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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

BOTH KOREAS DITCH THEIR BORDER ACCORD

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The last third of 2023 was eventful in Korea, especially the two final months. Fall found South Koreans preoccupied with events elsewhere, and their implications for the peninsula. In September, Kim Jong Un's Siberian summit with Vladimir Putin prompted worries as to how closer Pyongyang-Moscow military ties might affect the ROK. In October, Hamas' shocking attack on Israel added a new layer of alarm, warranted or otherwise. President Yoon Suk Yeol was among those expressing fear that the DPRK might launch a similar surprise assault. He soon had less hypothetical concerns. In November, in response to Pyongyang's successful launch (following two earlier failures) of a military reconnaissance satellite, Seoul partially suspended 2018's inter-Korean military accord—whereupon the North predictably scrapped it entirely. Tensions grew as both sides rearmed at the ironically named Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and talked tough—none tougher than Kim Jong Un, who spoke openly of occupying the South. As the year ended, Kim declared a major change in DPRK doctrine. Dropping its longstanding lip service to reunification, the North now regards the peninsular situation as “relations between two belligerent states.” The implications of this shift remain to be seen.

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The Kim-Putin Show: Less Than Met Seoul's Eye?

Four months is a long time in Korea. Back in early September, South Korea was basking in the relief of a second failed spy satellite launch by North Korea. On Sept. 1, Seoul slapped a set of sanctions on a bunch of DPRK officials, who (obviously) have no dealings with the ROK anyway, the 11th time Yoon's government has performed this empty gesture. The same day, the ROK military called off its search and salvage operations in the West/Yellow Sea, having found nothing significant. After Pyongyang's first failed launch in May, Seoul retrieved a big chunk of the rocket and part of the actual satellite. US and ROK experts examined the debris, snootily [concluding](#) it had "no military utility at all as a reconnaissance satellite." (So why all the fuss in November when the North got third time lucky?)

A few days later came the first media reports that Kim Jong Un would visit Russia. That is a different bilateral, covered elsewhere in this issue and more [widely](#). Our concern here is the impact (actual and potential) on inter-Korean relations, and how that was framed in Seoul. This visit was obviously something for the ROK to watch closely, but it also requires nuanced, well-informed, and sober evaluation. Those qualities seemed absent from much of the commentary, in Seoul and elsewhere, which took the spectacle of the Kim-Putin show at face value—just as the principals doubtless hoped. (Two ogres meet! The world is in peril!)



Figure 1 On September 13, President Vladimir Putin of Russia shakes hands with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un during a meeting at the Vostochny Cosmodrome in the far eastern Amur region. Photo: Vladimir Smirnov

Malevolent Kim and Putin may be, but each is also calculating. For instance, any suggestion

that Russia might now aid North Korea's nuclear program seems far-fetched. It is hardly in Moscow's interest to bolster Kim's capacity to act as a loose cannon, risking a repeat of the bloody and costly peninsular adventurism in which his grandfather embroiled the USSR in 1950 (a notional secret, which Putin for some reason chose to [reveal](#) in July). Moreover, although multilateral cooperation in the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the DPRK has broken down, Moscow was [cooperating](#) with a major Western think-tank in assessing North Korean WMD as recently as 2021.

Yet there had to be some quid pro quo for the DPRK munitions and [missiles](#) that are now killing Ukrainians. And there was: satellite launch assistance. Putin [said](#) so during Kim's visit, and South Korea's spy agency [reckons](#) there was Russian input in North Korea's successful launch in November. While this violated UNSC resolutions, helping a space program will be widely regarded as a less serious breach than directly boosting Kim's WMD efforts.

Also dubious is the [suggestion](#) that North Korea, Russia, and China constitute a "developing trilateral imperialist partnership." Despite a superficial resemblance, unlike the Cold War of yore this is an alliance of convenience between three states with a long history of deep mutual mistrust. Why assume each shares the other's goals? Xi Jinping has even less cause than Putin to assist Kim in harming South Korea, a key trading partner, which despite Yoon's pro-US bent is resisting pressure from Washington to disengage economically from China.

Indeed, contrarian as it may sound, Kim's snuggling up to Beijing and Moscow—a striking break from Pyongyang's shrill past assertions of *Juche* (self-reliance)—may actually enhance South Korea's security. The more North Korea depends on this pair, the better they can rein Kim in. Neither wants a Korean distraction from their primary foci, Ukraine and Taiwan.

Hamas: A Misleading Comparison; No Real Link

Then came Oct. 7, and the world changed. As with Kim's visit to Russia, South Korea must ponder the implications of Hamas's shocking assault on Israel and the war this unleashed. But here again, what is needed is careful analysis, not hasty and far-fetched comparisons. True, the ROK too faces a hostile and unpredictable

neighbor. Like Israel, its border security relies on human vigilance and electronic surveillance, either or both of which may fail. Yet does that really mean a North Korean attack “could follow a similar pattern to the Hamas invasion,” as the chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [suggested](#)? President Yoon echoed this in November, telling the visiting US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, that—as the BBC [put](#) it—the allies must “be vigilant against any type of North Korean attack, including surprise assaults ‘resembling Hamas-style tactics.’”

Vigilance is certainly essential, but misleading opportunist comparisons that foment a generalized jumpiness do not help. There is also a risk of fighting the last war. The 1950-53 Korean War did start with a surprise DPRK attack across the 38th Parallel. But in 2023, any future all-out conflict (God forbid) would begin in the air, with missile strikes. Or if—far more plausibly, recent rhetoric notwithstanding—Kim seeks to harm the South without provoking retaliation, then [cyber-attacks](#) would fit the bill much better.

The fact that Hamas has some DPRK weapons is irrelevant. In an awkward moment in January 2024, Washington said it did not know of any military links between Pyongyang and Hamas, contra claims by South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (NIS). In all probability, the Palestinian group obtained North Korean weaponry from Iran, its main sponsor.

North’s Spy Satellite: Third Time Lucky—But How Serious?

In November events refocused Seoul’s attention on realities at home rather than speculative comparisons. Yet once again, the balance of risk assessment was questionable. Moreover, it has to be asked whether the ROK government’s actions lowered risk, or potentially raised it.

After North Korea’s second attempt this year to place a military reconnaissance satellite in orbit failed in August, Kim Jong Un vowed to try again in October. That month came and went, but in mid-November preparations were noticed. On Nov. 21, the DPRK notified Japan (but no one else, it seems) of a 10-day launch window, starting from midnight. In the event they jumped the gun by 78 minutes, interrupting Yoon’s lunch with King Charles at Buckingham Palace in London.

The next day the National Aerospace Technology Administration (NATA, formerly NADA; the D was for Development) reported a successful launch, overseen by Kim Jong Un, adding that it plans to put up several more satellites “in a short span of time.” The morning after, Kim visited NATA’s control center in Pyongyang and congratulated all concerned. KCNA, North Korea’s news agency, reported that he was shown “aerospace photos of Anderson Air Force Base, Apra Harbor and other major military bases of the US forces taken in the sky above Guam in the Pacific.” Several similar visits and reports followed over the next few days, with claims that Kim had viewed photos of the Pentagon, the White House, and much more.



Figure 2 On November 22, 2023, Kim Jong Un (second from the right) visited the Pyongyang General Control Centre of the Korean National Aerospace Technology Directorate, a day after the launch of a rocket carrying the reconnaissance satellite ‘Malligyong-1’. Photo: AP

Did he, really? Were they any good? Regular readers may recall the brouhaha a year ago, when North Korea released satellite images of Seoul and Incheon in grainy black and white, taken from a test rocket—only to be mocked for their poor quality. Russian help may have solved the launch issues, but is the camera any better? Pyongyang has lied about its satellites before. This could all be a bluff. Even South Korea’s hawkish new Defense Minister Shin Won-sik (more on whom in a moment) called the North’s new satellite “rudimentary.”

