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**NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS**

## WANING MOON, SUPERSONIC KIM

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Korea's leaders offered contrasting New Year addresses. While Moon Jae-in pledged to keep pursuing peace until he leaves the Blue House in May, Kim Jong Un said nothing about South Korea or the US. He sent his message soon after, however testing two hypersonic missiles. Moon kept pushing for a peace declaration, despite Washington being lukewarm and Kim Jong Un's sister Yo Jong saying explicitly that the time is not ripe. Evaluating Moon's *nordpolitik* more widely as his term winds down, his refusal to rethink policy after three years of Kim shunning him is puzzling. His successor, whoever it be, will pay Kim less heed. Voters will decide on March 9; the frontrunner is the liberal continuity candidate, Lee Jae-myung. Cocking a snook at both governments, a young gymnast who in late 2020 scaled and jumped border fences to escape from North Korea changed his mind and went back—the same way.

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## Ring Out the Old, Ring In the New

The start of a fresh year is often a time to stop and reflect, looking forward and back. In both North and South Korea, a New Year address by the nation's leader has become a tradition. The South is more consistent here, while the North's practice has varied. The late Kim Jong Il, averse to public speaking, preferred a more indirect method. For most of his 17-year reign (1994-2011) on Jan. 1 the DPRK's three main daily papers carried a joint editorial, which performed much the same function: reviewing the year just ended, and setting priorities for the one ahead.

In this as much else, after inheriting power on his father's death in late 2011, Kim Jong Un reverted to the style of his grandfather, the DPRK's founding leader Kim Il Sung. The latest Kim has no qualms about speechifying, and does a great deal of it. The habit of a New Year address was thus restored. The past three years have seen a variation on this. Kim still speaks, often at great length, but within the context of a wider meeting of the ruling Workers' Party (WPK). In [2020](#) this was a plenary meeting of the WPK Central Committee (CC). The start of 2021 saw a full Party [Congress](#): another institution which had lapsed under Kim Jong Il. And this time, it was a [Plenary](#) again—formally, the Fourth Plenary of the Eighth WPK CC—held on the last five days of 2021. One loss—for analysts, if no one else—is that the full text of Kim Jong Un's orations is no longer published, but only summaries. Those are immensely long and detailed; but as with all third-person accounts, one misses the [personal](#) touch.

South Korea, by contrast, has stuck with a freestanding presidential New Year address. This year's was Moon Jae-in's last. Elected in May 2017 after Park Geun-hye was impeached (she was later jailed for corruption; Moon pardoned her on Dec. 24), his five-year term of office must end in May 2022. On March 9 ROK voters will elect his successor, who in turn will serve five years in the Blue House through May 2027.

It is worth pondering the utterly different [time horizons](#) the leaders of the two Koreas face, a factor that affects their interactions, or absence thereof. The ROK's brisk electoral timetable allows each president little time to make their mark. Just five years, and then they are gone.

In Pyongyang, by contrast, communism has given way to de facto hereditary monarchy. Now

entering his second decade as supreme leader, Kim Jong Un has seen off three South Korean presidents and will soon face a fourth. Having turned 38 on Jan. 8, the latest Kim—who in 2021 finally took his personal health in hand, [visibly](#) shedding the pounds—might yet rule for another half-century. Even if he only lives as long as his father, who died aged 69 (officially, but in fact probably 70), Kim Jong Un will see—or maybe choose not to see—no fewer than seven future ROK presidents as yet unknown. Should he emulate his grandfather's longevity and reach 82, that number rises to nine.

A dismal prospect for North Korea's foes, and indeed most of its citizens, such continuity permits a consistency of policy and long-term planning which South Korea lacks. With no bipartisan consensus on how to handle the North, every five years each new leader in Seoul in effect starts over afresh. While a few seek to build on their predecessors' achievements, such as Roh Moo-hyun after Kim Dae-jung during the "sunshine" decade (1998-2007), more often they change tack. Some even repudiate past policy: notably the conservative Lee Myung-bak (2008-13), who deliberately failed to implement the many concrete inter-Korean economic projects agreed by the liberal Roh at the second North-South summit in Pyongyang in 2007.

Now 80 and serving a 17-year [sentence](#) for corruption, Lee could die in jail unless pardoned like his successor Park—a fellow conservative, but bitter rival. One wonders whether, with much time to reflect, Lee might now judge this de facto abrogation a [mistake](#). His [memoirs](#), undiplomatically frank, reveal that having walked away from Roh's 2007 commitments, he then spent much effort secretly trying to mend fences with Pyongyang. Next, it was Park's turn: [veering](#) wildly from *trustpolitik* to hailing unification as a likely bonanza. (For more granular detail on all these ups and downs, the past 20 years of *Comparative Connections*—including as they do a chronology—are a valuable cumulative resource, if also depressing to re-read, given the persistent failure to make any lasting progress in inter-Korean relations.)

### Evaluating Moon's 'Nordpolitik'

With Moon soon to leave office, the fear is—depending who succeeds him, more on which later—of another Year Zero, as yet another president starts once more from scratch. At all events, it is timely not only to review the past fourth months—in truth, not a lot happened—

but also to look back on Moon's presidency and his inter-Korean policy overall.

