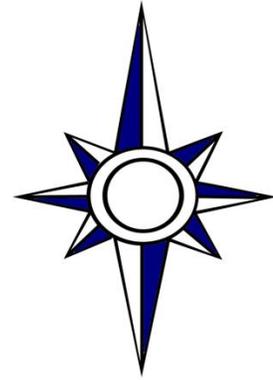


Comparative Connections

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South Korea-North Korea Relations: Summit in 2015? A Tough Climb

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As so often in inter-Korean relations, the final four months of 2014 proved a mixed bag. We noted in the [previous](#) issue of this journal how the period began hopefully. Despite various advance tantrums, North Korea sent a full sports squad, 273 strong, to compete in the 17th Asian Games (Asiad) held in Incheon, South Korea. Better yet, at short notice three of the DPRK's top leaders suddenly showed up at the closing ceremony on Oct. 4. Amid smiles all round, the two Koreas agreed to hold high-level talks within the next month. And then, as so often, the let-down. Pyongyang added a condition: Seoul must stop anti-Kim activists who regularly send balloons laden with propaganda leaflets badmouthing the DPRK regime and its leader across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). No can do, said the South. The leafleteers were breaking no law, and free speech is protected by the Constitution. So the talks were not held, and relations reverted to the usual bickering, sniping, and blame games.

But the turn of the year brought fresh hope, at least to those not jaded by past disappointment. In quick succession, both Koreas unexpectedly raised the possibility of high-level meetings. On Dec. 29 the South suggested talks in January, with no preconditions and at a higher level (between ministers) than the vice-ministerial dialogue held last February and planned for October. Kim Jong Un promptly trumped that in his New Year address, which dwelt more than usual on North-South ties. Kim even dangled the ultimate possibility, saying: "... there is no reason why we should not hold a summit meeting if the atmosphere and environment for it are created." That is a big 'if': unlike Seoul, Pyongyang attached strict conditions for such a meeting. All this is discussed in detail below. But first, we begin back in sporting September.

Back to the Future?

Our previous article analyzed the build-up to the Incheon Asiad in detail. As noted then, inter-Korean relations overall have moved beyond – or, arguably, retreated from – the heady “sunshine” days of conquering fresh peaks, when each breakthrough was a first, raising hopes that a cumulative and irreversible process of détente and reconciliation was under way.

We are no longer in that place, and may never be again. The “sunshine” policy's critics would insist that apparent progress a decade ago was illusory; or corruptly bought; or undermined and seriously incomplete, in that simultaneously North Korea was surreptitiously developing nuclear weapons. Regardless, South Korea's electoral system, which gives each president just five years before a new one takes over, makes it highly likely that the policy U-turns we have seen since 2008 will recur as voters zig-zag between the political left and right.

To prevent such oscillation would require the main political parties to hammer out a broadly bipartisan approach to North Korea policy. That seems unfeasible, as the ruling conservative Saenuri Party and the liberal opposition New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD) mostly have very different approaches, respectively hawkish and dovish. Compounding the problem, those differences are also fiercely fought out in domestic politics. This was seen on Dec. 19, when the ROK Constitutional Court found in favor of a suit brought over a year earlier by the government. Agreeing by 8-1 that the small far-left Unified Progressive Party (UPP) supports North Korean-style socialism, the Court found this to be against the Constitution. The UPP was banned with immediate effect, and its five lawmakers lost their seats. One, Lee Seok-ki, is already serving nine years in jail for the more tangible (if still rather hypothetical) crime of inciting insurrection. That the UPP has any lawmakers at all is mainly because it once had an electoral pact with the NPAD's predecessor. Since then the party had split, and the hard core that remains are indeed generally recognized to be at least fellow-travelers of the DPRK.

Nonetheless, banning a party for its views alone is a first in democratic South Korea, and has unnerved moderate progressives. Nor will it go down well in Pyongyang. Not that, if Kim Jong Un really wants a summit, he would let an issue like this stand in the way; North Korea regards its tiny band of Southern loyalists as expendable pawns. But if, as is probable, we are in for a prolonged bout of game-playing and point-scoring enroute to a summit that may or may not happen, then banning the UPP will certainly be used as one more stick with which to beat the South. This issue will remain in the limelight, as the UPP's ex-lawmakers plan to challenge their defenestration in the courts. Lee Seok-ki too has a final appeal left, to the Supreme Court which is expected to rule in January. In December, the US-based Carter Center [weighed in](#) on Lee's behalf, criticizing the National Security Law (NSL) under which Lee was convicted as a relic of dictatorship incompatible with democracy and international law. At an [earlier appeal](#) Lee was cleared of [plotting](#) insurrection, but his conviction for [inciting](#) the same (such are the niceties!) was upheld; his prison sentence was reduced from 12 to 9 years. Watch this space.