Even if it is for real, or if future satellites—Pyongyang has pledged more launches—carry better cameras, this might render the peninsula more rather than less secure, by reducing the risk of misunderstanding. Armageddon in Korea could plausibly begin, as in Jeffrey Lewis’s chilling 2018 speculative [novel](#), with one side wrongly believing it was under nuclear attack—and

responding in kind. If Kim Jong Un can now view ROK and US force movements in real time, he is arguably less likely to over-react to unseen unknowns.

Seoul could have taken a relaxed view of this new DPRK spy in the sky. Especially as, just 10 days later, its own—undoubtedly far superior—first indigenous reconnaissance satellite joined the North’s in orbit. To be sure, the North’s launch violated UNSC resolutions prohibiting any activity related to ballistic missiles (Pyongyang indignantly insists that space and BMs are two different things). Routine condemnation was thus *de rigueur*. Yoon could also have slapped on a few more symbolic sanctions.

Both Koreas Undermine Their Border Peace Accord

Instead, he chose to up the ante: suspending part of an inter-Korean military accord signed in September 2018, in happier times. While not addressing fundamental issues such as WMD, the Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA), as Seoul terms it, set up air and sea buffer zones along the border, banned live-fire drills with artillery and coastal guns, and withdrew a few guard posts from the DMZ. (Not many: each side demolished 10, but that still left the South with 67 and the North with 150.) By all accounts, these modest but meaningful measures had for five years improved the atmosphere and kept the peace at the de facto inter-Korean border. This was surely a plus— despite several breaches by North Korea, such as artillery shelling in buffer zones near the DMZ, and December 2022’s cheeky Boxing Day drone incursions.

That last incident prompted Yoon’s first threat to suspend the CMA, a call that grew louder as 2023 progressed. This fall it became an insistent drumbeat, after Yoon nominated a new minister of National Defense: Shin Won-sik, a retired three-star general turned lawmaker. Among many incendiary remarks, Shin has said South Korea’s military should prepare for “unification through marching North” and train units ready “to decapitate Kim Jong Un when there is a possibility to remove him.” He also once called Yoon’s liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in “a North Korean spy,” adding that it is a “matter of time until we cut his throat.” (Such appalling language is no joke. On Jan. 2, opposition leader Lee Jae-myung was [stabbed](#) in the neck, just

missing an artery, by a far-right assailant who [admitted](#) his aim was to stop Lee ever becoming president.)



Figure 3 Minister of National Defense Shin Won-sik addresses the audience during his inauguration ceremony at the ministry in Yongsan District. Photo: Yonhap

Shin apologized for that murderous last comment at his National Assembly confirmation hearing on Sept. 27. He also vowed to end or suspend the CMA, saying it “primarily benefits North Korea and is largely unfavorable for us.” In particular, the no-fly zone restricts surveillance and, as the ROK news agency *Yonhap* put it, limits “ROK capabilities for precision strikes against North Korea.” He also warned: “If North Korea attempts a nuclear attack, the DPRK regime will meet its end...If it provokes, we will retaliate powerfully so they miserably regret it...” This set the tone for similar strong language and calls to partly suspend the CMA, echoed by among others both the outgoing and incoming JCS chiefs.

It was hard to avoid the impression that Shin and others deemed the CMA a fetter, and were looking for a pretext to ease its restrictions. They must have known how Pyongyang would respond. Unpredictable as North Korea can sometimes be, how it would react to this was a racing certainty. And so it proved. On Nov. 23, a day after South Korea suspended Article 1, Clause 3 of the CMA, which sets no-fly zones, the North tore up the whole thing. Somewhat contradictorily, it accused the South of breaking faith—while also claiming that the accord “has long been reduced to a mere scrap of paper.” The DPRK Ministry of National Defense (MND, the same as in the ROK; for many years the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces) roundly declared: “From now on, our army will never be bound by the September 19 North-South

Military Agreement...We will immediately restore all military measures that have been halted.” Should “an irretrievable clash” occur, “the political and military gangsters of the ‘ROK’ ...will be held wholly accountable.” (More on that surprising ‘ROK’ below.)

Events then moved as expected. On Nov. 27 South Korea’s MND said the North had begun rebuilding guard posts—at first temporary structures, but later with concrete—and was bringing heavy firearms into the DMZ. Next day “informed sources” told *Yonhap* that KPA troops at Panmunjom were sporting pistols. Photos showed Northern troops installing temporary guard posts, carrying apparent recoilless guns, and standing guard at night in the DMZ. On Dec. 19, the UN Command (UNC), which has authority over the Joint Security Area (JSA) at Panmunjom, authorized ROK troops in the JSA to carry guns. Its spokesman added, “UNC has also informed the ROK government and KPA of its position that a disarmed JSA is safer and more peaceful ... this can be achieved by reimplementing the previous UNC-KPA agreements.”

This was by no means Korean War redux, but a return to the status quo ante pre-Sept. 2018. Yet as every headline agreed, [tensions rose](#). MND Shin called the partial suspension of the CMA “a proportional response” and “minimal defensive measure” to Pyongyang’s spy satellite launch. But if the wholly predictable result was to raise tensions on the peninsula, was the game worth the candle? In early January, North Korea fired some 350 artillery shells into the West Sea, close to the Northern Limit Line (NLL). 2024 looks set to bring more such activity, hopefully within rather than crossing the MDL.

What’s In a Name? If It’s Korea, Plenty

Words, which do less harm than shells, are hurled across the DMZ constantly, mostly, though not solely, from the Northern side. Our last issue noted some linguistic developments, such as Pyongyang sometimes using the phrase “ROK”—which hitherto it had abjured, as implying recognition. We noted: “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.”

They may both be right, Recent months have made it clear that something is up. As Kim Jong

Un’s year-end speech (discussed below) confirmed, North Korea has been reconceptualizing how it thinks about, relates to, and refers to, the South. This turns out to be no easy task, as witness the variety of usages—some at least implicitly contradictory—currently in play.

The one consistent thread is a new and radical rejection of the shibboleth that (at some level) Korea is one; hence inter-Korean relations are not normal inter-state relations, but special in some way. The DPRK’s increased use of ‘ROK’—usually abbreviated, rather than spelt out—is part of this. But if this is de facto recognition of a kind, it is also disparaging. The context makes this clear—as when Kim refers to “the ROK clan,” for instance—along with weird formulations such as “ROK things” (meaning people; B.R. Myers [suggests](#) “ROK types” as conveying the flavor Pyongyang intends).

“Region of South Korean puppets” is another odd phrase, now not rare in headlines: [searching](#) yields 203 uses (many are duplicates, to be sure), all but seven of them since July 2023. And whatever the new convolutions around “ROK,” the P-word has by no means gone away. During the Asian Games in October, a KCTV on-screen scorecard during an inter-Korean soccer game billed this brusquely a match between “Korea” and “Puppets.”



Figure 4 This footage, taken from North Korea’s Korean Central Television, features a women’s football match between South Korea and North Korea at the Asian Games held at Wenzhou Sports Centre Stadium in Wenzhou, China, on September 30. Photo: *Yonhap*

POWs and Abductees: Why Disinter Now?

