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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SUMMER FALSE DAWN: ON/OFF COMMUNICATIONS

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Summer 2021 saw a false dawn on the Korean Peninsula, hardly the first, but surely one of the shortest. On July 27 both North and South announced the reconnection of inter-Korean hotlines, severed for over a year. In Seoul, hopes were high—aren't they always?—that this signaled a fresh willingness by Pyongyang to engage, not only with South Korea but also the US. Yet this “breakthrough” lasted barely a fortnight. When the US and ROK began their regular August military exercises—albeit scaled back and wholly computer-based — North Korea snarled and stopped answering the phone. Inter-Korean relations remain frozen, as they have been ever since early 2019. With Moon Jae-in's presidency due to end next May, any real melting of the ice looks increasingly like a challenge for his successor.

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Moon, and South Korea, Unpictured

The period under review began with a slight from Pyongyang. A slighter slight than some—no threats, no snarling—yet quite Orwellian in its recasting of history, although there might be an innocent explanation.

In May, the DPRK's Foreign Languages Publishing House (FLPH) published a long lavish photo album (available [here](#); it may be a slow download). Catchily titled *Ushering in a New Era of Development in External Relations*, its 150 pages chronicle Kim Jong Un's sudden explosion of summit diplomacy in 2018-19. Page after page shows a genial Kim meeting and greeting: Xi Jinping (five times), Donald Trump (thrice), and the leaders of Singapore, Cuba, Vietnam, and Russia (once each). Spot the absentee. No word nor image of 2018's three inter-Korean summits with Moon Jae-in. Even for June 2019's third Kim-Trump meeting at Panmunjom, Moon is out of the picture (although that is pretty much how both leaders treated him—even though he was hosting Trump's visit to the DMZ).

True, neither Korean state officially regards the other as a foreign country. For both, Korea is a single nation, temporarily divided. (On that basis, some in Seoul prefer to say “intra-Korean” rather than “inter-Korean”). Conceptually and administratively, neither side classifies their relations under external affairs. Even so, a full or accurate account of 2018-19's summitry can hardly erase the inter-Korean dimension. If the two Koreas were still friends now, as they appeared to be in 2018, a way would surely have been found to include Moon.

This large lacuna aside, a wider point is worth noting. The book's title is not only clunky, but arguably a hostage to fortune. The dozen meetings it covers all occurred within the space of 15 months. Before that, in his first six years in power (2012-17) Kim Jong Un went nowhere and met no one, at home or abroad. In that sense 2018 was indeed a new era, but a very brief one: in mid-2019 all of this stopped. While COVID-19 is the main factor, even in a pandemic-free world Kim would probably not have kept up that pace. Where would he go? And who else would come visit? Besides, there is always the videoconferencing option. Yet Kim is one of very few world leaders not to have availed of that technology during the past two years. Far from ushering in a whole new era of outreach, it seems that after his brief and dazzling debut in the

global spotlight, Kim Jong Un has once again turned inward—much as his late father, Kim Jong Il, did earlier in this century.

Summit Excitement

Returning to inter-Korean relations, the asymmetry is striking. While Pyongyang was coolly writing the South out of the story, for President Moon Jae-in and his colleagues the North remains central. None more so than Minister of Unification (MOU) Lee In-young, whose enthusiasm knows no bounds—including those of reality. For Lee, a resumption of dialogue and diplomacy, though stalled now for two and a half years, is always just around the corner.



Figure 1 Minister of Unification Lee In-young. Photo: Yonhap

The May 21 first summit between Moon and Joe Biden was one such instance. Several times, both before and after the event (see the chronology for details), Minister Lee expressed his belief that this meeting would kickstart talks, both inter-Korean and US-DPRK. By mid-September that had yet to happen. Nor was Lee alone. Another optimist was Moon Chung-in, now head of the Sejong Institute, a leading ROK think tank, and formerly an adviser to Moon Jae-in (no relation). On May 25, Prof. Moon told a US-ROK forum that he expects Pyongyang to contact Seoul to get the lowdown on US policy: “It is very likely that North Korea will come. If ... not to the United States directly, maybe it will come to South Korea.” Moon's analysis is often incisive, as in this recent no-punches [op-ed](#) on real and false lessons for the ROK from the fall of Kabul. Yet in expecting Seoul once more to play honest broker between the US and DPRK, the wish is clearly father to the thought. True, that happened in 2018. But in 2021 Washington and Pyongyang no longer need a go-between. Already in 2019 Kim Jong Un told Seoul not to “pose as a meddlesome ‘mediator’ and ‘facilitator.’”