Good sport, but chances missed

But back to sport. As we reported last time, by mid-September North Korean athletes were starting to arrive in Incheon by special direct flights from Pyongyang on the DPRK national carrier Air Koryo. The Games themselves commenced on Sept. 19 and concluded on Oct. 4. Despite earlier rows on subjects ranging from cheerleaders – in the end the North sent none – to finance, North Korea made no protest when threats to its flag by Southern right-wingers prompted the Asiad organizers rather cravenly to take down street displays of all flags of the 45 competing nations. Team DPRK was loudly cheered on entering the stadium, where they got to watch such delights of the opening ceremony as Psy performing *Gangnam Style*. In the ensuing Games, they performed professionally and creditably, finishing 7th overall in the medals table (ahead of India, just) with 11 gold, 11 silver, and 14 bronze. North Korean male weightlifter Kim Un Guk broke two world records, while South Korean women archers and shooters did likewise. So it was a successful Games overall, held in a good atmosphere.

This being a pan-Asian event – all member states of the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) took part – South Korea as host saw its main responsibility as multilateral. Earlier spats with North Korea over finance implied that the ROK thought the DPRK should be treated like any other

participant state – welcome to attend, but deserving no special privileges. One can see the logic of that position, both in general and as trying to break the mendicant mentality that became a downside of sunshine. Back then, the North got into the bad habit of expecting the South to pay for pretty much everything. Much as that posture reflects the stark realities of the North-South economic chasm today, it is no basis to build a proper relationship of equality and trust.

And yet it is hard not to see this fortnight in autumn as an inter-Korean opportunity missed. It is not every day that nearly 300 North Koreans stay in the South. Athletes apart, the entourage included the top figures in the North's sports administration like Vice Sports Minister Jang Su Myong, well known in international Olympic circles. It was headed by Minister of Physical Culture and Sports Kim Yong Hun: less familiar, appointed only in May and reportedly close to Kim Jong Un. Kim was the most senior North Korean to visit the South since 2009. So far as in known, he stayed there for the duration. Having left Pyongyang on Sept. 16 – *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* coyly [refrained](#) from saying where he was headed – he was still minding his flock at least until Sept. 27, when *KCNA* [reported](#) him as presiding at an “evening longing for respected Marshal Kim Jong Un” (sic) in Incheon. This sounds like a morale-boosting exercise for the team while in enemy territory, which in fact they saw little of; presumably it took place in their quarters, with South Koreans not invited. The minister said that while they have only been away from the leader for about a week, “the minds of all members of the delegation and players are running to him whom they long to see, awake or asleep.”

So a North Korean minister and confidant of the leader visits the South for two whole weeks! Well, President Park Geun-hye's Dresden Declaration last March included these noble words:

If there is to be real connection and integration between the south and the north, we must narrow the distance between our values and our thinking. To achieve this, those from the south and the north must be afforded the chance to interact routinely. We will encourage exchanges in historical research and preservation, culture and the arts, **and sports** – all of which could promote genuine people-to-people contact – rather than seek politically-motivated projects or promotional events. (*emphasis added*)

The obvious question arises: why then did Park's government not take advantage of Minister Kim's prolonged presence, and hold talks to seek to put such lofty aspirations into practice? Park is right, sport would be a good area for inter-Korean activity for the reasons she states. Yet it has had a checkered, fitful history, more of regress than progress. (It is 24 years since a [unified](#) North-South Korean table tennis duo famously won the women's doubles in the world championships in 1991 held in Chiba, Japan; nothing similar has ever been attempted since.) Kim Yong Hun's visit was the perfect opportunity to do what Park claims to want: i.e., try to put at least one promising area of North-South interaction onto a regular, politics-free footing. Yet there is no evidence that her administration tried to initiate anything of the kind. This is frankly baffling, suggesting at the very least a lack of imagination and of proactive thinking.

The UNGA: another missed opportunity

As it happens, September saw not one but two occasions when North and South might have met and tried to take their relations forward, but chose not to. Besides the Incheon Asiad, the other such missed opportunity came – and went – in New York, at the annual fall session of the United

Nations General Assembly (UNGA). This time both Koreas sent some of their biggest guns. On Sept. 23 President Park made a keynote [speech](#) at the UN Climate Summit. That was chaired by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, himself a former ROK foreign minister – who has [denied](#) rumors that he might be a presidential contender in 2017, when Park’s successor will be elected. Park told Ban she was still waiting for Pyongyang to respond to Seoul’s offer of high-level talks, made in August. He [replied](#) that “opening up the North’s heart by cooperating on smaller sectors step by step would be a good idea.” Indeed.