Let us borrow a term coined by another Roh -- the recently deceased Roh Tae-woo, president during 1988-93, who pioneered outreach to North Korea and beyond. On his watch the ROK forged relations with almost the entire communist and post-communist world, except Cuba: first Hungary, then the USSR (soon to be Russia), all of eastern Europe, and in Asia the still communist-ruled but now market-oriented China and Vietnam, against which 300,000 ROK troops—including Lt. Col. Roh—fought fiercely for the then South Vietnam in the 1960s. Adapting German Chancellor Willy Brandt's term for his outreach to East Germany and its allies, *Ostpolitik* Roh dubbed his own ambitious and hugely successful diplomatic blitzkrieg *Nordpolitik*. Pyongyang seethed, impotently. As wags put it: Despite talk of more balanced cross-recognition, Seoul got all the recognition—while Pyongyang just got cross.

All that was achieved 30 years ago. Since then *nordpolitik* has reverted to a more literal and narrower usage in Seoul, simply meaning South Korea's policy toward North Korea.

How to evaluate Moon Jae-in's *nordpolitik*? Unlike his immediate predecessors Park and Lee, he at least had the virtue of consistency, and to some degree transparency. Both at home and abroad, not least in Pyongyang, Moon was a known quantity. A former chief of staff to Roh Moo-hyun, whom he accompanied to North Korea in 2007, Moon shares his mentor's engagement approach. Already in 2012 when he first ran for the presidency, losing narrowly to Park, he [proposed](#) an ambitious "Inter-Korean Economic Union" for mutual prosperity. His victory second time around in 2017 gave him the chance to put his ideas into practice.

Early on, during the *annus mirabilis* of 2018, Moon's dream seemed to be coming true. Three inter-Korean summits in six months—more than during the previous 73 years of division—plus three substantial-seeming agreements (one of them military), raised hopes that Kim Jong Un was serious and "sunshine" might resume. Not so, it turned out. Ever since the debacle of Donald Trump's second summit with Kim in Hanoi in February 2019, North Korea (and Kim personally) have largely ignored Moon, and sometimes insulted him. All various forms of cooperation that began so hopefully in 2018 stopped dead in

2019, and have remained stalled for almost three years now. Nothing is happening. There is no peace process. It is dead.



Figure 1 A South Korean soldier works to recover the remains of a fallen soldier from the 1950-53 Korean War inside the Demilitarized Zone. Photo: Yonhap

The question is why. The puzzle is that Moon seems not to ask this or consider any reset of policy, but instead carries on as if all were well and the hiatus is just a blip. To most neutral observers, it looks as if Kim was merely using Moon in 2018 to access Trump. That goal achieved, and after Trump walked out instead of granting the expected and much-needed sanctions relief, the Northern leader had no further need of or interest in his Southern counterpart. Kim may also have blamed Moon for leading him into this humiliating fiasco.

Elsewhere, meanwhile, the sole lasting fruit of Kim's busy summitry in 2018 is that the DPRK's ties with China have blossomed. Overall, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Kim has given up on any hope of progress with his enemies, and chosen instead to nestle under Beijing's wing (not that either side would put it thus). No other interpretation seems plausible.

Dismaying as this turn of events must be to Moon, it demands explanation, evaluation, and policy adjustment. Eschewing any of that, Moon carries blithely on as if there were still an inter-Korean peace process, albeit in abeyance pro tem. All the bad-mouthing, the gratuitous violence, like petulantly blowing up the inter-Korean liaison office which the South built and paid for, Kim's explicit rejection of cooperation by Kim (as with the former Mt. Kumgang tourist zone, where ROK-owned property costing over \$400 million is also under threat of demolition) ... None of this seems to give Moon pause for thought or cause to reconsider.

### ‘Peace Declaration’: Quixotic Quest?

Instead, his main energies recently have been devoted to the idea of securing a Korean peace declaration, sometimes known as an end-of-war declaration (EOWD). In a journal organized around bilateral relationships, it is hard to know where to file this amorphous idea. As Jeff Beck sang, “You’re everywhere and nowhere, baby.” Only here, critics see no silver lining.

The 1950–53 Korean War famously ended with an Armistice, but no peace treaty. This fact prompts some to indulge in tiresome and unhelpful tropes about “the world’s longest war.” Enough already. Anyone who has ever faced real gunfire knows that, though tensions persist, since 1953 the Korean Peninsula has thankfully been at peace for almost 70 years. Windy rhetoric misleads and muddies the waters. It also begs the key question: to tackle today’s security concerns effectively—rather than yesterday’s unfinished business symbolically—what should be done, who should do it, and which side must move first?

The EOWD falls short of an official peace treaty, which would need intricate diplomacy. Moon seems to think that if all concerned—the two Koreas, the US, and China—formally declare that yesterday’s war is over, this will somehow unlock progress on today’s pressing issues, notably North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. Yet there are many grounds for skepticism. Given acute mutual mistrust and the DPRK’s record of tearing up accords it has grown tired of—e.g., its unique withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003—it is hard to see how a mere form of words and a fresh piece of paper can make much difference. Who would sleep easier, or act differently, with an EOWD in place?



