

# COMPARATIVE

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## CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL  
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### NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## IN BOTH PYONGYANG AND SEOUL, AN OMINOUS HARDENING

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In mid-2023, the (non-existent) relations between the two Koreas got even worse, if that were possible. Confronting enlarged US-ROK military exercises, and the first visit of a US nuclear-armed submarine to the peninsula since 1981, Pyongyang's nuclear threats grew ever more frenzied. In Seoul, President Yoon Suk Yeol institutionalized his hard line by downsizing and repurposing the Ministry of Unification (MOU). Criticizing MOU for acting in the past as a support department for North Korea, Yoon evidently conceives its future role as being to hinder Kim Jong Un's regime—publicizing its human rights abuses, for instance—rather than help. Much as the DPRK's ever-expanding WMD threat requires robust deterrence, for Seoul to start emulating Pyongyang's unalloyed hostility hardly seems conducive to peace. The period under review also saw two attempts by North Korea to put a spy satellite into orbit; both failed. By contrast, the North's missile launches hardly ever go wrong these days. The large solid-fuel *Hwasong-18* ICBM, with a 15,000-km (9,300-mile) range, which first flew in April, had a second successful test on July 12.

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## Two Failed DPRK Satellite Launches; ROK Retrieves Debris

While North Korean missile launches are now routine and nearly always successful, its space program is a different matter. Just how different is in one sense a matter of dispute. Whereas Pyongyang indignantly maintains its right to launch satellites, the international community's view is that a big rocket is a big rocket, and as such dual-use. Hence UN Security Council resolutions have censured and banned DPRK space launches, viewing these as tantamount to ballistic missile (BM) tests. Not that the Kim regime takes the slightest notice in either case.

It is said of London buses that you wait for ages, and then two come at once. Similarly, after a long hiatus—plus some preliminary related tests, as discussed here earlier—the period under review brought not one but two attempts by North Korea to place a military reconnaissance satellite in orbit. To Seoul's relief and Pyongyang's embarrassment, both launches failed—as the North promptly admitted, with uncharacteristic honesty and transparency. (In the past it had sometimes [claimed](#) to have placed satellites in orbit, oddly undetectable by anyone else.)

On May 31, the official *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) [reported](#) that the National Aerospace Development Administration (NADA) had launched a military reconnaissance satellite, “*Malligyong-1*,” mounted on a new-type carrier rocket, “*Chollima-1*,” at the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground in Cholsan County of North Phyongan Province at 0627. (So much detail!) However, the rocket fell into the West Sea of Korea (the Yellow Sea) “after losing thrust due to the abnormal starting of the second-stage engine after the separation of the first stage.” KCNA quoted NADA as blaming “the low reliability and stability of the new-type engine system...and the unstable character of the fuel used.”

There are three reasons to classify this as an inter-Korean event. First, given that in December North Korea published grainy aerial

[shots](#) of Seoul and Incheon gained from one of its preliminary tests, we can assume that South Korea would be a principal target of any DPRK satellite.



*Figure 1 Aerial shots of Seoul and Incheon published by North Korea are said to be from their preliminary tests. Photo: KCNA*

Second, ROK authorities seem to share that view. At 0641 on May 31, 14 minutes after the North's launch, millions of Seoul residents—but not those living in the surrounding Gyeonggi province (in effect, greater Seoul)—were jolted awake by text alarms sent to their mobile phones. The brief and opaque message urged them to evacuate to safety—but did not explain why, or how, or whither. Twenty-two minutes later, the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) sent a follow-up message cancelling the first one, which it said had been sent in error: it was intended only for denizens of Baengnyeong-do, a frontline island close to the North Korean coast and the rocket's flight-path. (This shambles inspires scant confidence in the readiness or efficiency of ROK procedures and systems in case of a genuine emergency: an impression only reinforced by the first civil defense drill for six years, held on Aug. 23. Once again instructions were unclear, and most people simply ignored calls to take shelter.)

Third, in a nice twist of history's dialectic, it was the other Korea which ended up doing the spying. Unlike the North's missiles which usually travel eastward, this rocket was launched in a south-westerly direction: meaning that when it failed, it fell into South Korea's lap—or at least near ROK waters. Seoul did not miss this opportunity. Pyongyang may

have tried too, vicariously: Chinese vessels also [searched](#) the area, presumably on the DPRK's behalf. But South Korea got there first, eventually [salvaging](#) around 180 pieces of debris—including the satellite itself. Adding insult to injury, after examining it the [verdict](#) of ROK and US experts was that this had “absolutely no military utility as a reconnaissance satellite at all.”



Figure 2 A South Korean ship recovers a piece of what is believed to be a North Korean space launch vehicle. Photo: South Korean Defense Ministry/Reuters

On Aug. 24, North Korea tried again—and [failed](#) again. As before, KCNA [admitted](#) this fully and promptly. This time “the flights of the first and second stages of the rocket were normal, but the launch failed due to an error in the emergency blasting system during the third-stage flight.” Calling this “not a big problem in aspect (sic) of the reliability of cascade engines and the system,” NADA vowed to make a third attempt in October. Watch this, erm, space. Again, South Korea and China searched for debris, but nothing seems to have been found.

Pyongyang's blasé public face regarding these failures is impressive, but unconvincing. Kim Jong Un's Swiss education may not have included Oscar Wilde, but he would surely endorse a famous quip from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which might be adapted as: To fail once may be regarded as a misfortune; to fail twice looks like carelessness. The Kim regime has an ominously low tolerance for failure, especially when it is so embarrassingly public. In normal countries, you might lose your job; in Pyongyang, it could be your life. Economists

have been executed for failed projects, such as price reforms which backfired.