Also in New York was the South’s current foreign minister, Yun Byung-se. He had come for a different UN meeting, the first-ever ministerial [forum](#) on North Korean human rights issues, held alongside the UNGA as part of the continuing focus on this topic pursuant to the special UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) which reported last February. That pressure continues. On Dec. 18 the UNGA [passed](#) a resolution to refer the DPRK – and perhaps named officials – to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague on charges of crimes against humanity. The matter is now with the UN Security Council, which alone can make a binding referral – and where either Russia or China will surely use their veto to ensure that this does not happen.

No previous ROK administration, including Park’s hardline predecessor Lee Myung-bak, has embraced DPRK human rights concerns as keenly as this one. However laudable such a stand may be morally, it can hardly improve inter-Korean relations. Here, as often, it is not obvious how the different strands of Park’s *Nordpolitik* are supposed to weave a consistent pattern. In particular, hosting the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)’s new field office, which is set to open in Seoul by March specifically to monitor human rights in North Korea, is bound to anger the DPRK. Pyongyang has already attacked this plan, and will surely demand the OHCHR office’s withdrawal as one precondition – among others; see below for the hypothetical summit dangled by Kim Jong Un in his New Year speech.

But back to New York in September. Yun Byung-se was not the only Korean foreign minister in town for the UNGA. In North Korea, oddly, recent occupants of that post had tended to be figureheads whose job was to meet and greet; real power resided elsewhere, often with a nominal vice-minister. This changed last April with the appointment of Ri Su Yong, who in another Pyongyang peculiarity has undergone a name change. Formerly known as Ri Chol, he spent many years as ambassador in Switzerland; his duties included mentoring Kim Jong Un and his siblings during their Swiss schooling. He also reputedly ran key bank accounts for Kim Jong Il, so the US Treasury Department might well have wished it could arrange a quiet chat.

South Korea, however, showed no interest. As with Kim Yong Hun’s sojourn in Incheon, one might think that a forward-looking ROK government would seize the chance to at least hold an informal meeting with such a senior figure: the first DPRK foreign minister to attend the UNGA since 1999. Ri spent a whole week in New York, so there was plenty of time. Not so; or at least, not on terms the North could accept. Yun did offer to meet Ri – to discuss [human rights](#). Unsurprisingly that did not happen, especially as South Korea had supported the US in barring Ri from the earlier forum, which the US, not the UN organized, or Ri could have been there by right. Ri [told](#) *Voice of America* that the South had not suggested meeting, adding: “Even if it did, I do not intend to meet Minister Yun given his behavior.” So the UNGA came and went, unutilized. The two Korean ships passed in the night, each set on its own course.

Three Northern heavyweights pay a flying visit

If in New York neither Korea tried very hard to meet, Incheon was different. The North may well have expected the South to respond more fulsomely to its decision to participate fully in the Asiad, rather than (as might have been expected) taking its bat home and sulking after not getting its way on money and cheerleaders. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un himself was at this point a man of mystery: he vanished for most of September, prompting feverish speculation in what *KCNA* likes to call “reptile media” worldwide as to whether he had been ousted in a coup. The less melodramatic truth, as cooler heads surmised at the time, seems to be that he was recuperating after an operation and medical treatment for foot or ankle problems, possibly due to worsening obesity. He re-emerged in mid-October, sporting a walking-cane and a limp.

But as of early October, Kim’s continuing and unexplained month-long absence amplified a sudden twist which would in any case have been startling. By late September, furious at Park Geun-hye’s criticisms at the UNGA of its nuclear programs and human rights conditions, North Korea had reverted to name-calling. On Sept. 27, the Policy Department of the National Defense Commission (NDC) – the DPRK’s highest executive body, ranking above the Cabinet – called the ROK President “an indecent woman reeking off [sic] nasty smell” and “a modern-type sycophant ... and the worst traitor for all ages” whose “miserable doom has already been sealed ... it is necessary to decisively eliminate such hordes of traitors as Park.”

Hence, it was unexpected, to say the least, when just a week later the closing ceremony of the Asian Games on Oct. 4 was graced by the presence of no less than three of North Korea’s top leaders. They did not meet Park, but sent their respects and greeted her ministers and advisors with smiles all round. This was all extremely sudden. It seems that the visitors more or less invited themselves, at the last minute; leaving the South to scramble, first to accept and then accommodate their flying visit of just a few hours (they flew in and out the same day).

