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Rubbish Balloons, Mutual Repudiation: Is This How It Ends?

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Inter-Korean relations, already bad, got worse in 2024. North Korea launched a bizarre new campaign, sending balloons bearing trash. South Korea reacted by fully suspending the already defunct North-South military pact and resuming propaganda broadcasts at the DMZ. In August, ROK President Yoon Suk Yeol announced a new policy of unification under liberal democracy, which despite offering dialogue left no place for the DPRK or Kim Jong Un. The latter took umbrage at Seoul for exaggerating flood casualties in the North, but offered no figure of his own. It is unclear whether North Korea has revised its constitution to declare South Korea irredeemably hostile, as no text has been published. In October the North blew up inter-Korean road and rail links. In December, Yoon blew up his own presidency by briefly declaring martial law, plunging South Korea into political chaos. As of now the North has not taken advantage of this.

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New Northern Dirty Tricks: What A Load Of Rubbish!



Figure 1 Balloons full of trash and filth from North Korea are seen in south Chungcheong province, South Korea. Photo: CNN

The main inter-Korean news during the period under review was a new dirty tricks campaign—literally—by Pyongyang. Since late May, North Korea has [launched](#) between 6,000 and 9,000 missiles of a new kind across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Fortunately none bore explosive warheads or flew at supersonic speeds to rain death and destruction on the South. Instead they floated slowly through Southern skies, before depositing unpleasant but at worst mildly harmful payloads of a most peculiar kind: assorted rubbish.

Some background first. As regular readers know, North Korea has long bridled at Southern activists, some defectors, who launch helium balloons into the North laden with anti-DPRK propaganda; cargoes can also include medicines, dollar bills, memory sticks, and more. This became a political issue in South Korea when the previous liberal administration of Moon Jae-in in 2020 controversially banned such launches, though in practice they continued. Under Moon's conservative successor Yoon Suk Yeol, the Constitutional Court [struck down](#) that ban in September, 2023 as infringing freedom of speech. Activist NGOs like Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK) duly redoubled their efforts, infuriating the North, which vowed to retaliate.

Now it is doing so. The context is important. Weird as North Korea's action seems, this is not random in at least two ways. Sending rubbish echoes and mirrors the North's characterization of Southern balloon cargoes as rubbish sent by "human scum." Indeed, Pyongyang gave notice in advance, unusually. After yet another balloon launch by FFNK on May 10, DPRK Vice Defense

Minister Kim Kang II warned: "Mounds of wastepaper and filth will soon be scattered over the border areas and the interior of the ROK, and it will directly experience how much effort is required to remove them." Two days later he was as good as his word.

Official DPRK statements consistently framed this as giving the South a taste of its own medicine. Kim Kang II followed up on June 2: "We made the ROK clans (sic) get enough experience of how much unpleasant they feel and how much effort is needed to remove the scattered wastepaper." (For full quotation and more detail, see the Chronology.) Subsequent waves of Northern balloons have also been portrayed by Pyongyang as ripostes for Southern actions, since needless to say FFNK and their ilk have continued their own launches.

What to make of this odd turn? Some figures first. According to [Beyond Parallel](#), a DPRK-focused website which has been keeping score, as of Nov. 29—after almost exactly six months of this—North Korea had [sent](#) between 6,430 and 8,950 trash-filled balloons into South Korea, on 32 occasions (they are launched in batches, not continuously). Of these, 3,147—between a third and half—landed successfully, in 3,359 locations nationwide (so the latter figure, being higher, must include unsuccessful landings, whatever that means). The great majority came down in Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi province, but some have reached every ROK province except South Jeolla and Jeju island.

Rubbish comes in many forms, and payloads have varied. In *Beyond Parallel's* summary, "These balloons have been found to contain trash such as animal and human feces, batteries, cigarette butts, clothes, dark soil, plastic bottles, toilet paper, wastepaper, and vinyl." The nastier stuff was mainly earlier on. Fears at one point of disease-bearing vectors proved groundless. Some soil was [found](#) to contain parasites like roundworms, whipworms, and threadworms, reflecting the fact that North Korea largely uses human feces as fertilizer.

Seoul reacted with understandable anger. On June 2 National Security Adviser Chang Ho-jin threatened Pyongyang with "unendurable" consequences for its "despicable provocations that could not have been imagined by a normal country." This was after a second wave, whose cargo included cigarette butts, paper, and plastic

bags—but no more poop. In addition to the filthy balloons, for four days (May 29—June 1) the North tried to jam GPS signals near ROK islands in the West/Yellow sea, causing glitches to some vessels' navigation systems. Another brief bout of GPS jamming followed in November.

On June 4 South Korea responded in deed as well as word, by fully suspending 2018's inter-Korean tension reduction agreement. Pyongyang had already repudiated the whole accord, after Seoul partially suspended it in November. For the ROK, full suspension meant it could resume previously banned military exercises and other activities near the DMZ, which it duly did. On June 26 the ROK Marine Corps staged its first live-fire drills for seven years on Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong islands in the West/Yellow Sea, which lie close to the DPRK. Live-fire artillery drills on the mainland near the DMZ resumed on July 2.

After another wave of Northern balloons, Seoul took further action. On June 9 it reinstalled loudspeakers at the DMZ and resumed propaganda broadcasts, for the first time since 2016. The speakers blared for just one day in the first instance. But in July, as the balloons kept coming the speakers were turned on again, for longer and more often.

In due course the North riposted with loudspeakers of its own; only once again—as per the balloons—in a weird way. Rather than propaganda, Southern residents in some areas near the DMZ were disturbed and kept awake by very loud eerie howling and other strange sounds. At this writing (early December.) both sides were continuing their respective aural bombardments.

Floods Rattle Kim: He Takes It Out on Seoul

In late July northern North Korea was hit by severe floods. In itself that would be a domestic event, all too familiar in the monsoon season given the impoverished DPRK's failure to invest in the necessary infrastructure—although Kim Jong Un's response was to scapegoat and sack officials rather than admit this system failure. But there is also an inter-Korean dimension, indeed two. Seoul naturally offered aid, and was ignored. (When Putin did the same, Kim thanked him politely but said they will manage on their own.)



Figure 2 North Korean leader Kim Jong Un inspects a flood-affected area in North Pyongan Province, North Korea, on July 28. South Korean media has estimated the number of dead or missing to be over 1,000. Photo: Korean Central News Agency

The other, more intriguing connection is that Kim used part of a long speech to flood victims to vent his spleen against South Korea (see Appendix I). His whole response to this disaster is revealing of the dilemmas he faces and the strategies he adopts. On the positive side, as also seen in other areas such as failed satellite launches—there was another of those, promptly admitted, on May 27, just before the balloon launches began—this Kim does permit a bit more *glasnost* than his father or grandfather. The floods were reported, and some material damage was detailed. State media portrayed a concerned leader on the spot: risking his shiny new Maybach SUV in wheel-high floodwaters, or looking grim and getting soaked as he toured the area in an open rubber dinghy. One remarkably candid shot showed him ducking to avoid being thwacked by an overhanging branch on a watercourse that used to be a road.

But there are limits. DPRK media gave no casualty figures, although satellite photos showed considerable devastation—including at least one entire village swept away. Naturally, South Korean media and the ROK government sought to assess this aspect as well. On Aug. 1 TV Chosun quoted an ROK official as estimating that up to 1,500 people perished, “including rescue workers who died from over-exertion.” MOU concurred that there must have been “considerable casualties,” while noting that material damage appeared less than in previous floods in 2010, 2016, and 2020.

Such claims clearly got Kim's goat. I suggest you read Appendix I now. As you do, ponder thousands of sodden flood victims, herded to

listen to a typically long speech. Must they not have wondered, as you may too, why he was banging on about South Korea so much? And how did they react when he revealed that Southern claim of over 1,000 casualties? They would never have known that, had the Leader not said it, though rumors doubtless swirled. He did not say what the true figure was. Yet we know there were casualties, for elsewhere Kim admitted this. Sacking two party secretaries and the minister of Public Security on July 29, he said their neglect of flood prevention “caused even the casualty that can not be allowed.”

When you’ve just lost everything, being told over and over to hate South Korea is hardly the message you expect or want or need to hear. But that is evidently what was on Kim’s mind. Having to ram it home suggests that this message is encountering some skepticism, as well it might. (No mention, needless to say, that the evil ROK had actually offered to help.)

Yoonification Under ‘Liberal Democracy’: Bye Bye DPRK!



Figure 3 President Yoon Suk Yeol delivers the 47th Singapore Lecture on “A Vision for Korean Unification Towards a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region” at a hotel in Singapore, Wednesday. Photo: Yonhap

In Seoul, meanwhile, President Yoon was preparing to announce what was trumpeted as a wholly new vision of Korean unification. He duly did so on Liberation Day (from Japanese rule in 1945), Aug. 15, a public holiday in both Koreas. What was dubbed ‘Yoonification’ was indeed new. Hitherto, the varied stances adopted by ROK governments in the post-1987 democratic era all shared some version of a process by degrees. The end-point was reunification, but the starting point here and now had to be the two existing states. So the first step must be

dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang, leading over time to reconciliation.

Yoon wanted no truck with any of that. Despite a pro forma offer of talks, which many media misleadingly headlined—[Reuters](#), [Bloomberg](#), [Nikkei](#), [DW](#)—did you not read the full speech?—his core message was uncompromising: unification under liberal democracy. His words left no room for doubt or indeed dialogue. “The freedom we enjoy must be extended to the frozen kingdom of the North, where people are deprived of freedom and suffer from poverty and starvation.” True enough—but what exactly does that leave for Kim Jong Un to discuss?

NK News, by contrast, got the true message exactly right in its [headline](#) “ROK president makes no room for Kim Jong Un in a unified Korea. Yoon’s call for unification under democracy makes North Korean regime change unspoken goal, aiming to divide its society.”

In its own way, this stance is no less hostile toward North Korea as a state than Kim Jong Un’s new doctrine of South Korea as an implacable foe. One big difference is that Yoon recognizes North Koreans as fellow-Koreans: a truer and more logical stance, which also gives Seoul the moral high ground. Kim rages against the ROK as a state, says the DPRK is entitled to destroy it, but is silent on how 52 million South Koreans fit into this malevolent vision. They are no longer kin or compatriots, so perhaps they don’t count. As discussed in our last article, this is one of several ways that Kim’s doctrine makes no sense.