Figure 2 Image of an artillery competition conducted with the aim of “inspecting and evaluating how the mechanized troops of the KPA have conducted drills in order to increase their mobile artillery combat capabilities” released by KCNA. Photo: Yonhap

At the very least, as a recent sympathetic [critique](#) argues, any EOWD should not be merely symbolic, but “attached to practical steps for peace and denuclearization.” It should be part of a negotiating process, not seen as a separate precondition or catalyst. Sterner critics reject the whole concept as premature, rewarding Pyongyang before it has done anything to earn that. *The Korea Herald* headlined a survey of US specialists’ views [thus](#): “Risky gambit, with little chance of payoff.” While rehearsing arguments on both sides, author Ji Da-gyum found that:

“The majority sees more risk than opportunity, with adverse ramifications for the security of the Korean Peninsula, the South Korea-US alliance, American deterrence and the status of the United Nations Command. There is also concern that a symbolic and nonbinding end-of-war declaration would legitimize North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons.”

Reflecting such doubts, the Biden administration is distinctly lukewarm. China, by contrast, supports the idea. But the clincher, you would have thought, is that even North Korea regards this as untimely. That was made clear by Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong, who in recent years has emerged as a spokesperson especially on relations with South Korea and the US. Her style is interestingly different—more readable, sometimes quirkier—than most DPRK boilerplate (see Appendix). But given who she is, and how North Korean media for external audiences highlight her remarks, her utterances are undoubtedly authoritative.

On Sept. 24, in one of several published comments by her that month, Kim Yo Jong

directly [addressed](#) “the issue of the declaration of the termination of the war on the Korean [P]eninsula.” The context was “President Moon Jae In”—she has not always been so respectful—raising this proposal at the UN General Assembly. The good news for Moon is that she called this “an interesting and an admirable idea,” which North and South had discussed “on several occasions in the past.” However, “it is necessary to look into whether it is right time now [sic] and whether there are conditions ripe for discussing this issue.” On that, she is negative:

“Now double-dealing standards, prejudice and hostile policies toward the DPRK and speeches and acts antagonizing us persist. Under such situation it does not make any sense to declare the end of the war with all the things, which may become a seed of a war between parties that had been at odds for more than half a century, left intact.”

Kim is very clear. Like the US, if for different reasons, North Korea’s view is that an EOWD now would be premature. Yet Moon refuses to hear the message. In December, on a state visit to Australia—itsself an interesting and increasingly important bilateral relationship—he caused a stir by declaring that all the parties have agreed on an EOWD “in principle.” That generated [headlines](#) around the world, as if this were hard news or new news when in fact it was neither. If not exactly fake news, this was highly misleading. I was surely not alone in finding myself fending off media enquiries, from excited broadcasters who assumed Moon must be saying something substantial. It was sad to tell them there was no story: nothing to see here. An EOWD is not happening nor about to happen, however dearly Moon wishes it.

### **The Year Turns: Food, Silence, Fences—and Missiles**

Various facets of the current state of play between the two Koreas were highlighted in a series of largely unrelated recent events, as the old year ended and a new one began.

Speculation that in December North Korea would officially mark Kim Jong Un’s first decade in power proved unfounded. Despite [suggestions](#) that Kim is increasingly bigging up his own status, anniversary events instead focused on respectfully mourning his late father Kim Jong Il. Similarly, predictions that Kim’s birthday (Jan. 8) would this year be added to those of his father

(Feb. 16) and grandfather (April 15) as official red-letter days turned out to be wrong. The date came and went, unmarked and unremarked.

What Kim did do, as often and as noted above, was to hold a big meeting: the Party plenary. Though he spoke at great length, for our purposes the striking thing is what he did not say. Unusually the Plenary’s focus was almost wholly domestic, with attention focused on agriculture: yet more evidence that food supply is a growing problem (no pun intended).

Conversely, and perhaps unprecedentedly, Kim had no message whatsoever for the outside world. South Korea, accustomed to being annually admonished or attacked in these New Year orations or editorials by Kim and his predecessors, was not expecting to be simply ignored.

Indeed, the silence was broader. As the ROK daily *Hankyoreh* [noted](#), the rest of the world was dispatched in a single vague sentence: “The conclusion set forth principled issues and a series of tactical orientations, all of which should be maintained by the sectors of the north-south relations and external affairs to cope with the rapidly changing international political situation and the circumstances in the surroundings.”

That was all. No railing against hostile forces; no rants about double-dealing. Nor, equally unusually, was there any reference to the nuclear and missile programs, strategic weapons et al. These striking lacunae prompted some prematurely optimistic instant commentary. Not a few analysts inferred that North Korea has turned inward, preoccupied by internal problems such as food shortages, and hence will not be bothering the rest of us for a while. The two hypersonic missiles launched in early January scotched that sanguine interpretation.

A better reading of the Plenary and its silences is twofold. One is hedging. Kim is waiting to see who will succeed Moon Jae-in, and whether Joe Biden will come up with any concrete proposals. So he has nothing particular to say to foes at this time. Second, why bother with words when you have the option of deeds? This time, the missiles are the message.

Days after the Pyongyang plenary, but just before that brace of missiles, Moon Jae-in sent his own swansong message. In a wide-ranging final New Year [address](#) as ROK president on Jan. 3, among

much else Moon summed up his take on inter-Korean peace issues thus:

“Amid the touch-and-go crisis on the brink of escalating into a full-scale war at the start of my Administration, we opened the door for inter-Korean dialogue and worked to lay a path toward peace. Even though complete peace has not come yet and tensions simmer at times, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is being managed more stably than ever. Because we have suffered war and remained a divided nation, peace is more valuable than anything else. Peace is an essential prerequisite for prosperity. However, peace is prone to disruptions unless it is institutionalized. I will do everything possible until my last day in office. We must not forget the fact that the current hard-earned peace has been built and sustained through inter-Korean dialogue and North Korea-US talks at our initiative.” And later: “We will not cease the efforts to institutionalize a peace, which is as yet incomplete, through the end of my term to make it sustainable.”