By one anecdotal account (which I have been unable to retrace), that was how Kim's father Kim Jong Il reacted during the long years when rocket reliability was Pyongyang's weak link. Failed launches could be fatal for those involved. His son, by contrast, is said to have decided that shooting scientists—whose numbers are finite—*pour encourager les autres* is not the way to go. Whatever the reason, under Kim Jong Un North Korea's success rate in missile tests has increased hugely: failures are now rare. Satellite launches, by contrast, are evidently still a work in progress. One would not wish to be a DPRK space rocket scientist right now. The next attempt to put up a satellite may indeed be a matter of life or death.

#### MOU: Ministry Redefined, Minister Replaced

One of the period's major developments unfolded at mid-year. As usual these days, this was not anything that occurred directly between North and South—for the simple reason that they currently have no contact whatever. Though all the action took place in Seoul, this looks to be highly consequential—and perhaps ominous—for inter-Korean relations.

On June 28, after barely a year in office, President Yoon Suk Yeol named a new minister of Unification. Cabinet reshuffles are common in South Korea, and arguably over-frequent. While this one replaced a dozen vice-ministers, the sole Cabinet minister to lose his job was MOU Kwon Young-se. That drew attention. The official explanation is that Kwon is stepping down to focus on his parliamentary career, ahead of next April's National Assembly elections. Be that as it may, there is a striking contrast between the old man and the new. Kwon, who (like Yoon) used to be a prosecutor, and was once ambassador to China, is a moderate conservative—from a working-class background, unlike Yoon and unusually for South Korea. While he frankly had precious little to do as MOU, given the dire state of North-South relations these days, his

comments usually sounded reasoned and thoughtful.



*Figure 3 Kim Yung-ho, recently appointed unification minister, speaks to reporters in front of the Office of the Inter-Korean dialogue in central Seoul in June of 2023, before his parliamentary confirmation hearing. Photo: Yonhap*

Evidently this is not the note that Yoon wants Seoul to strike. Kwon's successor, Kim Yung-ho, could hardly be more different. A professor and former leftist—he translated the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and in 1987 was jailed for 10 months for publishing “unlawful” books and breaching the National Security Act (NSA)—he later moved sharply to the right, becoming a trenchant critic of the Kim regime. Until recently he ran a YouTube channel (now deleted) on North Korea. Its thousands of videos—sources say 2,800, 4,000, or 5,000—[included](#) calls for Kim Jong Un to be overthrown, repeated predictions of the DPRK's imminent collapse, and related fringe conspiracy theories (some of which mentioned Jews).

What was Yoon thinking, appointing such a person to head the ministry whose job it is to handle liaison with Pyongyang? We soon found out. A few days after nominating Kim, Yoon bluntly unveiled a new vision for MOU. He told his staff:

So far, the unification ministry has operated as if it were a support department for North Korea, and that shouldn't be the case anymore...Now, it's time for [MOU] to change...From now on,

the unification ministry must carry out its proper responsibilities, in accordance with the constitutional principles that unification must be based on liberal democratic order...The unification that we pursue must be one in which all the people from the South and the North enjoy better lives and are treated better as human beings.”

Yoon's characterization of MOU's role hitherto is correct. Institutionally, South Korea deals with the North under two major headings. Security is of course the main one, handled by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and related agencies such as the National Intelligence Service (NIS). Everything else falls to MOU. When the two Koreas are actually talking and interacting, as most recently in 2018, the ministry springs into life. When they are not, as for the past four years, it still goes through the motions. Bureaucrats will bureaucrat, so under both Yoon and his liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in MOU has published annual Work Plans which, while very different, shared a disconnect from reality (especially Moon's, with its notional commitment to spend aid money which was clearly never going to be disbursed.)

With progressives appalled that Yoon had (in their view) put a fox in charge of the hen-house, Kim Yung-ho's confirmation hearing before the opposition-controlled National Assembly on July 21 was predictably [stormy](#). Democratic Party (DPK) lawmakers questioned his fitness to lead MOU, calling him an “ultra-right wing YouTuber.” Even members of the conservative ruling People Power Party (PPP) urged him to be cautious in managing inter-Korean relations and to keep doors open. For his part, moderating some views he had expressed in the [past](#), Kim endorsed the Yoon administration's official stance that it does not pursue unification by absorption. (Yet what can Yoon's insistence, quoted above, that “unification must be based on liberal democratic order” mean, if not absorption? It will certainly be read so in Pyongyang.)

On July 27 DP lawmakers [urged](#) Yoon to withdraw the nomination, calling Kim “unsuitable” to head MOU: “[His] inconsistent attitude and outdated and Cold War-like thinking will only worsen the complex and delicate inter-Korean issues.” Ignoring this, Yoon appointed him on July 28—as the Constitution permits, and has become the norm under this administration—despite his not gaining parliamentary endorsement. The same day, MOU Vice-Minister Moon Seung-hyun lost no time in beginning the reorientation Yoon demanded—with a [purge](#): “As of today, five [of MOU’s] six high-level public servants tendered resignations.” Eighty of MOU’s 617-strong staff are to go, as four departments which all handle inter-Korean dialogue will be merged into a single unit. As Moon crisply put it: “This reflects the situation where there is zero inter-Korean dialogue and exchange going on.” Instead new teams will be created with fresh portfolios, such as South Korean detainees and prisoners of war held in North Korea.

### POWs: A Hiding to Nothing?

Reflecting these new priorities, Kim Yung-ho’s first official business as minister on Aug. 3 was a meeting with relatives of South Koreans detained by the North, and NGOs focusing on this issue. The plight of such persons—from the tens of thousands marched North during the Korean War, thousands of POWs not repatriated after the 1953 Armistice, hundreds of fishermen and others kidnapped in past decades, down to three missionaries and three others [detained](#) in recent years as alleged spies—is indeed scandalous. Yet it has been neglected especially by left-leaning ROK leaders such as Moon Jae-in, in their quest for dialogue with the Kim regime.

