South Korea. (See also Feb. 1 below.)

Jan. 25, 2021: MOU Lee [expresses](#) optimism for a “wise and flexible” solution to the issue of joint drills with the US.

Jan. 27, 2021: Park Sang-hak, a prominent DPRK defector who runs the activist group Fighters for a Free North Korea, [flies](#) to Washington to attend a proposed Congressional hearing on the ROK’s newly enacted ban on sending propaganda leaflets into the North.

Jan. 28, 2021: The ROK Committee for the June 15 Joint Declaration, formed to support the first inter-Korean peace agreement (signed on that date in 2000), [reports](#) receiving “warm greetings of solidarity” from its DPRK counterpart. This is the first such message from the North in over a year. How the message was transmitted was not revealed.

Jan. 31, 2021: The People Power Party (PPP), South Korea’s conservative main opposition party, [demands](#) a probe into allegations that Moon Jae-in’s government had plans to offer to build a nuclear power plant in and for North Korea. The government vigorously denies this.

Feb. 1, 2021: MOU Lee [weighs in](#): “I will say this clearly that we, as the unification ministry, have never discussed the issue of building nuclear plants in North Korea under any circumstances.” But the same day the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) publishes [documents](#) which show that this idea was indeed mooted, if only hypothetically.

Feb. 1, 2021: In his first interview since being ousted, former DPRK diplomat Ryu tells [CNN](#) (among much else) that Kim Jong Un will not give up nuclear weapons, and calls for pressure over human rights issues. He says his main motive was a better future for his teenage daughter. The family defected via the ROK embassy in Kuwait.

Feb. 2, 2021: ROK MND [publishes](#) its biennial defense [White Paper](#) (so far only in Korean). Among much else, the Korean People’s Army (KPA) Strategic Force Command now has 13 missile brigades, up from nine in 2018. The KPA has also upgraded its special forces. And yet, as in 2018, the DPRK is no longer termed an enemy as it always used to be. But this year, for the first time, Japan is no longer called a partner.

Feb. 4, 2021: After media reports that the conservative main opposition PPP will push for the Inter-Korean Co-operation Fund to be tapped to help those affected by COVID-19, MOU [says](#) this is inappropriate “from a perspective of the principle of national finance.” The fund has a budget of 1.25 trillion won this year, but is little used given the freeze between the two Koreas.

Feb. 5, 2021: At his parliamentary confirmation hearing, FM nominee Chung [says](#) US-ROK drills should be held “at a proper level”—but planning them must also consider inter-Korean ties and COVID-19. He takes up his post on Feb. 9.

Feb. 16, 2021: The National Intelligence Service (NIS) [tells](#) ROK lawmakers that DPRK hackers tried to steal data on coronavirus vaccines and treatment technologies from Pfizer as well as [South Korean](#) pharmaceutical firms. No date or further details are given.

Feb. 16, 2021: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [say](#) a North Korean defector in his 20s came South early today “via the eastern border.” Detected on CCTV at 4.20 am, he was caught three hours later near Goseong. (See also Feb.17 and 23, and March 4, below.)

Feb. 17, 2021: JCS [clarifies](#) that yesterday’s defector arrived by sea, swimming for six hours in a diving suit and flippers. As with a similar [case](#) in November, this provokes [concern](#) about border security and military [vigilance](#). Defense Minister Suh Wook apologises for the lapses (see also Feb. 23).

Feb. 18, 2021: MOU Lee [claims](#) that North Korea faces a food shortage of over 1.2 million tons this year: a chronic million ton shortfall, and the rest from 2020’s typhoon damage. Other estimates are more [optimistic](#), or [cautious](#).

Feb. 18, 2021: Ex-Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun [suggests](#) that foreign firms be included when seeking to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex. This would reassure North Korea, and make both sides hesitate before pulling out. He adds: “We have to come up with ideas that are appealing to North Korea. We need to explore ways to avoid UN sanctions.”

Feb. 20, 2021: *Yonhap* [reports](#) that the NGO Human Rights Watch has sent a formal opinion to MOU, criticizing the legal amendment to ban sending leaflets into North Korea as violating freedom of expression.