### **After Moon, Who?**

That is a fair and balanced summary, not unduly self-serving. The question, for Moon and generally, is whether his successor will continue those efforts in the same way: in particular the quest to “institutionalize” peace in the form of an EOWD. One suspects not, even if his Democratic Party (DPK) retains power for the next five years.

When the next issue of *Comparative Connections* comes out, in mid-May, Moon’s successor will just have started work. A few words now on who that might be, and what they may do, are thus in order. Currently leading in the polls is the continuity candidate: the DPK’s Lee Jae-myung, a former provincial governor. The initial front-runner Yoon Seok-yeol, a former prosecutor-general standing for the conservative opposition People Power Party (PPP), has seen his lead erode amid a series of gaffes, scandals, and intra-party rows. In a new twist, recent opinion polls suggest that a third candidate, the centrist ex-entrepreneur and educator Ahn Cheol-soo, could beat Lee were he to ally with the PPP, a ploy both sides reject, for now. But winning is sweet, so who knows what may happen before election day on March 9.

What difference will the outcome make to inter-Korean relations? Perhaps [less](#) than might be

supposed. The presumption that conservatives are more hawkish toward North Korea while liberals tend to be doves is not wrong, but too simple. Lee Jae-myung, while he shares Moon’s broad approach and attitudes (although personally they are not close), is very much focused on domestic issues of social and economic justice. Yoon, a political newbie (and oh boy, it shows), has sounded open to inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation, but recently caused a stir by seeming to [advocate](#) a pre-emptive strike on the North’s hypersonic missiles. If elected, hopefully professional advisers would head off any such recklessness.

Whoever wins, on past precedent it will take time for the two sides to size each other up. And maybe nothing much will happen, for both have bigger fish to fry. Kim Jong Un does indeed confront pressing domestic economic issues. Externally, as the latest missile launches show, the attention he seeks is in Washington rather than Seoul. The fond idea of South Korea as a go-between, like in 2018, has had its day. For North Korea, the US is the only foe that matters, and China is the only friend it needs. This leaves no obvious role for Seoul.

But in any case the next ROK president will also have much on his plate: COVID-19 and the economy at home, while abroad US-Chinese tensions and their impact will loom larger than anything Kim is likely to do. (I hope that statement does not prove a hostage to fortune.)

### **Double Defection: Jumping Gymnast Heads Home**

Meanwhile, far from weighty affairs of state, on Jan. 1 a single obscure, diminutive individual made his own choice between the two Koreas—for the second time. Attentive readers may [recall](#) (see Nov. 24 in the Chronology) a DPRK defector who in November 2020 turned up on the southern side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), having made the perilous crossing unscathed and (to the embarrassment of the ROK military) undetected. A former gymnast, he had to demonstrate his jumping prowess to Southern authorities to convince them he could have scaled border fences as he claimed. Their skepticism was understandable. “Jumping gymnast” might suggest a lithe six-footer, but Kim Woo-joo (unnamed officially, but identified by fellow-defectors) stood under five feet tall and weighed barely 110 pounds.



## Appendix: Two Statements by Kim Yo Jong, September 2021

### I. Pyongyang, September [24](#) (*Korean Central News Agency*)

- Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, made public the following press statement on Friday:

President Moon Jae In again proposed the issue of the declaration of the termination of the war on the Korean peninsula at the 76th UN General Assembly.

The declaration of the termination of the war is an interesting and an admirable idea in that it itself is meant to put a physical end to the instable state of ceasefire that has remained on the Korean [P]eninsula for a long time and to withdraw hostility toward the opposite party.

We discussed the declaration of the termination of the war on several occasions in the past as we acknowledged the necessity and significance of the declaration of the termination of the war, an initial step for establishing a peace-keeping mechanism on the Korean peninsula.

There is nothing wrong in the declaration of the termination of the war itself.

But it is necessary to look into whether it is right time now and whether there are conditions ripe for discussing this issue.

Now double-dealing standards, prejudice and hostile policies toward the DPRK and speeches and acts antagonizing us persist. Under such situation it does not make any sense to declare the end of the war with all the things, which may become a seed of a war between parties that had been at odds for more than half a century, left intact.

Smiling a forced smile, reading the declaration of the termination of the war and having photos taken could be essential for somebody but I think that they would hold no water and would change nothing, given the existing inequality, serious contradiction there-from and hostilities.

For the termination of the war to be declared, respect for each other should be maintained and prejudiced viewpoint, inveterate hostile policy

and unequal double standards must be removed first.

What needs to be dropped is the double-dealing attitudes, illogical prejudice, bad habits and hostile stand of justifying their own acts while faulting our just exercise of the right to self-[defense].

Only when such a precondition is met, would it be possible to sit face to face and declare the significant termination of war and discuss the issue of the north-south relations and the future of the Korean [P]eninsula.

South Korea had better pay attention to fulfilling such a condition in order to make durable and complete peace truly take its firm roots on the Korean [P]eninsula, as always touted by it.

We have willingness to keep our close contacts with the south again and have constructive discussion with it about the restoration and development of the bilateral relations if it is careful about its future language and not hostile toward us after breaking with the past when it often provoked us and made far-fetched assertions to find fault with anything done by us out of double-dealing standards.