Evidently South Korea will face fresh challenges from the North in 2024. Is Yoon Suk Yeol ready? We must hope so. Yet, aside from military matters, some aspects of his *Nordpolitik* are

frankly hard to fathom. One is the unrelenting focus on North Korea’s human rights abuses. This is of course a huge issue, downplayed by those past ROK governments—most recently Moon Jae-in—which sought to engage the DPRK government above all. The crux is familiar. Advocates of engagement argue for sequencing: Start by seeking common ground, and leave more difficult issues for later, once trust has been built. Trouble is, later never comes.

If Moon bent the stick too far in one direction, Yoon is at the opposite extreme. By all means stress North Korean human rights, but the question is: How? Why? For whom? And to what end? If the aim is to publicize DPRK abuses, surely these are already well known—having been the subject of a special UN investigation almost a decade ago. In practice, what Yoon’s administration mostly does, like its predecessors, is organize meetings and conferences. In December *NK News* ran an [article](#) headlined: “Lavish meals and North Korean human rights collide at Seoul’s glitzy conferences.” This noted the irony of marking DPRK suffering with a sumptuous steak dinner in a 5-star hotel—at which an actual defector, tearfully telling of her suffering and escape, was told to hurry up and finish her speech so that eating can commence.

The broad thrust of Yoon’s policy also includes specific peculiarities. Of all the “tough nut” issues on which Pyongyang has never engaged, POWs and early abductees top the list. Here again, the crime was real enough. In 1950 the DPRK took up to 100,000 South Koreans north, during its brief occupation of the ROK at the start of the Korean War. In 1953 it retained a further 90,000 POWs who should have been repatriated. The North’s shortage of skills and labor likely drove these de facto mass kidnappings. Criminal this was, but it is history: almost all concerned will now be dead. After over 70 years, why on earth, in 2024, would any ROK government seriously interested in engaging the North literally disinter this matter and try to put it on the formal inter-Korean agenda, packed as that is with many live issues? Yet that is Yoon’s avowed policy (see the Chronology, Nov. 14–15). One might conclude, from this and other evidence, that Yoon does not seriously expect or intend to talk to Pyongyang.

Kim Declares War—Or Does He?

Low expectations in Seoul are understandable. It is now four years since Kim Jong Un in effect broke off contact, even before his Hanoi debacle with Donald Trump in February 2019. If Kim shunned even the endlessly friendly Moon Jae-in, *a fortiori* he would have no time for his hawkish successor. That much was already clear as 2023 drew towards its close. And then Kim cranked up the rhetoric and tension even more.

In the Kim Jong Un era, the New Year speeches and editorials that laid out policy under his grandfather and father, respectively, have been replaced by year-end Party plenums, lasting several days and ranging widely. The latest of these—officially, the 9th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK—was held Dec. 26–30. At this meeting, among much else, Kim announced a radical [change](#) in North Korea’s stance toward the South. To [some](#), this sounded like a declaration of war; [others](#) reckoned it was not so new. Still others [predicted](#) it may actually benefit the South. The relevant section of *KCNA*’s report is excerpted as an Appendix, below.



Figure 5 The 9th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK occurred at the office building of the Central Committee of the WPK. Photo: KCNA

Writing against the clock, I leave it to readers to form their own judgment. The avowed stance certainly sounds new, in ways foreshadowed in the discussion of nomenclature above. But the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. North Korea says a lot of things, many of them tough. Talk is cheap, trash talk included. From now on Pyongyang will talk differently about Seoul. How far it will walk differently remains to be seen. Watch this space.

Appendix: North Korea's New Stance on South Korea

Excerpt from [KCNA](#), "Report on 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th WPK Central Committee," 31 Dec. 2023.

The General Secretary made a detailed analysis of the gigantic geopolitical changes in international geo-political situation and balance of forces in 2023, the main features of present international situation and the external environment of the Korean peninsula. And he advanced the strategic and tactical policies to be held fast to in the external affairs and clarified the need to newly formulate the stands on the north-south relations and reunification policy and make a decisive policy change in the work against the enemy.

The field of external affairs should actively and tactically cope with the changing and developing international situation and write a diplomatic history of the DPRK which accords with the position of a powerful country on the principle of defending the dignity of the Party, raising the national dignity and protecting the national interests.

He set forth the tasks for concentrating the main efforts on the development of relations with the ruling parties of socialist countries to further expand and strengthen the external sphere of the country, further consolidating the foundation of support and solidarity to the DPRK by further developing the relations with the anti-imperialist independent countries opposed to the hegemony strategy of the U.S. and the West under ever-changing international situation and waging a dynamic anti-imperialist joint action and struggle on an international scale.

We should consistently adhere to the anti-U.S. and anti-enemy struggle principle of power for power and head-on contest and pursue the high-handed and offensive toughest policy.

This year we reaffirmed the unshakable will to counter the frantic nuclear war threat racket and all-out confrontation of the U.S. and its vassal forces with nukes and all-out confrontation and inflicted insurmountable security crisis and horror upon the enemies by the overwhelming exercise of the thorough war deterrent.

Whatever the enemies attempt and whatever they choose, it is our unshakable principle and mode of struggle against the enemy to control by super-tough counteraction beyond it and by the exercise of powerful ability overwhelming it.

The conclusion put forward the line of making a fundamental turnabout in the sector of work toward the south on the basis of a cool analysis of the bitter history of the north-south relations which has repeatedly suffered only distrust and confrontation.

The Korean Peninsula is now constantly in the grip of an uncontrollable crisis due to the reckless anti-DPRK confrontation hysteria and military provocations of the U.S. and south Korean puppets.

It is a well known fact that physical clash can be caused and escalated even by a slight accidental factor in the area of along the Military Demarcation Line where large armed forces of both sides are standing in confrontation with one another, and no one can deny the fact that the two states, the most hostile toward each other, are coexisting in the Korean peninsula at present.

Such abnormal situation is not a random phenomenon like mutation in the light of the successive puppet regimes' extension of their policies but an inevitable result of the history of the north-south relations.

For a long period spanning not just 10 years but more than half a century, the idea, line and policies for national reunification laid down by our Party and the DPRK government have always roused absolute support and approval of the whole nation and sympathy of the world as they are most just, reasonable and fair. But none of them has brought about a proper fruition and the north-south relations have repeated the vicious cycle of contact and suspension, dialogue and confrontation.

If there is a common point among the "policies toward the north" and "unification policies" pursued by the successive south Korean rulers, it is the "collapse of the DPRK's regime" and "unification by absorption." And it is clearly proved by the fact that the keynote of "unification under liberal democracy" has been invariably carried forward although the puppet regime has changed more than 10 times so far.

The puppet forces' sinister ambition to destroy our social system and regime has remained unchanged even a bit whether they advocated "democracy" or disguised themselves as "conservatism," the General Secretary said, and went on:

The general conclusion drawn by our Party, looking back upon the long-standing north-south relations is that reunification can never be achieved with the ROK authorities that defined the "unification by absorption" and "unification under liberal democracy" as their state policy, which is in sharp contradiction with our line of national reunification based on one nation and one state with two systems.

Even at this moment, the south Korean puppets are unhesitatingly contending that the DPRK and its people are territory and population of the ROK that should be reclaimed, and it is shamelessly specified in the constitution of the ROK that "the territory of the ROK contains the Korean peninsula and its attached islands."

The reality urgently requires us to adopt a new stand on the north-south relations and the reunification policy.

Now we need to admit the reality and make the relations with the south Korean puppets clearer.

I think it is a mistake we should no longer make to regard the clan, who publicly defined us as the "principal enemy" and is seeking only the opportunity of "collapse of power" and "unification by absorption" in collusion with foreign forces, as the partner of reconciliation and reunification.

