



**South Korea-North Korea Relations:
Pyongyang's Bang Explodes Hope**

**Aidan Foster-Carter
University of Leeds**

2016 in Korea began with a bang. Though unlikely to be the hydrogen bomb it claims, North Korea's fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6 makes certain what was already likely: inter-Korean ties will not get better any time soon. The last four months of 2015 saw disappointingly little progress. Hopes briefly raised by the Aug. 25 six point accord, which – as discussed in the previous issue of *Comparative Connections* – not only defused that month's tensions but did so on terms highly favorable to Seoul, have not been fulfilled. The sole substantial outcome was a fresh round of reunions of separated families, held in October. However, the further provision to “continue to hold such reunions in the future, too” has not been met; no further reunions have been arranged or even discussed. Civilian exchanges did pick up to a degree. For instance, South Korea's five Roman Catholic bishops visited Pyongyang, as did Southern trade unionists to play football with their Northern counterparts. But this remained fairly light traffic, and wholly one-way; no North Koreans were reported as visiting the South.

Clause 1 of August's accord specified holding high-level talks “at an early date, to improve north-south ties and have multi-faceted dialogue and negotiations in the future.” Such talks did not take place until December, and then only between vice-minister level officials. Far from improving relations or leading to further dialogue, these two days of talks yielded absolutely nothing: no joint statement, nor any schedule to meet again. Predictably each side blamed the other. On this basis it was hard to be optimistic that 2016 would prove any better, even before Jan. 6's DPRK detonation exploded such slim hope as might have remained.

August accord: too good to be true

At a succinct and punchy 172 words, the 6-point accord bears repeating as a checklist of what was agreed vs. what ensued. Here it is again in full:

1. The north and the south agreed to hold talks between their authorities in Pyongyang or Seoul at an early date to improve the north-south ties and have multi-faceted dialogue and negotiations in the future.
2. The north side expressed regret over the recent mine explosion that occurred in the south side's area of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) along the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), wounding soldiers of the south side.

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3. The south side will stop all loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts along the MDL from 12:00, August 25 unless an abnormal case occurs.
4. The north side will lift the semi-war state at that time.
5. The north and the south agreed to arrange reunions of separated families and relatives from the north and the south on the occasion of the Harvest Moon Day this year and continue to hold such reunions in the future, too and to have a Red Cross working contact for it early in September.
6. The north and the south agreed to vitalize NGO exchanges in various fields.

The initial pace was encouraging. As described in our last issue, clauses 3 and 4 were duly implemented, leading to a welcome reduction of tensions. Talks also began promptly about clause 5, and a fresh round of reunions of separated families was duly held – albeit a month later than the accord suggested, in late October rather than a perhaps unfeasible September.

Family reunions: familiar scenes

The reunions, the 20th in the past 15 years, followed a familiar script. They went smoothly; long experience of co-organizing these events renders glitches unlikely. As usual, the venue was the Hyundai-built Mt. Kumgang resort complex on the DPRK's southeast coast, now otherwise mothballed since Seoul suspended tourism after a female tourist was shot dead there in July 2008. Intrusive media broadcast the customary heart-rending scenes of elderly Koreans crying as they embraced close kin (parents, spouses, children) with whom they had had zero contact for at least 62 years since the 1953 Armistice – and whom, under the harsh rules of these meetings, they would never see or hear from again. Like the present [writer](#), some South Koreans, including participants, wondered [aloud](#) whether these one-time brief encounters were really better than nothing – or maybe worse, given the psychological turmoil and heartbreak they stirred up. (Please take a moment to read the second article linked above.)

Clause 6, in which the two sides “agreed to vitalize NGO exchanges in various fields,” also saw some progress. On Dec. 18, as the year drew to a close, the ROK Unification Ministry (MOU) reported that the number of South Koreans who visited the North in the first 11 months of 2015 reached 1,778, a five-year high and three times 2014's total. (This excludes the hundreds – cumulatively, tens of thousands – commuting daily or weekly across the DMZ to the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last inter-Korean joint venture still functioning.)

Averaging fewer than five persons a day, this is not a huge figure and far less that during the decade of the Sunshine Policy (1998-2007). By type, the overwhelming majority – 1,481 people, 51 visits – were for “civilian or cultural” purposes: 220 people and 18 trips involved humanitarian aid, while only 77 persons and 11 visits were for business. The data confirm a spike after August's agreement: only 418 went North during the nine months January through September, but the numbers jumped to 880 in October alone and 450 in November. In the wake of Pyongyang's nuclear test, the expectation must be that Seoul will react by reining in such visits again. South Korea's five Roman Catholic bishops, who visited Pyongyang in December, may thus be thwarted in their plan to make such exchanges an annual event.

Even as civilian exchanges gained momentum during the fall, observers wondered what was happening with Clause 1. Despite the stipulation “at an early date,” neither side looked in any hurry to arrange fresh high-level talks. The ROK focused solely on the family reunions at first, and even once those were over little urgency was apparent. The first inkling of active planning came with debate in Seoul on the proper level of officials to deploy – how high is ‘high’? – and potential problems in matching their rank with their Northern counterparts, given the DPRK’s very different and rather opaque system. This rang ominous bells as similar quibbles in 2013 led to a protocol row that sank what would have been the first inter-Korean high-level talks of the Park Geun-hye era, dissected in these [pages](#) at the time.