### II. Pyongyang, September [25](#) (*Korean Central News Agency*)

- Kim Yo Jong, vice department director of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, made public the following press statement on Saturday:

I have carefully watched the moves of the south Korean political circle yesterday and today after the release of a press statement reflecting our transparent view and due demands.

I felt that the atmosphere of the south Korean public desiring to recover the inter-Korean relations from a deadlock and achieve peaceful stability as soon as possible is irresistibly strong.

We, too, have the same desire.

There is no need for the north and the south to waste time faulting each other and engaging in a war of words at present, I think.

If south Korea sincerely wants the inter-Korean relations to be recovered and to make sound

development, it should think twice to make a right choice before saying anything.

For instance, it had better stop spouting an imprudent remark of "provocation" against us that may trigger a war of words.

Explicitly speaking once again, we can never tolerate double standards.

The US and south Korean-style double standards towards the DPRK by which the DPRK's actions of self-defensive dimension to cope with the military circumstances and possible military threats existing on the Korean peninsula are dismissed as threatening "provocations" and their arms buildup are described as the "securing of a deterrent to north Korea" are illogical and childish and are a blunt disregard of and challenge to the sovereignty of the DPRK.

South Korea must not try to upset the balance of military force on the Korean Peninsula with such illogical and childish absurd assertion just as the U.S. does.

I only hope that the south Korean authorities' moves to remove the tinderbox holding double standards bereft of impartiality, the hostile policy toward the DPRK, all the prejudices and hostile remarks undermining trust are shown in visible practice.

I think that only when impartiality and the attitude of respecting each other are maintained, can there be smooth understanding between the north and the south and, furthermore, can several issues for improving the relations - the reestablishment of the north-south joint liaison office and the north-south summit, to say nothing of the timely declaration of the significant termination of the war - see meaningful and successful solution one by one at an early date through constructive discussions.

Here, I would like to emphasize that this is just my personal view.

I made my advisory opinion for south Korea to make a correct choice known in August.

I won't predict here what there will come—a balmy breeze or a storm.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## SEPTEMBER—DECEMBER 2021

**Sept. 2, 2021:** Speaking by videolink, South Korea's Minister of Unification (MOU), Lee In-young [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 the DPRK's.

**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: 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, the ROK Ministry of Unification (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. Notwithstanding 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:** ROK President Moon Jae-in invites local governments to adopt the seven puppies born in June to Gomi, one of two Pungsan breed hunting dogs given to him in 2018 by Kim Jong Un, and sired by another Pungsan belonging to Moon.

**Sept. 7, 2021:** MOU Lee In-young [tells](#) the National Assembly 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 had been 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](#) the ROK 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.

**Sept. 12, 2021:** ESTsecurity, a South Korean cybersecurity firm, [claims](#) that hackers thought to be linked to Pyongyang have sent fake phishing emails to try to steal data from members of an expert panel advising the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND).

**Sept. 14, 2021:** MOU [says](#) that henceforth all 243 ROK municipalities will be allowed to operate aid projects with the DPRK independently of central government. Hitherto only a dozen had permission, and before 2019 they had to have an NGO as a partner. All this is notional, as North Korea currently refuses any cooperation with the South.

**Sept. 15, 2021:** ROK successfully [tests](#) its own submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), becoming the seventh nation to have this capacity. President Moon, who watched, [says](#) the timing is unconnected to Pyongyang's firing two BMs hours earlier. "However, our enhanced missile power can be a sure-fire deterrent to North Korea's provocation."

**Sept. 15, 2021:** In a rapid response, Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Yo Jong, [calls](#) Moon Jae-in's use of the term "provocation from the north" earlier that day "an improper remark ... slip of tongue ... too stupid to be fit for the 'president of a state'" and a "thoughtless utterance ... which might be fitting for hack journalists." The Blue House [says](#) it will not react.

**Sept. 20, 2021:** Pyongyang media [publish](#) a longish (1,200 words) semi-technical article by Jang Chang Ha, president of the DPRK Academy of National Defense. As per the headline “Clumsy SLBM Launch of South Korea,” this pooh-pooh’s Seoul’s Sept. 15 missile test as “just in the stage of elementary step” (sic) and “clearly not SLBM.”

**Sept. 20, 2021:** South Korean police [say](#) that on Sept. 17 they caught an unnamed defector, a man in his 30s who arrived in 2018, trying to return to the DPRK near Chorwon in the central sector of the DMZ. He had four mobile phones and “a cutting machine” (presumably wire-cutters).

**Sept. 23, 2021:** Belatedly, ROK police [reveal](#) they are also holding another regretful DPRK defector, a woman in her 60s. At 0340 on Sept. 13 she approached a soldier at the heavily guarded Tongil Bridge in Paju, gateway to Dorasan Station (the border crossing to Kaesong), and said she wanted to go home.

**Sept. 24, 2021:** In more honeyed tones than on Sept. 15, Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) “President Moon Jae In’s” (she uses his official title) proposal of a “declaration of the termination of the war on the Korean Peninsula at the 76th UN General Assembly” “an interesting and an admirable idea.” However, the timing is not right as long as “double-dealing standards, prejudice and hostile policies toward the DPRK and speeches and acts antagonizing us persist.”

**Sept. 24, 2021:** MOU [says](#) it will provide 10 billion won (\$8.5 million) to help civilian NGOs offer nutrition and health aid to North Korea, with up to 500 million won for each project. It admits this is hypothetical as long as Pyongyang remains unresponsive.