It is not suitable to the prestige and position of the DPRK to discuss the issue of reunification with the strange clan, who is no more than a colonial stooge of the U.S., just because of the rhetorical word the fellow countrymen.

South Korea at present is nothing but a hemiplegic malformation and colonial subordinate state whose politics is completely out of order, whole society tainted by Yankee culture, and defense and security totally dependent on the U.S.

The north-south relations have been completely fixed into the relations between two states hostile to each other and the relations between

two belligerent states, not the consanguineous or homogeneous ones any more.

It can be said this is the present address that shows the relations between the north and the south today.

The conclusion, lucidly looking into and recognizing the reality, stressed the need to take measures for readjusting and reforming the organizations in charge of the affairs related to the south including the United Front Department of the Party Central Committee and to fundamentally change the principle and orientation of the struggle.

Solemnly declaring that if the U.S. and south Korean puppets stubbornly attempt a military confrontation with the DPRK, the latter's nuclear war deterrence will go over to a grave action without hesitation, the conclusion set forth the important tasks for the fields in charge of the affairs with enemies and foreign countries to make preparations in a foresighted way for keeping pace with the powerful military actions of the Korean People's Army to subjugate the whole territory of the south on the basis of making it a fait accompli that a war may break out on the Korean peninsula any time due to the enemies' reckless moves for invading the DPRK.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

Sept. 1, 2023: Responding to North Korea’s failed satellite launch on Aug. 24, South Korea [sanctions](#) the Ryugyong Program Development Company (which [reportedly](#) “develops unmanned weapon systems and deploys its experts abroad”), plus the firm’s CEO and four other officials. This is the 11th set of bilateral ROK sanctions imposed in little over a year under Yoon Suk Yeol, targeting 51 institutions (mostly DPRK) and 54 named individuals. None of these have any dealings with Seoul, obviously, so this gesture is largely symbolic.

Sept. 1, 2023: An unnamed official [tells](#) *Yonhap*, South Korea’s semi-official news agency, that the ROK military has halted search and salvage activities after the DPRK’s second failed satellite launch, having found nothing significant.

Sept. 2, 2023: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [says](#) that in the early hours the DPRK fired several cruise missiles toward the Yellow (West) Sea.

Sept. 3, 2023: Confirming Seoul’s report, *KCNA* [says](#) that “two long-range strategic cruise missiles tipped with mock nuclear warheads were fired” by “a high-spirited ... unit of the Korean People’s Army in the western region.” It [calls](#) this “a firing drill for simulated tactical nuclear attack...to warn the enemies of the actual nuclear war danger.” Pyongyang claims this “nuclear strike mission” was a success: the missiles flew 1,500 km for 7,672 and 7,681 seconds, respectively, detonating at a preset altitude of 150 meters above the target.

Sept. 5, 2023: South Korea’s Ministry of Unification (MOU) [reports](#) that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has delivered 98 speeches since inheriting power in late 2011. 32 of these, or almost one-third, were carried by DPRK media in his own voice—unlike his

microphone-shy father Kim Jong Il, who during his 17-year reign was only ever heard to utter a single sentence in public.

Sept. 5, 2023: MOU suggests that, as *Yonhap* [headlines](#) it, Kim Jong Un is “flaunting” his daughter Ju Ae at military events to “elicit” the Korean People’s Army (KPA)’s loyalty. 12 of Ju Ae’s 15 reported public appearances have been on military-related occasions. (As of Sept. 9 this becomes 13 of 16: father and daughter [attend](#) a paramilitary parade marking the 75th anniversary of the DPRK’s foundation in 1948.

Sept. 5, 2023: A propos US media [claims](#) (correct, it soon transpired) that Kim Jong Un may shortly visit Russia for a summit with Putin to discuss an arms deal, MOU [opines](#) that “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.” The ROK “is closely watching cooperative ties involving North Korea and has raised the reminder that all member countries of the United Nations have a duty to comply with the UN Security Council resolutions.”

Sept. 6, 2023: Speaking in Jakarta where he is attending the ASEAN and related summits, ROK President Yoon [says](#): “Attempts at military cooperation with North Korea, which damage peace in the international community, should be stopped immediately.”

Sept. 6, 2023: New MOU Kim Yung-ho [appoints](#) Ko Young-hwan—the first DPRK diplomat ever to defect to the ROK, and a former French interpreter for North Korea’s founding leader Kim Il Sung—as a special adviser “to help bolster the ministry’s capabilities.” (This must be for his experience rather than current knowledge: Ko came South in 1991.)

Sept. 7, 2023: After receiving a complaint from a Seoul city councilor, Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency (SMPA) [opens](#) a probe into Youn Mee-hyang, an independent lawmaker who recently attended a commemoration in Tokyo of the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. The event was organized by the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon, Chosen Soren), which supports Pyongyang. Under the National Security Law (NSL), South Koreans must notify their government in advance of any contact with Chongryon.

Sept. 7, 2023: South Korean canoeists, who at the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia won gold (500 meters) and bronze (200m) in dragon boat racing as part of a rare joint Korean women's team, [say](#) they look forward to beating their erstwhile Northern teammates at the upcoming Asiad in Hangzhou, China—but also hope to hang out with them. The DPRK has [registered](#) to participate in the Games. In May KBS, citing Kyodo, [said](#) Pyongyang will send 200 athletes for at least three events, including dragon boat racing. On Sept. 13 it is [confirmed](#) that the DPRK has registered 191 athletes for eight events, including dragon boat racing.

Sept. 9, 2023: ROK prosecutors [question](#) opposition leader Lee Jae-myung (on hunger strike since Aug. 31) for 11 hours; a medical team is on standby. This is Lee's fifth interrogation; already indicted on two other counts of corruption, he claims political persecution. This time, it is alleged that \$8 million illegally remitted to North Korea in 2019–20 by Ssangbangwool Group, an underwear maker, included \$3 million to facilitate a visit to Pyongyang by Lee, then governor of Gyeonggi province (greater Seoul). Lee says not a shred of evidence was produced. Admitting he had “tried to do business with the North for humanitarian support and exchanges,” he insists he “did not provide, or ask to provide, money and goods to the North in violation of South Korean laws and United Nations sanctions.” Lee is questioned [again](#) about this on Sept. 12, this time for five hours. He ends his hunger strike on Sept. 22.

Sept. 13, 2023: Yoon [nominates](#) Shin Won-sik, a hawkish retired three-star general turned lawmaker, as minister of National Defense. Among many incendiary remarks, Shin has [said](#) the ROK military should prepare for “unification through marching North” and train units ready “to decapitate Kim Jong Un when there is a possibility to remove him.” He also called Yoon's liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in “a North Korean spy,” adding that it is a “matter of time until we cut his throat.” (On Sept. 27 he apologizes for that last comment.)

Sept. 14, 2023: A propos the previous day's summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin, South Korea's National Security Council (NSC) [says](#) in a press release: “North Korea and Russia will clearly pay the price if they are involved in any acts that pose a significant threat to our security by violating UN Security Council resolutions.” Earlier, the ROK foreign ministry (MOFA) similarly warns that any Russia-DPRK military cooperation deal would have a “very negative impact” on Seoul's relations with Moscow. MOU Kim Yung-ho [chimes](#) in too, calling on “North Korea and Russia to stop illegal and reckless acts that only deepen their own isolation, and abide by international norms.”

Sept. 21, 2023: Following Kim Jong Un's trip to Russia (Sept. 10–19) and summit with Putin, South Korea [sanctions](#) 10 individuals (mostly North Korean) and two entities—both Slovakian companies—said to be involved in DPRK weapons exports, including to Russia. These are the 12th unilateral sanctions of Yoon's presidency. Those sanctioned now total 64 individuals and 53 institutions. (See also Sept. 1, above.)