SPA Damp Squib

Clarification had been anticipated in October, when the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA) — North Korea’s rubber-stamp Parliament, as it is often correctly tagged—was due to [meet](#) in order (inter alia) to revise the DPRK Constitution to reflect the new line on the South, as Kim had announced earlier in the year. Much attention was focused on this, to see how the changes would be worded. Kim had also spoken of clarifying territorial borders, threatening fire and brimstone should any foe cross them. This naturally raised fears of renewed tensions in the West/Yellow Sea around the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the de facto maritime boundary.

In the event this proved a damp squib, or perhaps a pig in a poke. The SPA duly met on

Oct. 7–8, but went unreported until afterward. Kim did not attend, instead giving a speech at what—in a further sign of his growing personality cult in his own right—is now renamed Kim Jong Un University of National Defense. Subsequent brief reports suggest that the SPA did indeed revise the Constitution, but as of December the new text has yet to be published.

This silence looks like a retreat. It is a stretch to imagine how one would draft such an absurd and incoherent notion into a Constitution. Chad O’Carroll of *NK News* [suggests](#) two different possible motives: domestic opposition to Kim’s new anti-unification policy and Pyongyang’s preference for strategic ambiguity, to keep its enemies guessing. Both may well be true.

North Delinks From South, Explosively

But maybe for Pyongyang actions speak louder than words. Never mind redrafting, let’s just stage an explosion! A week after the SPA met, on Oct. 15 North Korea ceremoniously blew up the roads and railway tracks—two of each, in the east and west of the peninsula—which in happier times earlier this century had physically reconnected the two Koreas (all paid for by Seoul, needless to add). True, this had been a very limited relinking. No regular train services ever ran, and the eastern road was only briefly used to ferry Southern tourists to the Mount Kumgang resort before tours were suspended in 2008 after a middle-aged female visitor was shot dead. The western road saw more use, as Southern businesses trucked supplies in and finished goods out from the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), which lasted until 2016. But no further. Except for rare high-level meetings, no one drove between Seoul and Pyongyang

Those seeking consolation may note that the destruction is symbolic too. In some future thaw, unimaginable currently, these now severed arteries could easily be reconnected. Interestingly, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff noted that the visually impressive large mounds of earth which the North has piled up to fortify the blockage are not militarily effective ramparts, much less the tank traps they claim. But they look good on camera. Here, as often, North Korea seems content with merely symbolic histrionics. We should be thankful Kim settles for that.

Yoon Loses The Plot—And His Job?



Figure 4 Demonstrators from a labour group take part in a protest calling for the ouster of South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol outside City Hall in Seoul on Dec. 12, 2024. Photo: ANTHONY WALLACE/AFP via Getty Images

North Korea is often described as unpredictable: led by an isolated and unloved ruler, whose paranoia might tempt him to misjudge situations and lash out. Wrong Korea, it would seem.

As I write, the political chaos unleashed by Yoon Suk Yeol’s mad declaration of martial law (swiftly rescinded) on Dec. 3 is ongoing. While primarily about South Korean domestic politics, this has clear implications for inter-Korean relations. This dismal affair is obviously negative for the ROK’s security: exposing weaknesses that Kim Jong Un might see as vulnerabilities. While we do not share the view that Kim is bent on all-out aggression—pin-pricks and gestures are more his bag—in principle he may seize such a golden opportunity to exploit Yoon’s and South Korea’s discomfiture. But as of this writing, he has not done so.

More specific issues also arise. Glad as we may be in this instance that some senior military commanders apparently refused or ignored orders they deemed unwarranted or even illegal, thereby ensuring a peaceful denouement, chains of command need to function properly and reliably. The subsequent formal power vacuum is also troubling. On Dec. 11, with Yoon sidelined but not yet impeached, who is South Korea’s commander-in-chief?

Also, crucially, the North was Yoon’s avowed excuse, however specious, for what he did. In his own [words](#): “I declare martial law to protect the Republic of Korea from the threats of North

Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang antistate forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order.”

It is a familiar rightwing McCarthyite ploy to [smear](#) democratic liberals as crypto-commies. There was in fact no specific DPRK threat. The same pretext may have been cited to soldiers involved, perhaps to pre-empt any doubts they might have. An opposition lawmaker claims that 2.5 hours before Yoon declared martial law, the ROK Army’s 707th Special Mission Group—the same unit sent to the National Assembly shortly after—received orders saying “the situation regarding North Korea is serious, and immediate deployment may be required.”

Moreover, as B R Myers notes in a typically contrarian [commentary](#), rumors of a possible declaration of martial law had swirled since September—but were dismissed as leftist paranoia. While the full truth must await the multiple investigations now under way in Seoul, this casts a new light on a drone which dropped leaflets on Pyongyang in early October. The possibility cannot now be ruled out that Yoon—or his (now ex-) defence minister and schoolmate Kim Yong-hyun, the seeming brains (if that is the word) behind what increasingly looks like an attempted [coup](#)—deliberately sought to antagonize the North, in hope of provoking a reaction which they could then use to justify abolishing democracy (in order to save it, of course).

As for North Korea, they waited a week to comment, perhaps as bemused as the rest of us. On Dec. 11 the party daily *Rodong Sinmun* finally carried quite a detailed factual account, albeit peppered predicatably with phrases like “puppet.” We reproduce this in full as Appendix II.

One can only wonder what North Korean readers are making of all this. Their government has just told them that in enemy South Korea there is a political opposition; you can come out on the streets in protest and denounce the leader, and he may yet fall. Those are heady thoughts to ponder in Pyongyang, even if none can be safely uttered aloud.

Sunrise, Sunset: A Roller-Coaster Quarter Century

As this is the final issue of *Comparative Connections* in its current form, it seems apt to stand back from immediate events and try to frame the bigger picture. What is the overall story of inter-Korean relations in the first quarter of the 21st century? And what are the lessons?

Let us remind ourselves of the main events. The century, and these articles, began with the radically new “Sunshine” policy pursued by Kim Dae-jung (ROK president 1998–2003), who sought to end decades of North-South hostility. The name derives from an Aesop fable, where sun and wind compete to make a man take off his coat. Warm sun triumphs over chilly wind.

For a decade under Kim and his fellow-liberal successor Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), each of whom went to Pyongyang for summits with the North’s then leader Kim Jong Il—who never repaid the compliment by visiting Seoul—the two Koreas took baby steps, if giant-seeming compared to the past, to interact and reduce tensions. Two joint ventures, financed by the South, were built on Northern soil. From 1998 to 2008 1 million South Korean tourists visited scenic Mount Kumgang on the east coast: first by boat, but later by bus or car through the hitherto impassable Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), staying in Southern-built facilities. Near the west coast, the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC, 2004–16) at its peak saw some 120 mostly small ROK companies employ over 50,000 DPRK workers to make various goods for South Korean and overseas markets.

In 2008 South Korean voters turned right. Two conservative Presidents—Lee Myung-bak (2008–13) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2017)—were skeptical of Sunshine. Lee decided not to implement any of the numerous new joint ventures agreed by Roh at the second North-South summit in 2007, near the end of his presidency (South Korean presidents serve a single five-year term). Presumably in reprisal, in 2010 the North sank the Southern corvette *Cheonan* with 46 deaths—Pyongyang denies responsibility—and shelled a Southern island, killing four. Lee retaliated by banning inter-Korean trade, with the large exception of the KIC. That JV continued till 2016, when Park abruptly shut it down after Pyongyang launched a satellite.

Park Geun-hye's impeachment gave Sunshine a second chance, as Seoul's pendulum swung left again (for reasons unconnected to North Korea). Her liberal successor Moon Jae-in (2017-22) had visited Pyongyang as Roh's chief of staff. 2018 appeared an *annus mirabilis*, starting with Northern participation (in hastily formed pan-Korean teams) in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. The North's leader Kim Jong Un, who for his first six years after inheriting power in late 2011 on the death of his father Kim Jong Il had met no other foreign leader, emerged on the global stage in a whirlwind of summitry: meeting Moon three times, the same with Xi Jinping of China, and a first ever US-DPRK summit with Donald Trump, held in Singapore.

But after the second Trump-Kim summit (held in Hanoi in early 2019) collapsed, Moon's reward for being an assiduous go-between was to be shunned by Kim and dissed by Trump. Though Moon insisted until the end of his term that a North-South peace process continued, the fact is that there have been almost no direct inter-Korean contacts for almost six years. (And yet these updates have never lacked issues to discuss.)

The latest ROK presidential election, in March 2022, narrowly voted in a conservative of a different kidney from Lee or Park, each of whom intermittently pursued dialogue with the North (not always [publicly](#)). Yoon Suk Yeol, a prosecutor new to politics, made an initial perfunctory "audacious offer" of aid, but soon showed he had no more interest in dealing with Kim than vice versa. As discussed above, his vision of unification has no room for the DPRK. Meanwhile the North sends trash balloons. We have come a long way since 2000: backward.

Was Sunshine Moonshine?

With chilly winds blowing colder than ever, it is tempting to conclude that sunshine failed. Certainly that era is over for the foreseeable future, partly due to wider geopolitical changes beyond our bilateral remit here: China's hardening under Xi Jinping, and Kim's enthusiastic new military support for Russia in Ukraine. Yet the value of *Comparative Connections* is to have provided a granular, blow by blow account of events as they unfolded. I hope scholars and policy-makers will mine this archive carefully, before rushing to a priori or superficial conclusions. Here are my own tentative thoughts, looking back.

Indeed, Sunshine had grave flaws and issues, which must be acknowledged. Let us list some:

- It was exceedingly one-sided. Seoul did all the running and paid all the bills.
- Initially it included large secret payments, which not only broke ROK law but could be seen as enabling Pyongyang's nuclear program.
- Very little was actually accomplished in any sphere. This encounter was marginal at best.
- Fundamental security issues, notably DPRK WMD, went unaddressed. North Korea's first nuclear test, and subsequent ones, occurred during and despite Sunshine.
- Also unaddressed were North Korea's appalling human rights abuses, as a corollary of respecting each others' systems.

These are major negatives. Looking back, no one could claim that Kim Dae-jung's Aesopian gamble worked out as he hoped. Hawkish skeptics, who from the start dismissed Sunshine as moonshine, may well feel vindicated. Undeniably, at no point did either Kim Jong Il or Kim Jong Un take major tangible—much less irreversible—steps to signal true reciprocity or an unmistakable willingness to change.

Many such would have been possible. Imagine, for instance, if reunions of separated family reunions had been genuine—in home towns, unchaperoned, for longer, more often and on a larger scale—rather than the ghastly brief media-driven blub-fest mockery that they became. Or if that be deemed too risky, as the Kims evidently judged: Imagine if trains and trucks had actually run on the reconnected cross-border roads and railways, rather than these remaining unused and merely symbolic. A little more courage from the North could have seen the sinews of a reunified Korea begin to be built, in cumulative ways not easily reversible.