Fortunately a repetition was averted, the two sides agreeing to send vice ministers or their equivalent. That seemed rather a come-down from August, whose accord was negotiated by real plenipotentiaries (for a full account, see the [previous issue](#) of *Comparative Connections*.) Then, the North played not only Kim Yang Gon, its long-time point man on South Korea (his formal title was secretary of the United Front Department of the WPK Central Committee), but also Hwang Pyong So, Kim Jong Un’s right-hand man. Both had come South briefly in 2014 for the Incheon Asiad closing ceremony. Their Southern interlocutors were Hong Yong-pyo, the newish minister of unification, and more importantly President Park’s national security adviser, Kim Kwan-jin, a tough former general and defense minister. With both Park and Kim Jong Un reportedly monitoring and directing these marathon talks (they lasted 43 hours, over three nights) via real-time videolink, this was a virtual inter-Korean summit.

Blame it on the Boogi?

By contrast, the talks eventually held in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) on Dec. 11 and 12 were between epigones. With all due respect to ROK Vice Unification Minister Hwang Boogi and Jon Jong Su, a vice director of the DPRK’s Committee for Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), neither man had the rank to clinch a deal. Nor, it seems, did either have the remit. The talks foundered because both sides refused to budge from their entrenched stances.

As the South [tells](#) it, the North linked any future family reunions to a resumption of tourism to Kumgang-san. Indeed, it made the latter a precondition of progress on any other issue. Seoul stuck to its longstanding position that Pyongyang must take steps to prevent any recurrence of 2008’s fatal shooting incident, guarantee the safety of tourists, and rescind its seizure of ROK properties at the resort. Refusing any linkage of family reunions to tourism, the South offered separate working-level talks on the latter issue – but the North rejected this. The Southern side was also ready to continue talking for a third day, but the North said there was no point. No joint statement was issued, nor any date set to meet again.

This was a dismaying result (or non-result), but hardly a surprising one. As past issues of this journal have catalogued, initial hopes in 2012-13 that new leaders in Seoul and Pyongyang might turn over a new leaf in inter-Korean relations have not borne fruit. Neither Park Geun-hye nor Kim Jong Un has got the other’s measure; she has stuck to her principles, and he to his guns. Neither leader has the imagination or political capital to try anything new or daring. For Park this was possibly her last chance. With only two more years in office, like all ROK presidents she

risks becoming a lame duck as attention shifts to the race to succeed her. Kim Jong Un, by contrast, could in principle still be in power in 2050, a depressing prospect.

Kim Yang Gon, gone

As things turned out, it might not have helped even if the talks had been higher-level. The official *Korea Central News Agency (KCNA)* said on Dec. 30 that Kim Yang Gon was killed in an auto crash early the previous morning. This sudden news rang alarm bells. Kim is the third senior North Korean cadre in recent years officially reported as dying in a car accident, after Kim Yong Sun (who also oversaw relations with the South) in 2003 and Ri Je Gang, deputy chief of the WPK's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), in 2010. Ri's death especially raised eyebrows as he was a rival of Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un's uncle by marriage and mentor, whom the young leader later had executed as a traitor in 2013.

Suspicion arises on two counts. North Korean personnel changes are opaque, with sudden purges common. Senior figures can vanish with no reason given, like Defense Minister Hyon Yong Chol in April (South Korean intelligence reports of Hyon's execution are plausible but unconfirmed). Alternatively, sometimes illness – not previously apparent – is cited. Second, traffic in Pyongyang remains light by global standards, however, roads are badly maintained and ill-lit, driving standards poor, and drunk-driving common. Kim Jong Un's eulogy and tears at Kim Yang Gon's bier appeared genuine, but the latter – viewed in Seoul as a known quantity and a voice for moderation – may have had other enemies. Whatever its cause, his demise dimmed the already faint hope for any improvement in inter-Korean relations in 2016.

In a further twist, Choe Ryoung Hae – formerly one of Kim Jong Un's two closest aides (the other being Hwang Pyong So), but not seen since October – popped up on Kim Yang Gon's funeral committee, listed in sixth place. Choe's absence from an earlier funeral committee in November certainly means that he has fallen from grace, but the reappearance of his name – he did not attend in person – shows that his purge is not fatal, and perhaps not politically terminal. He is thought to be undergoing political re-education, possibly in the countryside.

New Year speech: nothing doing

Since 2013, Kim Jong Un has reverted to his grandfather Kim Il Sung's practice of delivering a New Year speech, laying out political and policy priorities for the year ahead. His father Kim Jong Il, shy for some reason of public speaking – he was a witty conversationalist in private – instead used the more impersonal medium of a joint editorial in the DPRK's three main daily papers: those of the Party (*Rodong Sinmun*), Cabinet, and armed forces.

Speech or article, these annual screeds are minutely pored over by analysts hoping to glean clues about Pyongyang's likely courses of action. There are risks here, of over-interpretation and of taking things out of context. As we [noted](#) a year ago, Kim Jong Un's much-hyped remark in his 2015 speech about a possible summit looked a lot less hopeful if read in its full context. No such danger arises this time. The 2016 [speech](#) was altogether more inward-looking. When he finally got to “national reunification” – the *de rigueur* optic in both Koreas for framing their

relationship, if arguably not the most sensible or practical – it was mainly to point an accusing finger. As last year, this bears perusing in full (emphases added):

National reunification is the most pressing and vital task facing the nation.