Sept. 21, 2023: MOU [offers](#) to repatriate the remains of a North Korean—identified as such by his badge of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il—found on a beach on the South's Seongmo island on Sept. 10. During the decade 2010–19 Seoul returned 23 Northern corpses, but latterly Pyongyang has turned unresponsive. The last

two such cases, in November 2022 and June 2023, were cremated after the North failed to reply.

Sept. 26, 2023: By a 7-2 vote, the ROK Constitutional Court [strikes down](#) the Moon-era revision to the Development of Inter-Korean Relations Act, which since March 2021 has prohibited—though not effectively prevented—the sending of propaganda leaflets by balloon into North Korea. Activist groups had challenged the constitutionality of this. The Court rules that the ban excessively restricted freedom of expression.

Sept. 26-27, 2023: North Korea holds the 9th session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), its rubber-stamp Parliament. The date was announced in advance, but unusually the meeting goes unreported until [afterwards](#); causing brief [doubt](#) in Seoul as to whether the assembly actually assembled.

Sept. 27, 2023: At his National Assembly confirmation hearing, MND nominee Shin [vows](#) to end or suspend Sept. 2018's inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement ([CMA](#)). This created air and sea border buffer zones, banned live-fire drills with artillery and coastal guns, and partially withdrew guard posts from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Shin says the accord “primarily benefits North Korea and is largely unfavorable for us.” In particular, the no-fly zone (in Yonhap's summary) “restricts surveillance and ROK capabilities for precision strikes against North Korea.” Seoul claims Pyongyang has violated the CMA at least 17 times. Shin adds: “If North Korea attempts a nuclear attack [against us], the DPRK regime will meet its end...If it provokes, we will retaliate powerfully so they miserably regret it.”

Sept. 28, 2023: KCNA reports that, among the SPA proceedings (which also include a small Cabinet [reshuffle](#)), the section of the DPRK Constitution (chapter 4, article 58) which covers nuclear policy has been beefed up. (An amendment a year earlier [enshrined](#) the right to strike first.) Kim Jong Un [avers](#): “The DPRK's

nuclear force-building policy has been made permanent as the basic law of the state, which no one is allowed to flout with anything.”

Sept. 30, 2023: North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui [blasts](#) the UN Security Council (UNSC) for its “extreme double standard” in taking issue with Pyongyang's “exercise of its legitimate sovereign right” to strengthen its nuclear forces, while ignoring “the US and its vassal forces' ceaseless nuclear threats...which has lingered for more than half a century.”

Oct. 1, 2023: South Korea's foreign ministry [responds](#) to Choe: “The international community clearly bans North Korea's nuclear and missile development and provocations ... Regardless of North Korea's actions and claims, its possession of nuclear weapons will never be recognized, and the sanctions of the international community will further deepen.”

Oct. 1, 2023: KCNA [reports](#): “The women's football team of the DPRK attending the 19th Asian Games advanced into the semi-finals. The quarter-final match was held between teams from the DPRK and the region of south Korean puppets (sic) on September 30. The DPRK team defeated its rival 4:1.” Similarly, the North's *Korean Central Television* (KCTV), while broadcasting the match, [tags](#) it as being between Choson (the DPRK's name for Korea; the ROK uses Hankuk for itself) and “Puppets” (*Goeloe* 괴뢰 in Korean). (See also Oct. 5, below.)

Oct. 2, 2023: Speaking in Berlin, ROK MOU Kim Yung-ho [says](#) that Pyongyang's vicious cycle of provoking Seoul into talks, receiving aid, and then breaking off agreements “will no longer work” in the Yoon era.

Oct. 4, 2023: ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS) [reveals](#) that in August and September it detected “multiple” North Korean hacking attempts against South Korean shipbuilders and related firms. The agency attributes this to Kim Jong Un's order to build mid- to large-sized warships. Methods include infiltrating the computers of shipbuilders' IT maintenance

firms, and sending malware-infected emails to employees to steal sensitive information.

Oct. 4, 2023: Responding to the DPRK enshrining its nuclear force in its Constitution (see Sept. 28), the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [warns](#): “If North Korea attempts to use nukes (sic), it will face the end of its regime.”

Oct. 4, 2023: In a speech to the Korean Veterans Association, President Yoon [says](#): “We will firmly protect the free Republic of Korea and defend our people's safety by strengthening our capability to immediately and overwhelmingly respond to any provocation from the enemy.” He adds: “Our security is under threat from within and outside. Moreover, fake news and instigation through false manipulation are threatening this country's democracy.”

Oct. 5, 2023: A propos the North's “puppet” slur—see Oct. 1—an unnamed MOU official [comments](#): “North Korea has generally used the term South Korea in sports games. But the regime has revealed its own lack of confidence by using such an extremely belittling expression and overreacting even in a sporting event.”

Oct. 5, 2023: South Korea [beats](#) North Korea 3-1 in women's volleyball at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. Neither team is a medal contender by now, having lost earlier matches to China and Vietnam, respectively.

Oct. 5, 2023: MOU [says](#) it is “closely monitoring some 6,000 vulnerable North Korean defectors considered at a high risk of suicide attempts and lonely deaths due to financial difficulties and other hardships.” (That is more than one in six of all defectors, who total just under 34,000.) This monitoring began in Nov. 2022, after some [high-profile tragedies](#). MOU now uses 39 “crisis indicators, such as whether the supply of electricity, water and gas was suspended for their households or there was any previous attempt to commit suicide.”

Oct. 5, 2023: Seoul is oddly vague about its stance on sending leaflets across the DMZ, now that this has been unbanned (see Sept. 26). MOU [says](#): “We will consult with organizations while comprehensively factoring in circumstances such as the inter-Korean relationship ... [and] think about what policy [we] will take by taking various points into account.”

Oct. 7, 2023: As he is empowered to do, President Yoon [appoints](#) Shin Won-sik as minister of National Defense, despite the opposition-controlled National Assembly's refusal to confirm him.

Oct. 8, 2023: On the 10th anniversary of North Korea's arrest of South Korean pastor Kim Jung-wook, later [sentenced](#) to hard labor for life for alleged espionage and religious activity, MOU [urges](#) the North to free Kim and five other ROK nationals similarly held since 2014 and 2016, calling their detention “illegal and inhumane.” The DPRK holds a further 516 South Koreans, mostly fishermen abducted at various times since 1953. Choi Sung-ryong, head of an association of their family members, claims that more than half have subsequently died.

Oct. 10, 2023: A detailed [study](#) by Mandiant (Google's intelligence arm), titled “Assessed Cyber Structure and Alignments of North Korea in 2023,” reports—among much else—that DPRK hackers have targeted Lee Min-bok, head of a defector group which [claims](#) to have sent 300 million leaflets and other items by balloon into the North between 2003 and 2018, when Moon Jae-in's government made him stop. Lee, who came South in 1995, [confirms](#) that Pyongyang tries to hack his emails “about once a week.”

Oct. 10, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [renews](#) his attack on the CMA: “I will push for the suspension of the Sept. 19 inter-Korean military agreement as soon as possible ... Scrapping (the accord) requires a legal process, but I understand a suspension only requires a Cabinet approval.”

Oct. 11, 2023: MOU Kim Yung-ho, not often the voice of moderation, [tells](#) a parliamentary audit of his ministry that the CMA suspension issue should be “prudently discussed.”