That was the road not taken. Above all, the fact that Sunshine coincided with growing global concern about the DPRK's nuclear ambitions was fateful, and ultimately fatal. Pyongyang's refusal to abandon its nuclear quest inevitably set limits to how far South Korea, a US ally hosting US bases and troops, could go on the inter-Korean front. One such moment came in

Feb. 2016, when Park Geun-hye closed the KIC—not for any inter-Korean reason, but to punish Pyongyang for a satellite launch. Some might deem that an over-reaction: shutting down the last area of concrete North-South cooperation, for extraneous reasons.

Should we therefore conclude that Sunshine was misguided from the start? Was its net effect merely to enable or even strengthen a malign, cynical regime: happy to pocket ROK money, but which never had any intention of giving anything back, much less abandoning its WMD?

Historical counterfactuals (“what if ...?”) have their limits, but perhaps lessons may be learnt. What if more substantial inter-Korean economic relations had been built, like for instance those between China and Taiwan? As that case shows, such ties do not eliminate military risk but they certainly mitigate it. Bluntly, Xi Jinping will think twice before damaging TSMC.

The detail afforded by *Comparative Connections* enables us to zero in on key moments and episodes. 2008 still seems to me a [turning-point](#). What if South Korea’s incoming President, Lee Myung-bak, had gone ahead with the economic joint ventures inked by his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun? The structural links thus created would have made the North increasingly dependent on the South economically, a valuable card on many levels, not least in building constituencies in Pyongyang with a solid material interest in inter-Korean betterment. As it was, and as I [wrote](#) elsewhere some time ago, South Korea lost the North to China.

This relates to another clear lesson. Regardless of Pyongyang’s intentions, a big problem was South Korea’s failure—unlike West Germany, back in the day—to craft and implement a [bipartisan Nordpolitik](#): one which could endure despite the frequent changes of government in Seoul. Policy continuity is admittedly easier for dictatorships. But if DPRK archives are ever unsealed so we can read the discussions, I bet we’ll find their hawks raising a perfectly fair point: How can you make a deal with the South, when their next government might tear it up?

For all these reasons, bilateral inter-Korean relations, fitful and incipient as they were, never became more than a dependent variable in the broader regional and global geopolitical picture,

at the mercy of extraneous events and developments. I still reckon that North-South ties, if better handled, could in principle have become a driver—but it didn’t happen. **Looking Ahead: Never Say Never!**

So much for the past. What of the future, which sadly I shall no longer be chronicling and analyzing here? Murky though current prospects look, let me venture a few thoughts.

First, the point just made applies in spades. In the short term, more than ever inter-Korean ties will be subject to wider geopolitical developments. Three in particular loom large. Kim Jong Un’s ever deepening commitment to support Putin’s aggression in Ukraine, now with boots on the ground, has profound ramifications which are beyond our scope here. Second, the imminent return of Donald Trump to the White House is a wild card. In his first term Trump successively pursued two opposite North Korea policies: from sneering at ‘little rocket man’ to bromance. Which will he plump for this time? And third, South Korea’s sudden political crisis means that at this writing it is unclear—if increasingly unlikely—that Yoon Suk Yeol will serve out his presidential term. Progressives already looked likely to regain power in Seoul after Yoon, but that could now happen in 2025 rather than 2027—in which case the ROK’s Nordpolitik will change drastically, yet again.

Another lesson: Never say never in Korea. As of now, both Korean governments have taken mutual hostility to the point of formal repudiation—but that can turn on a dime. Should the opposition Democrats (DPK) form the next ROK government, they will certainly reject Yoon’s hard-line stance and revert to some form of outreach (hopefully having learnt lessons from Moon Jae-in’s misguided one-sided bending over backward toward Pyongyang.)

If that happens, how will Kim Jong Un respond? Having gone so far as to define the ROK as an enemy state in the DPRK Constitution, any U-turn could be difficult and embarrassing. Nonetheless, should Ukraine become an unpopular quagmire and Putin’s friendship prove limited and transactional, then given North Korea’s poverty and permanent economic crisis (self-inflicted by Kim’s refusal of market reforms), the lure of a rich and generous neighbor ready once again to wave checks—not blank, but substantial—may prove hard to

resist, not least as counterweight to an increasingly irritated Beijing. Moreover, should Trump pick a fight with Seoul over payments for USFK, as he has threatened, any resulting spats may afford the ROK more flexibility than in the past to go its own way in dealing with Pyongyang.

Extending our gaze to the medium- and longer term, further issues loom. Kim Jong Un's health remains a concern. If he drops dead tomorrow, that could unleash a power struggle in Pyongyang with alarming ramifications. Old hypothetical questions, never answered, would arise anew, starkly and for real. If there were chaos in North Korea, would South Korea and/or China intervene: to secure the North's loose nukes or perhaps restore order more broadly? If so, would Seoul and Beijing consult first—or might they, and the US, once again confront each other on the peninsula? One hopes there are agreed contingency plans, but I fear not.

Absent such collapse, more likely North Korea will limp on—but with an ever more restive populace, well aware that South Koreans live better and increasingly discontented with their own poverty and unfreedom. As Kim Jong Un's early pledge that they will no longer have to tighten their belts rings ever hollower, and youths are shot for watching South Korean movies, the control and stability the DPRK has always achieved hitherto cannot be taken for granted. Future South Korean governments, and their citizens, may need to brace for contingencies and decide whether these constitute threats or opportunities.

There I shall leave it—and leave you, dear readers. It has been a privilege to spend the first quarter of this century chronicling the vicissitudes of inter-Korean relations for *Comparative Connections*. Whatever the future holds, I hope the archive thus created will prove useful to future scholars, policy makers and others. Let me conclude with Gramsci: Pessimism of the intelligence; optimism of the will. History is not foreordained. Korean reunification may be beyond reach, but inter-Korean reconciliation is still possible—and well worth striving for.

Appendix I

Excerpt from [speech](#) by Kim Jong Un, headlined: “Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Clarifies in His Speech Stand of Party and Government on

Repairing Flood Damage and Consoles Flood Victims”, KCNA 10 Aug. 2024

Comrades,

It is necessary for us to impress on our mind once again that the current rehabilitation project is not simply an undertaking for our own but also a serious struggle against the enemy.

At present, the enemy, misusing the occasion when we have suffered damage, is continuing to make foolish attempts to tarnish the image of our state.

It is important to inform Party organizations and working people's organizations at all levels, various networks of education and the people of these facts and thus make them have a correct understanding of the ROK scum bordering on us.

The rubbish ROK's media are desperately slandering all the socialist benefits and measures taken by our Party and government for the flood victims and also the communist traits displayed throughout the society, abusing them as a means of achieving some sort of internal unity and a type of demonstration. They are also fabricating such false information, in their frantic maneuvers to slander our government and system, that the missing persons in the afflicted areas exceed 1,000 in number and that its intelligence authorities found out that several helicopters had fallen on rescue mission.

Worse still, they are spreading a baseless rumour that the V-day celebrations took place in Pyongyang on the 27th of last month when loss of life occurred in the flood-hit areas.

Because the rumor is in wide circulation in the ROK society that its government is always late in coping with all sorts of accidents that happened there and such is an everyday occurrence in the country, they seem to weave absurd sophistry that slanders and slights us in an attempt to coax their citizens and stir up world public sentiments.

When I visited the helicopter unit that rescued you, I gave full account of the rescue operation, including the crash-landing by one helicopter during the operation, and expressed my gratitude that there had been no casualties in the turmoil.

The enemy even went so far as to say that I reacted personally to the report fabricated by their media because there were heavy casualties and I intended to cover it up.

What is their dogged insistence on making you, safe and sound like this, missing or dead? It is an open and shut case.

This is a smear campaign and a grave provocation against our state as well as an insult to you.

I have reason and feel it necessary to say this about the media of the dirty, rubbish country.

There is no need for us to make separate materials for education. It is because these clear facts are actual and educational materials good enough to clearly bring home to the people how filthy the enemy clan is, what ancient and old-fashioned way they resort to for fabrication and political smear campaign to tarnish the image of our state, what their ulterior motives are and why we call the enemy the enemy and scum.

No country in the world has such media which does nothing but to invent groundless and exaggerated lies.

What we must clearly realize is that the enemy is what we see them now.

Referring to these actual facts, the whole country should have a correct understanding of the enemy and cultivate a correct feeling against them.

Our enemy is an unchangeable enemy.

We should make the current opportunity, which helps us to have a correct understanding of what our enemy is, an opportunity of having a correct stand towards the enemy.

Appendix II

The DPRK's first comment on the martial law crisis in South Korea

Headline: In the puppet Korea, social unrest expands due to martial law, more than 1 million people across the country take part in protests demanding the impeachment of Yoon Seok-yeol, the international community is keeping a close eye on it

Rodong Sinmun, 11 Dec. 2024, page 6 (unofficial translation)

The puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, who is facing a serious crisis of governance and impeachment, declared martial law without any hesitation and unleashed the guns of the fascist dictatorship on the people. This shocking incident has turned the entire puppet Korea into a mess.

On the night of December 3, the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol declared martial law in order to escape the worst crisis of his rule, and sent in fully armed martial law troops, including several direct-controlled planes and a group of thugs from the Army Special Warfare Command, to blockade the National Assembly. However, as the resolution demanding the lifting of martial law was passed in the plenary session of the National Assembly, which was urgently convened, the puppet Yoon had no choice but to lift it just six hours after declaring martial law.

The puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, who was in a tight spot both inside and outside of his term in office and was immediately forced out of his position of power, committed a crazy act reminiscent of the coup d'état during the military dictatorship decades ago, which drew strong condemnation from all walks of life, including the opposition party, and further exploded the public's impeachment fever.

The Democratic Party of Korea and other opposition parties immediately declared that they would file a complaint of sedition against the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, who caused the martial law situation, and those involved, the Minister of National Defense and the Minister of Public Administration and Security, and push for their impeachment.

On the 5th, six opposition parties, including the Democratic Party of Korea, and independents totalling 191 lawmakers proposed an impeachment motion. However, as the People Power Party members who had decided to oppose impeachment left the conference room en masse, the Yoon Seok-yeol impeachment motion was invalidated without even being able to open the ballot box due to a lack of voters.

When this news was delivered, not only the area surrounding the puppet National Assembly but also Korea itself became a national protest ground.