Last year, greeting the 70th anniversary of national liberation, we appealed to all the compatriots to pool their efforts to open up a broad avenue to independent reunification, and strived for its realization. However, the anti-reunification forces that are not desirous of national reunification and improved inter-Korean relations ran amuck to realize their schemes for a war and even created a touch-and-go situation short of crossfire, causing grave apprehension at home and abroad. *The south Korean authorities publicly sought to realize their goal of "regime change" in our country and unilateral "unification of systems" against the trend of inter-Korean dialogue and detente, and fanned distrust and confrontation between the north and the south.*

This year we should hold up the slogan “Let us frustrate the challenges by the anti-reunification forces within and without and usher in a new era of independent reunification!” and press on with the national reunification movement more vigorously.

We should reject foreign intervention and resolve the issues of inter-Korean relations and national reunification independently in keeping with the aspirations and demands of the nation.

It is none other than the outside forces that divided our nation, and it is also none other than the United States and its followers that obstruct the reunification of our country. Notwithstanding this, *the south Korean authorities are clinging to a smear campaign against the fellow countrymen in collusion with the outside forces while touring foreign countries to ask for the solution of the internal issue of our nation, the issue of its reunification. This is a betrayal of the country and nation that leaves the destiny of the nation at the mercy of the outside forces and sells out its interests.*

The issues of inter-Korean relations and national reunification should, to all intents and purposes, be resolved by the efforts of our nation in conformity with its independent will and demands, true to the principle of By Our Nation Itself. No one will or can bring our nation reunification.

The whole nation should struggle resolutely against the sycophantic and treacherous manoeuvres of the anti-reunification forces to cooperate with the outside forces. *The south Korean authorities should discontinue such a humiliating act as going on a tour of foreign countries touting for cooperation in resolving the internal issues of the nation.*

It is fundamental to realizing the country’s reunification to prevent the danger of war and safeguard peace and security in the Korean peninsula.

Today the peninsula has become the hottest spot in the world and a hotbed of nuclear war owing to the U.S. aggressive strategy for the domination of Asia and its reckless moves for a war against the DPRK. *The U.S. and south Korean war maniacs are conducting large-scale military exercises aimed at a nuclear war against the DPRK one after another every year; this is precipitating a critical situation in the Korean peninsula and throwing serious obstacles in the way of improving inter-Korean relations. Last year's August emergency showed that even a trifling, incidental conflict between the north and the south may spark a war and escalate into an all-out war.*

The U.S. and south Korean authorities must discontinue their extremely dangerous aggressive war exercises and suspend acts of military provocation that aggravates tension in the Korean peninsula.

It is our consistent stand to strive with patience for peace in the peninsula and security in the region. However, if aggressors dare to provoke us, though to a slight degree, we will never tolerate it but respond resolutely with a merciless sacred war of justice, a great war for national reunification.

We should value such agreements common to the nation as the three principles for national reunification and declarations between the north and the south, and in conformity with them, open up an avenue to improved bilateral relations.

These principles and declarations constitute the great reunification programme common to the nation, and all fellow countrymen wish that they are implemented as soon as possible and a radical phase opened up in reunifying the country.

If they are sincere about improving inter-Korean relations and reunifying the country peacefully, the south Korean authorities must not seek pointless confrontation of systems, but make it clear that they intend to respect and implement with sincerity the three principles for national reunification, June 15 Joint Declaration and October 4 Declaration, which crystallize the general will of the nation and whose validity has been proved in practice. They should cherish the spirit of the agreement signed last year at the inter-Korean high-level emergency contact, and desist from any act that will lead to a breach of the agreement and mar the atmosphere of dialogue. In the future, too, we will make strenuous efforts to develop inter-Korean talks and improve bilateral relations. We will also have an open-minded discussion on the reunification issue, one of the national issues, with anyone who is truly desirous of national reconciliation and unity, peace and reunification.

All the Korean people in the north, in the south and abroad will smash all challenges and obstructive moves by the anti-reunification forces in and out of the country and build a dignified and prosperous reunified Korea on this land without fail under the banner of By Our Nation Itself.

The United States has persisted in ignoring our just demand for replacing the Armistice Agreement with a peace pact to remove the danger of war, ease tension and create a peaceful environment in the Korean peninsula. *Instead, it has clung to its anachronistic policy hostile towards the DPRK, escalating the tension and egging its vassal forces on to stage a "human rights" racket against the country.* However, no plots and schemes of the enemy could break the indomitable will of our service personnel and people to firmly defend and add brilliance to our style of people-centred socialism, the base of their happy life.

Bang goes hope

We now know, of course, that even as he read this speech Kim had already signed the order for North Korea's fourth nuclear test to take place less than a week later, on Jan. 6. Given all that had gone before in the relationship, this merely added fresh rancid icing to an already rotten cake. Despite the initial shock and dismay, the test should have been no surprise. At no time has Pyongyang given any sign of rethinking its chosen nuclear path. Kim Jong Un legitimates his rule above all as loyal successor to his grandfather Kim Il Sung, who first pointed the DPRK down that fateful road, and father Kim Jong Il who implemented this. With that pedigree and

precedent, retreat is not an option. Also, given Pyongyang's penchant for marking major events in such a way, the year that will have the first full Congress of the nominally ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in 36 years in May was always likely to be ushered in with a bang. (By the same token, come spring there is every chance also of a new "satellite launch," which will double, as always, as a test of capability to launch a long-range missile.)

