

COMPARATIVE

C O N N E C T I O N S

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MORTAL MENACE, OR MERE MIND GAMES?

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Kim Jong Un elaborated his radical new line on South Korea to the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) in January. It sounded just as nasty as when he first expounded it in December, but no more coherent. Though obscure, this is clearly very important. Hence most of this article is devoted to a detailed reading of what Kim said, in a bid to tease out what this means in practice for South Korea’s security. While awaiting further specification in a promised Constitutional amendment, our provisional assessment is that this is more bark than bite. Buttressing that view, close analysis of the two Koreas’ artillery shelling near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in early January, and the barbs they also traded, highlights an element of performativity—especially from Pyongyang—that is somewhat reassuring. Despite much fiery rhetoric, and while vigilance and deterrence remain crucial, this does not look like a peninsula on the brink of war.

This article is extracted from Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal of Bilateral Relations in the Indo-Pacific, Vol. 26, No. 1, May 2024. Preferred citation: Aidan Foster-Carter, “North Korea-South Korea Relations: Mortal Menace, or Mere Mind Games?” Comparative Connections, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp 121-142.

Kim's New Stance on South Korea: What Does It Portend?

Without a doubt, this period's most important development is the new stand toward South Korea announced by Kim Jong Un at the end of 2023, and further adumbrated by him a fortnight later in mid-January. On its face, this upends Pyongyang's entire past policy—which means repudiating the legacies of his grandfather Kim Il Sung and father Kim Jong Il. Indeed, this may be the most significant event in all the years (over 20: this century, basically) that this author has been covering inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections*.

Accordingly, this article will focus on this topic. To assist the reader, and since *CC* in part aspires to be a journal of record, we reproduced the first tranche of Kim's new line as an Appendix in our last issue. (Pyongyang published this on the very last day of the year, so there was no time to analyze it in detail at that point.) This formed one section of a major and lengthy speech which Kim delivered at a major and lengthy meeting: formally, the 9th Enlarged Plenum of 8th Workers' Party (WPK) Central Committee. As has become the norm in recent years, this was held at the year's end; it lasted five days (Dec. 26–30).

The section in question was headed “On the orientation of struggle in 2024,” one of the plenum's main themes. Following a review of how Party and state policies were implemented in the old year, Kim turned to the future in the new one. Despite the typically militant wording, most of what was covered under this heading concerned mundane economic policy: school uniforms, for instance. (In North Korea, everything is a struggle.)

Regarding South Korea, however, the militancy is no mere metaphor, and the orientation is a radical reorientation. Earlier Kim had laid out the usual DPRK perspective, in terms familiar to the point of cliché. He spoke of “the dangerous security environment in the Korean peninsula on the brink of a nuclear war...the US and its vassal forces have still perpetrated vicious anti-DPRK confrontational moves and the desperate efforts of the enemies have reached the extremes unprecedented in history...[they] more persistently instigated the south Korean puppets and Japs (sic), who are playing the role as the most faithful stooge and ‘running-dog’...[They are] openly talking about ‘end of regime’ in the DPRK.”

Beyond such generalities, a wealth of detail on specific US and alliance developments showed how Pyongyang pays close attention to the moves of its foes. Kim's conclusion: “The word ‘war’ is already approaching us as a realistic entity, not as an abstract concept.” Cue a section on tasks facing the munitions and missiles industries, among other weapons sectors.

Naturally, Kim also blasted “the anti-DPRK confrontation behavior of traitor Yoon [ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol] getting evermore offensive recently.” This was why, in his view, the Sept. 19 North–South Military Agreement, “which had been playing a feeble mission of preventing armed conflict just for form's sake, was scrapped.” (The accord's collapse was discussed in our [last issue](#).)

“A Decisive Policy Change in The Work Against The Enemy”

So far, so boilerplate. But then Kim moved on to posit “gigantic geopolitical changes in [the] international geo-political situation...and the external environment of the Korean peninsula.” Here came a first mention of “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.” His audience—those not in the know—must have wondered what was coming.

Beyond the peninsula, hence outside our remit here, Kim confirmed in doctrine what had already become evident in practice. “The field of external affairs [aka diplomacy] should “concentrat[e] the main efforts on the development of relations with the ruling parties of socialist countries.” That too is a major change, though—unlike on North–South relations—he did not spin it as such. One might even call this a farewell to *Juche*.

Gone are the days when Pyongyang pivoted nimbly between powers: Kim Il Sung balancing between Moscow and Beijing, never fully in either's pocket while pocketing aid from both; or Kim Jong Il playing off China and South Korea. Like his grandfather, Kim Jong Un has reverted to the DPRK's two original big brothers, and perhaps in part he is playing them off. Yet he seems keener to stress loyalty to this camp than to emphasize North Korea's autonomy. That is a big change.

What of the peninsula? Kim called for “a fundamental turnabout in...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...No one can deny the fact that the two states, the most hostile toward each other, are coexisting in the Korean peninsula at present.” This “abnormal situation is not a random phenomenon,” and of course it is all the South’s fault. For 50 years the North has pursued “most just, reasonable and fair” policies on national reunification. By contrast, even though “the puppet regime has changed more than [10] times so far,” their constant theme is “the collapse of the DPRK’s regime” and “unification by absorption.”

Hold it there, comrade. What about Kim Dae-jung or Moon Jae-in? Kim is having none of it: “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.’” Hence the party has concluded 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.”

But all this is a travesty, as any long-term reader of this journal knows. True, some—perhaps most—conservative ROK leaders thought in the way Kim describes. Not so the three liberals—‘DJ’ (1998-2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003-08), and Roh’s protégé Moon (2017-22). Their vision was quite different, and much closer to Pyongyang’s own. This is fake history.

Kim then adduces a further example, while also shifting his ground:

“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.’”

True, South Korea’s Constitution does make that claim (in Article 3), whereas the North’s contains

no such territorial definition. (The closest it gets is in Article 9, which refers to “the northern half of Korea” and says the DPRK will strive to “reunify the country on the principle of independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity.”) But this is specious of Kim. From the beginning, neither Korean state has recognized the other. What the ROK rendered explicit was always implicit for the DPRK too. There is nothing “shameless” nor new about the South’s position. (If it was news to Kim, he hadn’t been paying attention.)

“Hemiplegic Malformation”

Moving swiftly on, Kim draws drastic conclusions (numbers added for convenience):

1. “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.
2. “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 US, just because of the rhetorical word the fellow countrymen.
3. “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 defence and security totally dependent on the US.
4. “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.”

A lot is being asserted here, but not much of it makes sense. Several comments are in order.

First, who or what exactly does Kim think “South Korea” is? He switches from government to territory to that peculiar “clan,” which prompts several questions. If the “clan” is unrepresentative—though freely elected, unlike north of the DMZ—then what of the Southern

people? Thus in paragraphs 1 and 2, if the “clan” is a colonial stooge or an untrustworthy partner, then surely the North should seek a non-stooge partner in the South? That is what it tried in the past, overtly or covertly: seeking stooges of its own, as a cynic might put it. Now, the implication is not only that Pyongyang has found no worthy interlocutors, but it never will—and has stopped looking.

Paragraph 3 gives another version of what South Korea is, and it ain’t pretty—nor remotely true. The distasteful disablist imagery that Kim bandies around here suggests an implicit political eugenics. Such a malformed, tainted, dependent entity is clearly unfit to be a dialogue partner. Does it even deserve to exist?

Another question: In what sense, if any, is Korea still one? Not at all, according to Kim. Like the fashionable view that sex and gender is all in the mind, he reckons “fellow countrymen” is merely a “rhetorical word.” In one sense it is: after almost 80 years apart, the two Koreas have evolved into utterly different societies. “Homogeneous” they are surely not. But Kim brackets this with “consanguineous,” which is different. Koreans remain related to one another, though what they choose (or are allowed) to make of it is another matter. The Leader himself is a case in point: Kim’s own mother Ko Yong Hui was born in Osaka to parents from southern Korea.

Paragraph 4. begs questions. Is it true that inter-Korean ties (at the level of states) are “fixed” into hostility? And regardless, what has that to do with either consanguinity or homogeneity?

Kim rounds off this farrago with two conclusions: bureaucratic, and then (more ominously) military. First, various organizations—not least, “the United Front Department of the Party Central Committee” need “readjusting and reforming” to “fundamentally change the principle and orientation of the struggle.” And lo it was done, in short order. On the very first day of 2024, Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui called a meeting “with officials concerned” to start implementing the organizational changes. Evidently MOFA—not always a high-status ministry in Pyongyang—will gain power and expand its bailiwick, as the formerly separate bodies (mostly under the WPK) which hitherto handled South Korea are summarily axed.

And then finally a concluding growl, which we quote in full before seeking to parse it:

“Solemnly declaring that if the US 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, [Kim] 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.”