A crowd of 1 million people rallied around the National Assembly building and staged a “siege march.”

They held up propaganda materials such as “Impeach Yoon Seok-yeol,” “Arrest Yoon Seok-yeol,” and “Oppose impeachment = Participate in rebellion,” and chanted, “Yoon Seok-yeol is no longer the president of the people. Impeach Yoon Seok-yeol!”, “Impeach the ringleader of rebellion, Yoon Seok-yeol!”, “Disband the People Power Party, a collaborator in rebellion!”, and “The National Assembly must immediately process the Yoon Seok-yeol impeachment motion!” They released a statement emphasizing that they would not stop fighting until Yoon Seok-yeol was suspended from his duties, resigned, and punished, and that the people would not tolerate the existence of the People Power Party.

On the 7th, the 118th candlelight vigil and demonstration was widely held in Seoul under the theme of “Impeach the insurgent Yoon Seok-yeol immediately! Arrest him immediately!” The rally and demonstration that day, which was carried out as a nationwide emergency protest action, was attended by 200,000 people from all over the place, including workers, farmers, and young students.

Speakers at the rally claimed that Yoon Seok-yeol’s existence itself was a war and a disaster, that Yoon Seok-yeol should be impeached immediately, and that he should be held accountable and punished without fail.

The rally participants chanted slogans such as “Yoon Seok-yeol, step down!” and “Disband the People Power Party!” and marched toward the National Assembly.

They then held a rally in front of the National Assembly, calling for “Yoon Seok-yeol, step down for insurrection!” We joined the “National Sovereignty Realization! Social Reform! National People’s March for the Resignation of the People”.

On this day, cries of anger against the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol and his party erupted in other regions as well.

At a rally hosted by the Incheon Movement Headquarters for the Resignation of the Yoon Seok-yeol Regime in Incheon, participants

expressed their outrage at the National Assembly’s failure to declare martial law and impeach Yoon Seok-yeol for committing a crime of sedition, and declared that they would launch a nationwide protest to force Yoon Seok-yeol out and disband the People Power Party.

In Daegu, the Daegu City National Assembly for the Resignation of Yoon Seok-yeol, comprised of 85 social groups in the Daegu and Gyeongbuk regions, held a rally for the resignation of Yoon Seok-yeol and declared that they would definitely fulfill the people’s wishes.

Protests also took place in front of the headquarters of the People Power Party in various places where the accomplices of the puppet Yoon Seok-yeol, the People Power Party, are nesting. On the 8th, 9th, and 10th, protest candles continued to burn in Seoul and all over the country.

With boiling anger toward Yoon Seok-yeol, who committed an indelible sin against the people through dictatorship, tyranny, and martial law, crowds of people from all walks of life declared a long-term impeachment struggle with the “Immediate Impeachment! Immediate Arrest! Candlelight Cultural Event” in front of the puppet National Assembly in Seoul.

Shouts such as “Immediately impeach and arrest the special criminal Yoon Seok-yeol!”, “Yoon Seok-yeol, who committed an atrocious crime by pointing guns at the people, is no longer the president!”, and “We will wage a nationwide struggle!” erupted everywhere. The puppet media reported that the whole country was shaking with protests, with headlines such as “Chants for Yoon Seok-yeol’s resignation from all walks of life”, “1 million candles surrounding the National Assembly”, “Cheerful candle struggle prepared for a long-term war”, and “Yoon Seok-yeol has difficulty avoiding impeachment trial”, and reported that the whole country was shaking with protests, that each region was forming a huge sea of candles demanding Yoon Seok-yeol’s impeachment once again, and that Yoon Seok-yeol could not avoid destruction as the candles were burning like an active volcano.

The international community is closely watching the emergency martial law and impeachment commotion in the puppet Korea, saying that the vulnerability of Korean society has been revealed, that Yoon Seok-yeol’s

sudden declaration of martial law is an expression of despair, and that Yoon Seok-yeol's political life could end early. [Korean Central News Agency]

Appendix III

Full [text](#) of “All DPRK citizens vent rage at ROK's provocation upon receipt of FM's crucial statement”, *Pyongyang Times* 14 October 2024.

“It made my blood boil when I received the news about the crimes puppet ROK scum committed at dead of night in October. Even the dirty dead bodies of the puppets should not be left, but be squashed in the crusher of our workshop.” Chae Song Il, worker of ore-dressing workshop No. 2 of the Musan Mining Complex

“The noxious insects irritating humans should completely be exterminated for the healthy development of humankind.” Ri Jong Hui, researcher at Pyongyang University of Medical Sciences

“If those brutes don't want to live any longer, our coal miners will finish them off by beating them to pulp and throw their bodies into disused mines.” Ri Jong Ho, manager of a pit at the Kogonwon Coal Mine under the Kyongwon Area Coal-mining Complex

“It is sickening and disgusting even to talk about the loathsome pack of dogs. I want to turn their stronghold into a sea of flames.” Ju Jae Song, department director of the Ministry of Machine-building Industry

“I eagerly wait for the day of condemning the ROK puppets to the most gruesome and horrible death.” Ri Song Mi, staffer at the Pyongyang Jonghyang Building-materials Factory

“The unparalleled human rejects playing with fire should be given, not ultimatum, but the most terrible shower of shells at once.” Workers of the Kim Jong Thae Electric Locomotive Complex

“The harshest punishment should be meted out to the enemies actually, not by word of mouth.” Kye Yong Gil, workteam leader of the Samyang Farm in Sonchon County

“At present, the whole university is burning with resentment. The enemies we are confronting are the wicked foes we should

surely exterminate.” Ju Kyong Sang, student of the forestry science faculty of Kim Il Sung University

Even elderly persons and Children's Union members say they want to take up arms to destroy the enemies by reducing their stronghold to ruins at once.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA–SOUTH KOREA

MAY–NOVEMBER 2024

May 2, 2024: South Korea [raises](#) the alert status at its embassies in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, and 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: ROK Ministry of Unification (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](#) South Korea’s quasi-official news agency *Yonhap* that in March (date unspecified) the ROK Marine Corps destroyed an unidentified 2-meter balloon which crossed the Northern Limit Line (NLL, the de facto inter-Korean maritime border) 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 were unsuccessful. It is assumed to have been North Korean, though China is also possible.

May 3, 2024: Two NGOs [tell](#) *NK News* (leading English-language resource on the DPRK) 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 61 more 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: ROK Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho [meets](#) Carsten Schneider, Germany’s minister of state for East Germany and equivalent living conditions (sic), after the annual session of the Korea-Germany Unification Advisory Committee. 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.” Schneider tells his hosts to be ready for the unexpected: “We did not know in the spring of 1989 that the Berlin Wall would collapse in November that year. If South Korea wants to catch such a chance, it should not lose the goal of unification while keeping close tabs on North Korean people’s situations.”

May 8, 2024: Gimm-Young Publishers in Seoul [announce](#) that they will publish former President Moon Jae-in’s memoir on May 20. Titled *From the Periphery to the Center*, and written in question and answer format, this will include “behind-the-scenes stories about key diplomatic events”. The book “candidly document[s] not only diplomatic and security achievements, but also regrets, limitations, successes and failures of [Moon’s] policies.”

May 8–10, 2024: ROK [stages](#) “defensive” annual combined maneuvers on border islands in the Yellow Sea, close to the DPRK. The Marine Corps is joined by army, navy, and air force units. Among other assets, this mobilizes UH-60 and CH-47 helicopters, F-15K and KF-16 fighter jets, destroyers, frigates, landing ships and amphibious assault ships. Drills include artillery

firing, counterterrorism operations and maritime live exercises.

May 10, 2024: MOU [says](#) the DPRK has demolished a fire station, built and paid for by the ROK government, at the former Mount Kumgang tourist resort on the east coast.

May 10, 2024: “Sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* the ROK military may deploy special forces inside the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ, the de facto inter-Korean border), to strengthen security while it rebuilds guardposts demolished under the now repudiated 2018 inter-Korean military accord.

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 DPRK hacking group known as Lazarus stole 1,014 gigabytes (GB) of data and documents from an (unnamed) ROK court computer network. The report did not say how the breach was effected.

May 11-12, 2024: Kim Jong Un [inspects](#) what the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) describes as “major defense industrial enterprises under the Second Economic Commission.” (The 2EC runs North Korea’s military economy.) With rare detail, KCNA itemizes these as “a complex producing ultramodern precision munitions,” “an enterprise producing major small arms”—where Kim “show[s]his deep care for a newly-developed sniper's rifle”—and a facility producing “updated 240mm multiple rockets launchers to be equipped by KPA [Korean People’s Army] artillery units newly formed this year.” Kim gives one of the latter a test run. His rather lengthy comments focus on production issues, quality control, and the like; there is no mention of South Korea or other enemies.

May 13, 2024: Park Sang-hak, who heads the activist NGO Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK), [says](#) that on May 10 his group sent 20 balloons into North Korea. Launched from Ganghwa island in the northwestern ROK, the balloons are said to carry 300,000 anti-DPRK

flyers and 2,000 USB sticks loaded with K-pop content. They trail banners which read: “Kim Jong Un, he is nothing but an irreversible traitor and an enemy of our people.”

May 16, 2024: Pyongyang [criticizes](#) a visit to Beijing by Seoul’s Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, who asked China to play a “constructive” role on the peninsula. Pak Myong Ho, vice minister for Chinese affairs at the North’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), said “No matter how earnestly the diplomats of the ROK order someone a constructive role through soliciting and begging diplomacy...we will never give up our sovereign rights crucial to our lives.”

May 17, 2024: “A military source” [tells](#) *Yonhap* that North Korea has been installing mines and reinforcing barbed-wire fences in four or five different locations within the DMZ.

May 21, 2024: ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) [says](#) a joint military-police probe is under way into the hacking of defense officials’ emails. DPRK involvement is suspected. No details are given, save to clarify that the breach involved their personal email accounts rather than military servers.

May 24, 2024: Seoul [sanctions](#) seven named North Koreans and two Russian vessels, said to be involved in illicit trading of arms and fuel between Pyongyang and Moscow.