**Sept. 25, 2021:** In her second “press statement” in as many days, and her third this month, Kim Yo Jong [reiterates](#) that in order to end the “deadlock” in inter-Korean relations, as both sides desire, the South “had better stop spouting an imprudent remark of ‘provocation’ against us.” She concludes: “I won’t predict here what there will come – a balmy breeze or a storm.”

**Sept. 26, 2021:** MOU [calls](#) Kim Yo Jong’s recent remarks “meaningful,” but insists that so as to resume dialogue, “inter-Korean communication lines should first be swiftly restored.”

**Sept. 28, 2021:** Following another DPRK missile launch, after being briefed at an emergency session of the National Security Council (NSC) President Moon [orders](#) a “comprehensive and close analysis” of North Korea’s recent words and deeds to ascertain Pyongyang’s intentions.

**Oct. 1, 2021:** Aboard an ROK navy ship to mark Armed Forces Day, Moon Jae-in [declares](#): “I have pride in our solid security posture.” Hours earlier, the DPRK carried out its third missile launch in two weeks.

**Oct. 1, 2021:** Despite Kim Jong Un telling the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) on Sept. 29 that inter-Korean hotlines will be restored in early October, MOU [reports](#) that North Korea is still not answering the South’s twice-daily calls.

**Oct. 11, 2021:** Opening an unprecedented Defence Development Exhibition (DDE), Kim Jong Un [waxes](#) Freudian about the missiles on display: “The more we stroke them ... the greater dignity and pride we feel ... they are ours.” Accusing Seoul of a “hypocritical and brigandish double-dealing attitude” for its own military build-up, Kim insists: “I want to reiterate that south Korea is not the target of our armed forces ... Our arch-enemy is the war itself, not south Korea, the United States or any other specific state or forces.”

**Oct. 12, 2021:** Responding to Kim’s critique, Seoul [calls](#) for resumed dialogue to narrow differences. MOU comments that inter-Korean relations cannot be resolved just by one side issuing unilateral demands.

**Oct. 14, 2021:** Following a regular NSC meeting, the Blue House says, as *Yonhap* [headlines](#) it, that “S. Korea aims to swiftly reopen talks with N. Korea.” Three months later, that aim remains unachieved.

**Oct. 19, 2021:** North Korea fires a suspected SLBM. South Korea’s NSC [expresses](#) “deep regret.” The timing may be no accident:

**Oct. 19-23, 2021:** South Korea [holds](#) its largest ever arms fair, the biennial International Aerospace and Defence Exhibition (ADEX). Unlike the North’s internally oriented DDE, this is internationally focused with attendees from 45 countries, including Russia but not China. President Moon arrives in style, in an air force jet fighter jet.

**Oct. 20, 2021:** Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong [tells](#) the ROK National Assembly: “We should take some actions to prevent North Korea from further developing its nuclear and missile capabilities ... Sanctions relief can be considered as part of efforts (sic), on condition that the North accepts the dialogue proposal.”

**Oct. 22, 2021:** After North Korea [tests](#) a new type of SLBM, South Korea’s NSC [reaffirms](#) that stability is paramount, tensions must not be raised, and dialogue should resume.

**Oct. 28, 2021:** Yonhap [notes](#) that Pyongyang has yet to comment on the death on Oct. 26 of former ROK President Roh Tae-woo (in office 1988-93), a pioneer in improving North-South relations. Their silence is not broken subsequently. DPRK media [references](#) to Roh have been consistently hostile, focusing on his earlier role as a coup-maker in 1979-80.

**Oct. 28, 2021:** Not for the first time, nor the last, South Korea [claims](#) to detect signs that the North is preparing to reopen its border with China. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) tells lawmakers that the main Sinuiju-Dandong railway crossing could be running again by November. As of mid-January this has yet to happen.

**Oct. 28, 2021:** NIS chief Park Jie-won [says](#) it is “possible” North Korea may agree to talks on a peace declaration without preconditions. That seems unlikely, since his agency also reports that Pyongyang’s demands before even discussing this include lifting sanctions and an end to joint US-ROK war games.

**Oct. 28, 2021:** In further comments, the NIS [says](#) Kim Jong Un has lost 20 kilos (44 pounds) in weight, but has no health issues. The DPRK is using the term “Kimjongunism” internally, while portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il no longer hang over official meetings.

**Nov. 1, 2021:** MOU [urges](#) the DPRK to respond to the Pope’s willingness to visit Pyongyang.

**Nov. 1, 2021:** In Glasgow, Scotland for the annual UN climate conference, Moon Jae-in [says](#) South Korea will seek to cut greenhouse gas emissions on the peninsula by jointly planting trees with the North. *The Korea Herald* [questions](#) the feasibility of this, since inter-Korean talks on forestry have been stalled (like everything else) since [2018](#).

**Nov. 2, 2021:** MOU [reports](#) that Unification Minister Lee In-young, who accompanied Moon to Europe, had meetings in Geneva to discuss DPRK humanitarian issues with the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and with representatives of the Red Cross. The impact of these endeavors is unclear, as North Korea continues to refuse aid—especially from South Korea.

**Nov. 8, 2021:** One day after KCNA [reports](#) an “artillery fire competition” involving “artillery sub-units under mechanized troops at all levels,” with top KPA generals present, MOU [notes](#) that the DPRK conducts various military drills. Seoul will monitor such moves “rather than prejudging North Korea’s intentions.”