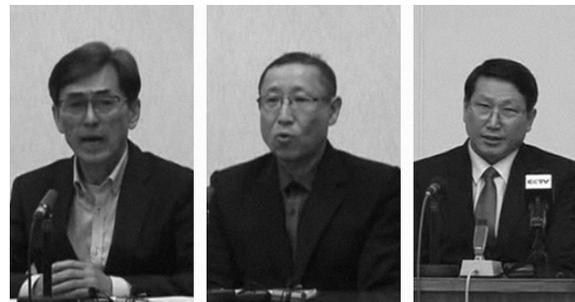


Figure 4 Three South Korean missionaries detained in North Korea and accused of espionage. Photos: KCNA / Uriminzokkiri

That said, Moon could retort: But what good will it do? The original 1950 abductees—much the largest cohort—and illegally held POWs are nearly all dead by now. A pragmatic ROK government would focus on the six most recent cases, whose freedom will be hard enough to secure. Arrested rather than abducted, lumping them into the wider story of DPRK kidnaps makes little sense analytically, and none at all politically. Yoon’s new MOU task force will cast a fresh spotlight on a heinous crime—but do nothing whatever to mitigate or resolve it.

MOU’s new priorities are also evident in the Ministry’s draft [budget](#) for 2024, unveiled on Aug. 29. A 23% cut in total spending—the largest in a decade—includes slashing the amount earmarked for economic cooperation projects with Pyongyang by 42%. By contrast, spending on political analysis of the DPRK is slated to rise by 36%.

### Tears For Fears: MOU Tracks KJU

At least in this long-time reader’s impressionistic view—not based, I must add, on any formal statistical analysis—the new broom at MOU has already begun to sweep clean. If in one sense the Ministry has been reined in and its priorities reshaped, the other side of the coin is a new freedom of expression: a flexing of muscles.

Consider, for example, data regarding Kim Jong Un published on Aug. 17. Taking the longer view, MOU notes that North Korea’s leader no longer gads about as he used to earlier in his reign, now in its 12th year. His “on the spot guidance”—a

practice inherited from his late father and grandfather, visiting a range of mainly economic or military sites—began vigorously, peaking at 214 separate field visits in 2013. Since 2017, however, the number of such trips each year has fallen below 100. This year, Kim has (or had at that point) chalked up 57 public appearances so far, of which 34 were field guidance trips; the remainder, no doubt, being Party meetings, parades and so forth. Notable too is the shifting balance of such trips, which nowadays are overwhelmingly military: 30 so far this year, as against just four which were economy-related.



*Figure 5 Kim Jong Un and his daughter attend a parade celebrating the 75th anniversary of North Korea's founding on Sept. 9, 2023. Photo: KCNA/Reuters*

So far, so familiar: MOU has long issued figures of this sort. But then it gets edgier. Kim may be getting out less, but he wants more respect. References to him as “President”—an honorific not long ago reserved for his grandfather Kim Il Sung—rose from four in 2020 to 16 in 2021, 23 in 2022, and 26 this year. And now MOU even tracks Kim crying: it reported that he was seen to shed tears on 10 occasions (over what time period is unclear), including late July’s military parade. Rubbing it in, an anonymous official commented: “This is the epitome of a tyrant’s politics appealing to people’s emotions.”

This is a new MOU: no longer a handmaiden but a gadfly. Evidently that is what Yoon wants. One may wonder if the foreign ministry (MOFA) is quite so keen. When US media reports claimed—correctly, as it transpired—that Kim Jong Un would soon visit Russia to discuss a possible arms deal with Putin, MOU promptly chimed in: “cooperation between North Korea and a nearby country, in all forms, should be conducted in a direction that does not hurt international order and peace.” Calling Kim a tyrant is one thing, but telling Russia what to do

(not by name, but the meaning was clear enough) arguably exceeds MOU’s brief—even if Yoon, in Jakarta for ASEAN summits, said much the same.

Returning to more familiar terrain, the same MOU report also offered economic analysis. After a tight period, when disruptions to food supply caused by border closure had led to deaths from starvation in some areas, now the “serious food situation seems to be somewhat alleviating, aided by supplies of summer farm produce such as potatoes and corn” (this is Yonhap’s summary). With no severe damage this year from heavy rains, the main autumn harvests “may not be bad.” That said, in the first quarter the price of flour was over four times higher than pre-Covid in 2019, and Engel’s coefficient rose from 58% to an estimated 94%—meaning most North Koreans now spend nearly all their income on food.

### Mocking the ROK? Or Reframing It as Foreign?

MOU also weighed in on a current mini-debate in Seoul. Pyongyang has long eschewed calling the ROK by that official name, except during rare periods of bonhomie such as 2018’s summits. It prefers “south Korea” (note the lower case). Recently, however, DPRK media have begun using ROK more, albeit usually in quotes (“ROK”). Given that Kim Jong Un is evidently not making nice, some analysts interpret this change as intended to redefine inter-Korean ties as a normal state-to-state relationship rather than anything unique and special. MOU is having none of that: in their eyes the new usage is sheer mockery.

Yet other evidence suggests that, just as Seoul under Yoon is reframing how it deals with North Korea, Pyongyang may be doing the same vis-à-vis the South. In late June, the chair of the Hyundai Group, Hyun Jeong-eun, told MOU she is applying to visit North Korea. Today’s Hyundai Group is a small rump after the break-up of the once-mighty chaebol (conglomerate); it no longer includes such titans as Hyundai Motor or the world’s largest shipbuilder, Hyundai Heavy. What it does include is Hyundai Asan, which for a decade (1998-2008) invested heavily in tourism into North Korea, following the dream of Hyundai’s hard-driving Northern-born founder Chung Ju-yung. When his sons quarreled and Hyundai broke up, Chung gave Asan to his fourth and favorite son, Chung Mong-hun. This proved a

poisoned chalice. Pyongyang milked Hyundai shamelessly, and under multiple pressures Mong-hoon took his life in Aug. 2003. When Seoul banned further trips after the KPA shot a tourist in 2008, the North seized Hyundai's facilities (worth some \$400 million) at the Mount Kumgang resort it had built on the DPRK's southeast coast. After intermittent use for rare reunions of separated families in happier times, these moldering facilities are now being torn down on the orders of Kim Jong Un, who—repudiating the stance of his father Kim Jong Il—explicitly rejects any idea of a joint North-South project on DPRK soil.