May 24 and 27, 2024: Monuments hoping for the return of five South Koreans, abducted as teenagers by North Korean agents in 1977-78, are [unveiled](#) on Seonyu and Hong islands, off the west coast, whence they were kidnapped. Relatives attend, as do MOU Kim Yung-ho and Julie Turner, US special envoy for North Korean human rights. [*Rob: it’s hardly hot news, but there are touching photos at the link.*]

May 26, 2024: Complaining of Southern provocations, including balloon launches and alleged incursions, DPRK vice-defense minister Kim Kang Il [warns](#) that “Mounds of wastepaper and filth will soon be scattered over the border

areas and the interior of the ROK, and it will directly experience how much effort is required to remove them.” *He means it.*

May 27, 2024: Another North Korean satellite launch [fails](#): its third in two years, as against a single success in November. Promptly admitting the mishap, the DPRK’s National Aerospace Technology Administration (NATA) [says](#): “The launch failed due to the air blast of the new-type satellite carrier rocket during the first-stage flight.” A day later, Kim Jong Un [adds](#) that “a destruct system [was] activated due to malfunctioning of the first-stage engine”

May 29, 2024: South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [say](#) that since late on May 28 North Korea has sent some 260 balloons carrying assorted rubbish, including fecal matter, into the South. A few reach over 200km south of the DMZ, the largest balloon incursion from the North. The JCS tells Pyongyang to cease such “inhumane and vulgar” actions. In a mocking statement, Kim Jong Un’s sister Kim Yo Jong [calls](#) the balloons “‘sincere presents’ to the goblins of liberal democracy.” She warns there will be more—as indeed there are: North’s campaign remains ongoing. (NB this Chronology does not record every single launch. For a timeline and analysis as of late August, see [here](#); and as of Nov. 29, see [here](#).)

May 29–31, 2024: On three consecutive days South Korean military officials [detect](#) Northern attempts to jam GPS signals around northerly ROK-controlled islands in the West/Yellow sea. Some ferries and fishing boats experience glitches in their navigational systems, but military communications are unaffected. Additionally, on May 30 North Korea fires 18 rounds from multiple rocket launchers toward the East Sea near the inter-Korean border.

May 30, 2024: MOU [says](#) that North Koreans are no longer permitted to name their children Hana, Tongil, or Hankook (respectively meaning one, unification, and South Korea), in line with Kim Jong Un’s new diktat to erase any idea of, or reference to, Korea being a single country.

Similarly, the geography section of the DPRK foreign ministry website, which had characterized Korea as a maritime nation with seas on three sides, has been removed.

May 31, 2024: MOU [says](#) that North-South trade fell to zero last year, for the first time since inter-Korean commerce began in 1989. There were also no personnel exchanges for a third straight year. Southern NGOs’ humanitarian aid totaled 900 million won (\$653,000) last year: down from 2.6 billion won in 2022, and the lowest figure since records began in 1995.

June 1, 2024: North Korea’s GPS jamming continues for a fourth day.

June 2, 2024: ROK National Security Adviser Chang Ho-jin [threatens](#) the DPRK with “unendurable” consequences, saying its “flying of trash balloons and GPS jamming are such despicable provocations that could not have been imagined by a normal country.” He adds that Seoul’s riposte may include resuming loudspeaker broadcasts across the DMZ.

June 2, 2024: ROK National Police Agency [reports](#) that as of 1600 local time it has received 581 reports of North Korean balloon sightings, mostly in western Seoul but also further afield. The JCS say they have detected 720 incoming balloons since 2000 the previous evening. This latest wave carries trash such as cigarette butts, paper and plastic bags, but not feces as in the first batch. Incheon International Airport has been briefly disrupted several times, and a car windscreen was broken.

June 2, 2024: DPRK vice-defense minister Kim Kang Il [says](#): “From the night of May 28 to the dawn of June 2, we scattered 15 tons of wastepaper, favorite toy of the human scum, over the border areas of the ROK and its capital region with more than 3,500 balloons of various sorts. We made the ROK clans (sic) get enough experience of how much unpleasant they feel and how much effort is needed to remove the scattered wastepaper. We are going to halt wastepaper scattering over the border

temporarily as our action was a countermeasure from A to Z. But, if the ROK clans resume anti-DPRK leaflet scattering, we will correspond (sic) to it by intensively scattering wastepaper and rubbish hundred times the amount of scattered leaflets and the number of cases, as we have already warned.” This suspension lasts less than a week.

June 3, 2024: In response to North Korea’s trash balloon campaign, South Korea’s National Security Council [decides](#) to fully suspend 2018’s inter-Korean tension reduction pact—which Pyongyang already repudiated, after Seoul partially suspended it in November. The Cabinet and President Yoon Suk Yeol [endorse](#) this on June 4, whereupon the Ministry of National Defense [says](#) it will resume military activities near the DMZ which the accord had banned.

June 5, 2024: South Korea’s NIS [says](#) it has detected signs that North Korea is demolishing part of the Donghae inter-Korean railway line. In 2006 Seoul built and paid for 27 km of new track linking the two Korea’s railway systems along the east coast, but after a test run in 2007 this was never used again.

June 9, 2024: After North Korea sends more trash balloons on June 8, the presidential office [says](#) South Korea will re-install loudspeakers at the DMZ and resume propaganda broadcasts today, for the first time since 2016. This duly [happens](#), but just for one day.

June 20, 2024: South Korea [expresses](#) “grave concern” at the Russia-DPRK comprehensive strategic partnership signed in Pyongyang on June 19 by Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin. This includes a mutual pledge to provide immediate military assistance if one is attacked. In the light of this, National Security Advisor Chang Ho-jin says: “We plan to reconsider the issue of arms support to Ukraine.” Seoul has not hitherto supplied weapons directly to Kyiv.

June 20, 2024: FFNK’s Park Sang-hak [says](#) his group has sent 20 balloons carrying 300,000 leaflets, US dollars, and USB sticks containing a

hit K-drama and songs across the DMZ from the border city of Paju. Next day Kim Yo Jong warns that the North will retaliate in kind.

June 20, 2024: “Sources” [tell](#) *Yonhap* that the ROK seized a cargo ship in the Korea Strait, which it suspects of breaching UN sanctions against the DPRK. The 2,900-ton vessel—its name and flag are not revealed—is carrying coal and iron ore. It is now at anchorage in Busan. Seoul effected a similar seizure of another small cargo vessel in March.

June 21, 2024: ROK JCS [say](#) that KPA troops working in the DMZ briefly crossed the Military Demarcation Line (MDL, the actual border within the DMZ) around 1100 local time. They returned after the South broadcast warnings and fired warning shots. This is the third such incident by work parties of 20-30 Northern soldiers in the central area of the front, following incursions on June 9 and [18](#). Seoul judges all to be accidental. Since April the North has deployed thousands of troops in 10 different locations in the DMZ for a range of [activities](#): reinforcing roads, planting mines (with “multiple casualties,” according to the [JCS](#)) and erecting presumed anti-tank barriers.

June 23, 2024: In a threat to directly arm Ukraine, speaking on KBS TV, ROK NSA Chang Ho-jin [says](#): “It all depends on what Russia will do. Will there be any line remaining for us if Russia gives precision weapons to North Korea?”

June 26, 2024: ROK Marine Corps [holds](#) its first live-fire drills for seven years on Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong islands in the West/Yellow Sea, which are close to the DPRK.

June 27, 2024: South Korea [sanctions](#) eight named North Koreans, four Russian vessels, and five entities of various types for illicit trade in weapons and fuel in violation of UN sanctions. The entities sanctioned include the DPRK Missile Administration. As ever these measures are largely notional, as none of those sanctioned would have dealings with South Korea anyway.

June 27, 2024: MOU [releases](#) its second annual [report](#) on North Korean human rights. Based on testimony from 141 defectors who reached Seoul in 2023, this includes [claims](#) of public executions for watching ROK media. A law against reactionary ideology also criminalizes white wedding dresses, a groom carrying the bride on his back, and wearing sunglasses.

June 28, 2024: A day after North Korea claimed it had successfully test-launched a multiple-warhead missile, South Korea's JCS [release](#) a video showing that in fact the rocket exploded in mid-air after travelling only 250 km.

June 30, 2024: In a longish statement, robust but not histrionic, the DPRK foreign ministry [condemns](#) "Freedom Edge, the first tripartite multi-domain joint military exercises in the waters near the DPRK from June 27 to 29...Lurking behind this is the US strategic scenario to use the US-Japan-ROK tripartite military bloc as a three-horse carriage for carrying out its strategy for hegemony in not only Northeast Asia but also the rest of the world."

July 2, 2024: JCS disses another KPA missile launch (see June 28). Hours after Pyongyang boasts that it successfully tested a new tactical ballistic missile on July 1, Seoul [suggests](#) that that is a "lie." North Korea [claims](#) its Hwasong-11Da-4.5, with a 4.5 ton 'super-heavy' warhead, "hit accuracy (sic) at the maximum range of 500 kilometers and the minimum range of 90 km". South Korea's military say they detected two BM launches, which travelled 600 km and 120 km. They reckon the latter was a failure: it flew abnormally, and came down on land rather than at sea. State media [published](#) no photographs of this test.

July 2, 2024: South Korea [holds](#) its first live-fire on-land artillery drills near the DMZ in six years. These were banned under the now-suspended 2018 inter-Korean military pact.

July 2, 2024: MOU [publishes](#) a 1,693-page dossier of newly declassified documents on inter-

Korean contacts during 1981-87, when military dictator Chun Doo-hwan was ROK president. These run the gamut: from the North's bid to kill Chun in Rangoon in 1983 (17 other South Koreans died), to its sending flood aid to the South just two years later in 1985, among much else. This is the fifth such cache of documents to be published since May 2022.

July 2, 2024: MOU [says](#) that since June 20 North Korea's Korean Central Television has, for reasons unknown, switched the carrier of its TV broadcasts from China's ChinaSat 12 to Russia's Express 103 satellite. This makes them harder to access in South Korea: *verboden* for ordinary citizens, but government, researchers, and media are permitted to do so.

July 5, 2024: MOU [says](#) that during Aug.-Oct it will spend 815 million won (\$592,000) on a survey of separated families. Hitherto quinquennial, future surveys will be done every three years. This cohort's number has fallen to 38,295 as of end-May: two-thirds are over 80.

July 8, 2024: Kim Yo Jong [denounces](#) South Korea's resumption of live-fire drills near the inter-Korean border, as well as the recent tripartite Freedom Edge military exercises as "suicidal hysteria" and an "inexcusable and explicit provocation." (She seems to forget a rash of DPRK artillery drills near the border in late 2022, violating the inter-Korean military agreement which has since been suspended.)

July 9, 2024: South Korea's Ministry of Environment [says](#) the North seems to have released water from its Hwanggang dam on the Imjin river without notice, but the volume is small enough to pose no downstream threat. It is over a decade (2013) since Pyongyang last deigned to give Seoul the advanced warning it agreed to, after an earlier huge unannounced discharge killed six South Korean campers in 2009. Another small discharge is [detected](#) on July 18.