For North Korea, the real lesson of the Biden-Moon summit—which in truth focused more on China—was rather different. One outcome was the ROK’s recovery of [missile sovereignty](#). After four decades in which Washington set caps—gradually relaxed over time—on the range and payload of South Korea’s missiles, Biden ended all such restrictions. This prompted the first and only comment by North Korean media on the summit, 10 days after the event. As Robert Carlin [reminds](#) us, Pyongyang’s messaging is always carefully planned in regard to tone, level, and other factors. Thus it is significant that the DPRK government and ruling party chose to make no comment whatever on the Biden-Kim summit. Yet the missile development could hardly go unremarked. Hence on May 31 KCNA rolled out Kim Myong Chol, a veteran pro-North Korean commentator in Japan, who slammed US “double-dealing” while calling Moon “shameful” and “indecent.” That is tame stuff by Pyongyang’s usual standards of insult and menace. While Kim Jong Un is hardly rushing to talk to Biden and is playing games with Moon (see below), the fact that he was not firing off any big rockets (actual or verbal) may suggest he is keeping his options open. In that context, North Korea’s test of new long-range cruise missiles on Sept. 11-12 (note the date) was a warning shot, reminding its foes to take it seriously, rather than a return to unbridled militancy. This underscores the need for renewed diplomacy (despite Pyongyang’s professed insouciance), yet may make it harder.

Kumgang: Resorting to Fantasy

Returning to MOU Lee In-young: By May 31 he had moved on, announcing plans to [meet](#) with business leaders who were involved in the Mount Kumgang tourism project. True to his word, the next day (June 1) he met Hyun Jeong-eun, whose title—she chairs the [Hyundai Group](#)—may mislead. A tiny rump since the mighty conglomerate founded by her late father-in-law Chung Ju-yung fell apart after his death, Hyundai Group is no longer connected to Hyundai Motor or Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), the world’s largest shipbuilder. Hyundai Group’s main business now is elevators, but back in the day its affiliate Hyundai Asan built and ran the Mount Kumgang resort. Its [website](#) makes this sound ongoing, but in fact it has been suspended since 2008, and Pyongyang has confiscated Hyundai’s and other assets there worth over \$400 million.

Undaunted, Lee [declared](#): “We remain unwavering in our commitment to push ahead with projects like allowing individual tours to Mount Kumgang as soon as the coronavirus situation improves.” For good measure, he hoped separated families could visit other regions such as nearby Wonsan city. He again trumpeted the recent US-ROK summit, and Hyun too professed “great expectations” that this would allow tours to resume—as well as reopening of the Hyundai-built Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in the southwestern DPRK not far north of Seoul, which was abruptly closed by Moon’s predecessor Park Geun-hye in 2016.

Whoa. Hold your horses. One hates to be a foreign killjoy, but this is sheer fantasy—as both Lee and Hyun well know. Pyongyang is often accused of being hard to read, but here Kim Jong Un has spoken plainly—more than once. As readers will recall, in October 2019 Kim [visited](#) the now moldering resort site, pronounced it “unpleasant,” and ordered it torn down. Coronavirus stayed his hand, but in a striking repudiation of his father’s vision and legacy, Kim made it crystal clear that he rejected the whole idea of this as an inter-Korean project: any new development would be strictly North Korean. As for the chimera of individual tourism—a hypothetical Moonite wheeze, devised to get around UN sanctions—Kim made his irritation plain in January this year, [singling](#) this out specifically as an example of Seoul’s bad habit of raising “inessential issues” rather than focusing on the basics.



Figure 2 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un visited Mount Kumgang, pronounced it “unpleasant,” and ordered it torn down. Photo: STR/KCNA via KNS/AFP via Getty

War Games: Shadow-Boxing?

In June, Minister Lee and others found a fresh cause. Ever since Donald Trump summarily

canceled upcoming regular US-ROK military exercises (not consulting either the Pentagon or Seoul) at his Singapore summit with Kim Jong Un in June 2018, the usual calendar of spring and summer allied drills has been much disrupted. Far from appreciating that olive branch, much less reciprocating, Kim saw this concession as a chance to press harder. Naturally North Korea has never liked US-ROK war games, which used to be awesome: *Team Spirit* (1974-93) was said to be the largest exercise of its kind in the world.

After several changes of name, these drills have waxed and waned in scale, reflecting the state of relations between the DPRK and its foes. Trump, soon followed by COVID-19, ushered in a new era of canceled or smaller maneuvers. Peace politics apart, since 2020 the pandemic has ruled out shipping in US troops in large numbers. So Kim has less to worry about, but he chose to go for broke, insisting that to hold joint exercises at all, in any form or on any scale, is a hostile act. This has created a new cycle, where every spring and summer the allies must decide what kind of drills, if any, to stage. Besides the security situation and force training needs, two further criteria now enter in: the coronavirus and how Pyongyang will react.