Like its predecessors, North Korea's latest nuclear test was universally condemned. The UN Security Council (UNSC), in emergency session, swiftly and unanimously deplored it. Fresh or tightened UNSC sanctions will follow, albeit amidst renewed debate as to their efficacy. Sanctions may have slowed the DPRK's nuclear program, but have palpably failed to stop it.

Will Seoul's ripostes help?

For its part, South Korea denounced the North's action and consulted urgently with its US and Japanese allies, as well as with China. It also took action, if ambiguously in two senses; it was unclear if the action would be effective, or in one case what it actually was. The latter relates to the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last inter-Korean joint venture standing. From the start of her presidency, Park Geun-hye has put a lot into keeping the KIC going, not least, patiently negotiating its reopening after the North summarily pulled out its workforce in 2013, and designing a new management structure meant to prevent a recurrence. All this, remember, just after North Korea's third and Kim Jong Un's first nuclear test in February 2013. Like her hardline predecessor Lee Myung-bak, who exempted Kaesong from the ban on trade with the North that he imposed in May 2010 in reprisal for the sinking of the corvette *Cheonan*, Park had seemed committed to ring-fencing this one last sprig of win-win North-South cooperation from the vicissitudes of politics.

That was then. Now, on Jan. 7 and again on Jan. 11, MOU announced plans to restrict South Korean entry into the zone which lies just North of the DMZ. As reported, from Jan. 12 only businessmen directly involved in the operation of the 124 factories there may enter freely. Contractors, by contrast, will only be allowed in if they enter and leave the same day. This is expected to cut the number of South Koreans overnighing in Kaesong from 800 to about 650. Why? MOU cited safety concerns. But if those were real, the ROK government ought to be pulling all its nationals out. All this petty restriction will do is inconvenience the ROK firms involved; they were quick to protest at the move.

In a further irony, the risk cited by MOU relates not to the nuclear test as such but to what it fears may be the North's reaction to its own counterblast. Declaring that the North's test had broken last August's six-point North-South agreement, Seoul invoked Clause 3 of that accord. This stipulates that the south "will stop all loudspeaker propaganda broadcasts along the MDL [Military Demarcation Line] ... *unless an abnormal case occurs*" (emphasis added). On that basis the Defense Ministry (MND) declared on Jan. 7 that such broadcasts would resume at noon local time the next day – which just happened to be Kim Jong Un's 33rd birthday. This was duly done, and at this writing the usual mix of K-pop, news and propaganda is again blasting northward across the DMZ. Not all South Koreans approve. Moon Jae-in, leader of the main liberal opposition party – now renamed Minjoo, but in the process of splitting – worried lest it

may intensify military tensions. North Korea duly warned that this could provoke a war, but as of Jan. 12 had taken no action – other than activate its own loudspeakers in riposte.

The anger and frustration in Seoul are understandable. Yet it is hard to see what switching the loudspeakers back on can seriously hope to achieve. That proved an effective tactic in August, but the dispute then was purely bilateral and inter-Korean. By contrast, as the South well knows, North Korea steadfastly refuses to discuss the nuclear issue on an inter-Korean basis. If prepared to negotiate on this at all – which is dubious – Pyongyang regards the US and the Six- Party Talks as the only appropriate interlocutor and forum for this matter.

Be bigger, Britain urges

The ROK's Western allies, sensitive to its front-line position and what it has to put up with, rarely break ranks. All the more striking, then, was swift and cogent public criticism from the UK's foreign secretary. A former secretary of defense (2011-14), Philip Hammond is well briefed on security issues. He happened to be in Seoul last August when the South switched on its speakers after the DMZ mine blast (for a full account, see the previous issue of *CC*). Hammond [condemned](#) this “unprovoked attack” which “threatened stability in this region,” adding that the “North Koreans must be held to account for the breach of the armistice.”

With striking timing, the North's nuclear test again found Hammond in East Asia, on a swing through the region taking in China, Philippines, and Japan. In Beijing when the blast occurred, he [described](#) Britain and China as: “on the same page on this. [We both] condemn any attempt by North Korea to ... test nuclear weapons, and we're very satisfied with the way China is responding to this incident.” (That comment seems to put him at odds with Secretary of State John Kerry, who – as doubtless discussed elsewhere in this issue – got into a spat with China by declaring that the test proved that China's North Korea policy “has not worked.”)

Moving on to Japan, where he was joined by his successor as the UK's Defense Secretary Michael Fallon, it was from the decks of the *USS Ronald Reagan* in the US naval base at Yokosuka that Hammond commented to reporters on South Korea's loudspeaker decision saying “North Korea acts in a totally irresponsible and provocative way ... I can entirely understand the pressure that the South Koreans feel to respond. But we have to be bigger than the North Koreans and I would urge South Korea and other like-minded countries in the region to exercise restraint. We know that responding in this way is simply rising to the bait that North Korea is presenting to us.”