Oct. 11, 2023: At the same audit, MOU (the ministry) [provides](#) data on past humanitarian aid by South Korea to the North, mainly via UN agencies. From 1996–2022 the ROK sent \$151.3 million via the World Food Program (WFP), \$66.48 million to the World Health Organization (WHO), and \$40.14 million to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). Bilaterally, during 2018–22 Seoul gave nutritional supplies and medicines worth 36 billion won (\$26.8 million), using a mix of state and NGO funding. (These figures seem incomplete: excluding, for instance, aid provided by ROK NGOs during the ‘sunshine’ era, 1998–2007). All this is loose change for South Korea, whose own GDP rose from \$610 billion in 1996 to \$1.7 trillion in 2023.

Oct. 11, 2023: Visiting Ground Operations Command in Yongin, 42 km south of Seoul, soon after Hamas’s attack on Israel, Defense Minister Shin [orders](#) the unit—tasked with neutralizing DPRK artillery: “If the enemy provokes, punish them immediately, strongly and until the end...I call on you to push for developing and deploying an operational system that can completely destroy the enemy’s long-range artillery capabilities within hours of an enemy provocation.” Shin again reiterates his call to suspend the CMA.

Oct. 12, 2023: Gen. Kim Seung-kyum, soon to be replaced as chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff ([JCS](#)), echoes new Defense Minister Shin in criticizing the CMA. He [tells](#) a National Assembly audit, “Due to no-fly zones set under the military agreement, our surveillance range is restricted in terms of time and space.”

Oct. 12, 2023: After the shock of Hamas’s Oct. 7 surprise attack on Israel, an anonymous MOU spokesperson [suggests](#) that Seoul could suspend the CMA even without any prior provocation by Pyongyang, “if it judges such a move is necessary for national security.”

Oct. 16, 2023: After Washington says the DPRK has delivered over 1,000 containers of arms and munitions to Russia recently, contra Pyongyang’s denials, MOU spokesperson Koo Byoung-sam [comments](#), “The true nature of North Korea, which has attempted to deceive the whole world, has been exposed.”

Oct. 18, 2023: ROK [blocks](#) two DPRK accounts on X/Twitter, [YuMi_DPRK_daily](#) (aka Olivia Natasha), and [@Parama_Coreafan](#). Fronted by winsome young women, both —especially the former—post ‘soft’ propaganda, supposedly portraying normal everyday life in North Korea. (Although ‘normal’ is [relative](#).)

Oct. 19, 2023: Unification Minister Kim [tells](#) *Yonhap*: “If Russia offers military technology to North Korea ... we cannot help but seek powerful sanctions against Russia and North Korea, with the US and other nations.” Taking a harder line on the CMA than a week ago, Kim now calls the pact “an own goal in the security field.” He ventures two predictions: doubting Pyongyang if could have “addressed technical challenges in a short span of time to enable it to make [a] third attempt” to launch a reconnaissance satellite—oops: see Nov. 21,—and (on safer ground) that the trickle of defectors reaching the South will more than double this year, as North Korea starts to reopen its borders.

Oct. 19, 2023: A *propos* reports that last week China repatriated some 600 North Korean defectors detained in its border provinces Jilin and Liaoning, South Korea’s Ambassador to the UN Hwang Joon-kook, [says](#), “We strongly protest this grave human rights incident, which should never happen again...The international community cannot tolerate such actions...We all should understand that the horrendous living conditions and human rights situation in the DPRK have continually forced its people to flee across the border, mainly to China...It is both horrifying and heartbreaking to witness North Korean escapees, who had risked everything including their lives on their long arduous road to freedom, being forcibly repatriated.” Such

trenchant criticism of Beijing by Seoul is rare, even under Yoon.

Oct. 23, 2023: Visiting the frontline island of Yeonpyeong, shelled by North Korea in 2010 (four died), Defense Minister Shin again [calls](#) for the CMA's suspension.

Oct. 23, 2023: In policy reports for a parliamentary audit, the ROK Army and Air Force [describe](#) how each plans to strengthen defense capabilities against North Korea's evolving WMD threat and asymmetric warfare tactics. (For details, see the [link](#).)

Oct. 24, 2023: South Korea's Marine Corps Commandant [tells](#) a parliamentary audit that live-fire exercises need to resume on five front-line islands in the West Sea. Lt.-Gen. Kim Gye-hwan says the CMA has weakened military readiness, which requires firing major assets such as K-9 self-propelled howitzers into the sea. Since 2018 such drills have been held on land, but this is more expensive and the range is too short.

Oct. 24, 2023: The ROK coast guard and military [report](#) that four North Koreans—one man and three women—have defected in a small (7.5 meter) boat via the East Sea. They first approached a Southern fisherman, Lim Jae-kil, asked where they were, and said how nice his vessel was. As for their own craft, Lim said “he had never seen such a boat in his more than 40 years of life as a fisherman ... it appeared to have the engine of a cultivator.”

Oct. 24, 2023: MOU data [show](#) the number of Northern defectors reaching South Korea this year so far has more than tripled: up from 42 in January–September 2022 to 139 in the same period of 2023. This is still far below the pre-pandemic annual [norm](#) of 1,000 or more. (Very few of these will be direct arrivals; most have spent years elsewhere, usually in China.)

Oct. 26, 2023: With the end of the month nigh, MOU [sees](#) no signs of a fresh satellite launch

attempt by North Korea. After two failures, Kim Jong-un had vowed to try again in October.

Oct. 27, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [says](#) North Korea has violated the CMA “close to 3,600” times in the western maritime buffer zone. Most (3,400) of these involve failing to cover gun barrels; Shin acknowledges that Pyongyang “doesn't seem to recognize leaving the porthole (of artillery pieces) open as a violation.” It has also fired artillery shells into the sea 110 times.

Oct. 29, 2023: ROK JCS [says](#) a spotter plane found a small (10m) DPRK vessel drifting near the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto maritime border) in the East Sea. Seoul dispatched a patrol boat. Those aboard said they had been adrift for 10 days, and asked for food and water, which they were given. They did not wish to defect. Next day the JCS [reports](#) that a North Korean vessel came and towed them away.

Oct. 30, 2023: After the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force (FATF) decides, for the 13th consecutive year, to keep the DPRK on its [list](#) of “high-risk jurisdictions subject to a call for action,” MOU spokesman Koo Byoung-sam declares: “The North Korean regime's seizure of illicit funds to secure money for its rule and development of weapons of mass destruction is becoming bolder day by day, in means and scale ... The shortcut to resolving all problems on the Korean Peninsula, such as the North's denuclearization and promotion of human rights, lies in blocking the inflow of black money to the regime of Kim Jong Un.”

Nov. 1, 2023: Adm. Kim Myung-soo, [named](#) on Oct. 29 by Yoon as the next chairman of the JCS, [says](#) “there are certainly limitations militarily” caused by the CMA. He adds: “The South Korean military should exist as a tiger and fight like a hound.” (See also Nov. 17.)

Nov. 2, 2023: MOU [says](#) it will recognize relatives of South Koreans imprisoned in the North as victims of abduction. This renders them eligible for state compensation, at a

modest 15–20 million won (\$11,234—15,100) per family. [Six](#) such detainees are known—three [missionaries](#) and three defectors; four have family in South Korea. Pyongyang is silent about their fate. (See also Oct. 8.)

Nov. 2, 2023: MOU [urges](#) North Korea to reactivate the inter-Korean liaison line; Pyongyang has not picked up the phone since April. Seoul notes that cases like the recent drifting DPRK vessel—see Oct. 29—highlight the need for this; although in fact the ROK found other ways to get in touch, via the UN Command and international maritime communication channels.