Despite all that, hitherto Ms. Hyun (widow of Chung Mong-hun) had been an honored guest in the North—even attending Kim Jong Il's funeral in 2011. Several times, most recently in 2018, she visited Mount Kumgang for a joint ceremony in memory of her late husband. That was her plan again, to mark the 20th anniversary of his death. Yet this time she was brusquely rejected. Hours after MOU publicized her intentions—megaphone diplomacy being the sole mode of inter-Korean contact these days—Pyongyang shot back. Kim Song Il, an official at North Korea's foreign ministry, told KCNA: "We make it clear that we have neither been informed about any South Korean personage's willingness for visit nor known about it and that we have no intention to examine it." Kim added two wider riders. It is DPRK policy not to allow South Korean nationals entry. And the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (APPC), the body which Ms. Hyun sought to contact (as in the past), has no authority in this regard.

Beyond the rude rebuff to Ms. Hyun, this looks like a policy shift by Pyongyang. MOU called it "quite unusual" for the North's foreign ministry to be handling this, rather than an agency under the United Front Department (UFD) of the ruling Workers Party (WPK) such as the APPC. This may mean North Korea now rejects the concept hitherto shared by both Koreas (one of the few things they had agreed on) that the peninsula's division renders their relationship special—both regard Korea as a single country—and hence not to be dealt with under foreign affairs.

### War Rhetoric Escalates

The period under review closed dismally. One might think North Korea's rhetoric could not get more bellicose than it already is, but somehow they find a way. After a summer of major US-ROK war games and trilateral exercises including Japan, Pyongyang no doubt felt it had to respond in kind. KCNA, which does not normally disclose the exact date of Kim Jong Un's military-related activities, reported that on Aug. 29 he visited "the training command post of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA)," to observe a command drill "aimed at occupying the whole territory of the southern half by repelling the enemy's sudden armed invasion and switching over to an all-out counterattack." This was in response to "the US and 'ROK' [sic, including quote marks] military gangsters [staging] extremely provocative and dangerous large-scale joint exercises simulating an all-out war against the DPRK." Kim was [pictured](#) pointing at a (rather fuzzy) map of South Korea KCNA's report ended by describing KPA commanding officers as "burning with the will to accelerate the war preparations and thus mercilessly wipe out the enemies and put the whole territory of the southern half under control anytime once an order is issued by [Kim]."



Figure 6 Kim Jong Un points to an area close to Seoul on a map of South Korea at the the 7th Enlarged Meeting of the 8th Central Military Commission on Aug. 9, 2023. Photo: KCNA

Ominously, the current situation is that both sides on the peninsula are escalating in word and deed. In Pyongyang and Seoul alike the talk has got tougher, while war games are becoming

larger and more frequent. In typical chicken and egg fashion, each side blames the other for escalating matters, claiming they are merely responding to the threat the other poses. Even if neither side seriously intends to provoke conflict, this is not a recipe for keeping the peace.

Revamping MOU may not help either. Admittedly, after Moon Jae-in's delusional clinging to a peace process which in reality died in 2019, Yoon Suk Yeol's robust calling a spade a spade is in some degree a relief and refreshing. Yet attitude is not a strategy, nor is striking a pose to be confused with crafting effective policy. Yes, the DPRK is an evil regime which does many terrible things. We knew that. What does Yoon hope to gain by saying this more often, in greater detail, louder, and more widely? There is no new information here, and (crucially) no hint of any mechanism whereby this psy-war campaign—which is what Yoon's plan amounts to—will ameliorate any of the evils or defuse threats it pinpoints.

Similarly, how does reminding Kim Jong Un *ad nauseam* what a bad guy he is, and what a failed state he runs, bring either peace or reunification closer? Kim will conclude (correctly) that Yoon's earlier notional offer of an "[audacious initiative](#)" was hogwash. Telling North Korea to simply surrender its WMD has never worked, and stands no chance now that Kim is strengthening his ties with both China and Russia. A wise ROK government, while ensuring deterrence, would try to keep channels open and offer Kim an off-ramp, even if only on the off chance. Time will tell how Yoon's approach works out, but I fear it may bear bitter fruit.

# CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

## MAY—AUGUST 2023

**May 1, 2023:** Days after ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol's summit in late April with US President Joe Biden, the official DPRK *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* begins a multi-part [series](#) under the title: "Puppet Traitor Yoon Suk Yeol's Visit to US Draws Censure, Ridicule and Concern." This cites media comments criticizing Yoon's trip from around the world, including South Korea. Six installments are published in the ensuing days.

**May 3, 2023:** ROK Minister of Unification (MOU) Kwon Young-se, [tells](#) the Unification Future Planning Committee: "We need to urge and induce North Korea to make the right decision so that all members of the Korean Peninsula can feel safe and lead prosperous lives."

**May 3, 2023:** Visiting a front-line area where North Korean drones infiltrated last year, the chairman of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), army Gen. Kim Seung-kyum, [warns](#) that Pyongyang will attack "in unknown and unexpected formats going forward." South Korea must respond "overwhelmingly...We have to imprint in the enemy minds that the only price for provocation is gruesome punishment."

**May 4, 2023:** ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [announces](#) what may be the largest ever joint live-fire drills. The "Joint and Combined Firepower Annihilation Training" will run May 25-June 15 at Pocheon, 20 miles from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), marking the US-ROK alliance's 70th anniversary. This is the 11th such exercise, since 1977; the last was in 2017 (none took place under Moon Jae-in).

**May 4, 2023:** MOU [says](#) that that [burning](#) Yoon Suk Yeol in effigy at a recent mass rally in Pyongyang was "extremely regrettable" and went "too far," adding that DPRK authorities

seem to be trying "to control citizens by exaggerating external threats via internal media."