That is well said, though it can hardly have been appreciated in Seoul. It remains to be seen what effect this resumption of broadcasts will have, for good or ill. They surely risk ratcheting up tensions on the peninsula. Last August there were concessions that Kim Jong Un could and eventually did make; but what exactly does the ROK hope to elicit from him now? (Philip Hammond did add that “continuing with words is not enough; we have to show we are prepared to take the actions to make the sanctions regime against North Korea effective.”)

Turning inward

It hardly needs adding that the wider prospects for North-South ties in the short and medium term are grim. They already were, given the failure of December's inter-Korean talks. After nearly three years of desultory mutual probing, Kim and Park Geun-hye are still nowhere near the same page on anything important. And now both Koreas are turning inward, to focus on domestic politics first and foremost. The South's relentless electoral cycle is kicking into high gear: National Assembly elections are due April 13, while the crucial vote to pick Park's successor as president (she cannot run again) comes in December 2017. Though that is nearly two years away, the long run-up tends to make any incumbent a lame duck in the final year or two of their single five-year term. That may be less so if Park's ruling conservative Saenuri Party increases its majority in April, as it may well do given Minjoo's woes. North Korean provocations usually benefit Southern conservatives at the ballot box. As with Obama on his home stretch, it is hard to see Park or Saenuri risking political capital on outreach to Kim Jong Un in the coming two years. An alternative reaction, long feared in Washington, is a regional nuclear arms race. Some in Saenuri want the ROK to have its own bomb, including the party floor leader Won Yoo-cheol. Every new DPRK nuclear test risks strengthening such voices.

In Pyongyang too, the upcoming WPK Congress means the North will be preoccupied above all with its internal affairs for at least the first half of 2016. What that key meeting will bring remains to be seen. Optimists hope that Kim has called this to proclaim some major change of policy direction, but it may just serve to formalize and further cement his rule. Despite some economic experiments and cosmetic changes like girl bands, Kim Jong Un's overall record as he enters his fifth year in power shows deep political and strategic continuity – with an added dash of volatility. The new North Korea is basically the old North Korea, with fresh paint but a greenhorn driver. That is not good news for inter-Korean relations, the region, or the world.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations September – December 2015

Sept. 2-4, 2015: ROK President Park Geun-hye is one of only two heads of states allied to the US to [visit](#) Beijing for events, including a military parade, marking the 70th anniversary of Japan's defeat in 1945.

Sept. 5, 2015: *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* headline [reads](#): “*Rodong Sinmun Urges S. Korea Not to Do Foul Behavior.*” It cites the daily paper of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) as warning right-wing ROK media not to spoil the mood for dialogue.

Sept. 7, 2015: Pursuant to their Aug. 25 six-point agreement, the Koreas begin preliminary Red Cross talks at the border village of Panmunjom about arranging fresh reunions of family members separated for over 60 years since the 1950-53 Korean War.

Sept. 8, 2015: The Koreas [agree](#) on a date for family reunions: Oct. 20-26. Venue and format will be as usual: two sessions of three days each, with 100 elderly persons from each Korea meeting any kin the other side can trace at the North's Southern-built Mt. Kumgang resort.

Sept. 8, 2015: Daejeon District Court [acquits](#) a 23-year-old student charged with violating the National Security Law by praising socialism and making pro-North statements on Facebook. Judge Song Kyung-ho says: “Just writing on Facebook doesn’t lead to instigating rebellion.”

Sept. 9, 2015: ROK Red Cross [says](#) its computers have picked a preliminary batch of 500 candidates for upcoming family reunions. This will be halved to 250 on criteria of health and willingness. The final 100 will be based on whosever relatives the DPRK comes up with.

Sept. 9, 2015: Marzuki Darusman, the UN special rapporteur on DPRK human rights, [says](#) during a five-day visit to Seoul that pursuit of inter-Korean unification and ensuring North Korea’s responsibility for its human rights violations are mutually reinforcing goals.

Sept. 9, 2015: Speaking at the Seoul Defense Dialogue ([SDD](#)), the only multilateral security meeting hosted by the ROK, Park Geun-hye [urges](#) North Korea to embrace reform and opening. (The DPRK was [invited](#) to the SDD, but scornfully declined.)

Sept. 9, 2015: Meeting Jin Liqun, president-designate of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), President Park [proposes](#) a complementary Northeast Asia Development Bank to develop North Korea’s infrastructure – provided it denuclearizes.

Sept. 9, 2015: ROK opposition leader Moon Jae-in [says](#) inter-party differences over a bill on North Korean human rights, which has been under discussion in the National Assembly for 11 years, could be bridged within a day.

Sept. 10, 2015: ROK Defense Ministry (MND) [suggests](#) the DPRK may mark 70th anniversary of the founding of the WPK on Oct. 10 by testing a long-range missile. MND also says the South will “conduct aggressive military operations at the DMZ” to counter Northern provocations.

Sept. 10, 2015: South Korea’s Unification Ministry (MOU) [proposes](#) a budget for 2016 of 1.49 trillion won (\$1.26 billion), up 1.6 per cent from this year, “to reflect the government’s will to improve ties with North Korea.”

Sept. 10, 2015: An opinion poll in the Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* [shows](#) growing hostility to and declining interest in North Korea among South Koreans, especially those in their 20s.