July 11, 2024: South Korea's defense ministry (MND) [says](#) it will rename and reorganize its

North Korea policy division. Henceforth to be dubbed the North Korea strategy division, this will concentrate on sanctions and their enforcement, while scaling down its focus on inter-Korean military talks and agreements (those now being a dead letter).

July 14, 2024: Kim Yo Jong, noting that “dirty leaflets and things of the ROK scum have been found again in the border area,” [warns](#) that “the ROK clans...must be ready for paying a very high price for their dirty play.” Pyongyang duly sends further waves of trash balloons, while defector activists in the South continue to launch further leaflet-bearing balloons.

July 16, 2024: Kim Yo Jong [weighs in](#) again, in surprising detail. 29 large balloons “sent by the scum of the Republic of Korea” landed in six different counties. “In case the scum of the ROK continues to conduct crude and dirty acts, the change in our countermeasure will be inevitable...I warn seriously again. They should be ready for gruesome and horrible cost.”

July 17, 2024: After Kim Yo Jong’s threats, ROK Defense Minister Shin Won-sik [calls](#) for firm readiness against DPRK provocations. The JCS urge vigilance lest recent heavy rains wash Northern mines into the South. A spokesman says: “North Korea tends to randomly place them without relevant safety measures...Whether it occurs intentionally or naturally due to heavy rains, there is a higher possibility of the land mines flowing down.”

July 19, 2024: After a further wave of North Korean trash balloons, South Korea [resumes](#) propaganda broadcasts into the North from areas where the balloons landed. The loudspeakers blare for 10 hours starting at 1800 local time (i.e., throughout most of the night).

July 21, 2024: With DPRK balloon launches continuing, after four days of limited broadcasts South Korea [turns on](#) all its border loudspeakers. *Yonhap* notes that programs “typically comprise news, a message urging North Korean soldiers near the border to escape to South Korea, as well

as K-pop songs including...BTS’ megahit singles ‘Dynamite’ and ‘Butter.’

July 22, 2024: Tae Yong-ho, appointed a week earlier by President Yoon as head of the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council, [says](#) his appointment sends a message to Pyongyang that Seoul seeks peaceful reunifications. A former DPRK deputy ambassador in London who escaped to Seoul in 2016, Tae is the first defector to head the PUAC.

July 23, 2024: MOU Kim Yung-ho [tells](#) an ROK-sponsored forum in Washington on DPRK human rights that over half the 196 Northern defectors last year were young, or high-ranking officials. This “attest[s] to the influence of South Korean culture, which is causing cracks in the rigid wall of *juche*...“many North Koreans are consuming *juche* culture by day and South Korean culture by night.” Hence “the importance of cultural approaches is increasing alongside political and military approaches to strongly deter North Korea’s military threats.”

July 23, 2024: MOU [says](#) 105 defectors reached South Korea in the first half of 2024, more than the 99 who arrived in Jan.-June last year: 43 came in the first quarter, 62 in the second.

July 24, 2024: ROK Presidential Security Service (PSS) [says](#) a North Korean trash balloon landed in the presidential compound today. Nothing dangerous is found.

July 30, 2024: ROK defense ministry [reveals](#) that a military court has issued an arrest warrant for an unnamed civilian employee of the Korea Defense Intelligence Command, who allegedly devastated South Korea’s spy network by passing the names of “black” (covert) agents to a Chinese ethnic Korean national suspected of working for Pyongyang.

July 30, 2024: *NK News* [reports](#) that South Korea will spend \$530,000 this year on overseas conferences spotlighting North Korean human rights: more than MOU spends on

counseling centers and trauma recovery programs for escapees from the North.

July 31, 2024: KCNA [confirms](#) that “Many public buildings, facilities, roads and railways, including more than 4,100...houses and nearly 3 000 hectares of farmlands, were flooded in Sinuiju City and Uiju County.” It is silent on casualties. Kim Jong Un visits affected areas. An emergency enlarged Politburo meeting, held in Sinuiju on July 29–30 on Kim’s personal train, [sacks](#) the Minister of Public Security and the Party secretaries in the two provinces worst hit, Jagang and North Pyongan. Kim proposes “to strictly punish those who severely neglected their responsible duties assigned by the Party and the state and thus caused even the casualty that can not be allowed.”

Aug. 1, 2024: MOU [concurs](#) that the North must have suffered “considerable casualties” from flooding, although material damage appears less than in 2010, 2016 and 2020. Soon after, the ministry [says](#) “it is willing to urgently support North Korean flood victims with the necessary supplies from a humanitarian and fraternal perspective through the Korean Red Cross.”

Aug. 5, 2024: Under the snappy headline “Commissioning Ceremony of Absolute Weaponry Demonstrating Sure Victory of Cause of Building Powerful Army Ceremony for Celebrating Transfer of New-Type Tactical Ballistic Missile Weapon System Takes Place with Splendor,” KCNA [reports](#) that on Aug. 4 Kim Jong Un, with daughter Ju Ae, presides at the handover—held at night, with fireworks, at the Mirim military parade training complex in Pyongyang—of 250 nuclear-capable “new-type tactical ballistic missile launchers,” said to be “personally designed by Kim Jong Un and impeccably completed under his energetic guidance,” to front-line units. (Days earlier, monsoon rains severely [flooded](#) the northwestern DPRK where major arms factories are [located](#)). A female-led band, clad in tee-shirts bearing the DPRK flag, [plays](#) the national anthem in heavy-rock style; some attendees are

visibly baffled. [Rob, the NK News [report](#) on this has some striking pics]

Aug. 5, 2024: South Korea’s Korea Cybersecurity Intelligence Community—an inter-agency body comprising the NIS, prosecution, police, and military—[warns](#) of a sharp increase in North Korean hackers trying to steal data on construction and machinery. It attributes this to Kim Jong Un’s plans to boost economic projects in the provinces.

Aug. 8, 2024: In a policy report to the National Assembly, the ROK MND [says](#) that despite recent downpours the DPRK continues to lay landmines and build walls within the DMZ. It also tallies the North’s launches so far this year: 37 ballistic missiles on eight occasions, plus 11 cruise missiles in six instances. Seoul has responded with 10 large-scale combined drills with the US in the first half of this year: twice as many as during the same period last year.

Aug. 9, 2024: ROK JCS [say](#) no signs have yet been detected of the new tactical missile launchers ceremoniously transferred on Aug. 4 arriving at front-line units, adding that it will take “considerable” time for the North to manufacture enough missiles for them (they carry four each). Also Pyongyang lacks fissile material for so many warheads.

Aug. 10, 2024: In a speech to flood victims, Kim Jong Un attacks South Korea—the “dirty, rubbish country”—at some length. “The rubbish ROK’s media are desperately slandering all the socialist benefits and measures taken by our Party and government for the flood victims.” He is especially riled by the claim of 1,000+ casualties, but offers no alternative figure.

Aug. 12, 2024: MOU [suggests](#) that Kim Jong Un’s lashing out at South Korean media reports of massive casualties from flood damage in the North is a diversionary tactic “to minimize the deterioration of public sentiment by shifting the subject of criticism to the outside.”

Aug. 15, 2024: President Yoon proclaims what is touted as a new vision of reunification. On Liberation Day (from Japan in 1945: a holiday in both Koreas), he [says](#): “Complete liberation remains an unfinished task...The freedom we enjoy must be extended to the frozen kingdom of the North, where people are deprived of freedom and suffer from poverty and starvation. Only when a unified free and democratic nation rightfully owned by the people is established across the entire Korean Peninsula will we finally have complete liberation.” Somewhat contradictorily, he also proposes an official dialogue channel with Pyongyang which can “take up any issue.” (The full text is [here](#), among other places.)

Aug. 16, 2024: MOU Kim Yung-ho [calls](#) on Pyongyang to accept Yoon’s offer. Opining that the North “will carefully review” Seoul’s proposal and not reject it out of hand, he denies that it is tantamount to unification by absorption: “We seek a gradual and peaceful unification.”

Aug. 16, 2024: Kim Yong-hyun, the ROK Presidential Security Service chief (and old school friend of President Yoon) nominated to be Minister of National Defense, [says](#) “all means and methods are open” for South Korea to counter the North’s nuclear threat. Kim has in the past called for Seoul to acquire its own nuclear deterrent. On Sept. 2, at his parliamentary confirmation hearing, Kim is [explicit](#): going nuclear “is included among all possible options.”

Aug. 18, 2024: Pyongyang [criticizes](#) imminent *Ulchi Freedom Shield*, the major ROK-US annual summer combined military exercise. The DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Institute for American Studies says this “fully betrays its dangerous colors as the biggest military training in the Asia-Pacific region and offensive multinational muscle-flexing involving even NATO member states.”

Aug. 19, 2024: *Ulchi Freedom Shield* (UFS) [begins](#). This 11-day exercise includes 48 field training

events such as amphibious landings and live-fire drills, 10 more than last year; and 17 brigade-level exercises, up from four in 2023. As UFS kicks off, Yoon [warns](#): “We must strengthen our readiness to respond to North Korea’s gray-zone provocations, such as the spread of false information, fake news and cyberattacks.” He adds, ominously: “Anti-state forces that threaten the free democracy are operating covertly in various places.”

Aug. 20, 2024: MOU [suggests](#) that Kim Jong Un is seeking to shift the blame for destruction caused by recent floods to lower-level officials: “This could mean that North Korea’s flood damage is very significant and people’s discontent remains high.”

Aug. 26, 2024: As UFS continues, separate joint coastal maneuvers [begin](#). During the 13-day *Ssangyong* (meaning Double Dragon) exercise, over 40 US and ROK aircraft, 40 ships and 40 amphibious assault vehicles practice landings on South Korean east coast beachheads.

Aug. 26 2024: NIS [doubts](#) if North Korea has sufficient missiles to equip the hundreds of new launchers that Kim Jong Un ceremonially sent to the front line on Aug. 5, given that it is also supplying Russia. It also suggests that Kim visited flooded areas in North Pyongan rather than harder-hit Jagang province, to avoid exposing the latter’s military installations to scrutiny. Major arms factories are located in Jagang.

Aug. 27, 2024: MOU [says](#) it is seeking to verify a report from an NGO that 15 North Korean would-be defectors (13 women and two children) were ambushed and arrested on Aug. 21 in Kunming in southern China. They were about to board a boat to southeast Asia, but have now been sent to Jilin for likely repatriation to the tender mercies of the DPRK.

Aug. 29, 2024: *Ulchi Freedom Shield* [concludes](#).