Nov. 2, 2023: A “government source” [tells](#) *Yonhap* that the four Northerners who defected by boat last month include a pregnant woman in her 20s. They cited food shortage as their reason for leaving.

Nov. 5, 2023: North Korea [designates](#) Nov. 18 as “day of the missile industry,” marking the date in 2022 when it tested a *Hwasong-17* ICBM. More significantly, this was the first public appearance of Kim Jong Un’s daughter Ju Ae. (In 2021 some DPRK calendars [marked](#) Nov. 29—the anniversary of an earlier launch of a different ICBM, the *Hwasong-15*, in 2017—as “rocket industry day”; but this was not celebrated, and has gone unmentioned since.)

Nov. 6, 2023: Seoul [deplores](#) Pyongyang’s designation of a missile industry day.

Nov. 6, 2023: MOU Kim [says](#) North Korea seems to have been getting technical help from Russia for another satellite launch. He also suggests that Pyongyang’s recent “designation of a ‘missile industry day is ...apparently not irrelevant to [Kim] Ju Ae’s emergence.”

Nov. 7, 2023: MOU Kim Yung-ho [tells](#) an academic forum in Seoul that the ROK “will continue to support” the stalled joint project of compiling a unified Korean [dictionary](#). In 2005–10 and 2014–15 lexicologists from North and South met 25 times, in Seoul, Pyongyang,

Kaesong, Mount Kumgang, and three Chinese cities: Beijing, Shenyang, and Dalian. They agreed on the definition and pronunciation of 128,000 of a projected 307,000 words. Since 2015 the Southern team has continued alone, faxing their work to Pyongyang, but receiving no response. One comments: “It’s like a one-sided love.”

Nov. 8, 2023: A KCNA [article](#) headlined “It Will Act as ‘Detonator’ of End of ‘Republic of Korea’” warns that, if propaganda balloon launches resume (see Sept. 26), “it is the stand of the enraged revolutionary armed forces of the DPRK to pour a shower of shells into the bulwark of the region of south Korean puppets.” (Bylined as commentary by a named author, this carries less weight than an official government or Party statement.) It also repeats the ludicrous canard that this is how Covid-19 got into North Korea, referring to “the inroad of the malignant infectious disease caused by shabby things of human scum.” (sic).

Nov. 9, 2023: MOU [responds](#), calling the leaflets “a voluntary activity carried out by civic groups in accordance with the freedom of expression guaranteed in our Constitution ... We sternly warn North Korea against acting rashly.”

Nov. 9, 2023: Following [reports](#) that North Korea has revised its election law to permit some voters in local elections a choice between two candidates, instead of just endorsing one as hitherto, MOU [comments](#): “This is far from [an] actual guarantee of people’s suffrage.” The ballot will still not be secret. The first elections under the new system are due in Nov.

Nov. 14, 2023: Government “sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* that if Pyongyang tries again to launch a spy satellite, Seoul “is considering partially suspending [the] 2018 inter-Korean military agreement as a precautionary measure against North Korean provocations.”

Nov. 14, 2023: ROK’s task force on South Korean abductees held in North Korea [meets](#) for the first time since 2012. Four ministries are

involved—MOU, MND, MOFA, and MOJ (justice)—plus the National Police Agency and NIS. Admitting past government action has been “insufficient,” MOU’s Kang Jong-suk says the North “continues to deny the presence of abductees, detainees and prisoners of war, and remains unresponsive to our requests to verify their status and repatriate them.”

Nov. 15, 2023: MOU Kim [presents](#) his ministry’s “fourth basic plan,” a five year blueprint for inter-Korean relations (2023-27; President Yoon’s term ends in May 2027) to the National Assembly. This includes a pledge to raise the issue not only of separated families, but also of detainees, abductees and POWs held by North Korea. Pyongyang has never admitted the last two categories, estimated as originally having [numbered](#) almost 100,000 and over 90,000 respectively. After 70 years almost all must now be dead, so the point of pushing this as an agenda item is unclear. For that matter, with no North-South talks held since Dec. 2018 and none in prospect, any and all of what Seoul might propose now is arguably hypothetical.

Nov. 17, 2023: Kim Myung-soo, the next JCS Chairman nominee, [tells](#) his parliamentary confirmation hearing that the CMA “clearly limits [our] military’s capability.” Specifically, it restricts surveillance of North Korea in terms of “space and time,” including (as *Yonhap* puts it) “real-time monitoring of the North’s rear side,” and live-fire drills on ROK islands close to the DPRK in the West (Yellow) Sea. (See also Oct. 24.)

Nov. 18, 2023: DPRK media carry [no](#) reports of the recently designated missile industry day being marked. Kim Jong Un too has gone unreported for almost a month; he was last seen greeting Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, on Oct. 20.

Nov. 19, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [predicts](#) that North Korea may launch its military satellite “within a week or so,” having “almost resolved” its engine problems “with Russia’s help.”

Nov. 20, 2023: Lt. Gen. Kang Ho-pil, ROK JCS chief director of operations, [warns](#) the DPRK to “immediately stop” its satellite launch preparations. Should it go ahead, “our military will come up with necessary measures to protect the lives and safety of our people.”

Nov. 21, 2023: At short notice, the DPRK [notifies](#) Japan (but seemingly no one else) of a 10-day satellite launch window, starting midnight, through Dec. 1. In the event they jump their own gun by 78 minutes, launching at 2242 local time that same day.

Nov. 21, 2023: ROK and Japanese military officials [say](#) the DPRK has launched its satellite, slightly ahead of the window it had notified. President Yoon [chairs](#) a National Security Council meeting from London, where he is on a state visit: the North’s launch interrupted his lunch at Buckingham Palace. South Korea announces that it will resume reconnaissance activities close to the DMZ, ahead of formal suspension of the relevant section of the CMA.

Nov. 21, 2023: ROK National Police Agency (KNPA) [says](#) that a DPRK hacking group, dubbed “Kimsuky,” hijacked the email accounts of 1,468 South Koreans so far this year: a 30-fold jump from 49 cases in 2022. Victims include 57 current or former government officials. Nothing important was stolen, however, thanks to strict security protocols.

Nov. 22, 2023: DPRK National Aerospace Technology Administration (NATA, formerly NADA; the D was for Development) [reports](#) a successful satellite launch, late on the previous evening, overseen by Kim Jong Un. It plans to put up several more “in a short span of time.” Next morning, Kim [visits](#) NATA’s Pyongyang General Control Center and congratulates all concerned. He is shown “aerospace photos of Anderson Air Force Base, Apra Harbor and other major military bases of the US forces taken in the sky above Guam in the Pacific.”

Nov. 22, 2023: An extraordinary [Cabinet](#) meeting chaired by Prime Minister Han Duck-soo officially [suspends](#) Article 1, Clause 3 of the [CMA](#), which stipulates no-fly zones, effective 3 p.m. local time. President Yoon later approves this electronically from London.

Nov. 23, 2023: Pyongyang responds to Seoul's partial suspension of the CMA by [repudiating](#) it *in toto*. Accusing Seoul of breaking faith—while also claiming that the accord “has long been reduced to a mere scrap of paper”—the DPRK MND [declares](#): “From now on, our army will never be bound by the September 19 North-South Military Agreement ...We will immediately restore all military measures that have been halted.” If “an irretrievable clash” occurs, “the political and military gangsters of the “ROK” ...will be held wholly accountable.”

Nov. 23, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [calls](#) Seoul's partial suspension of the CMA “a proportional response” and “a minimal defensive measure” to Pyongyang's spy satellite launch.

Nov. 27, 2023: ROK MND [says](#) North Korea has begun rebuilding guard posts and is bringing heavy firearms into the DMZ.