**May 5, 2023:** *Rodong Sinmun*, North Korea's leading daily, fills half a page with [photos](#) of recent anti-Yoon protests in South Korea. DPRK media have not done this for some years. In past instances, according to defectors, it backfired: readers noted that the other Korea looked more developed, and its people better dressed.

**May 5, 2023:** ROK's ruling conservative People Power Party (PPP) [criticizes](#) the National Election Commission (NEC) for [ignoring](#) warnings from the National Intelligence Service (NIS) that DPRK hackers attacked it eight times in 2021-22. The NEC denies receiving such warnings. The liberal opposition Democrats (DPK) accuse the PPP and NIS of playing politics. On May 23 the NEC [agrees](#) to a cybersecurity check-up by the NIS.

**May 5, 2023:** MOU [says](#) it may sue the DPRK for "illicit" actions in the Mount Kumgang tourist zone, "including the unauthorized removal of ROK assets like a floating hotel owned by Hyundai Asan." This is a tad tardy. As *NK News* [notes](#), North Korea began demolishing the Haegumgang Hotel in March 2022; by December it was gone.

**May 8, 2023:** Perhaps celebrating their recent court victory (April 27), the activist group Freedom Fighters for North Korea (FFNK) [say](#) that on May 5 it sent 20 balloons carrying vitamin C tablets, Tylenol pills, and booklets into North Korea from Ganghwa Island, northwest of Seoul.

**May 8, 2023:** Seoul Central District Court [orders](#) the DPRK and Kim Jong Un to pay 50 million

won (\$37,900) each to three former POWs who escaped from the North in the early 2000s, almost half a century after being taken prisoner during the 1950–53 Korean War. The defendants were not represented. With some understatement *Yonhap* notes: “It seems difficult for the plaintiffs to actually receive the compensation.”

**May 9, 2023:** MOU [says](#) North Korea seems to be illicitly operating some 10 ROK-owned factories at the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which Seoul withdrew from in 2016.

**May 10, 2023:** DPRK website [Uriminzokkiri condemns](#) the recent ROK–Japan summit: “The military collusion between South Korea and Japan, much wanted by the United States, has entered the stage...to be recklessly carried out.” It calls Yoon’s foreign policy “submissive.”

**May 10, 2023:** Two years after a major data breach at Seoul National University Hospital’s intranet, when personal data on 827,000 people—mostly patients—was hacked, ROK police [say](#) they [attribute](#) this cyber-attack to North Korea.

**May 10, 2023:** Suwon District Court [indicts](#) and detains four former officials of the ROK’s largest and most militant umbrella labor body, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, for allegedly spying for North Korea. The four unnamed accused deny all charges and are refusing to cooperate.

**May 18, 2023:** Two Koreas are both [drawn](#) in Group B for the second round, to be held this fall, of the Asian women’s soccer tournament, a qualifier for the Olympic Games. China and Thailand complete the group. North Korea has won 15 of 19 previous inter-Korean encounters, against just one win for South Korea; three were draws.

**May 19, 2023:** NIS [reveals](#) that a family group of 10 North Koreans, who crossed the Northern Limit Line —the de facto marine border in the West/Yellow Sea—by boat on May 6, told their

ROK interrogators that “they had admired our society while watching South Korean television, and decided to defect as they grew exhausted of the North Korean regime amid tightened social control stemming from the pandemic.”

**May 22, 2023:** MOU Kwon [urges](#) North Korea to return to dialogue, saying the South has no hostile intentions.

**May 23, 2023:** “A source” [tells](#) *Yonhap* that earlier this month a DPRK boat (whether civilian or military is unclear) told a 30,000-ton ROK cargo ship sailing in the East Sea/Sea of Japan to “move out to the open sea.” The latter complied, even though it was in fact in international waters.

**May 23, 2023:** Suwon District Court [jails](#) An Bu-soo, chairman of the Asia Pacific Exchange Association (a private body), for 42 months, having found him guilty of embezzlement and unauthorized foreign exchange transfers to North Korea. This is the first conviction related to the case of Ssangbngwool Group’s ex-chairman Kim Seong-tae, whose own trial is ongoing.

**May 23, 2023:** In the seventh such action under Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea unilaterally [sanctions](#) three DPRK organizations (all under the North’s Ministry of National Defense) and seven individuals. All are said to be involved in Pyongyang’s illegal cyber activities.

**May 29, 2023:** ROK’s foreign and health ministries jointly [voice](#) “deep regrets and concerns” at the DPRK’s recent election to the World Health Organization (WHO)’s executive board. “It is questionable whether North Korea, which has continued to contravene UNSC resolutions and disregard the UN’s authority, meets the standards for a WHO executive board member, which should abide by international norms, pursued by the U.N., and contribute to enhancing global health.”

**May 31, 2023:** North Korea’s attempt to put a spy satellite in orbit [fails](#); the rocket crashes into

the West/Yellow Sea. The launch [triggers](#) an evacuation alarm, sent to millions of phones in Seoul—in error. The Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) apologizes.

**June 2, 2023:** Responding to Pyongyang’s failed satellite bid, South Korea becomes the first country to unilaterally [sanction](#) the (not obviously connected) DPRK hacking group known as Kimsuky.

**June 7, 2023:** South Korea’s National Police Agency [says](#) that the North’s Kimsuky hacked senior ROK officials among others for several months recently, by sending phishing emails to 150 diplomacy and security experts. Nine persons—three former minister and vice minister-level officials, one incumbent government official, four academics or experts, and one reporter—fell for it, and had their account information compromised. Nothing confidential was stolen.

**June 7, 2023:** Yoon administration publishes its [National Security Strategy](#). Besides (unsurprisingly) identifying North Korea’s WMD threat as the South’s most pressing security challenge, it also focuses on wider issues and the ROK’s ambition to become a “global pivotal state.”