Sept. 11, 2015: ROK Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo [says](#) that “many types of civilian inter-Korean exchanges” are possible without breaching Seoul’s sanctions on Pyongyang – which he says will continue unless the North sincerely apologizes for sinking the *Cheonan*.

Sept. 11, 2015: Gen. Choi Yoon-hee, chairman of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), [says](#) any fresh DPRK nuclear or long-range missile test would create an “abnormal situation” in terms of the Aug. 25 accord, causing Seoul to resume loudspeaker broadcasts at the DMZ.

Sept. 11, 2015: A Seoul court [sentences](#) Kim Ki-jong, an avowedly pro-DPRK activist who knifed US Ambassador Mark Lippert at a seminar in March as a protest against US-ROK military drills, to 12 years in jail for attempted murder and other charges.

Sept. 14, 2015: Taking a train to Cheorwon on the Gyeongwon line, Unification Minister Hong [calls](#) this “a path of unification and hope extending to the world.” South Korea is rebuilding 9.3km of track from Cheorwon up to the DMZ.

Sept. 14, 2015: The director of the DPRK’s National Aerospace Development Administration [tells](#) KCNA that “the world will clearly see a series of satellites ... soaring into the sky at the times and locations determined by the WPK Central Committee.”

Sept. 15, 2015: KCNA [reports](#) the head of the Atomic Energy Institute as saying that all facilities at Yongbyon nuclear complex have “started normal operations.”

Sept. 16-17, 2015: Southern officials and technicians spend two days at Mt. Kumgang, checking the resort’s largely disused facilities ahead of upcoming family reunions. MOU [says](#) on Sept. 18 it will send in a technical team to carry out necessary repairs.

Sept. 20, 2015: Park Sang-hak, head of Fighters for a Free North Korea, [says](#) his group sent leaflets by balloon across the DMZ to protest Pyongyang’s recent missile and nuclear threats.

Sept. 21, 2015: MOU [reveals](#) that North Korea refused its invitation to participate in an Aug. 5 ceremony marking the start of work to restore the Gyeongwon railway line.

Sept. 21, 2015: Chung Mong-gyu, president of the ROK’s Korea Football Association (KFA), [returns](#) from the 46th East Asian Football Federation (EAFF) Executive Committee meeting in Pyongyang. Chung briefly met his DPRK counterpart Ri Yong Nam to suggest exhibition matches and joint training sessions. But Ri said this needed further discussion.

Sept. 22, 2015: An ROK civic group [says](#) the DPRK is rebuffing its efforts to arrange a joint celebration of National Foundation Day on Oct 3. A Southern delegation went North for this last year, and it was marked jointly in 2002, 2003 and 2005.

Sept. 23, 2015: North Korean website [Uriminzokkiri](#) [warns](#) that anti-DPRK leafleteers may jeopardize the prospects for family reunions: “How can the separated families between the two Koreas ... afford to meet together under the sky of flying leaflets against North Korea?”

Sept. 23-29, 2015: Both Korean foreign ministers and President Park Geun-hye visit New York to attend the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly ([UNGA](#)). As last year, neither side avails of this opportunity to arrange bilateral meetings of any kind.

Sept. 24, 2015: *Yonhap* [says](#) Pyongyang is lukewarm on implementing the Aug. 25 agreement, for two reasons: preoccupation with preparing for its upcoming Party 70th anniversary celebrations on Oct. 10, and divergent agendas. Rebuffing sports and cultural exchanges, the North wants the South to lift economic sanctions first.

Sept. 24, 2015: The Secretariat of the (North's) Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) [attacks](#) what it calls South Korea's plan to set up a special warfare command to strike the North's nuclear facilities as a "foolish self-destructive act."

Sept. 25, 2015: The North's National Reconciliation Council (NRC) [urges](#) South Korea not to pass a bill on human rights in the North, calling this "an evil law inciting confrontation."

Sept. 25, 2015: North Korea [demands](#) the repatriation of Kim Ryon-hui, a defector who now claims she was forcibly taken to South Korea by a broker who helps refugees.

Sept. 26, 2015: Talking to thinktanks in New York, President Park [vows](#) to boost cooperation with the US, China and other regional powers to achieve Korean unification, which she calls the "fundamental solution" to the North's nuclear and human rights concerns. She airs similar themes with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, himself a former ROK foreign minister.

Sept. 28, 2015: Addressing the UNGA, Park Geun-hye [calls on](#) North Korea not to launch a long-range rocket. She tells the North to help its people out of difficulties through reform and openness instead of carrying out additional provocations, while urging Pyongyang also to give up nuclear arms and heed international concern on its human rights record.

Sept. 28, 2015: *Rodong Sinmun* [says](#) that no one may "slander or infringe on" the DPRK's exercise of independent rights, such as launching satellites or bolstering its nuclear deterrence.

Sept. 29, 2015: The North's CPRK fiercely [attacks](#) Park's comments at the UNGA, warning that they put the planned family reunions at risk.

Oct. 5, 2015: The DPRK [deports](#) Joo Won-moo, a 21 year old NYU student resident in the US but an ROK national, via Panmunjom. It arrested him in April for trying to illegally enter the North from China. Seoul calls for the release of three other South Koreans detained in the North.

Oct. 4, 2015: MOU [says](#) that the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last remaining inter-Korean joint venture, produced goods worth a cumulative \$3 billion since it opened in 2004.