Feb. 21, 2021: Four DPRK defectors [say](#) they will sue MOU Lee for defamation after he is quoted as querying whether defector testimonies on human rights abuses “reflect reality or are just a one-sided story.” They duly [file](#) a complaint of criminal defamation, but the case is deemed unlikely to proceed.

Feb. 22, 2021: MOUA hastily [clarifies](#): “The Unification Ministry and its minister believe that the testimonies of defectors are valuable records that let our government and the international community know about the human rights situations in North Korea.”

Feb. 22, 2021: MOU Lee [calls](#) for work to resume soon on an inter-Korean [dictionary](#). The “Gyeoreomal-keunsajeon” ([겨러 말큰 사전](#)) project began in 2005, was suspended in 2010, and resumed in 2014—only to halt again in 2016. At 307,000 words and after 25 meetings, the work is said to be [81%](#) complete. (A later [report](#) suggests that ROK scholars may soon try to send a draft to their DPRK colleagues.)

Feb. 23, 2021: Speaking at a seminar on inter-Korean cooperation in public health—not, alas, an inter-Korean seminar on cooperation in public health—MOU Lee [renews](#) his call to build a joint response system with North Korea against infectious diseases. The two Koreas [agreed](#) to do this in [2018](#), but like much else it was never implemented.

Feb. 23, 2021: Embarrassed JCS now [admits](#) that last week’s defector was caught 10 times on military CCTV. The first eight went unnoticed, despite alarm bells ringing (literally).

Feb. 25, 2021: MOU Lee [says](#) the ROK will push for individual tourism to the DPRK once the pandemic ends, as this is “the best way to break boundaries” and help restore “national homogeneity.”

March 1, 2021: In his latest wide-ranging report, issued ahead of the UN Human Rights Council meeting (see March 23), UN Special Rapporteur on DPRK human rights Tomas Ojea Quintana [voices](#) concern that the ROK’s upcoming ban on sending leaflets into the DPRK “limits many activities of escapees and civil society organizations, and such limits may not comply with international human rights law.” He recommends a review of the new legislation. (See also March 9, 11 and 30 below.)

March 3, 2021: Following publication of an [interview](#) with MOU Lee in the *Financial Times* on Feb. 26, his spokesperson [clarifies](#) that Lee did not mean to imply that global sanctions are the sole cause of North Korea’s humanitarian crisis; only that after five years it is time to review whether this is achieving the declared goal of denuclearization.

March 4, 2021: Maj. Gen. Pyo Chang-soo of the ROKA’s 22nd Infantry Division, which guards the eastern land and sea border, is [dismissed](#) over last month’s defector incident. Four other senior officers will also face disciplinary hearings. (See Feb. 16, 17 and 23 above.)

March 8, 2021: The ROK and US [begin](#) regular spring military exercise. Scaled back due to COVID-19, which saw last year’s maneuvers cancelled, the Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) involves computer simulations—but no outdoor drills, as with all major joint exercises since 2019. MOU [urges](#) North Korea to “show a wise and flexible approach” about this. Pyongyang makes no immediate response (but see March 16 below).

March 9, 2021: MOU [announces](#) finalized guidelines, ahead of a ban on sending leaflets into North Korea. The ministry clarifies that this only covers items sent from the South; it does not apply to anything dispatched to the DPRK from third countries, as activist groups had feared.

March 11, 2021: Unusually, MOU Lee [accompanies](#) DM Suh to the B-1 bunker, somewhere under Seoul, which would be a command center in case of war with North Korea. Their visit is “to encourage soldiers” during ongoing CCPT maneuvers.

March 11, 2021: A propos the imminent leafleting ban, MOU [vows](#) the “utmost effort” to coordinate with the international community on DPRK human rights issues. As reported by *Yonhap*, the ministry denies that critical comments by the UN Special Rapporteur relate specifically to the new ban. But they do: his [text](#) is explicit and clear on this point (section 32; see also March 1).

March 15, 2021: Four lawmakers of the conservative opposition PPP, including former DPRK diplomat Thae Yong-ho, [meet](#) MOU Lee at his ministry to protest delays in implementing the North Korean Human Rights Act passed in 2016. Thae says “the government must stop walking on eggshells not to upset the North Korean regime.”