Many questions arise. So the “territory” of the South can be subjugated—but only if the foe makes the first move? What about the Southern people: are they to be ‘subjugated’ too? And why is Kim, who ended his father’s military-first strategy (*Songun*) by restoring party control over the KPA, now in effect telling MOFA to spruce up and keep pace with the soldiers?

New Line, Part II: Kim Addresses SPA

All in all, Plenum delegates had plenty to ponder as they saw in the New Year. If any sought further clarification, it was not long coming. Despite the rigors of the season and a creaking transport system, why hold just one big meeting in the depths of the North Korean winter if you can hold two? Barely a fortnight after the WPK Plenum ended, many of the same people were recalled to Pyongyang for the 10th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) on Jan. 15. As often, a single day sufficed: saying yes does not take long.

North Korea’s rubber-stamp Parliament used to meet in balmy spring, but last year too it convened in January (and again in September). This makes some sense, as a major agenda item is the budget for the new as well as the old year; so it was odd when this used not to be promulgated till the year was already under way. The budget duly featured this time, but the main event was another big speech by you know who. This one was grandly titled: “On the Immediate Tasks for the Prosperity and Development of Our Republic and the Promotion of the Wellbeing of Our People.”

As that suggests, like at the Plenum the focus was once again on economic policy. That is not our concern here, but perhaps a comment may be allowed. This rather elderly writer has been reading such speeches, for his sins, for over half a century now—indeed since before the current North Korean leader was born. They are astonishingly and depressingly unchanged. Same sectors, same underperformance, same harangues. Same assumption that the state and party must run everything—“The Cabinet should make sure that no unit is out of its control”—when actually that is precisely the problem, not a solution.

Yet the latest Kim is honest about failure: “It is reality that the Party and the government yet fail to meet even the simple demand of the people in life, although they are said to be striving to live up to the people's deep trust without fail.” That is quite an admission, as is his call for “the people's living [to] be put on a normal track.” Evidently it is far from normal at present.

As in December, all this is context preceding Kim's remarks about South Korea. The full excerpt is below as an Appendix, Part II. (Part I is KCNA's report of remarks by Kim in similar vein to munitions workers a few days earlier: a handy summary of the new line.)

Addressing the SPA, Kim began with a warning about the worsening security environment. This included a sideswipe at Seoul: “the suicidal acts of such servile states as the ROK unconditionally submitting to the US inflame the enmity of our Republic and...offer reasonable and full justification for strengthening the military capability and more rapidly improving the overwhelming nuclear war deterrent.”

Ominously, he added that “preparations for a great event have become urgent reality and our army has been entrusted with the important mission of ensuring it through a powerful military action.” It is hard to see what this could mean, except reunification by force. Yet what basis can that have, given that the new line (as he goes on to say) involves “recognizing two states on the peninsula”? This is an odd kind of recognition. In the past, when Pyongyang (rarely) used the phrase Republic of Korea or ROK, this meant relations were improving. No longer. Kim now acknowledges this other state as a fact—but seems not to accept its right to exist.

Military threats loomed large in Kim's SPA speech. He reiterated the DPRK's longstanding non-recognition of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime border in the West/Yellow Sea: “As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal ‘northern limit line’ and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.001 mm of our territorial land, air and waters, it will be considered a war provocation.”

This stance and rhetoric are not new. The first phrase begs the question: Clearly drawn by whom? Kim then moves on to revising the Constitution. As in December, he is vexed that the ROK Constitution lays claim to the whole peninsula, whereas the DPRK's has no such provision. Therefore “it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised.”

If that seems fair, what follows is startling: “In my opinion, we can specify in our constitution the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of (sic) a war breaks out” on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover “it is necessary to delete such expressions in the constitution as ‘northern half’ and ‘independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity.’” Likewise such linguistic remnants misinterpreting the north and the south as fellow countrymen as “3,000-ri tapestry-like land” and “80 million compatriots.” Instead, the constitution must specify that “education should be intensified to instill into [our people] the firm idea that ROK is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy.”

One hardly knows where to start. None of this makes any sense: it is profoundly incoherent, as well as outrageous. Kim cannot have it both ways. If the ROK is a wholly separate entity, such that “northern half” is a wrong term, then on what conceivable basis can the DPRK lay any kind of claim to it?—let alone the right to occupy, subjugate, reclaim, and annex it? He talks as if this were a matter of territory alone—but what of 52 million South Koreans, who (whatever he says) remain compatriots by kinship, language, culture, and history?

It will be interesting, to say the least, to see how the amended constitution tries to square all these

circles. We may not have long to wait, as Kim called for amendment to “be discussed at the next session of the Supreme People’s Assembly.” The SPA was due an election in March, when its five-year term expired, but nothing has been announced. So the existing Assembly will probably be reconvened later this year, to amend the Constitution according to Kim’s whims, before a new SPA is elected to approve whatever he comes up with next.

The new line also dictates practical tasks. Kim called for cross-border railways to be cut off, physically, completely, and “irretrievably” (Might they not come in handy one day for all that subjugating?). Furthermore, “we should also completely remove the eye-sore ‘Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification’ [in] Pyongyang.” The monument—a rather striking road arch, representing two women from North and South joining hands—[seems](#) to have come down promptly, with the railway and other work following some months later.



Figure 1 The Monument to Three Charters of National Reunification South of Pyongyang, North Korea. Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

Kim ends in a welter of militancy and contradictions. The DPRK’s military buildup does not, he insists, presage any “preemptive attack for realizing unilateral ‘reunification by force of arms’...Explicitly speaking, we will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us.”

Ah, so this is purely for self-defense? “Absolutely not. I have already clearly mentioned the second mission of our nuclear force, in addition to its basic duty of deterring war.” This second mission reserves the right to make a preemptive nuclear strike. In other words, Kim

maintains the right to strike first if he feels threatened or provoked.

He concludes: “We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it. There is no reason to opt for war, and therefore, there is no intention of unilaterally going to war, but once a war becomes a reality facing us, we will never try to avoid it, and we will take perfect and prompt action we thoroughly prepared...The war will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence. And it will inflict an unimaginably crushing defeat upon the US.”

The tone here recalls a British patriotic song from the Victorian era: “We don't want to fight but by Jingo if we do/We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too.” In both cases, the pro forma protestation of not wanting to fight seems belied by the glee with which the prospect is savored. Ponder Kim’s penultimate sentence. Not just “destroy,” but “terribly destroy.” Does that mean killing, or subjugating, 52 million South Koreans? And defeat the US as well? In your dreams, comrade. Unimaginable is indeed *le mot juste*.

Less Than Meets the Eye

What to make of all this? Any judgment at this stage risks being premature. We should no doubt await the promised constitutional amendments, and more broadly wait to see what North Korea does, if anything. The following analysis is thus inevitably preliminary; it may also sound complacent to some. That said, we offer some tentative initial thoughts.

First, this whole turn should be seen primarily as an event in DPRK domestic politics, rather than inter-Korean relations. It reflects Kim’s frustration, shared by his predecessors, at the fact that South Korea exists: right there, on his doorstep and in his face, ever more successful and infinitely more prosperous. That is a profound challenge on many levels. Any North Korean government must find a way to account for and handle the South, in theory and practice alike.

Second, I suspect this is Kim’s own idea. His visceral dislike for the ROK underlay an earlier episode: the razing of Southern-built facilities at the former Mount Kumgang tourist resort. True, they were decaying: something had to be done. Yet Kim’s remarks at the time betrayed a

seething anger at the very idea of South Korean property on Northern territory. He seemed to be against cooperation as such, not just annoyed at how this project had turned out.

Third, another reason to attribute this idea to Kim is the sheer incoherence noted above. It just doesn't add up. What does he mean by 'ROK': Regime? Territory? People? He slips between all three, especially the first two. And if ROK is a separate state, on what basis is the DPRK entitled to subjugate it?

Put another way, this bears the hallmark of Kim Ki Nam's retirement. If the master molder of DPRK ideology and propaganda over many decades had still been on the case—he died aged 94 on May 7, having retired some years earlier—such a crass idea would surely never have been approved. For it solves no problems but creates a number of new ones.

Those include cognitive dissonance on at least three fronts. Whatever Kim says, ordinary North Koreans know that South Koreans are in fact their kin, both in general and in particular. Highly publicized family reunions, whatever their inadequacies, are not a distant memory. People will be puzzled, to say the least, at now being told otherwise. Moreover, this runs directly counter to the line decreed by previous Kims. Jong Un's legitimacy rests largely on fidelity to his father and grandfather, so for him to openly defy this legacy must be risky.

Above all, the new line entails an immense Orwellian rewriting of history. This is well under way, starting in early January between Kim's two speeches. Most websites aimed at South Korea or focused on unification have [vanished](#); the best-known being *Uriminzokkiri*, often cited in past issues of this journal.