Oct. 5-7, 2015: Following up on a July visit, South Korean forestry experts [visit](#) Mt. Kungang to help Northern colleagues treat pest-infested pine trees. The South is providing insecticide and sprayers worth 130 million won (\$109,000).

Oct. 7, 2015: MOU [rebutts](#) an opposition lawmaker's claims that drought in North Korea is threatening the Kaesong IC's operations

Oct. 8, 2015: Uriminzokkiri website [denies](#) that the DPRK was behind hacking attacks on two servers of the subway operator Seoul Metro in 2014 saying that, "Whenever cyber attacks occur, South Korea blindly criticizes us without presenting any proof."

Oct. 8, 2015: The Koreas [exchange](#) final lists of participants in upcoming family reunions.

Oct. 8, 2015: MOU says that some 100 artifacts unearthed in a joint archaeological dig at the Koryo dynasty Manwoldae palace in Kaesong will go on display soon, there and in Seoul. In fact no pieces cross the border, but [holograms](#) of them are displayed.

Oct. 14, 2015: ROK officials [reveal](#) that on Oct. 7 the DPRK without notice released water from its Hwanggang dam on the Imjin River.

Oct. 15, 2015: ROK Vice Unification Minister Hwang Boo-gi [says](#) North-South civilian exchanges are expanding rapidly, and may soon reach levels not seen for seven years. He attributes this to a positive shift in policy in Pyongyang.

Oct. 15, 2015: Local ROK court rules [that](#) authorities may stop leaflet launches across the DMZ if it would endanger citizens in border areas. MOU says this confirms official policy, but stresses that the government is not empowered to restrict freedom of speech by an outright ban.

Oct. 20-22, 2015: Family reunions are [held](#) at Mount Kumgang, as agreed. 389 members of 96 Southern families drive across the DMZ in 16 buses to meet 141 Northern relatives. They get six private meetings, totaling just 12 hours of private contact, during the three-day event.

Oct 24-26, 2015: [Second](#) round of family reunions takes place. Some 250 South Koreans from 90 families meet their Northern close kin. DPRK Red Cross Chairman Ri Chung Bok tells ROK counterpart Kim Sung-joo he is ready to discuss regular reunions and consider letter exchanges.

Oct. 27-31, 2015: 162 ROK trade unionists – the largest Southern group to go North for five years – [fly](#) to Pyongyang for a friendly soccer competition with their DPRK counterparts.

Oct. 29, 2015: Citing a range of examples, *Yonhap*'s "Topic of the Week" headline [predicts](#): "Inter-Korean relations likely turn for better after reunions of separated families."

Nov. 6, 2015: *Rodong Sinmun* [calls](#) for opening an "epochal" new phase in inter-Korean ties: "Whether North-South relations improve or not depends on what attitude the North and the South have and how they approach the problem"

Nov. 12, 2015: *Yonhap* [cites](#) unnamed ROK government sources as saying that in late August the (North) Korean People's Army (KPA) replaced the front-line commander involved in that month's landmine blasts at the DMZ. Commander of the Second Corps Kim Sang Ryong was reassigned to command the 9th corps, well away from the border.

Nov. 17, 2015: MOU [announces](#) the third test operation over the past year of a project to import Russian coal by rail and ship using the DPRK's Rajin port. 120,000 tons will be shipped to three ROK ports by Nov. 30. A 20-strong Southern team, including the three ROK firms involved and government officials, will stay in Rajin until Nov. 20 to check how its facilities function. This pet project of President Park is exempt from the May 24 sanctions.

Nov. 17, 2015: North Korea [repatriates](#) via Panmunjom a South Korean aged 48, named only as Lee, who entered the DPRK from China in September for reasons unknown.

Nov. 20, 2015: North Korea's DPRK sends a message to the South's MOU via Panmunjom [proposing](#) a working-level meeting there on Nov. 26 about arranging high-level talks. The South accepts with alacrity.

Nov. 24, 2015: The two Koreas [exchange](#) delegate lists for the Nov. 26 working meeting on high-level talks at Panmunjom. The South's three-strong team will be led by Kim Ki-woong, head of MOU's special office for inter-Korean dialogue; the North's by Hwang Chol, a senior DPRK official who has taken part in previous North-South talks.

Nov. 24, 2015: MOU [reports](#) a partial setback for its Rajin logistics project. The Russian coal shipments are on track, but heavy snow on DPRK roads is delaying another trial consignment comprising ten container-loads of bottled water from China.

Nov. 26-27, 2015: Working discussions at Panmunjom [agree](#) to hold vice-ministerial talks on Dec. 11 at the Kaesong complex. ROK media reaction includes disappointment that the level is not higher, and fears of a repeat of 2013's [protocol row](#) in case the North sends someone whom the South deems too junior.

Dec. 1, 2015: MOU [says](#) 23 ROK lexicographers will meet with DPRK colleagues in Dalian, China on Dec. 7-13 to continue work on the dictionary project.

Dec. 1-4, 2015: A 17-strong delegation of South Korean Roman Catholics, led by Archbishop Kim Hui-hung and including five bishops, visits North Korea at the invitation of the latter's Catholic Association. They celebrate Mass at Pyongyang's Changchung Cathedral, the DPRK's sole functioning Catholic church.