**June 9, 2023:** MOU [says](#) that it plans to return, via Panmunjom, the corpse of a young (20s–30s) presumed North Korean man, found in waters off Ganghwa island northwest in May. Pyongyang has yet to indicate acceptance. Since 2010 South Korea has sent 23 bodies back to the North, most recently in 2019. In the last such case, a female flood victim in 2022, the DPRK’s radio silence meant the ROK had to cremate her. This time the North again fails to respond, so on June 16 Seoul [says](#) he too will be cremated.

**June 15, 2023:** NIS [says](#) DPRK hackers have created a fake version of Naver, ROK’s leading Web portal and search engine, which 25 million South Koreans—almost half the total population—use as their homepage. The agency warns netizens to be on their guard.

**June 14, 2023:** In a further instance—albeit mainly symbolic—of the Yoon administration’s hardening stance, almost three years after North Korea blew up the inter-Korean liaison office at Kaesong, the ROK [sues](#) the DPRK government in Seoul Central District Court; claiming damages of 44.7 billion won (\$35 million) for destruction of state property. (Although located on Northern territory, South Korea built and paid for this facility.)

**June 20, 2023:** ROK Cabinet approves a plan to establish a drone operations command in September. “A source” [tells Yonhap](#) that South Korea “has adopted an aggressive counter-drone operational principle, under which a single North Korean drone infiltration would prompt it to send 10 or more unmanned aerial vehicles into (sic) Pyongyang.”

**June 23, 2023:** Amid reports that some 2,000 North Koreans held in China face imminent repatriation now that the PRC–DPRK border has begun to reopen, the head of the ROK’s National Human Rights Commission of Korea, Song Doo-hwan, [urges](#) Beijing not to do this.

**June 23, 2023:** At the NIS’s request, South Korea blocks three North Korean propaganda channels on YouTube. As of 1400 local time, attempts to access [Sally Parks Song-A Channel](#), [Olivia Natasha- YuMi Space DPRK daily](#), or New DPRK come up as “not available” in the ROK. On June 27 YouTube itself [terminates](#) all three channels.

**June 26, 2023:** FFKK [says](#) it marked the 73rd anniversary of the start of the Korean War on June 25 with another balloon launch. This one sent 20 balloons carrying 200,000 leaflets, 10,000 face masks, Tylenol pills, and anti-regime booklets into North Korea.

**June 29, 2023:** President Yoon [nominates](#) Kim Yung-ho, a professor of political science and trenchant “[new Right](#)” critic of North Korea, as minister of unification.

**June 30, 2023:** MOU nominee Kim [says](#) “there is a need to selectively [re]consider inter-Korean agreements.” Specifically, September 2018’s military accord may require review, if (in *Yonhap*’s paraphrase) “the North continues to violate it with high-intensity provocations.”

**June 30, 2023:** MOU [says](#) it is considering an application by Hyun Jeong-eun, chairwoman of the Hyundai Group, to visit Mount Kumgang in North Korea—where Hyundai Asan ran tours during 1998–2008—to mark 20 years since the [suicide](#) of her husband, former group chairman Chung Mong-hun, on Aug. 4. She last held a memorial service for him there, with DPRK participation, on the 15th anniversary in 2018.

**June 30, 2023:** As heavy rain pounds the peninsula, MOU [urges](#) Pyongyang to notify Seoul of any planned release of water from its Hwanggang Dam on the Imjin river, which flows into South Korea. In 2009 flood waters from an unannounced discharge killed six South Koreans who were camping. Despite Pyongyang promising advance notice in future, last year (as often) this was lacking. On July 14 MOU [says](#) the North has made no response.

**July 1, 2023:** Pyongyang publicly and brusquely [rejects](#) Ms. Hyun’s visit; previously it had welcomed her as an honored guest. Kim Song Il, a director general at North Korea’s foreign ministry, tells KCNA: “We make it clear that we have neither been informed about any South Korean personage’s willingness for visit nor known about it and that we have no intention to examine it.” He adds that policy is not to allow South Korean nationals entry, and that the Asia-Pacific Peace Committee (APPC), which Ms. Hyun sought to contact (as in the past), has no authority in this regard.

**July 2, 2023:** President Yoon signals a major policy shift on MOU, [telling](#) his staff: “Hitherto the unification ministry has operated as if it were a support department for North Korea. [T]hat shouldn’t be the case any more..It’s time for the unification ministry to change.”

**July 3, 2023:** After Pyongyang’s rejection, Hyun Jeong-eun [withdraws](#) her application to visit Mt. Kumgang.

**July 5, 2023:** ROK JCS [say](#) that South Korean and US experts, having analyzed debris from North Korea’s failed satellite launch in May, retrieved from the Yellow/West Sea, have concluded that the spy satellite would have had “absolutely no military utility.”

**July 6, 2023:** MOU [publishes](#) dossier of hitherto classified government documents on North-South contacts before and after the first inter-Korean accord: joint communiqué signed on July 4, 1972. Covering the period Nov. 1971–Feb. 1979, this has 1,678 pages—of which 230 remain redacted.

**July 7, 2023:** MOU [says](#) it has issued hard copies of the English translation of its 2023 [report](#) on North Korea human rights, “as part of efforts to raise global awareness on the issue.”

**July 10, 2023:** At the Hanawon resettlement center for defectors, three North Korean women, recent arrivals from China—where they had lived since 2004, 2014, and 2019, respectively—[describe](#) how Beijing’s anti-coronavirus restrictions worsened their lives. Lacking Chinese ID cards, they could not access most services. Even so, life was better than in North Korea.

**July 10, 2023:** Kwon Young-se—still unification minister, though his successor has been named—[tells](#) a media briefing that North Korea faces a serious food crisis, despite grain imports from China and prices stabilizing somewhat. On Kim Jong Un’s health, Kwon says it “does not appear good, but it is not serious enough to pose some problems for him to work.”