On Jan. 13, just before the SPA session, KCNA headlined what it termed a "Meeting of Officials in Charge of Affairs with Enemies" (only in North Korea!), which "readjusted" four named front organizations. The SPA [abolished](#) three more: the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country, National Economic Cooperation Bureau and Kumgangsan International Tourism Administration.

Some changes are relatively easy. From Jan. 16 KCTV changed its [maps](#) to stop highlighting South Korea along with the North. In February *NK News* [reported](#) that the national anthem had had

a phrase amended to remove an implicit reference to South Korea.

Others will be far harder. It is one thing to remove some websites, and purge others of articles which go against the new line. But what of the collected works of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, which contain multiple references to South Korea and reunification? Will they be rewritten? How long will that take? And who would dare undertake such *lèse-majesté*?

Moreover, the new line is a propaganda gift to South Korea, —which can now pose as the sole and undisputed champion of pan-Korean unity. ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol lost no time in condemning Kim's new doctrine as "anti-national and ahistorical"; he is correct. In soccer, this would be called an own goal for Pyongyang.

Also a hostage to fortune is Kim's deployment of fascistic health metaphors. (It is hard to avoid politically incorrect language here, but he started it.) He suggests that one Korean state is thriving and normal, while the other is wizened and deformed. That is true, actually, —but we all know which is which. Most South-North economic gaps are now too large even to fit on the same graph, unless a logarithmic scale is used. This does not seem wise terrain for Kim.

Bark or Bite?

Words are one thing, deeds another. We know what Kim now says, but what will he do? At risk of sounding complacent, my bet is: Nothing much. There are at least three reasons to think that this new line, while radical in theory, may not portend much change in practice and certainly not the lurid ostensible fantasies of subjugation and the like.

First, at the risk of sounding contrarian, another trend which has some analysts worried may make the peninsula safer. Kim's keenness to snuggle up to both Russia and China by no means creates a strong, united troika. For both Moscow and Beijing, North Korea has long been the comrade from hell. Behind the formal bonhomie, both Xi and Putin are wary that this Kim might emulate his grandfather and drag them into costly and distracting conflict. China, in particular, which holds the purse-strings, will not tolerate any peninsular adventurism.

A second point was succinctly made by South Korea's hawkish defense minister, Shin Won-

sik: “A barking dog does not bite.” If Kim seriously intended to cause trouble at the NLL, for instance, would he really give advance warning? Extreme and high-pitched as North Korean rhetoric can be, it is also highly performative. Hamas did not go around shouting like this before Oct. 7, nor warn that they planned to cut Israel’s border fence.

A third reason is Kim Jong Un’s record. Readers may recall (or can [look up](#)) the politically tempestuous summer of 2020. Pyongyang frothed with talk of marching south, though this was not billed as a change of line. It all ended explosively, but no one was hurt when the North blew up the (by then unoccupied) former inter-Korean liaison office near Kaesong.

Northern Shelling Nullifies Border Buffer Zones

That pantomime was four years ago, but arguably Pyongyang is still playing the same game. Consider the faux shooting match which unfolded in the gap between Kim’s two speeches.

The Korean People’s Army (KPA) began the new year with a bang. On the afternoon of Jan. 5, South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) reported that earlier in the day—from 0900–1100, to be precise—North Korea fired some 200 artillery shells into the sea, not far from the NLL.

According to the JCS, the shelling came from two locations near ROK-controlled islands in the West/Yellow sea, themselves close to the DPRK mainland. Jangsan Cape lies north of Baengnyeong, South Korea’s northernmost island, while Deungsan Cape is to the north of Yeonpyeong, itself further south and not far from North Korea’s Ongjin peninsula. Residents of both islands were told to evacuate: arguably an ambiguous term. It did not mean to leave the island—impossible anyway, since ferry services were suspended—but to seek shelter.

Hours later, the KPA General Staff confirmed part of their Southern counterparts’ analysis. They had indeed held a live-fire drill at the time stated, with 192 shells from 47 “cannons.” However, the KPA GS asserted, “the direction of naval live-shell firing doesn’t give even an indirect effect on Paekryong and Yonphyong islands” [as DPRK orthography renders them in English].” This exercise was a “natural countermeasure” to “military actions of the ROK (sic) military gangsters” (these were not specified). Warning of “tough counteraction” to any future Southern

provocation, the statement concluded: “The concept about the same nation and fellow countrymen has already been removed from our cognition.” (KPA political officers had evidently been quick to absorb Kim Jong Un’s new doctrine.)

Another day, another drill. On Jan. 6 and 7 KPA artillery were in action again, according to the ROK JCS. Or were they? Not so, according to Kim Yo Jong. In what was already her second press statement of a year just a week old, the first sister claimed that on Jan. 6 the KPA did no sea shelling, but rather “conducted a deceptive operation” with explosions on land—to see if Seoul could tell the difference: She added, with schoolgirl glee: “The ROK military gangsters quickly took the bait we threw.” The ROK JCS [dismissed](#) her claim as “psychological warfare.”

More briefly and soberly, the KPA General Staff [confirmed](#) that on Jan. 6 “the southwest coastal defence of the 4th Corps...conducted a deceptive operation simulating shelling”—and had pictures to prove it. Admitting they also held real shelling drills next day (Jan. 7), the KPA GS said this was just routine training—and not near the Military Demarcation Line: “any intentional threat was not exposed to an enemy state” (sic). *NK News* [noted](#) that the ROK JCS was vague as to the exact location of the North’s shelling on Jan. 6 and 7, having been very precise regarding Jan. 5.

So who really did what, and what does it all mean? Kim Yo Jong is playing mind-games: her claim of deception was itself meant to deceive. In fact, Seoul has several ways to distinguish between maritime and terrestrial explosions. For one thing, it can detect splashdowns.

But if the KPA had really fooled the ROK this time, would they boast publicly—or quietly log this gap in Seoul’s intelligence? Recall the media post mortem on the unfortunate [Lee Dae-jun](#), when ROK military intelligence squirmed not to confirm what was clear from what they revealed they knew: they were evidently listening in to the KPA’s communications. Serious military forces, primed for real hostilities, do not tell the foe how much they know.

Did any of this really matter? It is regrettable that the former maritime buffer zones near the NLL were de facto nullified by this shelling, both sides having already scrapped the 2019 military accord which created them. A military source [told](#)

Yonhap that some KPA shells landed “as close as 7 km” to the NLL. That is not very near. Had they crossed the line or fallen near the southern islands, that would have been much more serious.

Not that South Korea took this lying down. Following President Yoon’s somewhat alarming and mechanical [principle](#) of “multiple-times stronger punishment,” ROK marines on the two islands riposted on Jan. 5 with artillery fire of their own—but twice as much: 400 rounds, to the North’s 200. Yoon later [congratulated](#) them. More prudently, on Jan. 8 the ROK JCS, announcing that in response to the North’s action it too would resume live-fire drills, specified that this would not be on a tit-for-tat basis but “according to its own plan.”

None of this suggests a peninsula on the brink of war. Both sides are pushing the envelope, and the North’s new doctrine is alarming if taken at face value—but that is the nub. Kim Jong Un faces a mountain of problems at home. Threatening to subjugate the South solves none of them but may—or may not—briefly distract his people from their hardships. While vigilance remains essential, Kim’s lurid new stance looks very like a new variation on a very old theme of fire-breathing performativity.

Appendix: North Korea’s New Stance Towards South Korea

I. Extract from KCNA [report](#), “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Inspects Major Munitions Factories,” 10 Jan. 2024

He [Kim Jong Un] made an appraisal of the security environment of the DPRK and the regional situation, stating the necessity and validity of the sustained store of incomparably overwhelming strength.

Saying that the historic time has come at last when we should define as a state most hostile toward the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea the entity called the Republic of Korea (ROK) which has pursued a history of vicious confrontation with bloodshot eyes to overthrow our regime and social system for nearly 80 years, he stressed that our state should recognize this unavoidable and irrevocable reality as it is and

properly settle the historic problem of actively coping with the new phase of change and thoroughly countering everything.

Predicating that the ROK clan is our principal enemy, he said what the DPRK should prioritize in the relations with the hostile state running high fever in arms buildup while inciting the confrontation posture with the former is to bolster up the military capabilities for self-defence and the nuclear war deterrent first of all.

He said that we would by no means unilaterally bring a great event by the overwhelming strength in the Korean peninsula but we have no intention of avoiding a war as well. If the ROK dares attempt to use armed forces against the DPRK or threaten its sovereignty and security and such opportunity comes, we will have no hesitation in annihilating the ROK by mobilizing all means and forces in our hands, he said, affirming that we have such will, forces and capabilities and will continue to expand and strengthen them without delay in the future, too.

He noted that the DPRK will invariably take its vivid action based on the principle of righteous struggle, unless the gangster-like ruling quarters of the ROK realizes the mistake of the self-destructive anti-DPRK confrontation policy, which is running counter to the desire of mankind for peace and bringing misfortune on itself, and completely gives it up.