March 16, 2021: In a poetically titled but otherwise unlyrical statement, “It Will Be Hard to See Again Spring Days Three Years Ago,” Kim Yo Jong [blasts](#) US-ROK military exercises. Unimpressed by their scaling down (“we are not taken in by their nonsense coating mad dog with sheepskin”), she threatens that the North may dissolve its organizations dealing with the South—or even abrogate the inter-Korean military accord. For good measure, she also warns the Biden administration to “refrain from causing a stink at its first step.”

March 16, 2021: A propos Kim Yo Jong’s threats, ROK MND [reiterates](#) that “the Korea-US combined exercise is a command post exercise ...conducted on a regular basis and ... defensive in nature.” MND urges Pyongyang to be flexible, and to fully implement—rather than scrap—inter-Korean military accords.

March 18, 2021: Joint CCPT US-ROK maneuvers [conclude](#), having gone “without a hitch” according to an unnamed military source. The two allies’ defense ministers are quoted as concurring (US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is in Seoul for ‘2+2’ talks).

March 23, 2021: MOU Lee [reiterates](#) that South Korea stands ready to provide a “sizable” amount of food and fertilizer aid to the North. The same day, his ministry [says](#) it is reviewing how best to send such aid—which Pyongyang continues to reject.

March 23, 2021: An anonymous spokesperson [says](#) the ROK says it will not join the US, Japan, and EU member states in co-sponsoring this year’s [resolution](#)—the 19th in successive years—on DPRK human rights abuses at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, but will join the document’s adoption by consensus, the third year the Moon administration has taken that stance. The ROK used to be a co-sponsor.

March 25, 2021: In its first missile test in a year, North Korea [fires](#) two initially unidentified projectiles into the East Sea. The ROK National Security Council (NSC) [holds](#) an emergency meeting and expresses “deep concern.”

March 26, 2021: DPRK media [confirm](#) yesterday’s successful test of two “new-type tactical guided [missiles](#),” with “irregular orbit features of low-altitude gliding leap type flight mode.” Using solid fuel and able to carry a 2.5-ton warhead, they flew 600 kilometers (Seoul had estimated 450; see also April 29 below). The test was supervised by [Ri Pyong Chol](#), one of Kim Jong Un’s [closest](#) aides.

March 29, 2021: MOU Lee, evidently unfazed by rockets, [calls](#) on Pyongyang to be “flexible” and accept Seoul’s offers of humanitarian cooperation. He says this at a seminar discussing the idea, far-fetched given current relations, of running joint trains to send cheering squads from both Koreas to the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

March 30, 2021: In her second diatribe in as many weeks, Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) Moon “a parrot raised by America,” among other barbs. She accuses him of double standards, in deploring North Korea’s missile tests while praising the South’s. The Blue House [describes](#) her comments as “regrettable.”

March 30, 2021: Controversial amendment to the ROK’s Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act banning sending leaflets into the DPRK, passed in December, [comes](#) into effect. Violators face potential fines of 30 million won (\$27,400) or up to three years in jail.

April 1, 2021: MOU [says](#) that, amid signs that easing of DPRK-China border restrictions is growing likelier, it is considering letting South Korean NGOs resume aid to the North. This follows several [supportive statements](#) from Minister Lee.

April 5, 2021: MOU [announces](#) its third quinquennial [survey](#) of separated families. It will poll the 48,000 reunion applicants on its books to see if they are still alive and keen. It also plans to build 6-7 further video reunion facilities (13 exist), even though North Korea shows no responsiveness. The last reunions were held in 2018, after a three-year hiatus.

April 6, 2021: In a rare case of DPRK plaintiffs suing under ROK jurisdiction, Seoul Central District Court [rejects](#) a claim for damages brought by two North Korean entities—and a South Korean acting for them—against four Southern companies, regarding zinc worth 5.3 billion won (\$4.7 million) allegedly not paid for in 2010.

April 7, 2021: South Korea [vows](#) to keep trying with North Korea, despite the latter’s decision to pull out of the Tokyo Olympics, the first summer games it will miss since Seoul in 1988. The ROK had hoped, somehow, to use the Games to kickstart the peace process.