Aug. 30, 2024: MOU [issues](#) English translation of 280-page report on North Korea’s economic and

social situation, based on interviews with 6,351 defectors. The Korean edition was published in Feb. The English version is [here](#).

Aug. 30, 2024: For the first time since last November, MOU [permits](#) nine South Korean NGOs to try to contact North Korea and offer aid for flood damage relief. It is unclear whether anything comes of this.

Sept. 3, 2024: A report from the Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS), the NIS's think-tank, [reckons](#) that during 2017-23 North Korea earned \$6.29 billion from illicit or banned activities, despite sanctions. The biggest item was coal exports (\$2.15 billion), followed by income from workers in China and Russia (\$1.75bn) and cybercrime (\$1.35bn). Arms sales to Russia are a new revenue stream, earning \$540 million last year.

Sept. 4, 2024: PUAC head and former DPRK diplomat Tae Yong-ho [suggests](#) that one reason Pyongyang has not reacted to Yoon's new unification vision is that it has not yet institutionalized Kim Jong Un's new line of two hostile states: "I believe North Korea has not yet fully established the theoretical framework to justify the policy internally."

Sept. 4, 2024: NIS [says](#) it has detected signs that North Korea might have executed some officials after the recent flood damage. Victims may include Kang Pong Hun, the dismissed party secretary of Jagang province.

Sept. 6, 2024: In a third successive night of DPRK rubbish balloons, the ROK JCS [say](#) 260 were launched, 140 trash bundles landed in Seoul and surrounding Gyeonggi province. These mainly comprise paper and plastic bottles; no hazardous substances are found. In response, South Korea continues to blast the North daily with propaganda from loudspeakers.

Sept. 11, 2024: Opening Cyber Summit Korea, a global event hosted by the NIS, Yoon [says](#) that South Korea's continuously developing its cyber defense capabilities to deal with hostile forces

like North Korea has made it "a cyber drill hub in the Indo-Pacific region." On Sept. 1 the National Security Council (NSC) [unveils](#) a National Cybersecurity Basic Plan, involving 14 different government agencies.

Sept. 12, 2024: Seoul media [report](#) that North Korea too has activated border loudspeakers. These emit not propaganda but weird deafening high-pitched noises, making life a misery for South Koreans living within range. Opinions differ on whether this is anti-ROK psy-war, or rather a crude form of jamming to prevent North Koreans hearing the South's broadcasts.

Sept. 19, 2024: In a speech in Gwangju marking the sixth anniversary of his joint Pyongyang [Declaration](#) with Kim Jong Un after their third summit, former President Moon [urges](#) Seoul to "completely review the existing discourse about peace and unification...now that North Korea has defined inter-Korean ties as ones between two hostile nations...We are at a very dangerous moment where just one small wrong step could turn into a military clash." His ex-chief of staff Im Jong-seok—long a [controversial](#) figure—goes further, blasphemously suggesting that reunification as a goal be abandoned altogether: "I think it would be good for South and North Korea to live just as they are while respecting each other."

Sept. 20, 2024: Rejecting Moon's call for a *Nordpolitik* rethink, President Yoon's office [brands](#) his predecessor's approach unrealistic: "Didn't they lobby the US and the world that 'the war is over, and peace has arrived?' It is a matter of how to build peace."

Sept. 20, 2024: Exactly 4,000 days after North Korea sentenced Kim Jung-wook, a Southern missionary, to hard labor for life on espionage charges, unification minister Kim Yung-ho [calls](#) on Pyongyang to "immediately and unconditionally" return him and five other South Koreans detained in the North. *Yonhap* calls this "a rare statement." In fact the Yoon administration has strongly prioritized these cases, as discussed in previous [issues](#).

Sept. 20, 2024: For the second time, a DPRK trash balloon [lands](#) inside the government complex in Seoul. The first one, in May, landed on the roof. Another was found inside the presidential office compound in July. This latest reportedly carries mostly household garbage, including a green piece of plastic with an address in Pyongyang.

Sept. 20, 2024: Visiting Prague to support South Korea's bid to build a new nuclear power plant in Czechia, President Yoon [denies](#) that Seoul seeks its own nuclear weapons, and says it is focused on strengthening joint deterrence with the US.

Sept. 23, 2024: JCS [state](#): "While there may be inconveniences and difficulties caused by North Korea's trash balloons, our fundamental measure to eradicate them is to show that 'there is nothing to gain for the enemy.'" But they promise "stern military measures" should citizens' safety be endangered, "or if the North is assessed to have crossed the line." They add that shooting the balloons down would increase risk. This follows the North sending some balloons with timers for releasing their load, which could be a fire hazard.

Sept. 24, 2024: Yoon [slams](#) the idea of jettisoning Korean reunification as "unconstitutional" and "[incomprehensible](#)," adding: "Is the two nations theory really possible?"

Oct. 1, 2024: In a speech on Armed Forces Day, which (unusually for this Korea) features a military parade, President Yoon [warns](#): "If North Korea attempts to use nuclear weapons...that day will be the end of the North Korean regime."

Oct. 3, 2024: In the first of a plethora of anti-ROK press statements in Oct.—too numerous and repetitious to itemize here—Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong [mocks](#) South Korea's military parade. She derides Seoul's newly revealed Hyonmoo-5 ballistic missile as "a weapon of worthless large bulk." In a rhetorical flourish which KCNA uses in its headline, she concludes: "Is the event marking the ROK 'army day' a

'boast of strength' by the group of curs or a funeral procession of colonial mercenary army?"

Oct. 4, 2024: Visiting a "training base of KPA special operation units in the western area," Kim Jong Un [launches](#) his strongest attack for two years on "the puppet Yoon Suk Yeol, who had never been rid of his anti-DPRK intent" a propos Yoon's Oct. 1 speech. Chiding him for "bragg[ing] about overwhelming counteraction of military muscle at the doorstep of the state possessed of nuclear weapons," which he called "a great irony that caused the suspicion of being an abnormal man," Kim warns that "to pray for a good luck of survival in a military conflict with the nuclear weapons state would be a foolish thing...if such situation comes, the permanent existence of Seoul and the Republic of Korea would be impossible."

Oct. 7, 2024: Skipping the SPA, Kim Jong Un instead [visits](#) what is now his eponym: Kim Jong Un University of National Defense. Almost half his [speech](#) rants against South Korea, including this: "To be honest, we have no intention of attacking the Republic of Korea. Thinking of it is abominable, and we hate dealing with those in it. Formerly, we often spoke about liberating the south and reunification by force of arms, but now we are not interested in it. And since our statement about two separate states, we have been all the more unwilling to be conscious of the state in the south. However, the point is that the latter provokes us now and then." His second sentence was [actually](#): "Even thinking about them gives me the creeps and I don't even want to get near those people." KCNA's translators evidently deemed that undignified. (In [Korean](#): 의식하는것조차도 소름이 끼치고 그 인간들과는 마주서고싶지도 않습니다.)

Oct. 9, 2024: KCNA et al [report](#) that the 11th Session of the 14th SPA was held as scheduled on Oct. 7-8. The stated agenda includes amending the Constitution; but with no detail given, it is unclear whether this refers to Kim Jong Un's new line on South Korea. The SPA appoints a new Minister of National Defence, No Kwang Chol. Or rather an old one, since No—a four-star

general— held the same post in 2018–19, when it was called Minister of the People’s Armed Forces (MPAF). In that role he [saluted](#) Donald Trump in Singapore, who saluted back.

Oct. 9, 2024: KPA General Staff [announces](#) that, starting today, it will “completely cut off roads and railways connected to the ROK and fortify the relevant areas of our side with strong defence structures,” so as to “permanently shut off and block the southern border with the ROK, the primary hostile state and invariable principal enemy.” It adds that “the US forces side” (presumably the UN Command) was notified by telephone, “to prevent any misjudgment and accidental conflict.” This follows months of KPA clearing and other activities in the DMZ, including accidental crossings of the MDL, which were not so notified.

Oct. 11, 2024: Seoul [reveals](#) that on Sept. 17 a North Korean defected by boat to the South’s Baengnyeong island, near the DPRK west coast, the third direct cross-border defection in two months.

Oct. 11, 2024: In what *KCNA* [headlines](#) as “Crucial Statement of DPRK Foreign Ministry,” North Korea claims that the ROK infiltrated drones on Oct. 3, 9, and 10, the last of which committed “such a hideous crime as scattering a huge number of anti-DPRK smear leaflets over the central part of Pyongyang.” State media publish [photos](#) of said leaflets: partly blurred, but leaving readers able to work out that they are criticizing Kim Jong Un for his luxury watch and his daughter’s expensive Dior coat while the people are starving.

Oct. 13, 2024: Pyongyang’s drone accusation sparks [debate](#) in Seoul and beyond. Having first denied any responsibility, the official ROK response shifts (tellingly) to neither confirm nor deny—along with counter-charges that this could be DPRK black propaganda.

Oct. 15, 2024: As per its earlier notice, North Korea blows up roads that led to South Korea on

its side of the DMZ. The explosive moment can be watched [here](#).

Oct. 17, 2024: Under the headline “Roads and Railways to ROK Completely Blocked,” *KCNA* [reports](#) that by order no. 00122 of the WPK Central Military Commission (CMC), inter-Korean western and eastern road and rail links “have been completely blocked through blasting.” It calls this “an inevitable and legitimate measure...in keeping with the...DPRK Constitution which clearly defines the ROK as a hostile state.” The amended text of the said Constitution remains undisclosed. *MOU* [comments](#): “This action is anti-unification and anti-national by betraying the hopes of the South Korean people and North Korean residents for unification, which the government strongly condemns.”

Oct. 17, 2024: On an inspection visit to the headquarters of the KPA Second Corps, Kim Jong Un [summarizes](#) his new line on the South. As quoted by *KCNA*, he “stressed that our army should keep in mind once again the stark fact that the ROK is a foreign country and an apparent hostile country. Recalling that we completely blocked the roads and railways to the territory of the ROK two days ago through blasting, he said that it means not only the physical closure but also the end of the evil relationship with Seoul which persistently lasted century after century and the complete removal of the useless awareness about fellow countrymen and unreasonable idea of reunification. And he added that it also means the last declaration that when the DPRK’s sovereignty is violated by the ROK, a hostile country, its physical forces will be used unhesitatingly, without sticking to conditions any longer. As we have already declared, if our offensive forces are used in the precondition of ‘if’, it constitutes legitimate retaliatory action against the hostile country, not the fellow countrymen.”