II. Excerpt from Kim Jong Un’s speech “On the Immediate Tasks for the Prosperity and Development of Our Republic and the Promotion of the Wellbeing of Our People”, given at the 10th Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA), 15 Jan. 2024

Note: This passage comprised about a quarter of the speech, most of which (as per its title) focused on economic problems and tasks.

Comrade Deputies!

Our Republic is a peace-loving socialist state and remains unchanged in its desire for taking the road of independent

development in a peaceful and stable environment free from aggression and interference and we have paid dearly for it.

But our country's security environment has been steadily deteriorated, far from being eased, and today it has become the world's most dangerous zone with the risk of the outbreak of a war.

The frequent remarks made by the US authorities about the "end of our regime", vast nuclear strategic assets stationed in the peripheral area of the DPRK nearly all around the year, ceaseless war exercises with its followers staged on the largest scale, the military nexus between Japan and the Republic of Korea boosted at the instigation of the US, etc. are seriously threatening the security of our state moment by moment.

The policy of confrontation with the DPRK pursued by the US century after century and the suicidal acts of such servile states as the ROK unconditionally submitting to the US inflame the enmity of our Republic and at the same time offer reasonable and full justification for strengthening the military capability and more rapidly improving the overwhelming nuclear war deterrent.

The US and its stooges are now buoyed with war fever.

We should invariably cover the road of bolstering up our military capability for self-defence to ensure wellbeing of the country, the people and the posterity. The deputies present here should not regard the indiscriminate war holocaust in the Middle East as a matter of other but do their best to bolster up our military capability for self-defence to the maximum, cherishing the firm belief that military strength is the security, dignity and prestige of the state and people.

Once again, I emphasize that our army should keep a sharp watch on even the enemy's slight military move and make confident and full preparedness to thoroughly and mercilessly control and

frustrate provocative acts of any type through overwhelming counteraction, mindful of its noble mission which is to devotedly defend the security of the country and the wellbeing of the people.

As preparations for a great event have become urgent reality and our army has been entrusted with the important mission of ensuring it through a powerful military action, every level of the entire army should sincerely study and implement the spirit of the plenary meetings of the Eighth Party Central Committee and the Central Military Commission of the Party, intensify training under the simulated conditions of an actual war and, at the same time, direct great efforts to the political and ideological education as usual so as to prepare itself enough to surely win in the confrontation with the enemies by dint of political, ideological, military and technological superiority.

Kim Jong Un said that the People's Army's preparations for war are unthinkable without modernization of its military hardware.

He set forth the strategic tasks to be maintained and carried out by the munitions industry in its responsible struggle for bolstering up the DPRK's nuclear war deterrent and augmenting the national defence capacity this year as required by the prevailing situation and the developing revolution and referred to other issues.

[section omitted on bolstering civil defense]

Comrade Deputies!

Today the Supreme People's Assembly newly legalized the policy of our Republic toward the south on the basis of putting an end to the nearly 80 year-long history of inter-Korean relations and recognizing the two states both existing in the Korean peninsula.

As solemnly clarified at the 2023 December Plenary Meeting of the Party Central Committee, our Party, government and people had shown great magnanimity and tireless patience and

made sincere efforts always with the view that those of the ROK are still the fellow countrymen and compatriots in the long period of history and even discussed with them the great cause of national reunification in a candid manner.

But it is the final conclusion drawn from the bitter history of the inter-Korean relations that we cannot go along the road of national restoration and reunification together with the ROK clan that adopted as its state policy the all-out confrontation with our Republic, dreaming of the "collapse of our government" and "unification by absorption," and lost compatriotic consciousness, getting more vicious and arrogant in the madcap confrontational racket.

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. This is the present situation of the relations between the north and the south today caused by the heinous and self-destructive confrontational maneuvers of the ROK, a group of outsiders' top-class stooges, and the true picture of the Korean peninsula just unveiled before the world.

We have formulated a new stand on the north-south relations and the policy of reunification and dismantled all the organizations we established as solidarity bodies for peaceful reunification at the current session of the Supreme People's Assembly which discusses the laws of the DPRK. It can be said this is an indispensable process that should take place without fail.

As the southern border of our country has been clearly drawn, the illegal "northern limit line" and any other boundary can never be tolerated, and if the ROK violates even 0.001 mm of our territorial land, air and waters, it will be considered a war provocation.

In this regard, I think it is necessary to revise some contents of the Constitution of the DPRK.

I have already recalled at the recent plenary meeting that the so-called constitution of the ROK openly stipulates that "the territory of the ROK covers the Korean peninsula and its attached islands."

Recently I studied the constitutions of some other countries and found that they clearly stipulate the political and geographical definition of the territorial parts in which state sovereignty is exercised, the territorial land, territorial waters and territorial airspace in other word.

There is no provision specifying such definition in the existing constitution of our country. Since our Republic definitely defined the ROK as a foreign country and the most hostile state after completely eliminating the original concept contradictory to reality that the ROK is the partner for reconciliation and reunification and the fellow countrymen, it is necessary to take legal steps to legitimately and correctly define the territorial sphere where the sovereignty of the DPRK as an independent socialist nation is exercised.

In my opinion, we can specify in our constitution the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of a war breaks out on the Korean peninsula.

And I think it is right to specify in the relevant paragraph of our constitution that such linguistic remnants misinterpreting the north and the south as fellow countrymen as "3 000-ri tapestry-like land" and "80 million compatriots" are not used in the political, ideological, mental and cultural life of our people, and that education should be intensified to instill into them the firm idea that ROK is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy.

Besides, in my view, it is necessary to delete such expressions in the constitution as "northern half" and "independence, peaceful reunification and great national unity."

I think the constitution of the Republic should be revised in consideration of such matters and the issue should be discussed at the next session of the Supreme People's Assembly.

The constitutional revision should be followed by timely practical measures to get rid of the remnants of the past era which may be seen as symbols of "north and south Korea with consanguineous and homogeneous relations", "By Our Nation Itself" and "peaceful reunification."

For the present, we should take strict stepwise measures to thoroughly block all the channels of north-south communication along the border, including the one of physically and completely cutting off the railway tracks in our side, which existed as a symbol of north-south exchange and cooperation, to an irretrievable level.

We should also completely remove the eye-sore "Monument to the Three Charters for National Reunification" standing at the southern gateway to the capital city of Pyongyang and take other measures so as to completely eliminate such concepts as "reunification", "reconciliation" and "fellow countrymen" from the national history of our Republic.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to make clear once again the revolutionary character of the work for strengthening the self-reliant military capabilities, which our Republic firmly preserves as its own life, unfazed by any changes of situation.

I reaffirm that the strongest absolute strength we are cultivating *is not a means of preemptive attack for realizing unilateral "reunification by force of arms"* but the capabilities for legitimate self-defence pertaining to our right to self-defence,

which should be bolstered up without fail definitely to defend ourselves.

In the present world where jungle law prevails, and to our country located in the hot spot where the danger of war have lingered for decades, the possession of powerful military muscle is an inevitable process of struggle to be indispensably chosen to defend the destiny of our country and nation and a historic task to be accepted as a fate.

Despite the worst difficulties accompanied by the enemy's persistent pressure and sanctions, we have remarkably bolstered up our self-reliant military capabilities and nuclear war deterrent to be strongest without any slightest vacillation. As a result, any aggressor forces on the earth have long dared not push the situation to such worst phase as the outbreak of a war.

Explicitly speaking, we will never unilaterally unleash a war if the enemies do not provoke us.

The enemies should never misjudge this as our weakness.

Then, will we confine our national self-defensive capabilities to serving the purpose of only defending ourselves and preventing war?

Absolutely not.

I have already clearly mentioned the second mission of our nuclear force, in addition to its basic duty of deterring war.

A level-headed judgment of the special environment, in which the most hostile state, the Republic of Korea, exists in our nearest neighborhood, and of the situation, in which instability of the regional situation is soaring due to the US-led escalation of military tensions, has found that the danger of the outbreak of a war to be caused by a physical clash has considerably aggravated and reached a red line.

We do not want war, but we also have no intention of avoiding it.

There is no reason to opt for war, and therefore, there is no intention of unilaterally going to war, but once a war becomes a reality facing us, we will never try to avoid it, and we will take perfect and prompt action we thoroughly prepared in order to defend our sovereignty, security of the people and right to existence.

The war will terribly destroy the entity called the Republic of Korea and put an end to its existence.

And it will inflict an unimaginably crushing defeat upon the US

Our military capabilities, already in readiness to do so, are being rapidly updated.

If the enemies ignite a war, our Republic will resolutely punish the enemies by mobilizing all its military forces including nuclear weapons.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY-MAY 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: Official (North) *Korea Central News Agency (KCNA)* [reports](#): “Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui held a consultative meeting with officials concerned on [Jan.] 1 to thoroughly carry out the tasks given by the respected Comrade Kim Jong Un at the historic 9th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea to dismantle and reform the bodies in charge of the affairs related to the south and the struggle against enemy (sic) and change the fundamental principle and orientation of the struggle.”