**July 12, 2023:** North Korea [test-fires](#) an ICBM off its east coast. According to Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno this flew for a record 74 minutes to an altitude of 6,000 km (3,728 miles) and a range of 1,000 km. Next day Pyongyang [confirms](#) that this launch was of its

large *Hwasong-18* solid-fuel ICBM, first tested in April, which has a range of 15,000 km. Analysts [reckon](#) this second successful test means it could soon be deployed.

**July 14, 2023:** Seoul retaliates to Pyongyang's latest ICBM test by again [slapping](#) unilateral sanctions on three DPRK entities and four named individuals. Since none (obviously) have any dealings with the ROK, this move is largely symbolic.

**July 18, 2023:** USS *Kentucky*, an 18,750-ton *Ohio*-class nuclear ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), docks in Busan. This is the [first](#) visit to South Korea by a US SSBN since 1981.

**July 18, 2023:** US-South Korea Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), set up at April's summit between Presidents Biden and Yoon, [holds](#) inaugural meeting in Seoul. Yoon stops by and [urges](#) that the allies' nuclear deterrence be beefed up such that North Korea "does not dare to use nuclear weapons."

**July 18, 2023:** A man later identified as Travis King (23), a private (second class) serving in US forces in Korea (USFK), [breaks away](#) from a tour group and dashes to the northern side of the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom. It emerges that he was being sent home, unguarded, to face disciplinary charges. Instead of boarding his plane he exited Incheon airport, returned to Seoul, and booked a tour of Panmunjom.

**July 18, 2023:** MOU [reports](#) that defector arrivals, while still a trickle by historical standards, almost doubled in the second quarter. 65 North Koreans—18 men and 47 women—reached South Korea during April-June, compared to 34 in January-March. The ministry attributes this to China easing its coronavirus restrictions. Almost all defectors come via China.

**July 19, 2023:** South Korea's NIS [claims](#) North Korea stole cryptocurrency worth \$700 million last year, but has not yet monetized it. The

agency says this could fund 30 ICBMs, and that hacking accounts for 30% of Pyongyang's foreign currency earnings. It adds that a DPRK hacker was caught trying to get a job with an ROK energy company abroad, having posted his resume on LinkedIn, using a forged passport and graduation certificate.

**July 20, 2023:** North Korea's Minister of National Defense Kang Sun Nam [issues](#) a press statement, warning that the US SSBN deployment "may fall under the conditions of the use of nuclear weapons specified in the DPRK law on the nuclear force policy." This "allows the execution of necessary action procedures...[if] it is judged that the use of nuclear weapons against it is imminent."

**July 20, 2023:** ROK's Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), a division of the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF), [reports](#) that last year North Korea's trade dependence on China rose even further to 96.7%, a 10-year high. While doubling in volume year-on-year, trade has grown even more unbalanced. Pyongyang imported goods from Beijing worth \$1,398 million, while exporting a mere \$134 million.

**July 21, 2023:** Reacting to DPRK Defense Minister Kang Sun Nam's threat (July 20), the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [warns](#) that any North Korean attack "will face an immediate, overwhelming and decisive response from the [US-ROK] alliance and...will result in the end of the North Korean regime."

**July 21, 2023:** MOU nominee Kim Yung-ho [tells](#) National Assembly confirmation hearing that he will prioritize "substantive" results in any dealings with North Korea, rather than "dialogue or its own sake."

**July 25, 2023:** At the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) meeting in San Diego CA, Chun Young-hee, who heads the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Korean Peninsula Peace Regime Bureau, [deplores](#) North Korea's WMD provocations and inattention to its "dire"

humanitarian crisis. NEACD is an annual Track 1.5 meeting of all the former Six Party Talks participants. The DPRK has not showed up since 2016.

**July 28, 2023:** President Yoon formally [appoints](#) Kim Yung-ho as minister of unification, as the law permits, despite his not having been confirmed by the opposition-controlled National Assembly. Kim is the 15th minister appointed by Yoon without parliamentary approval.

**July 31, 2023:** New MOU Kim Yung-ho [visits](#) the National Cemetery in Seoul to pay tribute to South Korea's patriotic martyrs and war dead.

**July 31, 2023:** A propos Pyongyang's military parade on July 28, which displayed a wide range of WMD and other armaments, MOU spokesman Koo Byoung-sam [expresses](#) "strong regret over how North Korea is adhering to nuclear development and an attitude of confrontation rather than seeking denuclearization and peace despite this year marking the 70th anniversary of the Armistice." He calls on the North to choose the "right" path.

**Aug. 1, 2023:** South Korea's Ministry of Unification [confirms](#) a *Radio Free Asia* report that on July 20, 24, and 27 North Korea opened floodgates on its Hwanggang Dam to release water, without first warning Seoul as it is supposed to do under inter-Korean accords. Noting that Pyongyang "frequently" released water thus during July, "despite our repeated request" [to be notified], MOU calls this "very regrettable."

**Aug. 2, 2023:** New MOU Kim Yung-ho announces his first official schedule: a meeting the next day with civic groups focused on Southern abductees and detainees in North Korea, and their relatives. The ministry will create a task force on the abductee issue.

**Aug. 3, 2023:** MOU Kim [pledges](#) that the Yoon government will "never" seek a formal declaration ending the 1950-53 Korean War.

That had been a key, if chimerical, policy aim of Yoon's liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in. Kim explains: "Conditions for the end-of-war declaration have not been met. If [it happens], the issue of abductees, prisoners of war and detainees in the North will be overshadowed."

**Aug. 3, 2023:** UN Command (UNC) at Panmunjom, which controls the southern half of the JSA and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), [says](#) North Korea has confirmed that it is holding the fugitive US soldier Travis King.

**Aug. 6, 2023:** KCNA [reports](#) that on Aug. 3-5 Kim Jong Un "gave field guidance to major munitions factories." These included facilities producing "the shells of super large-caliber multiple rocket launchers," "new serial small arms," engines for cruise missiles and UAVs, "erector launchers for major strategic weapons," and "a new light electrical appliance factory which will play an important role in modernizing the KPA."