Nov. 28, 2023: “Informed sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* that KPA troops at Panmunjom are now sporting pistols. Photos released by MND show Northern troops installing temporary guard posts, carrying what appeared to be recoilless guns and standing guard at night in the DMZ.

Dec. 1, 2023: Ten days after the North's launch, South Korea too [gets](#) its own (much higher quality) first indigenous military reconnaissance satellite, launched atop a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California.

Dec. 3, 2023: Among much such bluster daily from DPRK media, *KCNA* carries a lengthy (2,850 word) [article](#) by “a military commentator.” Accusing Seoul of multiple provocations, this [warns](#) that a “physical clash and war on the

Korean peninsula have become a matter of time, not possibility...Any hostile act of the puppet group against the DPRK will lead to the miserable destruction of the puppet army and the total collapse of the ‘ROK’ (sic).”

Dec. 4, 2023: After a joint investigation with the FBI, Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency [says](#) that a hacker group dubbed Andariel, a unit of the DPRK's Reconnaissance General Bureau, stole 1.2 terabytes of data in 83 separate raids between Dec. 2022 and March 2023. “Dozens” of ROK entities were compromised: defense firms, universities, research centers, financial institutions, et al. A laxly monitored Southern server was used to hack the targets, who were unaware. The stolen data is thought to include key defense technologies, notably anti-aircraft [lasers](#). Andariel also netted 470 million won (\$360,236) from ransomware attacks on three South Korean firms; the transfer of some of the proceeds to Pyongyang was traced. (See also Nov. 21.)

Dec. 4, 2023: MOU [raps](#) Pyongyang for its “false and far-fetched claims” and using “rude language” (see Dec. 3). The ministry specifically denies the North's [claim](#) that Seoul “blared anti-Pyongyang loudspeaker broadcasts along the border 3,200 times this year.” Propaganda loudspeakers at the border remain banned under ROK law, although Yoon's ruling People Power Party and other conservatives have called for their resumption.

Dec. 6, 2023: For the first time under Yoon Suk Yeol, the ROK government [holds](#) an inter-agency meeting—MOU, MOFA, and MND—on Southern POWs detained in North Korea. Seoul urges Pyongyang to acknowledge this issue, “and cooperate in uncovering their fate.” An estimated 80-90,000 were not returned as the 1953 Armistice stipulated. The DPRK has always denied this, but over the years around 80 have escaped; at least one wrote a gripping [memoir](#). As of 2016 the South reckoned some 500 might still be alive.

Dec. 7, 2023: After a year-long investigation into how Seoul handled the case of Lee Dae-jun, the ROK fisheries official killed in mysterious circumstances off the DPRK coast in 2020, the Board of Audit and Inspection (BAI) [issues](#) a damning final report. It accuses the then Moon Jae-in government of (1) not acting promptly to try to save Lee; (2) seeking to cover up the incident, after the North killed him and burnt his body; and (3) distorting the truth by claiming Lee was seeking to defect. Agencies failed to coordinate; data were deleted, facts withheld, and Parliament misled. BAI recommends that 13 officials involved be disciplined or cautioned, including ex-Defense Minister Suh Wook and a former Coast Guard commissioner. Last year BAI called for 20 officials to be prosecuted; several court cases are in progress.

Dec. 8, 2023: MOU [says](#) North Korea is illegally operating some 30 South Korean-owned factories—up from [10 in May](#)—at the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which the ROK unilaterally shut down in 2016. Pyongyang is also removing debris from the former joint liaison office in the KIC, which it blew up in 2020. Seoul warns that both these actions infringe on its property rights, and tells the North to desist—or it may sue. *Reports that Kim Jong Un's riposte was "Go ahead, dude, make my day" remain unconfirmed.*

Dec. 12, 2023: MOU Kim [tells](#) a press conference that his ministry will “introduce a new human rights roadmap” and establish a National Center for North Korean Human Rights, to raise awareness about abuses there. It will also publish a report titled “Economic and Social Reality of North Korea,” based on interviews with over 6,000 defectors. He insists he also supports humanitarian aid to Pyongyang.

Dec. 13, 2023: Defense Minister Shin [tells](#) senior ROK military commanders: “North Korea has only two choices: peace or destruction...If they make reckless actions that harm peace, only a hell of destruction awaits them...Our military must clearly imprint this on North Korea.” He

also savages Moon Jae-in's approach: “The ‘peace process,’ which relied on North Korea's goodwill and surreal optimism, was completely fake. It would not be an exaggeration to describe it as a well-planned fraud.” He makes other similarly trenchant speeches.

Dec. 15, 2023: A [report](#) by South Korea's Rural Development Administration (RDA) broadly endorses Pyongyang's [claims](#) of a good harvest this year. RDA estimates total output of North Korea's main crops—rice, corn, potatoes, wheat, barley and soybeans—at 4.82 million tons, up 6% from 2022. This is still below the pre-pandemic figure of 5.2 million tons, let alone the 8 million tons claimed in the 1980s and [set](#) as a target for 2020 in 2016's five year plan.

Dec. 19, 2023: UN Command (UNC) [permits](#) ROK troops in the JSA to carry guns. Its spokesman [says](#) “Given the KPA's current armed security posture, [we have] authorized ... members of the guard forces on the UNC side of the JSA to re-arm to protect both civilian and military personnel.” He adds, “UNC has also informed the ROK government and KPA of its position that a disarmed JSA is safer and more peaceful for the Korean Peninsula, and that this can be achieved by reimplementing the previous UNC-KPA agreements.”

Dec. 19, 2023: A day after North Korea [test-fires](#) its fifth ICBM this year, Yoon tells his Cabinet: “The North Korean regime will come to realize its provocations will only come back to them (sic) as greater pain.” He does not say how such a learning experience will be arranged. The third successful test of a *Hwasong-18* probably means that this solid-fuel, road-mobile ICBM is now [operational](#).

Dec. 19, 2023: ROK Defense Counterintelligence Command [reveals](#) that a young sailor doing his national service has been indicted for distributing pro-DPRK materials in his unit's restroom. The unnamed petty officer second class is also accused of using his smartphone to

disclose his vessel's location to an unidentified Chinese during maritime operations.

Dec. 20, 2023: Yoon Suk Yeol [tells](#) the third meeting of the presidential defense innovation committee, which he [set up](#) a year ago, to “dramatically strengthen our military's surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities...against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.” MND says it will streamline procedures to halve average procurement time from 14 to seven years.

Dec. 26–30, 2023: As has become the norm at year-end, North Korea holds a party plenum to look forward and back. The 9th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the WPK is held on Dec. 26–30, with short daily reports on KCNA from [Dec. 28](#) onward.

Dec. 28, 2023: The NIS [says](#) “there is a high possibility that North Korea could unexpectedly conduct military provocations or stage a cyberattack in 2024, when fluid political situations are expected with the [April 10 parliamentary] elections.” The agency cites three factors: past precedent; the return to high office in Pyongyang of three figures linked to previous incidents; and military measures the North has taken since the CMA collapsed.

Dec. 29, 2023: Echoing the NIS a day earlier, Yun Jae-ok, floor leader of South Korea's conservative ruling People Power Party (PPP) [avers](#): “It seems certain that North Korea has planned to simultaneously carry out military provocations and covert operations against South Korea to interfere in our elections.”

Dec. 31, 2023: *KCNA* [reports](#) the Party Plenum, at length. Among much else, Kim Jong Un announces a radical [reorientation](#), and hardening, of North Korea's stance and policy toward South Korea (see Appendix).