Dec. 2, 2015: MOU says it will start [collecting](#) on soft loans extended in 2010 to firms hit by that year's sanctions on trade with and investment in North Korea. A total of 32.5 billion won (\$28.1 million) will be sought from 150 out of 168 borrowers.

Dec. 2, 2015: A lawyer in Seoul acting for Ko Yong Suk, Kim Jong Un's maternal aunt and former guardian in Switzerland who fled to the US in 1998 with her husband, [files suit](#) against three prominent defectors for allegedly defaming her. She is not expected to appear in court.

Dec. 7, 2015: The ROK Catholic Bishops' Conference (CBCK) [says](#) it hopes to send priests regularly to the DPRK to jointly celebrate major holy days. On possibly training Northern priests, Archbishop Kim Hui-jung says: "That's not something we can discuss at present."

Dec. 7, 2015: Ten containers of bottled water produced by Nongshim, the ROK's top noodle maker, at a plant in Erdaobaihe, China close to Mount Paekdu [reach](#) Busan, having been first trucked to the DPRK's Rajin port and then shipped to Busan.

Dec. 9, 2015: In a telephone [interview](#) Lee Kang, husband of Ko Yong Suk, tells *Yonhap* they fled to the US in fear they might be victimized when Kim Jong Il died: “I had felt the cruelty of power.” Lee says he now runs a laundry business. Ko also wanted to seek medical help for her sister Ko Yong Hui, Kim Jong Un’s mother, who died of breast cancer in Paris in 2004.

Dec. 11, 2015: Inter-Korean talks are held at Kaesong. Vice Unification Minister Kim Boo-gi leads the ROK delegation; his DPRK counterpart is DPRK vice director Jon Jong Su.

Dec. 12, 2015: After a second full day, the North-South talks [break down](#) with no joint statement or even a date to meet again. The North demanded a resumption of tourism to Mt. Kumgang, linking this to further family reunions. The South refused on both counts.

Dec. 15, 2015: [Data](#) from the ROK’s Statistics Korea show that the inter-Korean chasm in economic performance, already huge, widened further in 2014. With twice as many people as the North, South Korea produces 13 times more energy and 59 times more steel. The South’s total trade of \$1.1 trillion was 144 times bigger than the North’s \$7.6 billion.

Dec. 16, 2015: MOU’s [briefing](#) on what it calls the First Vice Minister Level Talks confirms that they broke down due to the two sides’ irreconcilable differences on priorities and agenda.

Dec. 18, 2015: MOU [reports](#) more South Koreans as visiting the North this year, especially since the Aug. 25 accord.

Dec. 30, 2015: KCNA [reports](#) that Kim Yang Gon, the DPRK’s point man on the ROK, died in a car crash early the previous day. Kim’s state funeral on Jan. 1 does not quash speculation in Seoul that someone – not necessarily a [tearful](#) Kim Jong Un – wanted him out of the way.

Jan. 1, 2016: Kim Jong Un’s New Year [speech](#) lays less emphasis on inter-Korean issues than last year’s, and is more “finger-wagging” in tone. Mostly it focuses on domestic policy.

Jan. 6, 2016: Denouncing the North’s nuclear test, South Korea [vows](#) close cooperation with allies and the global community to punish this.

Jan. 7, 2016: MOU [says](#) it will restrict ROK entry into the KIC to business persons directly invested there. It is unclear how far this is actually implemented, at first.

Jan. 7, 2016: Calling the North’s nuclear test a “grave violation” of the Aug. 25 inter-Korean agreement, Cho Tae-yong, deputy chief of national security in the ROK presidential office, [says](#) the South will resume propaganda broadcasts across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

Jan. 7, 2016: Won Yoo-chul, floor leader of the ROK’s ruling conservative Saenuri Party, [says](#) South Korea should consider creating its own nuclear potential for self-defense.

Jan. 8, 2016: South Korea marks Kim Jong Un’s 33rd birthday by switching on its propaganda loudspeakers along the DMZ. The ROK’s liberal main opposition Minjoo party [warns](#) that this

may raise tensions and stoke uncertainty. North Korea denounces the move as a provocation and activates its own south-facing speakers, which are less powerful.

Jan. 8, 2016: The North's *Korean Central Broadcasting Station (KCBS)* TV airs images of Kim Jong Un giving field guidance during an ejection test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) supposedly conducted on Dec. 21 in the East Sea.

Jan. 10, 2016: *Yonhap* [reports](#) ROK Defense Minister Han Min-koo as telling Army Missile Command commanders during a field inspection the previous day that "If the enemy provokes, retaliate speedily and accurately without hesitation."

Jan. 10, 2016: *KCNA* reports Kim Jong Un as [visiting](#) the Ministry of People's Armed Forces (MPAF). Offering New Year congratulations on the "H-bomb" test, Kim also "informed them of the complicated situation which the Korean revolution is now facing."

Jan. 10, 2016: A US [B-52](#) *Stratofortress* strategic bomber flies low over [Osan](#) Air Force Base south of Seoul, accompanied by ROK *F-15* and US *F-16* fighters, in a show of force also described as a training mission. The *B-52* later returns to Andersen Air Force Base in Guam.

Jan. 11, 2016: MOU [says](#) that from Jan. 12 it will restrict South Koreans' staying in the KIC to those directly running businesses there. Contractors must go in and out the same day.