**Aug. 7, 2023:** MOU spokesperson Koo Byoung-sam [tells](#) a regular media briefing that Kim Jong Un's recent visits to major weapons facilities "appear to have had multiple purposes—show off the country's achievements in the defense sector, respond to [US-ROK] joint military drills, and seek arms exports"—despite the last being banned under UN sanctions.

**Aug. 11, 2023:** Chairing the second quarterly meeting of a new (mostly civilian) presidential defense innovation committee he set up, President Yoon [says](#) Seoul must prioritize boosting its deterrence capability against Pyongyang's "imminent" nuclear and missile menace, along with the North's other asymmetric threats (cyber and drones). By contrast, "we need to...boldly adjust projects aimed at operating weapons systems that are not immediately urgent." (That sounds like bad news for those in MND who [harbor](#) blue water and aircraft carrier ambitions.)

**Aug. 16, 2023:** MOU Kim Yung-ho [urges](#) Beijing not to send defectors back to the DPRK: "North

Korean defectors in China should be..able to enter countries that they are hoping to go to, including South Korea.” They should be treated as refugees, not as illegal immigrants. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, among 8,148 cases—no time period was given—of such forcible repatriation, 98% were from China.

**Aug. 16, 2023:** Pyongyang issues its first report on defector Travis King. KCNA says he “decided to come over to the DPRK” due to “inhuman maltreatment and racial discrimination within the U.S. Army.” (King is Black.) “He also expressed his willingness to seek refuge in the DPRK or a third country, saying that he was disillusioned at the unequal American society. The investigation continues.”

**Aug. 17, 2023:** MOU [offers](#) some figures regarding Kim Jong Un’s titles and trips, as well as DPRK economic trends and nomenclature.

**Aug. 18, 2023:** After the rightwing Seoul daily *Dong-A Ilbo* [claims](#) there was some sort of terrorist bombing in or near Pyongyang a month or two earlier (alleged details are extremely vague), South Korea’s NIS says it has detected no such event. In May, however, the spy agency told lawmakers that violent crime in the North has tripled from a year earlier, including “large-scale and organized” crimes like “throwing of homemade bombs in attempts to extort goods.”

**Aug. 21, 2023:** Back from his trilateral [summit](#) with the leaders of the US and Japan at Camp David, President Yoon [tells](#) his Cabinet: “The larger North Korea’s threats of provocations become, the more solid the structure of trilateral security cooperation among South Korea, the US and Japan will become. [This] will lower the risk of North Korea’s provocations and further strengthen our security.”

**Aug. 21, 2023:** KCNA [reports](#) that Kim Jong Un oversaw a naval drill involving cruise missiles.

**Aug. 21, 2023:** *Ulchi Freedom Shield* (UFS), a large joint US–South Korea annual military exercise, [begins](#). Continuing through Aug. 31, it includes some 30 field training events—more than in past years—“based on an all-out war scenario,” according to the ROK JCS.

**Aug. 22, 2023:** In a response to UFS, headlined “DPRK Armed Forces Show No Mercy,” KCNA [warns](#): “An unprecedented large-scale thermonuclear war is approaching the Korean Peninsula every moment as reality.” (Despite the apocalyptic tone, comments from a mere news agency—as opposed to, say, Kim Jong Un—are a relatively low-key reaction.)

**Aug. 22, 2023:** After Pyongyang [reportedly](#) notifies Japan’s Coast Guard that it plans to put a satellite in orbit during Aug. 24–31, South Korea’s foreign ministry [urges](#) the North “to immediately withdraw the plan.” MOU [chimes in](#): “A satellite launch by the North is a blatant illegal act that flatly violates UN Security Council resolutions that ban any launches using ballistic missile technology. Pyongyang cannot justify it with any excuse.”

**Aug. 22, 2023:** ROK Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries [issues](#) a maritime safety warning for the three areas which Pyongyang notified Tokyo its satellite launch might affect—while noting that “South Korean ships do not frequently pass through these zones.”

**Aug. 23, 2023:** Amid several signs that Pyongyang is partially easing stringent border controls it had imposed in Jan. 2020 to keep out COVID-19 (unsuccessfully), MOU [says](#) it is monitoring when North Korea will reopen its border with China “in a full-fledged manner.” Reporting to the National Assembly, the ministry judges that so far the North “has opened its border in a limited manner while struggling to stabilize a food crisis.”

**Aug. 23, 2023:** South Korea [holds](#) its first nationwide air defense drills in six years. Many citizens [ignore](#) the sirens and officials telling them to get off the streets and seek shelter.

**Aug. 24, 2023:** For the second time in three months, a North Korean satellite launch [fails](#). Promptly [admitting](#) this, KCNA quotes the DPRK's National Aerospace Development Administration (NADA) as blaming "an error in the emergency blasting system during the third-stage flight." Calling this "not a big problem," NADA vows to try again in October.

**Aug. 28, 2023:** Amid further [signs](#) that North Korea is starting to partially reopen its borders, MOU [characterizes](#) Pyongyang's steps so far as a "limited border reopening," prompted by economic problems and the inconveniences of closure for personnel.

**Aug. 29, 2023:** Destroyers (one each) from the US, Japanese, and South Korean navies [stage](#) a trilateral ballistic missile defense exercise. A US military [press release](#) links this to North Korea's recent rocket launches in "brazen violation of multiple unanimous UN Security Council resolutions that raises tension and risks," and cites the recent Camp David summit as "inaugurat[ing] a new era of trilateral partnership."

**Aug. 31, 2023:** KCNA, which does not normally disclose the exact date of Kim Jong Un's military-related activities, [reports](#) that on Aug. 29 he visited "the training command post of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA)," to observe a command drill "aimed at occupying the whole territory of the southern half by repelling the enemy's sudden armed invasion and switching over to an all-out counterattack." This is in response to "the US and 'ROK' [sic, including quote marks] military gangsters [staging] extremely provocative and dangerous large-scale joint exercises simulating an all-out war against the DPRK."