Jan. 2, 2024: DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un’s sister, Kim Yo Jong, issues a [press statement](#). Sarcastically, she thanks “President Yoon [Suk Yeol] [who], indeed, deserves to be granted the title of ‘special class hero,’ as he makes steady ‘contributions’...to bolster up the military muscle of the DPRK.” By contrast, she damns his liberal predecessor Moon Jae-in—South Korea’s friendliest leader ever towards the North, who in 2018 first invited her to Seoul and then held three summits with her brother—as “crafty” and deceptive.

Jan. 2, 2024: South Korea’s Ministry of Unification (MOU) [launches](#) a new early warning system to detect Northern defectors who need more support or are at risk. (See also Oct. 5 in our previous issue.)

Jan. 4, 2024: MOU [says](#) it will dissolve a foundation supporting the former joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which Seoul shut down in 2016: “As the [KIC] has long been suspended, it is almost impossible for the foundation to normally carry out its...work.” Reports that the North is illicitly running 30 Southern-built and (nominally)—owned factories in the zone also influenced this decision. So [did](#) “operational inefficiencies”: running the foundation has cost the ROK government 58.4 billion won (almost \$45 million) since 2016.

Jan. 4, 2024: An unnamed MOU official [says](#) Pyongyang is “attempting to create tension on the Korean Peninsula and divide our society through threats and criticisms.” Specifically,

they accuse the party daily *Rodong Sinmun* of exaggerating or distorting facts in covering South Korean protest rallies; e.g. by using photographs which were actually of a different event.

Jan. 5, 2024: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [says](#) that from 0900 to 1100 the DPRK fired some 200 shells into the sea from two locations: [Jangsan](#) Cape, north of South Korea’s northernmost island of Baengnyeong, and Deungsan Cape, north of the ROK’s western border island of Yeonpyeong. Residents of both islands are [ordered](#) to “evacuate” (meaning seek shelter, not to actually get off the islands: regular ferry services are briefly suspended).

Jan. 5, 2024: (North) Korean People’s Army (KPA) General Staff (GS) [admits](#) it held a live-fire drill between 0900–1100, with 192 shells fired from 47 “cannons.” However, “the direction of naval live-shell firing doesn’t give even an indirect effect on Paekryong and Yonphyong islands [as DPRK orthography renders them in English].” Calling this exercise a “natural countermeasure” to (unspecified) “military actions of the ROK military gangsters,” the KPA GS warns of “tough counteraction” to any provocation, adding: “The concept about the same nation and fellow countrymen has already been removed from our cognition.”

Jan. 6, 2024: ROK JCS [report](#) a second day of KPA coastal artillery firing.

Jan. 7, 2024: Kim Yo Jong issues another [statement](#). She claims the KPA did no sea shelling yesterday, but rather “conducted a deceptive operation” with explosions on land—to see if Seoul could tell the difference: “The ROK military gangsters quickly took the bait we threw.” The ROK JCS [dismiss](#) this claim as “psychological warfare” More briefly and soberly, the KPA General Staff [confirms](#) that on Jan. 6 “the southwest coastal defence of the 4th Corps...conducted a deceptive operation simulating shelling.” They admit they also held real shelling drills next day, but say this was just routine training—and not near the Military

ROK JCS [dismiss](#) this claim as “psychological warfare” More briefly and soberly, the KPA General Staff [confirms](#) that on Jan. 6 “the southwest coastal defence of the 4th Corps...conducted a deceptive operation simulating shelling.” They admit they also held real shelling drills next day, but say this was just routine training—and not near the Military Demarcation Line (MDL, the de facto inter-Korean border): “any intentional threat was not exposed to an enemy state” (sic). *NK News* [notes](#) that the ROK JCS was vague as to the exact location of the North’s shelling on Jan. 6 and 7, having been precise regarding Jan. 5.

Jan. 7, 2024: A military source [tells](#) *Yonhap* that most of the recent KPA shells landed in the former maritime buffer zone, some as close as 7 km to the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto maritime border, which Pyongyang does not [recognize](#)). The source adds: “As North Korea vowed to scrap the inter-Korean military pact and conducted live-fire drills near the maritime buffer zone, mutually agreed buffer zones that ban hostile acts no longer exist.”

Jan. 8, 2024: Experts consulted by *NK News* [agree](#) that Kim Yo Jong is playing mind-games: her claim of deception is itself meant to deceive. In fact Seoul has several ways to distinguish between maritime and terrestrial explosions. For one thing, it can detect splashdowns.

Jan. 8, 2024: ROK JCS [declare](#) that, since North Korea has resumed live-fire drills near the border, the South will do the same—not tit-for-tat, but “according to its own plan.”

Jan. 8, 2024: Visiting Drone Operations Command (DOC) in Pocheon, 52 km northeast of Seoul), ROK Minister of National Defense (MND) Shin Won-sik [calls for](#) a strengthened defense posture, given that “North Korea keeps raising the level of asymmetric threats by bolstering its drone capability and advancing its nuclear and missile programs.” The DOC was created in Sept., following a Northern drone incursion in Dec. 2022. Pyongyang has since rolled out new surveillance and attack drones; Dec. 2023’s Workers’ Party (WPK) Plenum vowed to build yet more.

Jan. 8-9, 2024: Kim Jong Un [visits](#) “major munitions factories” (unnamed) “to learn about the production of weapons and equipment.” Praising their achievements (while “pointing out some shortcomings”), he calls for “greater

leaping progress...by further elevating the surged spirit [sic].” He also summarizes his new hard line toward South Korea (see Appendix, I).

Jan. 9, 2024: MND spokesman Jeon Ha-kyu [confirms](#) that since Seoul regards Pyongyang’s recent artillery firing as [nullifying](#) the former buffer zones, it too will resume military drills—live fire, and field or marine maneuvers—near the DMZ. The ROK military regards these exercises as important for operational readiness.

Jan. 9, 2024: As it has done ever since 1996, the Korean Institute for National Unification ([KINU](#)), the ROK government’s main think-tank on North Korea, [releases](#) its annual *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (an English [translation](#) follows in May). Highlights—if that is the word—of this solid 800-page report include the first [confirmation](#), from recent defectors, of a public execution for violating COVID-19 regulations; no details are given. In general public executions are now [rarer](#), even as the number of capital offenses has grown. At the report’s launch, researcher Joung Eun-lee [highlights](#) sexual violence: a 2022 revision of 2015’s DPRK Criminal Code reduced maximum penalties for rape.

Jan. 10, 2024: Citing precedents from 2016 and 2020, ROK Vice Unification Minister Moon Seoung-hyun [warns](#) that with parliamentary elections upcoming in April, “North Korea will continue with its psychological warfare against the South to split public opinion and pressure the government.” (Looking back from May, it is far from clear whether Pyongyang even tried such tactics—much less succeeded.)

Jan. 11, 2024: In a wide-ranging [interview](#), MND Shin Won-sik tells *Yonhap*, South Korea’s quasi-official news agency, that Kim Jong Un’s recent inspection of munitions factories featured new close range ballistic missiles (CRBM) that can carry tactical nuclear weapons. Shin reckons Pyongyang may supply some to Russia. As of end-Dec North Korea has sent Moscow some 5,000 containers of weapons, which could hold 2.3 million rounds of 152 mm shells or 400,000 of 122 mm (sic). Going forward he expects new IRBM tests and non-lofted ICBM launches. Regarding the collapse of the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) in Sept, noting how quickly the KPA re-occupied its former guardposts in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), Shin speculates that they had only been

destroyed above-ground, with their underground structures remaining intact.

Jan. 11, 2024: *NK News* [reports](#) that several North Korean propaganda websites targeting South Korea went offline simultaneously. Sites affected include *Uriminzokkiri*, *DPRK Today*, *Arirang Meari*, *Tongil Voice*, and *Ryomyong*. This appears related to Pyongyang trying to work out Kim Jong Un's new line on South Korea. Four months later, all remain offline.

Jan. 11, 2024: Asked about seeming US-ROK analytical discrepancies, an embarrassed ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) [says](#) it has nothing to add. John Kirby, the US National Security Council coordinator for strategic communications, said yesterday the US is unaware of any military links between Pyongyang and Hamas. South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), by contrast, had issued photographs of a North Korean F-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher used by Hamas. (There is a simple explanation: Hamas probably acquired these weapons from Iran, its main sponsor, rather than directly.)

Jan. 11, 2024: Starting work as South Korea's 41st foreign minister, Cho Tae-yul—a career [diplomat](#), unlike his predecessor [Park Jin](#)—dismisses [calls](#) for peace talks: "I don't think it's that time yet...North Korea continues to advance its nuclear and missile capabilities, and we're not in the mood for dialogue." Besides, Pyongyang refuses to talk.