With the next exercises not due till August, Lee In-young started the ball rolling early. On June 6, he called for “maximum flexibility,” insisting that joint drills “should never work in a way that causes or further escalates tensions on the Korean Peninsula.” That was tantamount to calling for their cancellation, which as a minister Lee could not do directly. This kicked off a fresh round of the perennial argument in Seoul about the right balance of stick and carrot, force readiness vs peace process, and so on. Besides playing out in the [media](#), politically more important was the debate inside the ruling Democratic Party (DP), and above all necessarily hidden discussions within Moon Jae-in’s government.

Some of this may be shadow-boxing. Arguably, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the military establishment, not to mention Washington, would not countenance complete cancellation (in 2018 Trump forced their hand). Even as public debate continued, planning and preparations were surely underway. Meanwhile, as we now know, at some point and in some form Moon and Kim began exchanging messages about reactivating inter-Korean hotlines, unused for a year after Pyongyang blew up the

Kaesong joint liaison office in June 2020. Ever since then, the South has faithfully called as agreed at 0900 each day, but gotten no reply. (Talk of the lines being “cut” misleads: They still work, but the North chooses not to pick up.)

Lights! Camera! Action! They’re Talking Again!

The problem is how all these pieces fit together. As with a jigsaw it helps to start with the edges. Our best bet is to begin with what we do know. (The chronology below gives a full, day-by-day account.) On July 27, with much fanfare, the Blue House in Seoul and the official DPRK news agency KCNA in Pyongyang both announced the reconnection of inter-Korean hotlines. As doubtless intended, this created quite a stir. In a triumph of hope over expectation all too familiar in inter-Korean relations (but we never learn), hopes ran high that after a two-year hiatus that Pyongyang might finally be ready to engage again. And not only with Seoul. As elaborated elsewhere in this issue, even after half a year of cautious but clear overtures from Washington, it is still unclear what the DPRK makes of the new—or now not so new—Biden administration. No doubt Kim Jong Un is preoccupied at home, with a [tanking economy](#) and keeping COVID-19 at bay. But on this key foreign front, he is certainly taking his time.



Figure 3 The inter-Korean hotline at Panmunjom. Photo: Yonhap

For a week or two, inter-Korean ties seemed to flicker back into life. Beyond the formality of just checking the lines daily, there were signs of substance. The two sides used the line to compare tallies and positions of Chinese vessels illegally fishing in the West Sea near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto inter-Korean maritime border, which the DPRK has never formally recognized. Besides sharing notes to repel intruders, such liaisons in sensitive and

sometimes contested waters would help avoid any risk of accidental clashes.

So far so good, but it went no further. An eager Seoul broached concrete proposals—virtual talks, family reunions by videolink—but got no immediate reply. Then Kim Yo Jong weighed in. On Aug. 1, four days after the lines were restored, Kim Jong Un's sister warned against “premature hasty judgment. What I think is that the restoration of the communication liaison lines should not be taken as anything more than just the physical reconnection.” In particular, the “unpleasant story that joint military exercises between the south Korean army and the US forces could go ahead as scheduled” would surely “becloud” inter-Korean prospects. She closed with a rhetorical flourish: “Hope or despair? Choice is not made by us.”

That could hardly be clearer. Seoul's response was what we Brits call “faffing”: talk of a “wise and flexible” stance (MOU) or “prudent consultations” (Moon). Such waffling neither fooled nor assuaged Pyongyang. On Aug. 8 Seoul announced that joint drills would go ahead, albeit computer-based with no field exercises. This predictably prompted an angrier second salvo from Ms. Kim, attacking the “perfidious” South for this “unwelcoming act of self-destruction for which a dear price should be paid.” That was on Aug. 10. In the morning the hotlines still worked, but by 5 pm the North was not picking up. Nor has it done so since.

As You Were

What to make of this episode? The Blue House denied insinuations by Yoon Seok-youl—a leading contender for the conservative opposition People Power Party (PPP)'s presidential nomination next year, though his star has fallen [since](#)—that a secret deal lay behind the hotlines restoration. If that is true, then it fell apart in record time. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) claims the initiative came from Kim Jong Un. If that is the case, then one hypothesis is that Kim was testing Moon over the joint drills. Perhaps he thought this sop might tip the balance of the debate in Seoul. It did swell the ranks of those in the ruling party who favored cancellation, but not enough. Once it was clear the exercises would go ahead, Kim duly exacted punishment, reverting to noncommunication and the status quo ante.

Reading Moon's mind is harder. Though an idealist on inter-Korean ties, he is also a canny politician whose time is running out: his successor will be elected on March 9 next year. He may have felt he had little to lose, and we don't know what was said in the letters he and Kim exchanged. Unclear too is what input, if any, the foreign ministry (MOFA) or even MOU had in any of this. Reportedly, the Blue House handles dealings with Pyongyang itself, no doubt via the NIS. Did Moon reckon Pyongyang would not really mind the joint exercises, despite Kim Yo Jong's clarity on the issue? Perhaps one day the archives will reveal all.