Oct. 18, 2024: In another [press statement](#), this one weirdly petty, Kim Yo Jong chides ROK “idiots” for raising provenance and copyright issues about photos *KCNA* published of North

Korea's road-blocking explosions: "Their behavior makes even a cat laugh."

Oct. 19, 2024: DPRK media [publish](#) photographs of a claimed ROK drone which crashed in the North. *NK News* [cites](#) experts who note that Pyongyang could have faked these images.

Oct. 24, 2024: North Korean propaganda leaflets, presumably carried by balloon, are found on the streets of Seoul. They attack Yoon and his wife, who is mired in scandal. In Reuters' [summary](#): "They included graphic messages accusing the Yoon government of failures that had left his people living in despair, and describing the first couple as immoral and mentally unstable." This is the first of [several](#) leaflet drops. Meanwhile trash balloons keep coming too.

Oct. 29, 2024: NIS [claims](#) that Kim Jong Un's personal security has been beefed up for fear of assassination attempts, and now includes equipment to jam communications and detect drones. Separately, the agency confirms [reports](#) that after 27 years North Korea has ditched the Juche calendar, based on the year of Kim Il Sung's birth, which it introduced in 1997. This is seen as a move by Kim to boost his own status relative to his father and grandfather.

Oct. 30, 2024: South Korea's Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) [tells](#) lawmakers that North Korea has completed preparations to launch a long-range missile. Hedging its bets, the agency says this may be an ICBM to test reentry capabilities, or it could be "a space launch vehicle."

Oct. 30, 2024: ROK military Cyber Operations Command [tells](#) the National Assembly's Intelligence Committee that North Korea's 8,400-strong hacking team—not further specified or named, so perhaps lumping together all the various [different](#) teams of DPRK threat actors—mounted some 15,000 cyber-attacks on the South's defense sector during Jan.-Sept. this year: up from 9,000 in 2022 and 13,000 in 2023. No major breaches occurred.

Oct. 31, 2024: ROK and Japanese monitors [report](#) successful test of the DPRK's biggest ICBM yet. Lofted vertically as usual, the [Hwasong-19](#) flew almost 5,000 miles into space, landing in the East/Sea of Japan just over 1,000km east of where it launched. Flight time was a record 86 minutes.

Nov. 1, 2024: In another snappy headline—like the missiles, they are getting bigger—KCNA [confirms](#): "Crucial Test Showing DPRK's Definite Response Will and Overwhelming Edge of Its Strategic Attack Force. Test-fire of DPRK's Latest ICBM Hwasongpho-19 Successfully Conducted under Guidance of Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un." Somewhat contradictorily, after thundering that "The entity of absolute power loaded with the DPRK people's soaring enmity and strong will to punish all evils and injustice on earth was launched toward the sky," they go on: "The test-fire had no negative effect on the security of neighboring countries."

Nov. 4, 2024: ROK JCS [say](#) the North has built earth mounds 11 meters high, with anti-tank trenches, to completely block the inter-Korean road and rail links it severed in October. But they add that this is "just for show": se are not militarily effective defenses.

Nov. 4, 2024: In his speech to the belated official opening of the National Assembly—read by Prime Minister Han Duck-soo, since (unprecedentedly in the democratic era) the president chose not to attend—Yoon [avers](#): "The recent international security situation and the illegal military cooperation between North Korea and Russia pose a significant threat to our national security. We will thoroughly review all possible scenarios to prepare countermeasures." He pledges to "work to expand the international community's understanding and support for the vision of a free and unified Korea."

Nov. 4, 2024: MOU [says](#) it presumes the new DPRK Institute of Enemy State Studies is a rebranding of the former National Reunification Institute under the WPK, which has long been Pyongyang's main think-tank covering South Korea.

Nov. 4, 2024: Korea Internet & Security Agency (KISA), the ROK's cybersecurity watchdog, [warns](#) that "amid the Russia-Ukraine war [and] North Korea's dispatch of troops, cyber threats against South Korean organizations through distributed denial-of-service attacks have increased."

Nov. 5, 2024: South Korea's defense ministry [says](#): "More than 10,000 North Korean troops have currently gone to Russia, and we understand that a considerable number of them have moved to front-line areas, including Kursk."

Nov. 13-15, 2024: ROK, Japan and US [hold](#) the second iteration of the trilateral multi-domain exercise *Freedom Edge*. PACOM reports: "Approximately 7,000 trilateral military and defense force personnel, seven ships and more than 20 fighter, maritime patrol and tanker aircraft executed Ballistic Missile Defense, Air Defense, Anti-Submarine Warfare, Maritime Interdiction, and Defensive Cyber training."

Nov. 13, 2024: South Korea's NIS [says](#) North Korean troops sent to Russia have moved to the frontline Kursk regions and are "already engaging in combat" against Ukrainian forces.

Nov. 14, 2024: MOU [says](#) that in response to Pyongyang's deployment of troops to fight for Russia, Seoul "will proceed to implement effective, phased measures grounded in principles of composure and discipline." It does not elaborate.

Nov. 15, 2024: MOU [publishes](#) DPRK diplomatic cables from 2016-23 brought out by Ri Il-kyu, former political counsellor at North Korea's embassy in Havana who defected last year. They show Kim Jong Un personally guiding responses to human rights criticisms. Pyongyang is sensitive to such critique from UN bodies, but cares less what NGOs say. Ri promises further revelations, in what he calls a "North Korean version of WikiLeaks."

Nov. 16, 2024: After eight straight days of DPRK jamming of GPS signals, an unnamed ROK military official [says](#) the North has extended this to a range of regions along the DMZ. But the signals are weaker than in the May-June episode, and this time the purpose seems to be for anti-drone training rather than attacking the South.

Nov. 21, 2024: *Beyond Parallel*, a DPRK-focused [website](#) run by the Korea Chair of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC, [updates](#) its tally and map of North Korea's trash balloons. On 31 occasions starting May 28, the North "sent between 6,390 to 8,910 trash-filled balloons into South Korea, with over 3,117 balloons landing successfully."

Nov. 21, 2024: As KCNA [puts](#) it: "Weaponry Exhibition 'National Defence Development-2024' Splendidly Opens. Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Commemorative Speech at Opening Ceremony." Kim's speech is [here](#). NK News analyzes the armaments on show [here](#).

Nov. 22, 2024: In something of a scoop, an NK News investigation near the DMZ [identifies](#) three hitherto unknown TV stations broadcasting South Korean content into the North. All ROK government agencies contacted offer a curt "no comment," or fail to reply.

Nov. 22, 2024: ROK National Security Adviser Shin Won-sik [says](#) that in exchange for North Korea sending troops to fight Ukraine, "Russia is believed to have provided equipment and anti-air missiles to strengthen Pyongyang's vulnerable air defense system." Analysts [say](#) Kim Jong Un's focus on offensive weapons systems has not been matched by attention to defense, which could risk incapacitation of critical command and control infrastructure in a conflict.

Nov. 26, 2024: South Korea's military [says](#) North Korea has cut Southern-built power lines which supplied electricity to the shuttered former joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). It expects the North will also demolish 15 pylons (of 48) which are on its territory. Although ROK then

President Park Geun-hye abruptly closed the KIC in Feb. 2016, the South continued to supply power until June 2020 when the North blew up the inter-Korean liaison office in the zone.

Dec. 3, 2024: In a late night unscheduled TV broadcast Yoon Suk Yeol shocks South Koreans and the world by [declaring](#) martial law. “I declare martial law to protect the Republic of Korea from the threats of North Korean communist forces, to immediately eradicate the unscrupulous pro-Pyongyang antistate forces that pillage the freedom and happiness of our people and to protect free constitutional order.” Lawmakers rush to the National Assembly, despite police blocking entry, and the 190 present unanimously nullify martial law, which Yoon formally rescinds around 0430 on Dec. 4 (he later mendaciously [claims](#) to have done so much earlier, around 0100). Political crisis continues in Seoul at this writing, but social order is maintained. (See [here](#) for a detailed timeline of the initial events.)

Dec. 6, 2024: KCNA [announces](#) that the 14th SPA will hold its 12th session on Jan. 22 (just after Donald Trump’s inauguration). The stated agenda includes “the issue of revising some provisions of the Socialist Constitution.” Nothing is said about fresh ‘elections,’ which are [overdue](#): they should have been held in March.

Dec. 10, 2024: NK News [reports](#) that DPRK media have suspended normal coverage of protests in Seoul against Yoon, even though the latest demonstrations are the largest yet. *Rodong Sinmun*, the Party daily, had covered these regularly since May 2023, including every week for the past five months—until now.

Dec. 10, 2024: Opposition lawmakers [accuse](#) ex-MND Kim Yong-hyun, now under arrest, of ordering the drone incursion that dropped leaflets on Pyongyang in Oct., and of pressing for military strikes against Northern trash balloon launch sites days before the martial law crisis. They claim that JCS chairman Adm. Kim Myung-

soo refused the latter order as escalatory, whereupon Kim called him a “clueless fool...Get rid of him.” The JCS denies the latter story; re the drone, it repeats its position that it “has nothing to confirm.” (Adm. Kim was passed over to head the short-lived martial law command.)

Dec. 11, 2024: Pyongyang finally comments on ructions in Seoul. *Rodong Sinmun* offers a surprisingly full and detailed [account](#) of “the puppet Yoon Suk Yeol’s actions and travails. (See Appendix II. As of Dec. 13 no official English translation has yet been published.)

Dec. 11, 2024: An [article](#) in the Seoul-based *Daily NK*, which has sources inside North Korea, details the DPRK reaction to Yoon’s declaration of martial law. The KPA General Staff immediately called a meeting around 11pm on Dec. 3 and put all forces on high alert until 5pm on Dec. 4. Some WPK officials senior enough to have access to outside media, who thus knew right away, allegedly feared the KPA had attacked the South without telling the Party. Others wondered if Northern agents in the South had been nabbed. Amid uncertainty on how to frame events, they went unreported for a week in DPRK media. Even the “reference newspaper,” circulated to high officials to tell them what is really going on in the world, had no mention for several days. (None of this can be confirmed.)

Dec. 13, 2024: Nicely illustrating the Kim regime’s reportage dilemmas, *Daily NK* claims that college students in Haeju in the southwestern DPRK had to undergo self-criticism for raising questions after a lecture on anti-Yoon protests (which were widely reported in DPRK media prior to Dec. 3). The idea of approval ratings for leaders piqued their curiosity, as well it might. As one complained: “The lecturer brought up concepts we don’t understand, like the puppet state president’s approval rating. Why is it wrong to discuss what we learned?”