Jan. 12, 2024: At his first formal press conference, directly after being [sworn in](#), MOFA Cho [opines](#) that North Korea's recent shelling had "the intention of driving a wedge between [the ROK], the US and Japan." Seoul's response will remain "firm and very restrained," in consultation with Washington: focused on bolstering deterrence, while continuing efforts to a change Pyongyang's stance.

Jan. 13, 2024: *KCNA* [reports](#) that "officials in charge of affairs with enemies" (organizations were not specified, nor persons) met on Jan. 12 to implement Kim's "switchover in the policy towards the south." This is summarized as: "a firm viewpoint that the clays (sic) in the region of south Korean puppets who have pursued only the 'collapse of the DPRK's power' and unification by absorption' are the main enemy of the DPRK to be completely wiped out ., [while] making preparations for a great event...in keeping with

the powerful military action of the Korean People's Army to suppress the whole territory of the southern half of the Republic." On this basis, four named solidarity organisations are to be "readjusted."

Jan. 15, 2024: *KCNA* briefly [reports](#) that on Jan. 14 "the DPRK Missile Administration conducted a test-fire of an intermediate-range solid-fuel ballistic missile loaded with a hypersonic maneuverable controlled warhead." It adds: "The test-fire never affected the security of any neighboring country and had nothing to do with the regional situation." No flight details were given, but the ROK military [say](#) it was launched from the Pyongyang area and flew circa 1,000km (presumably eastward). This is a double threat: solid-fuel propelled missiles can be loaded and launched faster than liquid-fuelled; and hypersonic missiles are hard to intercept, flying at Mach 5 or more at low altitudes on unpredictable flight paths.

Jan. 15, 2024: In a lengthy [speech](#)—mainly economy-focused—to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA, the DPRK's rubber-stamp Parliament), Kim Jong Un elaborates his new line on South Korea. This includes changing the Constitution to "specify ...the issue of completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming the ROK and annex it as a part of the territory of our Republic in case of [sic] a war breaks out on the Korean peninsula." North Koreans must no longer think in terms of "consanguinity" and "80 million compatriots." Instead, "education should be intensified to instill into them the firm idea that ROK (sic) is their primary foe and invariable principal enemy."

Jan. 15, 2024: The SPA [abolishes](#) three bodies handling inter-Korean matters: the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRK), the National Economic Cooperation Bureau, and the Kumgangsán International Tourism Administration.

Jan. 16, 2024: Condemning Kim's stance as "anti-national and ahistorical," Yoon Suk Yeol [tells](#) his Cabinet: "The current ROK government is different from any previous [one]...Our military has an overwhelming response capability....Should North Korea provoke us, we will punish them multiple times as hard (sic)." Ironically, later in the meeting, apropos employer penalties under a new SME workers' safety law, he declares: "Punishment isn't everything."

Jan. 17, 2024: South Korea [sanctions](#) 11 vessels, two individuals, and three companies. Most are North Korean, and all have been named in UN Panel of Experts (PoE) reports as involved in ship-to-ship transfers of oil, coal and other products: violating UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions against the DPRK. These are Seoul's first ship sanctions [a great tongue-twister!] in eight years: Yoon's predecessor, Moon Jae-in (president 2017-22), eschewed such gestures. By contrast, this is the 15th set of sanctions imposed in the 20 months since Yoon became president in May 2022.

Jan. 18, 2024: MOU data [show](#) that North Korean defector arrivals almost tripled in 2023. From a high of 2,914 in 2009, numbers have [declined](#) since 2012 in the Kim Jong Un era—and then fell dramatically to just 63 in 2021 and 67 in 2022, amid Pyongyang's drastic anti-COVID border restrictions. In last year's cohort of 196, the great majority (164) were female.

Jan. 19, 2024: ROK opposition leader Lee Jae-myung [calls on](#) Kim Jong Un to “immediately stop missile provocations and put an end to hostile acts...so as not to undermine the efforts made by his predecessors...Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung.” Lee also criticizes Yoon's hard line: “If we respond to a neighbor throwing stones by throwing an even larger stone and cause greater harm, what benefit would that bring us?”

Jan. 19, 2024: A DPRK defense ministry MND press [statement](#), headlined “We will never tolerate the reckless military confrontation hysteria,” claims that in response to tripartite naval maneuvers off Jeju island by “military gangsters of the US, Japan and ROK” held on Jan. 15-17, “the Underwater Weapon System Institute under the DPRK Academy of Defence Science conducted an important test of its underwater nuclear weapon system ‘Haeil-5-23.’” No range claims are made nor any photographs [issued](#), unlike after the weapon's first [test](#) in April 2023. In March 2023 KCNA [trumpeted](#) an earlier model (*Haeil-1*) at length, boasting that it could “stealthily infiltrate...and make a super-scale radioactive tsunami through underwater explosion to destroy naval striker groups and major operational ports of the enemy.”

Jan. 21, 2024: Apropos the recently tested *Haeil-5-23*, the ROK Presidential Office [says](#): “We are weighing the possibility that North Korea's claim is exaggerated and fabricated.” It continues, bizarrely: “There is a very slim possibility that it

is a nuclear-powered system. There is no case of the development of a small reactor that can be fitted in a torpedo with a diameter of less than 1 meter.” No one suggests this craft is nuclear-[powered](#); the issue is whether it may be nuclear [armed](#).

Jan. 23, 2024: An unnamed MOU official [denies](#) reports that Pyongyang's new hostile stance is prompting Seoul to rethink its own unification blueprint. Formulated in 1994, among much else this includes the concept of a “Korean commonwealth.” (In fact, a rethink is indeed under way under Yoon, preceding the North's change of line; see March 8, 15, and 20 below.)

Jan. 24, 2024: After North Korea testfires several cruise missiles over the Yellow Sea, ROK MND Shin [tells](#) ROKAF 17th Fighter Wing, which operates 40 F-35 stealth fighter jets out of Cheongju Air Base (112 km south of Seoul): “If the Kim Jong Un regime opts for the worst choice of waging war, you should be at the vanguard of removing the enemy's leadership at the earliest possible time and put an end to the regime.”

Jan. 25, 2024: South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) [says](#) that production of spy drones to monitor North Korea has begun, under a Won 471.7 billion (\$353.6 million) contract it signed in December with a consortium comprising Korean Air and two defense firms, LIG Nex1 and Hanwha Systems. 13m long and 3m high with a 25m wingspan, the new craft will fly at 10-12km altitude. It can take high resolution images from distances of over 100km.

Jan. 31, 2024: Not for the [first](#) time, MOU [says](#) it is considering suing North Korea for its illegal use of Southern-owned facilities in the defunct Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). This follows a report by the Seoul daily *Dong-A Ilbo* that the ROK government plans to seek Won 400bn (\$300m) in damages from Pyongyang. Without commenting on the amount, MOU confirms that “we are closely reviewing legal aspects necessary for a lawsuit and preparing for it...We will decide on the specific timing...after taking into account the situation at the complex.” Like MOU's lawsuit last June over the North's destruction in 2020 of the joint liaison office at Kaesong, any such action would be purely symbolic.

Jan. 31, 2024: Cho Hyun-dong, ROK ambassador in Washington, [insists](#) that notwithstanding the DPRK's threats, bilateral cooperation—as well as

trilaterally with Japan—will only grow stronger: “We will never be perturbed [and] never bow to those provocations.” He terms Seoul’s approach “wholistic” (sic), involving “deterrence, dissuasion and dialogue” (MOU [calls](#) this 3D). The first two Ds will supposedly persuade Pyongyang to opt for the third.

Jan. 31, 2024: Introducing a screening of [Beyond Utopia](#), a high-profile US documentary about escapees from North Korea, MOU Kim Yung-ho [condemns](#) unspecified South Korean “liberal experts,” who reportedly told a forum at the National Assembly that “they can accept North Korea’s perspective of war for the purpose of peace.” Kim avers: “Their remarks made in the name of academic freedom carries (sic) an anti-state view that undermines the achievements and identity of the Republic of Korea. This cannot be tolerable.”

Feb. 1, 2024: South Korea [unveils](#) a new National Cybersecurity [Strategy](#). This criticizes the document it replaces, issued in 2019 under Yoon’s pro-engagement predecessor Moon Jae-in, for not “look[ing] squarely” at North Korea, “the biggest actual threat.” The new version stresses the need to be [pre-emptive](#): “simply reinforcing our defense capabilities has its limits...we must change our paradigm to respond offensively to North Korea.”

Feb. 1, 2024: MOU [publishes](#) a symbol—first [trailed](#) on Jan. 18—created for its [campaign](#) to raise awareness of South Koreans detained in North Korea. This consists of three blue forget-me-not flowers, representing respectively abductees, detainees, and unreturned POWs. [Ul:kin](#), a leading streetwear fashion brand, features the new motif in a collection shown at Seoul Fashion Week (Feb. 1-5).