April 12, 2021: Former Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun, executive vice-chair of the presidential National Unification Advisory Council and a prominent advocate of engagement with Pyongyang, [criticizes](#) an upcoming hearing by a bipartisan US Congressional caucus on the ROK’s anti-leafleting law as “interference in internal affairs” with “impure intentions.”

April 14, 2021: MOU [reports](#) that the number of Northern defectors reaching South Korea in the first quarter, having already fallen markedly in 2020 to 135, dropped further this year by 77% to just 31. The DPRK’s anti-coronavirus border closure is the main factor.

April 14, 2021: MOU [says](#) that via “various channels” it continues to seek North Korea’s participation in a regional forum on public health, proposed by President Moon, launched in December. Other participants include China, Japan, Mongolia, and the US.

April 19, 2021: MOU [says](#) it seeks to revise the Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Act to require advance approval for South Koreans exchanging digital files of films or books with North Koreans. Currently, contacts with the North can be reported after they happen. It denies media reports that the aim is to restrict internet radio broadcasting into the DPRK.

April 21, 2021: In a tougher tone than usual from the current ROK government, Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [demands compensation](#) for last June’s blowing up of the inter-Korean joint liaison office. North Korea “must not only apologize ... but also promise to make sure something like this would never happen again.”

April 21, 2021: MOU [says](#) it is considering a system to pre-approve projects which local governments seek to pursue with North Korea. Currently they must first sign an agreement with Pyongyang. It is also mulling a budget for this within the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund. (This all seems hypothetical in current circumstances.)

April 21, 2021: *With the Century*, the 8-volume memoirs of North Korea’s founding leader Kim Il Sung issued in the early 1990s, [goes](#) on sale in South Korea for the first time. These “memoirs” mostly cover, and greatly embroider, Kim’s exploits as an anti-Japanese partisan.

April 22, 2021: MOU [says](#) the local publisher of Kim Il Sung’s memoirs did not consult or seek permission in advance. It will look into this, taking action if necessary. Another firm that tried to bring out these memoirs in the ROK in the 1990s was investigated under the National Security Act (NSA).

April 25, 2021: Kyobo, South Korea’s largest bookstore chain, [pulls](#) Kim Il Sung’s memoirs from sale. It says this is “to protect customers” from potentially being charged under the National Security Act (NSA). Other ROK sellers online continue to offer the books.

April 26, 2021: Assistant Minister Kim Chang-hyun [shows](#) reporters a new videoconference room at MOU, specifically for talks with North Korea. It took two months to build and cost 400 million won (\$360,000). Kim says the North has the necessary equipment too: “there is no problem at all in connecting the two Koreas.” (No technical problem, anyway.)

April 26, 2021: Ahead of the third anniversary of the first [summit](#) between President Moon and Kim Jong Un at Panmunjom, MOU spokesperson Lee Jong-joo [reiterates](#) South Korea’s “firm determination” to implement inter-Korean accords: “It is necessary to restore all levels of dialogue between the South and the North at an early date, including summit talks.” The anniversary is celebrated unilaterally, with various low-key NGO-led events.

April 26, 2021: At a tree-planting ceremony, MOU Lee [calls](#) for the two Koreas to cooperate on forestry issues, to reduce carbon omissions and mitigate the risk of landslides. In 2018 the two sides agreed to work together on such issues, but nothing concrete has ensued.

April 27, 2021: On the third anniversary of the Panmunjom Summit, MOU Lee [says](#): “We emphasize again that we are willing to talk with the North anytime, anywhere and on any issues regardless of the format ... We hope North Korea will come out for talks at an early date in respect for the spirit of the Panmunjom Declaration.” In Pyongyang, by contrast, the anniversary goes wholly unmentioned, as in 2020.

April 28, 2021: MOU [issues](#) its annual Unification [White Paper](#). This includes data on inter-Korean exchanges. Though dismayed that Pyongyang will not talk, it notes that tensions have been contained. In his preface MOU Lee writes, with rare sharpness, that “North Korea’s destruction of the inter-Korean liaison office in June and the lethal shooting of a South Korean citizen at the west sea in September were intolerable incidents that shocked South Koreans hoping for peace.” In 2020 Seoul spent a mere 3.6% of the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund’s billion-dollar budget, down from 6.7% in 2019.