**Nov. 10, 2021:** MOU Lee [opines](#) that inter-Korean medical co-operation is “inevitable.” North Korea appears to take a different view.

**Nov. 10, 2021:** Citing “legal sources,” Yonhap [reports](#) that prosecutors in Suwon indicted a defector, a woman in her 40s, as an DPRK agent tasked with persuading other defectors to return home. On Nov. 23, now identified as Song Chun-son, aka “Agent [Chrysanthemum](#),” she is jailed for three years, despite insisting she acted under duress. (This *New York Times* [report](#) well portrays the dilemmas involved.)

**Nov. 11, 2021:** MOU Lee [says](#) the ROK will “comprehensively review” whether or not to co-sponsor the annual UN resolution on North Korean human rights, drafted by the European Union. Predictably, the Moon administration once again declines to do this.

**Nov. 12, 2021:** MOU [anticipates](#), wrongly, that in December North Korea will hold events to celebrate Kim Jong Un’s first decade in power, saying this is needed “to strengthen internal unity.” Instead, the DPRK solemnly marks the 10th anniversary of Kim Jong Il’s death.

**Nov. 18, 2021:** MOU Lee tells a forum in Seoul: “23 years ago today, the historic Mount Kungang tourism project ... got under way. As soon as the circumstances are met, we will have serious consultations with the North on creating a joint special tourism zone on the east coast.” In reality, Kim Jong Un has explicitly [repudiated](#) any such cooperation.

**Nov. 19, 2021:** MOU [announces](#) plans to construct a new database center on unification at Goyang, on Seoul's northwestern outskirts. This will replace the Information Center on North Korea, founded in 1989 and currently housed in the National Library of Korea in southern Seoul (which is short of space). Costing an estimated 44.5 billion won (\$37.6 million), the new building is due to be completed by end-2025.

**Nov. 23, 2021:** Do Hee-youn, head of the Citizens' Coalition for Human Rights of Abductees and North Korean Refugees, [says](#) he has submitted a formal application to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on behalf of the family of Lee Han-young, asking that his death be investigated. Lee, a nephew of Kim Jong Il's former wife Song Hye-rim, defected in 1982. In 1997 he was shot dead in Seoul by suspected North Korean agents.

**Nov. 24, 2021:** MND [says](#) the ROK military has completed excavations at White Horse Ridge, a Korean War battle site inside the DMZ. 37 bone fragments from 22 soldiers were recovered, plus 8,262 items including combat gear. Though meant to be a joint inter-Korean project, the South proceeded alone as the North pulled out before work started.

**Nov. 26, 2021:** A poll of 1,000 South Koreans by the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council [finds](#) that over half (53.9%) reckon an inter-Korean summit at the Beijing Winter Olympics is impossible. Surprisingly, 40.1% think this is possible.

**Nov. 30, 2021:** Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) the ROK state to pay 26 million won (\$22,000) to a defector couple—later divorced, and one now deceased—who on arrival in 2013 were detained at an NIS facility for almost twice the maximum legal limit of 90 days. They had sued for 210 million won, but the court rejected their allegations of harsh treatment.

**Nov. 30, 2021:** MOU [says](#) it has approved three applications by NGOs to send healthcare aid to North Korea. No further details are provided.

**Dec. 3, 2021:** Despite frozen North-South ties, the National Assembly [approves](#) a 2% rise over 2021 in MOU's budget next year, to 1.5 trillion won (\$1.3 billion). The 1.27 trillion won for inter-Korean cooperation includes a new 31.1 billion heading for local governments' cooperation with the North, and 200 million won to counter fake news. Support for defectors is cut by 2.7% to 95.2 billion won, as the numbers arriving have fallen sharply.

**Dec. 6, 2021:** MOU [elaborates](#) on the need "for a more systematic monitoring due to the frequent spread of false, fabricated information on North Korea on new media platforms which led to various negative consequences, including the distortion of policy environment." Its website already has a section to scotch false media reports. Whether purveyors of untruth will be [penalized](#) is unclear.

**Dec. 9, 2021:** *Joongang Ilbo*, Seoul's leading center-right daily, [says](#) it has been told by "a high-ranking Blue House official" that "we have continued to communicate with North Korea" about an end-of-war declaration. This is the first confirmation that a top-level channel to Pyongyang exists. Its precise nature is not disclosed.

**Dec. 9, 2021:** MOU survey of 5,354 members of separated families—among a total of 47,004 persons registered as such—[finds](#) that the great majority (82%) have no data on the fate of their Northern kin. Of the lucky 18%, half said they obtained the information through private sources or NGOs: twice as many as the few who got this via the government. On background, MOU notes that this elderly cohort are dying at a rate of about ten per day, so time is running out for any more family reunions; the last was in 2018.

**Dec. 12, 2021:** In Canberra, President Moon says that both Koreas, China, and the US have agreed "in principle" to declare a formal end to the Korean War. This makes [headlines](#), even though Moon admits no talks are yet possible because Pyongyang objects to US "hostility."

**Dec. 15, 2021:** NIS [warns](#) that, ahead of next March's presidential election, hackers may (in Yonhap's summary) "beef up attempts to steal information on Seoul's North Korea policy and other security issues." It points no finger at who in particular might seek to do this.