Feb. 5, 2024: Denouncing MND Shin’s “worst ludicrous statements” (see Jan. 24), KCNA [warns](#) that such remarks could be a “catalyst” for a physical clash.

Feb. 7, 2024: SPA Standing Committee, which acts when the full Assembly is not in session (i.e., most of the time), [approves](#) a decree abolishing laws on north-south economic cooperation and the Mt Kumgang tourist zone, plus various related accords and regulations.

Feb. 9, 2024: Citing Safe and Secure World ([S2W](#)), a South Korean cyber threat intelligence firm, NK News [reports](#) new DPRK malware designed to steal data from ROK targets.

Feb. 14, 2024: South Korea’s presidential office [says](#) that the private email of a staffer, which he was also using for work (in violation of regulations), was hacked—“presumably” by North Korea—just before Yoon’s visits to the UK and France last Nov. “Necessary measures were taken,” and the office’s own security system was not compromised.

Feb. 15, 2024: DPRK media [report](#) that Kim Jong Un, at the test-firing of a new surface-to-sea missile named *Padasuri-6*—it means sea eagle—the previous day, termed the NLL “a ghost [line] without any ground in the light of international law.” Kim calls on the KPA Navy to “thoroughly defend the maritime sovereignty by force of arms and actions, not by any rhetoric, statement and public notice.” (Pyongyang’s stance, that the terrestrial MDL be extended westwards, takes no account of three ROK-controlled islands located north of that.)

Feb. 15, 2024: Responding to Kim, the ROK JCS [say](#): “The NLL remains our military’s unchanged maritime border. We will firmly respond to any provocations.”

Feb. 16, 2024: Ten years after a special UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) [found](#) the DPRK regime responsible for “widespread, systematic and gross” human rights violations, MOU [says](#) the situation remains “poor and dismal, with North Korean people not being guaranteed the minimum level of human rights amid the regime’s harsh surveillance and punishment.” MOU urges Pyongyang to “make the right choice.”

Feb. 20, 2024: NIS [says](#) it will ask the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC) to block access to “Olivia Natasha,” a YouTube channel featuring a young North Korean woman. Google shut the account down last year, but new content has been posted, and [reuploads](#) can be found.

Feb. 21, 2024: MOU Kim [says](#) his ministry will push for July 14 to be designated an official day for North Korean defectors. On that date in 1997 a law protecting and supporting defectors came into effect. Ji Seong-ho, a defector and lawmaker of the conservative ruling People Power Party (PPP), had earlier [proposed](#) July 8: the date the Hanawon resettlement facility opened in 1999. Another PPP defector lawmaker, Thae Yong-ho, suggested Aug. 26, when the Soviet Red Army,

which liberated northern Korea, closed off the 38th Parallel in 1945

Feb. 23, 2024: Ko Young-hwan—a former North Korean diplomat who defected in 1991, now a special [adviser](#) to MOU Kim—[suggests](#) that Pyongyang may create a post of first vice foreign minister to handle South Korea in future, and might appoint Ri Son Gwon, head of the United Front Department (UFD) of the WPK. Lower UFD officials may similarly transfer to MOFA, which had previously handled inter-Korean relations until the mid-1990s. (Later reports suggest such a reorganization is indeed happening; see March 29 below.)

Feb. 25, 2024: MOU Kim [says](#) of Kim Jong Un's new line: "There's a high possibility that erasing the achievements of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, who are the basis for hereditary power, will create an ideological vacuum or confusion among North Korea's elite...If there is internal conflict, there's a high possibility [North Korea] will carry out a military provocation to overcome the crisis...Our government considers the situation very serious, and we have prepared thorough measures in response, including military deterrence measures."

Feb. 28, 2024: *Yonhap* [reports](#) that the DPRK [website](#) dealing with postage stamps has erased all reference to stamps with unification themes, including those issued to commemorate past inter-Korean summit meetings. Pyongyang has also removed images of the Korean peninsula from other websites, or blurred the southern half.

March 4, 2024: NIS [reveals](#) that DPRK hackers have broken into at least two ROK makers of chipmaking equipment. In December and February they stole photographs of facilities and drawings of product designs, using hard-to-detect "living off the land" (LOTL) techniques which take over legitimate tools installed within servers. Warning firms to be vigilant, the agency adds: "We believe that North Korea might possibly be preparing to produce its own semiconductors in the face of difficulties in procuring them due to sanctions."

March 4, 2024: *Yonhap* [says](#) KCNA has removed from its website most articles referring to unification and the like. (Everything can still be found as it was on [KCNA Watch](#))

March 4, 2024: *Freedom Shield*, a large-scale annual US-ROK military drill, [begins](#). It will last 11 days. Though a regular event, these are the first such maneuvers since the inter-Korean military accord collapsed in Nov. They include 48 field drills, over twice as many as last year—although none are near the DMZ. Personnel from 12 member states of the United Nations Command (UNC), including Australia, Britain, the Philippines, and Thailand, will also join, observed by the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC).

March 5, 2024: North Korea as usual [denounces](#) *Freedom Shield*. Warning that the US and ROK "will be made to pay a dear price for their false choice," a DPRK MND spokesman adds: "The large-scale war drills staged by the world's biggest nuclear weapons state and more than 10 satellite states against a state in the Korean [Peninsula] where a nuclear war may be ignited even with a spark, can never be called 'defensive.'"

March 6, 2024: [Visiting](#) "a major operational training base in the western area," Kim Jong Un [calls](#) for intensified "practical actual war drills" to counter the enemy's "slightest attempt to ignite a war."

March 7, 2024: In a second successive day of military-related activities, Kim Jong Un [guides](#) artillery drills, at front-line sub-units "who have put the enemy's capital in their striking range. *Yonhap* [deadpans](#): "The enemy's capital is believed to be referring to Seoul."

March 7, 2024: Dismissing recent threats by Kim Jong Un as an attempt to promote unity within North Korea's "unstable" internal system and sow division in the South Korea, ROK MND Shin—as often—returns fire with fire. Visiting a key military bunker operated by the Capital Defense Command in Seoul, Shin [tells](#) the troops: "Make all-out efforts for realistic practice and training to ensure the end of the Kim Jong Un regime in the shortest period of time, if the enemy invades the Republic of Korea."

March 7, 2024: They wouldn't put it this way, but Seoul follows Pyongyang's lead—see Jan. 1 and 13—with some reorganization of its own. ROK MOFA [says](#) it will abolish its Office of Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs, replacing it with a new Office of Diplomatic Strategy and Intelligence. As per its name, intelligence collection and strategic planning will be folded

into the new office: placing North Korea in a broader context, while also shifting the main focus from dialogue to deterrence. Critics [warn](#) that the long-term goal of peace and denuclearization should not be lost sight of, remote as these prospects may seem right now.

March 8, 2024: MOU [says](#): “In response to North Korea's policy shift into an anti-national and anti-historical stance, the year 2024 will be the most appropriate time to actively lay out our unification vision and lead the North's change.” In other words, Pyongyang's new stance facilitates Seoul proceeding with its own previously announced revisionism.

March 13, 2024: North Korea [reveals](#) a new battle tank (no name or model is mentioned) during a training competition. Kim Jong Un drives one, calling this “the most powerful [tank] in the world”. First paraded in 2020, the new tank [looks](#) to have been upgraded since. After “watching with satisfaction the fierce advance of tanks dashing ahead like wind”, Kim calls this the most satisfying of all the KPA exercises he has guided. He congratulates the winners, the Seoul Ryu Kyong Su Guards 105th Tank Division, noting that they are “a unit with the proud history and tradition of having occupied the enemy capital” (in June 1950). If all KPA units were this well prepared, “he would never worry about the preparations for war.”

March 13, 2024: Visiting Army Special Warfare Command in Icheon, 56 km southeast of Seoul, MND Shin [tells](#) his troops: “If Kim [Jong Un] starts a war, as a key unit of Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR), you must become the world's strongest special operations unit to swiftly eliminate the enemy leadership.” KMPR is the ROK's operational plan to take out the DPRK leadership if the North starts a war.

March 14, 2024: Freedom Shield [wraps up](#) with a live-fire [tank drill](#) near the DMZ involving US military engineers, *Yonhap* notes that North Korea did not launch any missiles during the 11-day exercise, as some expected. Kim Jong Un did guide other drills, including artillery and tanks. Suspected DPRK attempts to disrupt Global Positioning System (GPS) signals around the northwestern border islands were detected from March 5-7, but no damage was reported.

March 15, 2024: ROK's Unification Future Planning Committee (UFPC), an advisory body launched last year, [holds](#) its first meeting. UFPC

is tasked with drawing up a new vision of unification, which “espouses the principle of freedom” and reflects the changed security situation on the peninsula. (See also March 20, below.)