In any event, Moon swiftly moved on. Days after the hotlines were re-ruptured, he gave a speech to mark Liberation Day (Aug. 15) whose theme seemed to come from an alternate universe. Suggesting that both Koreas would benefit from “institutionalizing peace” on the peninsula, he offered Germany as a precedent for building such a trust-based system. The tin ear whereby successive ROK presidents cite the German case when addressing the DPRK—often in Germany, just to ram the point home, as Moon has previously done—is hard to fathom. In Pyongyang they have watched that movie too—and they remember how it ends.



Figure 4 South Korean President Moon Jae-in celebrates Liberation Day in Seoul Station on Aug. 15, 2021. Photo: Yonhap

Imaginary Trains of Thought

Despite the hotlines debacle, as the peninsula's humid summer began to turn toward a more temperate fall, the Moon government's enthusiasm for inter-Korean cooperation remained as fervent as ever—and as divorced from reality. Once more Lee In-young took the lead. On Sept. 2, he addressed Russia's Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok by videolink, the first ROK unification minister ever invited to this high-level gathering. Lee's bold vision startled his listeners. As [reported](#) by Yonhap, he said:

“When dialogue among South Korea, North Korea and the US resumes, and the political situation improves, we plan to strengthen inter-Korean cooperation, including a special tourist zone on the east coast, and to expand this to tourism among South Korea, North Korea and Russia ... This will allow a train departing from Busan in South Korea to pass through North Korea’s Mount Kumgang and Wonsan to reach Vladivostok and Moscow in Russia and even farther to other European countries, while South Korea, North Korea and Russia will also be connected via seaways.”

“We plan?” Even within the works of fiction that MOU annual [Work Plans](#) have become since North Korea took its bat home in 2019, nothing like the above appears. Moreover, the obstacles to these envisaged transports of delight are not only political—although those are formidable enough. Physically too, no such route exists. In happier days, the Koreas did indeed reconnect two cross-border railway lines. But while the west coast line is real—in principle, trains could run from Seoul to Pyongyang and on to Beijing—the east coast Donghae line has a large gap on the Southern side. Despite having been symbolically relinked at the border, no track exists south from Jejin near the DMZ down to Gangneung city, a substantial distance of 111 kilometers.

Last year Moon’s government decided to rebuild that stretch, classifying it as an inter-Korean project—not unreasonably, but this means the normal feasibility evaluation can be skipped. It won’t be swift. According to KBS, the work will cost \$2.5 billion and take 7-10 years. Maybe by then inter-Korean relations will be on a better track politically too. But as of now, such talk is blather. Lee’s audience in Vladivostok—busy elites, who had convened to discuss serious matters—were reportedly not impressed.

After Moon: More of the Same?

While this journal is primarily a chronicle and analysis of the recent past, as a presidency winds down it is natural to try to peer into the future. With ROK presidents constitutionally limited to a single five-year term, less than half a year from now South Korea will have a new president-elect, voted in on March 9 and due to take office May 9. Who might that be, and what might their stance be toward the other Korea?

While ROK elections (as everywhere) are fought mainly on domestic issues, especially the economy, the outcome will also affect North Korea policy. The liberal ruling DP, like its predecessors since Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine policy at the turn of the century, largely favors peace and engagement. The oft-renamed conservative party tends to be more hawkish, yet all four of its presidents in the post-1987 democratic era—Roh Tae-woo (1988-93), Kim Young-sam (1993-98), Lee Myung-bak (2008-013), and Park Geun-hye (2013-16)—have in varying degrees attempted outreach to Pyongyang. In June, the PPP elected a new young leader, Lee Jun-seok, who favors unification by peaceful absorption of the North; he has also called for MOU to be abolished as redundant. Yet Lee will not be the party’s presidential candidate; at this point, it is far from clear who will. So even if the right regains the Blue House, which looks a longish shot, that does not rule out détente and dialogue.

Six months is a long time in politics, especially in Seoul. As of now, while Moon Jae-in is becoming a lamer duck (albeit with better poll ratings than most of his predecessors at this stage), the DP looks in better shape than the PPP. Within the DP, ongoing primaries have confirmed a front-runner: Lee Jae-myong, governor of Gyeonggi province which surrounds the capital (indeed, it has become a largely urbanized greater Seoul).

Though not personally or factionally close to Moon, ideologically Lee shares his [engagement](#) stance. He also favors conditional sanctions [relief](#) for the DPRK. So, if he is the next ROK president, expect policy continuity rather than change. The problem is that Moon’s approach has not worked, even if his government appears in denial on that score. At the very least, Lee (if it is he) will have to be more imaginative in finding ways to break the deadlock. A more detailed discussion must await our next issue in January, by which time the parties will have nominated their candidates and prospects generally may—or may not—be clearer.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2021

May 2, 2021: DPRK leader Kim Jong Un’s sister, Kim Yo Jong, [issues](#) a brief but terse statement condemning the latest leaflet launch across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) by defector activists in the ROK. Accusing Seoul of “winking” at the leafleteers, she warns: “[R]esponsibility 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](#) the controversy in Seoul over publication there 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.” (See April 21, 22, and 25 in our previous issue, and May 6 and 16 below.)