April 28, 2021: MOU [tallies](#) last year’s inter-Korean exchanges, such as they were. In 2020 613 South Koreans visited the North, mostly ROK staffers at the inter-Korean liaison office; down from 9,835 in 2019 and 6,689 in 2018. No North Koreans (defectors aside) came South, compared to 809 in 2018. Cross-border trade transactions, which numbered 699 in 2018 and 434 in 2019, fell to just 45: mostly supplies for the liaison office, and coronavirus-related aid – though the DPRK claims to have no cases of COVID-19— from ROK NGOs.

April 28, 2021: Asked why MOU’s center for North Korean human rights records, set up in 2016 under a law passed that year, has yet to publish a report despite interviewing over 3,000 DPRK defectors to date, an unnamed official [says](#) they need more time, more data, and a way to check the “consistency (of testimonies) and verify their credibility.”

April 29, 2021: MOU Lee [opines](#) that the first half of 2021—only two months left—“will be a golden opportunity and the most optimal time for the South, the North and the US to move together toward the Korean Peninsula peace progress.” He adds that he has had his first COVID-19 vaccination, so as to be in a position to visit Washington. (The ROK has been relatively slow in rolling out vaccinations.)

April 29, 2021: A day after DM Suh says the DPRK’s missiles test-fired on March 25 flew 600 kilometers, South Korea’s JCS [explain](#) why they initially underestimated this at 450 km. The missile performed a pull-up maneuver, and was launched eastward where the Earth’s curvature creates blindspots for ROK radar. But not to worry: “If (missiles) fly in our direction, we can detect them all.”

April 30, 2021: Park Sang-hak, leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), [claims](#) that during April 25-29 his group flew 10 balloons carrying some 500,000 leaflets, 500 booklets and 5,000 \$1 bills into the North from border areas in Gyeonggi and Gangwon provinces, despite such acts being illegal in the ROK since March 30.

May 2, 2021: Kim Yo Jong issues a brief but terse [statement](#) condemning the latest leaflet launch. Accusing Seoul of “winking” at the leafleteers, she warns, “responsibility for the consequences thereof will entirely rest with the south Korean authorities who stopped short of holding proper control of the dirty human scum.”

May 3, 2021: ROK Police Commissioner-General Kim Chang-yong [orders](#) a “swift and thorough investigation” to “strictly handle the sending of anti-North Korea leaflets.”

May 3, 2021: DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* [criticizes](#) brouhaha in Seoul over publication of Kim Il Sung’s memoirs: ““It is dumbfounded [sic] to see such impure forces’ reckless act to make a fuss as if a huge disaster happened and try to block their publication and distribution in a wicked way.”

May 3, 2021: ROK Korea Football Association (KFA) says its DPRK counterpart has informed the Asian Football Confederation that North Korea will not take part in the much-delayed second round of soccer World Cup qualifiers (Group H) which South Korea will host in June. The North reportedly cited fears of COVID-19. In the first round, [held](#) in Pyongyang in October 2019, the two Koreas’ ill-tempered match ended in a 0-0 draw.

May 4, 2021: *Chosun Ilbo*, a leading conservative Seoul daily, [claims](#) that most of the half a million propaganda flyers launched toward North Korea by Park Sang-hak on April 30 actually landed in South Korea, due to wind conditions.

May 4, 2021: Three DPRK media outlets for external audiences—*DPRK Today*, *Tongil Voice* and *Uriminzokkiri*—[attack](#) the April 21 [dismissal](#) by a Seoul court, on grounds of sovereign immunity, of a suit brought by former “comfort women” (victims of wartime sexual slavery) against the Japanese government.

May 6, 2021: In an article on the brouhaha over publishing Kim Il Sung’s memoirs in South Korea, *The Korea Times*’ Nam Hyun-woo [notes](#) that, although a rightwing NGO is seeking an injunction to ban the work, the conservative main opposition party is more relaxed. PPP Deputy Spokesperson Park Ki-nyeong comments, “We should have faith in South Korea's public awareness and superior system and leave this to the public judgment ... No one in this country will sympathize with those who hail Kim Il-sung.”

May 6, 2021: The Seoul Metropolitan Police [raid](#) Park San-Hak and FFNK’s offices.