**Dec. 16, 2021:** MOU [claims](#) that North Korea's private sector has steadily grown during Kim Jong Un's decade in power. Based on surveying successive cohorts of defectors, with a cut-off point in 2020, this contradicts or misses what most analysts [regard](#) as a significant and ongoing rollback of reform during the past two years.

**Dec. 21, 2021:** Heartbreaking data from MOU [reveal](#) that of 24,007 video letters produced by separated family members since 2005, only 20 have actually been sent to North Korea (in 2008).

**Dec. 22, 2021:** MOU Lee In-young [warns](#) that the peninsula's geopolitics in 2022 will reach an "extremely critical juncture," with uncertainties including the ROK presidential election. For the umpteenth time, Lee urges Pyongyang to talk: "We have finished preparations to start inter-Korean dialogue at any time, anywhere, regardless of agenda and form."

**Dec. 22, 2021:** Two ROK experts [claim](#) the DPRK economy does not face imminent crisis, as imports of crude oil and fertilizer have continued despite sanctions and COVID-19 curbs.

**Dec. 27, 2021:** MOU [says](#): "We hope North Korea will start the new year by opening the door for dialogue ... and take a step forward for engagement and cooperation."

**Dec. 27-31, 2021:** North Korea [holds](#) the 4th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee at WPK headquarters in Pyongyang. This turns out to be heavily domestic-focused, especially on agriculture. At least as reported, nothing whatever is said about South Korea—nor the US, nor the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs.

**Dec. 29, 2021:** Family of Lee Dae-jun, the ROK fisheries official [killed](#) by DPRK forces in Northern waters in September 2020 (see our earlier report [here](#)), [apply](#) for an injunction to stop whatever information the Blue House holds on this incident being designated as presidential records, meaning access would be restricted. They fear this is why the Blue House National Security Office (NSO) and the Coast Guard are appealing a court ruling last month, ordering them to share all data they have with the family.

**Jan. 2, 2022:** First reports [come in](#) that a man has entered North Korea from the South by crossing the DMZ.

**Jan. 3, 2022:** In his final New Year's [speech](#) as ROK President, Moon Jae-in [says](#) he will pursue an "irreversible path to peace" on the peninsula until his term ends in May: "I will not stop efforts to institutionalize sustainable peace ... If we [the two Koreas] resume dialogue and cooperation, the international community will respond ... I hope efforts for dialogue will continue in the next administration too."

**Jan. 3, 2022:** South Korea's Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) it has had no response from North Korea to a message it sent on Jan. 2 via the western military communication line, urging the North to protect the border-crosser. Another report [clarifies](#) that while Pyongyang did acknowledge receipt of the message, sent twice, it made no comment on the protection request. MND also confirms the man's identity as being the same person who had arrived by a similar route across the DMZ in November 2020.

**Jan. 4, 2022:** Amid reports that last week's presumed returnee defector was suffering financial problems in South Korea, MOU [insists](#) the man—who worked as a cleaner—had received due resettlement support from the ROK government.

**Jan. 5, 2022:** After investigating Jan. 1's redefector border crossing, the ROK JCS [report](#) that the man crossed into North Korea despite being caught five times on military surveillance cameras. General Won In-choul, the JCS chairman, admits: "We failed to carry out given duties properly ... I apologize for causing concerns to the people."

**Jan. 5, 2022:** President Moon [urges](#) the ROK military to "have a special sense of alert and responsibility." Calling the "failure of security operations ... a grave problem that should not have happened," he demands a special inspection of front-line units to ensure no repetition.

**Jan. 5, 2022:** ROK JCS [reports](#) that North Korea fired an apparent ballistic missile over the East Sea (Sea of Japan). South Korea's presidential National Security Council convenes, is briefed, and expresses concern. This is Pyongyang's first such launch in 2022; its last was an SLBM in October. Two more missile tests (so far) follow, on Jan. 12 and 14.

**Jan. 5, 2022:** Reacting to Pyongyang's missile launch, President Moon [voices](#) "concerns that tensions could rise and a stalemate of inter-Korean relations could further deepen." Yet South Korea should not give up on dialogue, and "North Korea also should make efforts in a more earnest manner."

**Jan. 6, 2022:** ROK government [says](#) that next month it will launch a new inter-agency team, including MOU and the police, to support vulnerable defectors from the North. Last year MOU's biannual survey found that 1,582 defectors needed help additional to the basic support package that all ex-DPRK arrivals receive. Almost half (47%) spoke of having psychological problems.

**Jan. 6, 2022:** *Korea Times* [profiles](#) Tim Peters, a Seoul-based US activist whose NGO, Helping Hands Korea, has since 1996 helped over 1,000 North Koreans in China to safety in third countries. Despite the pandemic, in 2020 HHK enabled more such evacuations than ever before as hitherto hidden sub-groups, such as the elderly or disabled, came to light.

**Jan. 10, 2022:** MOU [says](#) it is monitoring any potential changes in how North Korea handles COVID-19, such as easing its current strict border controls, after *Rodong Sinmun*—the main DPRK daily, organ of the ruling Workers' Party (WPK)—avers that "we need to move to a better advanced, people-oriented epidemic work from one that focused on control measures."

**Jan. 10, 2022:** Refuting recently [publicized](#) research [claiming](#) that as many as 771 of the 33,800 North Korean defectors in the South have moved on to third countries as of 2019, MOU [insists](#) the true figure for the five years 2016-20 is only 20 (which seems implausibly low.) It [confirms](#), however, that 31 have redefected to the North.