March 20, 2024: At a forum held in Seoul by the government's Korea Institute for National Unification, Cho Han-bum, a senior research fellow at KINU, [argues](#) that the 1994 National Community Unification Formula (NCUF) should be kept but recalibrated, since it is hard to obtain bipartisan consensus and this should not be politicized. The NCUF posits three stages: reconciliation and cooperation, the creation of a Korean commonwealth, and full unification. By contrast, Kim Hyun-wook, a director-general at the Korea National Diplomatic Academy, says the NCUF must be replaced, as stage two (commonwealth) “is not valid anymore.”

March 26, 2024: In a message to the commander of the ROKN frigate *Cheonan*—a newly commissioned warship, named after the corvette sunk by North Korea exactly 14 years earlier—MND Shin [says](#): “North Korea is claiming the NLL is a ghost line without legal grounds and is continuously trying to nullify it...Protect the Yellow Sea and the NLL that the comrades before you have defended by giving up their lives.” Cdr. Park Yeon-soo, who commands the new *Cheonan*, served on the old one and is a survivor of the 2010 attack.

March 27, 2024: Meeting relatives and advocacy groups, MOU Kim Yung-ho [denounces](#) North Korea's past abduction and continuing detention of thousands of South Koreans as “inhumane.” The new forget-me-not motif is much in evidence: President Yoon and other ministers also wore pin badges of this in Cabinet the previous day.

March 28, 2024: Noting that North Korea should have staged a parliamentary election this month (the last was held in March 2019), MOU [speculates](#) that the current 14th SPA may first be convened once more to formally scrap further inter-Korean agreements, and to approve the constitutional changes regarding South Korea which Kim Jong Un called for in January.

March 29, 2024: In line with surmise in Seoul (see Feb. 23), *Daily NK* [quotes](#) “a source in North Korea” as confirming that the UFD is essentially being shut down. The Party will retain a small specialist staff, but most functions are being

transferred—in two directions. MOFA is taking over strategic projects regarding South Korea, while activities in the South will fall to the KPA Reconnaissance General Bureau. (The RGB already handles those operationally, so the precise impact of this aspect of the reorganization is unclear.) The source claims it has not yet been decided which agency will take charge of pro-North sympathizers in South Korea.

April 7, 2024: It is a year since North Korea stopped picking up the phone, severing thitherto twice-daily liaison contact with the South. Yonhap [notes](#) that inter-Korean communications have an on-off history: Pyongyang broke contact in Feb. 2016, resumed it in Jan. 2018, broke it off again in June 2020, and resumed in July 2021. Kim's new line on the South suggests prospects are bleak this time. Absent direct contact, Seoul has two options: megaphone diplomacy, making announcements in public media; or more privately, via the US-led UN Command, which oversees the DMZ and thus has its own channels to the North.

April 7, 2024: ROK's second indigenous military reconnaissance satellite is [launched](#) by a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Kennedy Space Center in Florida; it goes into orbit 45 minutes later. Whereas its first spy satellite, launched in Dec., used electro-optical and infrared sensors, the new one has synthetic aperture radar (SAR) sensors; these use microwaves, and thus can gather data unaffected by weather conditions. South Korea's next three spy satellites, to be launched by 2025, will also have SAR sensors. By contrast, North Korea's so far solitary spy satellite—three more promised are yet to appear—which Seoul claims to be bothered by, lacks any technology approaching this sophistication.

April 8, 2024: Prosecutors in Suwon [seek](#) a 15 year jail term—plus a fine, confiscation of assets and legal costs—for Lee Hwa-yong. The former vice governor of Gyeonggi province, which surrounds Seoul, was indicted for bribery and illicit money transfers in October 2022 in a case centred on underwear manufacturer [Ssangbangwool](#). The firm is alleged to have sent \$5 million to North Korea in 2019 on behalf of Gyeonggi, whose then Gov. Lee Jae-myong—who now leads the liberal opposition DPK, and is himself facing [charges](#)—had hoped to visit Pyongyang and to support a smart farm project in the DPRK.

April 11, 2024: Visiting Kim Jong Il University of Military and Politics (some DPRK [media](#) style this Kim Jong Il Military and Political Academy), Kim Jong Un [says](#): “Now is the time to be more thoroughly prepared for a war than ever before.” KCNA's photos show blurred maps and a model, which appear to depict South Korea and central Seoul.

April 15, 2024: The ROK Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST) chooses DPRK founding leader Kim Il Sung's birthday to further [publicize](#) its campaign, symbolized by a three forget-me-nots motif, drawing attention to South Korean abductees, detainees and POWs held in North Korea. (See also Feb. 1 and March 27, above).

April 18, 2024: “A source” [tells](#) Yonhap that in March North Korea removed street lamps along two (notionally) cross-border roads: Gyeongui, which runs between Kaesong in the North and Paju in the South, and the Donghae east coast road. In Jan. the North mined both roads. Calling this a violation of the spirit of inter-Korean agreements, MOU also wants its money back: during 2002-08 Seoul lent Pyongyang \$133 million for inter-Korean works. As with every Southern loan ever, nothing was ever repaid.

April 22, 2024: South Korea's JCS [say](#) North Korea is preparing to launch a second military satellite, but this does not seem imminent. ROK MND Shin suggested a launch this month was highly possible. Pyongyang has said it will put three more satellites in orbit this year, after its first successful launch in November—which followed two failed attempts.

April 24, 2024: South Korea's National Police Agency (NPA) [says](#) that three different DPRK cyber groups—Lazarus, Andariel, and Kimsuky—have stolen data files from at least 10 ROK arms manufacturers, in campaigns which began in Nov. 2022. They especially target secondary defense subcontractors, whose systems may be more vulnerable.

April 29, 2024: An unnamed ROK military official [tells](#) Yonhap that “late last year” the Korean People's Army (KPA) laid mines on an unpaved road within the DMZ near Arrowhead Hill, in Cheorwon, 85 km northeast of Seoul. In 2018, in happier times, the two Koreas built the road to facilitate joint searches for MIA remains; this was the site of a major [battle](#) in the Korean War. In the event ROK troops conducted the

exhumations [alone](#). South Korea’s JCS rule out laying any mines in retaliation as “disproportionate.”

April 30, 2024: MOU [reports](#) that in the first quarter 43 North Korean defectors—eight men and 35 women—arrived in the South: fewer than in the previous quarter (57), but more than in the same period in 2023 (34).

April 30, 2024: South Korea’s defense and culture ministries announce 10 new peace-themed hiking trails at various locations along the DMZ. These will open to the public on May 13. The intrepid can sign up for tours at www.dmzwalk.com.

May 2, 2024: South Korea [raises](#) the alert status at its embassies in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, and its consulates in Shenyang and Vladivostok, all places where North Korea has a strong presence. Seoul [claims](#) to have [intelligence](#) suggesting a “high possibility of a terrorist attack.” In 1996 an ROK diplomat in Vladivostok, who monitored DPRK activities there, was [bludgeoned](#) to death; no conclusive link to Pyongyang was proven.

May 2, 2024: MOU [says](#) that North Korea appears to have dismantled a South Korean building near the former Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). Never used, the facility was built by an ROK company “for investment purposes.” No further details are provided.

May 3, 2024: “Sources familiar with the issue,” doubtless military, [tell](#) *Yonhap* that in March (date unspecified) the ROK Marine Corps shot down an unidentified 2-meter balloon, which crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL) near Baengnyeong, a front-line South Korean island in the West/Yellow Sea. A KA-1 light attack aircraft shot down the intruder; salvage efforts failed. It is assumed to have been North Korean, though it could also have been Chinese.

May 3, 2024: Two NGOs [tell](#) *NK News* that in April China forcibly [returned](#) some 260 North Koreans. Jang Se-yul, head of the North Korean People’s Liberation Front, says that on April 26 about 200 were repatriated from Changbai Korean Autonomous County in Jilin province. The same day, according to Lee Young-hwan, executive director of the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), a further 61 were sent back from Tumen, Hunchun, and Dandong. MOU vice-spokesperson Kim In-nae comments: “The

[ROK] government maintains the position that under no circumstances should North Korean defectors residing abroad be forcibly transported against their will.”

May 3, 2024: MOU Kim Yung-ho [meets](#) Carsten Schneider, Germany’s minister of state for East Germany and equivalent living conditions, after the annual session of the Korea-Germany Unification Advisory Committee, founded in 2011. Kim asks for Berlin’s support for the ROK’s “unwavering commitment to pursuing a peaceful unification of the two Koreas based on liberal democracy.”

May 11, 2024: A joint probe by South Korea’s police, prosecution and National Intelligence Service (NIS) [finds](#) that over a two-year period in 2021-23, the North Korean hacking group Lazarus stole a total of 1,014 gigabytes (GB) of data and documents from an ROK court computer network. The report did not name this, nor say how the breach was effected.