May 3, 2021: ROK’s 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 5, 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 of Fighters for a Free Korea (FFNK) on April 30 landed in the South, due to wind conditions at the time.

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 of a suit brought by former “comfort women”—victims of Imperial Japan’s 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. The PPP’s 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.” (See also April 21, 22 and 25 above and May 16 below.)

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

May 12, 2021: *Yonhap*, the semi-official ROK news agency, [notes](#) that a new DPRK [album](#) of Kim Jong Un’s diplomatic activities in 2018–19 omits any mention of his three summits with Moon Jae-in, though this might be because neither Korea officially treats inter-Korean relations as foreign.

May 13, 2021: South Korea’s Minister of Unification (MOU) [urges](#) North Korea to return to nuclear talks. Lee In-young says that the upcoming summit in Washington between ROK President Moon and US counterpart Joe Biden will be a “big turning point.” Lee makes several further comments in this vein, both before and after the summit; e.g. on May 21, 24

May 13, 2021: Contra a CNN report claiming that Pyongyang has rejected cooperation with the global COVID-19 vaccine distribution program, MOU says: “As far as we know, relevant negotiations are currently under way between the North and the COVAX side,”

May 16, 2021: Seoul Western District Court [nixes](#) a bid by several conservative organizations to ban publication of Kim Il Sung's memoirs. The court rules that the plaintiffs "cannot seek an injunction on behalf of other citizens." An appeal is planned.

May 17, 2021: ROK MOU [calls](#) the DPRK's decision to pull out of World Cup soccer qualifiers due to take place in South Korea next month "disappointing." Pyongyang cited coronavirus concerns.

May 18, 2021: MOU [releases](#) new master plan for 2021-23 on supporting North Korean defectors. Its 24 tasks include strengthening psychological support programs, not least for those at risk of sexual violence or suicide. It notes that defectors' employment rate fell 3.8% last year amid the pandemic to 54.4%. For ROK-born citizens the fall was only 1%, to 60.4%.

May 20, 2021: MOU Lee In-young [calls](#) for nonpartisan support for the National Assembly to ratify the Panmunjom Declaration, signed by Kim Jong Un and President Moon at their first summit in April 2018. This would help replace "wasteful political disputes [with] more mature and constructive debate."

May 21, 2021: Presidents Moon and Biden [meet](#) in Washington. Their joint statement is emollient regarding North Korea. *Inter alia*, the US [lifts](#) all limits on the range and payload of ROK missiles. Washington had set such ceilings ever since 1978.

May 25, 2021: Moon Chung-in, former adviser to Moon Jae-in, [tells](#) a US-ROK virtual forum that he expects Pyongyang to contact Seoul to get the lowdown on US policy: "It is very likely that North Korea will come. If ... not to the United States directly, maybe it will come to South Korea."

May 27, 2021: An MOU official anonymously briefs reporters that Kim Jong Un's public activities are on a "downward trend." The DPRK leader was last seen on May 7. (He will [reappear](#) on June 4, after a 29-day absence.)

May 28, 2021: MOU [reports](#) to the National Assembly that it will seek to resume inter-Korean dialogue and restore communication links, since the recent Moon-Biden summit has created "sufficient conditions" for this. It will also pursue humanitarian cooperation, such as sending rice and fertilizer.

May 31, 2021: In the first mention of the Moon-Biden summit in DPRK media, the official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) [carries](#) an article by Kim Myong Chol, a pro-North Korean resident in Japan, headlined: "What Is Aim of Termination of 'Missile Guidelines.'" This attacks Moon's enthusiasm for missile sovereignty as "disgusting" and "indecent."

May 31, 2021: Pressed by opposition lawmakers after initially declining to comment, ROK Defense Minister Suh Wook [tells](#) the parliamentary National Defense Committee that Kim Myong Chol's remarks about President Moon are "rude" and "highly inappropriate."

June 1, 2021: Meeting with Hyundai Group chairperson Hyun Jeong-eun, MOU Lee [states](#) his "unwavering ... commitment to push ahead with projects like allowing individual tours to Mount Kumgang as soon as the coronavirus situation improves."

June 3, 2021: MOU [says](#) it will spend 1.18 billion won (\$1.06 million) to build seven video conference facilities for virtual family reunions. Sites include Uijeongbu, Gangneung, Wonju, Cheongju, and Hongseong. Thirteen such centers already exist, mostly in or near Seoul.

June 6, 2021: Speaking on TV, MOU Lee [calls](#) for "maximum flexibility" in regard to joint military maneuvers with the US, due in August. These "should never work in a way that causes or further escalates tensions on the Korean Peninsula."

June 7, 2021: MOU spokesperson Lee Jong-ju [praises](#) project by Gyeonggi province and the [Korean Peasants League](#) to create a "farmland for peace." This would grow rice for North Korea near Gunnam dam, 62 km north of Seoul, built in 2010 on the Imjin river to cope with sudden water discharges by the DPRK upstream, after one such surge in 2009 killed six South Koreans. Despite a 2009 inter-Korean agreement to give notice in future, last year Pyongyang several times released water from its Hwanggang dam without notifying Seoul.

June 9, 2021: MOU [says](#) it continues to call North Korea at 0900 every day, but no one picks up. The line at Panmunjom is not "cut," as there is still a dial tone.

June 10, 2021: MOU [declines](#) to join in frenzied media speculation about Kim Jong Un's apparent recent weight loss. While analyzing photographs of his public appearances, "we have nothing to say about his health issues, and it is not our place to openly comment on it."

June 11, 2021: International Olympic Committee (IOC) [names](#) Brisbane as the sole candidate city to host the 2032 summer Olympic Games. This means the always far-fetched joint bid by Seoul and Pyongyang to co-host in 2032 is officially dead.

June 14, 2021: In Vienna (while on a state visit to Austria), Moon Jae-in [says](#) he will seek to cooperate with North Korea in providing COVID-19 vaccines, given South Korea's bid to become a "global vaccine production hub."

June 15, 2021: On the 21st anniversary of the first North-South summit, both MOU [Lee](#) and his ministry [urge](#) North Korea to resume dialogue and [restore](#) communication channels. Lee opines that "quite good conditions" for dialogue now exist. He also [postpones](#) a [plan](#) to visit the US, citing uncertainties in inter-Korean relations.

June 18, 2021: ROK opposition lawmaker Ha Tae-keung of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) [says](#) the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute (KAERI) was hacked on May 14. Some of the 13 external IP address intruders came from servers linked to North Korea's "Kimsuky" network. Ha claims that KAERI denied the breach before admitting it, and accuses the government of reluctance to acknowledge DPRK cyber-attacks.

June 18, 2021: Citing "government sources," *Yonhap* [says](#) that on June 16 a South Korean man in his 40s stole a boat on Baengnyeong, an ROK island near the DPRK coast, and tried to defect to the North—but failed, as it ran out of fuel and drifted.

June 22, 2021: Meeting with Sung Kim, the new US Special Representative for North Korea, MOU [calls](#) for "active and agile" US-ROK cooperation to bring Pyongyang back to talks.

June 30, 2021: An official at Hanawon, South Korea's resettlement center for North Korean defectors, [says](#) they admitted just 57 in the first half of 2021: down 85% from the 380 who entered during the same period last year. Fresh arrivals in the ROK—who are questioned by the National Intelligence Service (NIS) before their three-month stay in Hanawon—fell from 31 in the first quarter to a record low of two in the second quarter.

July 1, 2021: An unnamed MOU official [tells](#) *Yonhap* that a recent Politburo meeting of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party (WPK), whose agenda included "an organizational issue," appears to have seen a reshuffle of some senior officials. Other observers [concur](#).

July 5, 2021: MOU spokesperson Lee Jong-joo [says](#) North Korea is facing greater volatility in prices and foreign exchange rates. The ROK government is "keeping an eye" on this.

July 7, 2021: Amid wild rumors in Seoul that Kim Jong Un is unconscious after a cerebral hemorrhage and his uncle Kim Pyong Il has staged a coup, the NIS [seeks](#) to steady the ship: "We determine that the speculation about Kim's health is groundless ... [he] presided over a politburo meeting all day long on June 29 and has carried out state affairs normally as head of state."

July 8, 2021: Briefing the ROK National Assembly's intelligence committee, NIS [confirms](#) that KAERI was hacked, presumptively by North Korea (see June 18). It also reports that Kim Jong Un has lost 10–20 kg in weight but is healthy, and on other matters.

July 9, 2021: ROK [sends](#) a written response to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, rebutting concerns voiced in April by the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights that South Korea's anti-leafleting law violates freedom of speech.

July 13, 2021: [Uriminzokkiri](#), a DPRK website for external audiences, warns South Korea not to go ahead with joint maneuvers with the US: "War games and schemes to strengthen armed forces will never stand hand in hand with peace."

July 14, 2021: DPRK media for external consumption attack Lee Jun-seok, the new young head of the ROK conservative opposition PPP, for advocating abolition of the gender equality ministry. [Meari](#) calls this a “reactionary view,” while [Uriminzokkiri](#) accuses Lee of “showing outright discrimination against women.” Unmentioned is the other ministry Lee also urged to be scrapped as purposeless or outmoded: MOU.

July 16, 2021: Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), the ROK’s main state think tank on the DPRK, [publishes](#) an opinion survey. Although over 90% of South Koreans polled think Pyongyang will not give up nuclear weapons, indifference toward the North (especially among the young) is growing—as is hostility to sending aid for COVID-19.

July 18, 2021: Not very promptly and rather mildly, one DPRK media outlet [comments](#) on Lee Jun-seok’s quest to abolish the unification ministry. [Tongil Voice](#) radio, quoting ROK media, says critics have called this “foolish, irresponsible and absurd.”

July 21, 2021: In a TV debate Lee Jun-seok [repeats](#) his call to abolish MOU, adding that he favors “unification by peaceful absorption” of North Korea.

July 22, 2021: Rebutting Lee, MOU [says](#) “the South Korean government does not support unification by absorption ... It pursues peaceful unification through brisk exchanges and cooperation, and eventually inter-Korean agreement based on mutual respect of the other’s system.”

July 23, 2021: KINU [reports](#) that recent defector testimony suggests there are fewer public executions in the DPRK, and less mobilization of citizens than formerly. However, the regime has cracked down harder on mobile phones and other digital devices in border regions, in a bid to stop South Korean popular culture flowing in.

July 27, 2021: Blue House [announces](#) that by agreement of President Moon and Kim Jong Un, as of 10am the two Koreas have reopened hotlines that the North cut in June 2020. KCNA [confirms](#) the resumption, cites “the recent several exchanges of personal letters” and adds: “Now, the whole Korean nation desires to see the North-South relations recovered from setback and stagnation as early as possible.”

July 27, 2021: MND [confirms](#) restoration of inter-Korean military hotlines: “Phone calls and faxing to exchange documents now operate normally.” The western line is fine, but the eastern one has technical problems.

July 28, 2021: On the [second day](#) of restored inter-Korean communications, the Blue House [denies](#) a claim by *Reuters* that the two sides are planning a fourth Moon-Kim summit: “There have been no discussions on either face-to-face contact or virtual talks.” Earlier, Cheong Wa Dae also [nixes](#) reports that the ROK will send a special envoy to Pyongyang, citing COVID-19 constraints.

July 28, 2021: MOU [pledges](#) to use newly restored communications with North Korea to raise the case of [Lee Dae-jun](#), the ROK fisheries official [killed](#) last September at sea by the KPA in contested circumstances. Having met with MOU Lee, the victim’s brother urges Seoul to push for talks with Pyongyang and deliver his letter to Kim Jong Un.

July 29, 2021: MOU [says](#) that, given the pandemic, it will use the restored hotlines to discuss holding virtual inter-Korean talks. Next day it [faxes](#) such a proposal to the North. As of now there are no plans to offer to help Pyongyang with facilities or equipment.

July 29, 2021: Blue House [says](#) Seoul will push for virtual family reunions as an inter-Korean priority. There have been no reunions since the last in-person ones in August 2018.

July 30, 2021: MOU [says](#) that starting today it will resume approving requests by NGOs to send aid to North Korea, suspended for 10 months since the killing of Lee Dae-jun.

Aug. 1, 2021: KCNA publishes [statement](#) by Kim Jon Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong, [warning](#) that if US-ROK war games go ahead, this will “becloud” prospects for improved inter-Korean relations: “Hope or despair? Choice is not made by us.”

Aug. 2, 2021: MOU spokesperson Lee [says](#) the South will take a “wise and flexible” stance on US-ROK drills. Earlier, an anonymous ministry official called suspending the drills “desirable.” Lee adds that Pyongyang has not yet replied to Seoul’s offer of virtual talks. MND, however, [says](#) the allies are discussing when and how to hold the military exercises.

Aug. 2, 2021: “Government sources” [tell](#) Yonhap North Korea is using the reopened hotlines to fax details every morning “about foreign fishing boats operating illegally in the Yellow Sea, such as their number and exact locations.” South Korea sends the North its own assessments, which tend to tally. All this prevents accidental clashes. Some 20-30 Chinese vessels are typically found in Korean waters, near the inter-Korean maritime border.

Aug. 3, 2021: North Korea finally [answers](#) the South’s calls made by radio link on the international merchant marine network hotline. Seoul had been phoning for a week, but —unlike their fixed hotlines—Pyongyang had not yet responded on this channel.

Aug. 3, 2021: South Korean lawmakers, briefed by the NIS, [say](#) the spy agency told them it was Kim Jong Un who requested that inter-Korean communications lines be restored.

Aug. 4, 2021: At a rare Blue House meeting with ROK military top brass, Moon [tells](#) MND Suh Wook to hold “prudent consultations” with Washington on joint exercises.

Aug. 5, 2021: Yonhap [reports](#) that calls to postpone this summer’s US-ROK military drills are gaining traction within the ruling Democratic Party (DP).

Aug. 8, 2021: Citing “sources,” Yonhap [reports](#) that South Korea has “tentatively” decided to go ahead with scaled-back US-ROK drills, without any field component. The computer-based Combined Command Post Training (CCPT) will run Aug. 16-26, after four days of crisis management staff training starting Aug. 10. Despite Pyongyang’s objections, the source says: “We are working to stage the exercise as planned, which is a regular one and necessary for a combined readiness posture.”

Aug. 9, 2021: After heavy flooding in South Hamgyong province on the DPRK’s east coast, MOU [says](#) Seoul will explore every avenue for offering assistance. Pyongyang has steadfastly refused such help. The floods have not been discussed on the restored hotlines.

Aug. 10, 2021: Kim Yo Jong issues another [statement](#), blasting the “perfidious” South and the US for going ahead with “dangerous war exercises ... designed to stifle our state by force, and an unwelcoming act of self-destruction for which a dear price should be paid.”

Aug. 10, 2021: Hours after “officials” [assure](#) Yonhap that inter-Korean hotlines are working normally, North Korea [fails](#) to answer the South’s 5 pm call—and all its calls [thereafter](#).

Aug. 11, 2021: After Yoon Seok-youl—ex-prosecutor-general, now a leading presidential contender for the conservative opposition PPP—[asks](#) publicly whether any secret deal lay behind reopening hotlines with North Korea, the Blue House says that is “untrue.”

Aug. 12, 2021: Kim Yong Chol, head of the WPK’s United Front Department (UFD) which handles South Korea, [lambasts](#) Seoul for ignoring Kim Yo Jong’s warning and going ahead with “frantic military exercises” (which are desk-based). He warns: “We will make them realize by the minute what a dangerous choice they made and what a serious security crisis they will face because of their wrong choice.”

Aug. 15, 2021: In a Liberation Day [speech](#), Moon Jae-in [suggests](#) that both Koreas would benefit from “institutionalizing peace” on the peninsula, to create a German-style trust-building system.

Aug. 18, 2021: More downbeat than usual, MOU Lee [urges](#) North Korea to return to talks soon, since “it is highly likely that the momentum for the peace process on the Korean Peninsula will weaken” due to the impact of various external factors.

Aug. 19, 2021: “Military sources” [tell](#) Yonhap that North Korea declared a no-sail zone off its east coast for Aug. 15-16. This usually precedes a missile launch (though Pyongyang often gives no such warning). South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) say that no such launch or other weapons test occurred.

Aug. 20, 2021: MOU [says](#) seven new video conference facilities for virtual separated family reunions, additional to and more widely located than the 13 that already exist, will be ready by the end of this month.

Aug. 26, 2021: As US-ROK drills conclude, Urimizokiri [calls](#) them “a dangerous playing with fire.” Since Kim Yo Jong’s salvos, Pyongyang’s criticism has been relatively muted.

Sept. 2, 2021: Speaking by videolink, MOU Lee [puzzles](#) a high-level Russian business conference in Vladivostok with lofty [vistas](#) of a special tourist zone on the east coast of both Koreas which could be expanded to Russia. None of this is in any official ROK plan, much less DPRK.

Sept. 2, 2021: ROK government sources [say](#) that almost 10,000 troops have been observed gathering at Pyongyang's Mirim Parade Training Ground, suggesting rehearsals for a major parade. This is [held](#), initially unannounced, in the small hours of Sept. 9: the 73rd anniversary of the DPRK's founding. No new [weapons](#) are displayed.

Sept. 2, 2021: Despite an almost three-year freeze in North-South relations, MOU [requests](#) 1.27 trillion won (\$1.1 billion) for the Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund in 2022, up 1.9% from this year's figure. 51% is earmarked for humanitarian aid, 46% for economic projects, and 3% for social and cultural exchanges. Despite the lack of activity currently, the ministry says it needs this budget "to brace for a possible change on the Korean peninsula."

Sept. 2, 2021: Moon Jae-in invites local governments to adopt the seven puppies born in June to Gomi, one of two Pungsan hunting dogs given to him in 2018 by Kim Jong Un, and sired by another Pungsan belonging to Moon.

Sept. 7, 2021: Lee In-young [tells](#) the National Assembly's foreign affairs and unification committee that in January-July North Korea's trade with China, its sole significant partner, fell 82% from the same period last year. It was 15 times higher before COVID-19.

Sept. 9, 2021: A day after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) suspends the DPRK from the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics as punishment for its refusal to participate in this year's Tokyo games, the Blue House [insists](#) it will continue to pursue inter-Korean sports diplomacy. There had been speculation that Moon Jae-in would try to use the Beijing games to reach out to Pyongyang.