For any one of this trio to visit the South alone would have been noteworthy. For all three to come is quite unprecedented. The most junior – but still very senior – and least surprising was [Kim Yang Gon](#). As director of the United Front Department of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK), Kim runs North Korea’s relations with the South and has visited at least twice before. Readers may [recall](#) that in 2013 Seoul demanded Kim as head of the North’s team for planned talks; they fell through when Pyongyang refused, calling this a breach of protocol. Kim has never headed routine dialogue, but he is the man in overall charge. As such, it is to him that the South, undeterred, sent its latest offer of high-level talks; more on which anon.

The other two DPRK visitors are widely seen as the second and third most powerful figures in Pyongyang, though opinions differ on which is which. [Choe Ryong Hae](#), a near-contemporary and long-time crony of the late Kim Jong Il, has worn many hats, latterly the peaked cap of a vice-marshal. Despite a wholly civilian career, in 2012 he was made director of the Korean People’s Army (KPA)’s Political Bureau in a bid by Kim Jong Un to bring the military under control. The uniform seemed ill-fitting, literally and metaphorically, and after various ups and downs – which led to rumors of his being purged – he is now a civilian again, as a Presidium member of the WPK Politburo. [Reports](#) in January that his son Choe Song recently wed Kim

Jong Un's younger sister Kim Yo Jong, if true, should secure his position, although the fate of Jang Song Thaek shows that even Kim family in-laws are not necessarily invulnerable.

Completing the troika and prompting most excitement was Choe's successor as KPA political director, [Hwang Pyong So](#). Clearly the most senior of the three, Hwang arrived in full vice-marshal's regalia (although like Choe he is a civilian who donned this only in recent years), [flanked](#) by two bodyguards in civilian suits and shades – a privilege by some [accounts](#) reserved for the supreme leader. This touch boosted speculation, fueled by the continued absence of Kim Jong Un – only for 10 more days, it turned out – that Hwang is the real power holder in Pyongyang. That is indeed the view of one school of thought on the DPRK power structure, which regards Kim as a figurehead and the WPK Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), where Hwang has spent his whole career, as the body which really pulls the strings.

Balloons puncture hope

But we digress, albeit on important questions. The world gasped at this sudden outbreak of inter-Korean bonhomie. Hearts beat faster when they agreed to resume high-level talks, last held in February with no progress, within a month. The visitors departed as suddenly as they had arrived, and like a child's balloon the puffed-up euphoria they had briefly inspired began to sag. An apt metaphor, since real balloons were a major reason for this. North Korea soon attached conditions to holding talks, the main one being that the South must stop one of Pyongyang's especial bugbears – the regular launching across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) by defectors and their supporters of helium balloons bearing propaganda leaflets critical of the DPRK regime and leader, plus such [items](#) as dollar bills, USB drives, or transistor radios. US-supported Christian groups [send](#) religious tracts and Bibles by the same method.

As in most inter-Korean disputes, there is a history here. Balloon launches have been banned or discouraged by some past ROK governments: mainly liberal ones, but also Lee Myung-bak at least [once](#) in 2012 when he judged that the North's threats were a real danger. But as with DPRK human rights, here again Park Geun-hye, although she won the presidency running as a moderate conservative, in office is proving more hardline. The South insisted it could not legally stop the leafleteers, despite escalating threats from Pyongyang. Local residents along the DMZ are also hostile, for both security and economic reasons as the launches frighten off tourists who come to peer across into the North. On Dec. 10, lawyers for some 100 such locals said they will file an [injunction](#) to force four named leaflet-sending groups to desist.

That came after a tense October. As detailed in the chronology, the month that was supposed to see preparations for high-level talks in fact witnessed no fewer than three exchanges of fire between the two Koreas, including one where the KPA shot at balloons – it is unclear if any were downed – and shell casings landed in the South. In each case the ROK fired back, in a considered reaction, taking care not to hit anyone or anything, just as the North had. But such careful calibration may not always be possible, and there is always a risk of miscalculation by either side. Freedom is a noble cause, but a responsible government must weigh all pertinent factors. The latest pledge by Park Sang-hak, the defector who leads Fighters for a Free North Korea, to float 100,000 copies of the controversial new film *The Interview* – which not only mocks Kim Jong Un, but shows his head being blown off – with subtitles in Korean into the North by late

January is especially incendiary. If Park Geun-hye has any interest in holding a summit with Kim Jong Un, she will surely need to dissuade her namesake somehow.

Let's just talk, shall we?

Hopes raised by the DPRK troika visit were thus dashed. The rest of 2014 saw no significant events – until the year was all but over. On Dec. 29, Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-jae announced that his government had that day faxed a letter to WPK UFD Director Kim Yang Gon, proposing minister-level talks on “issues of mutual concern.” Topics might include family reunions and sporting and cultural exchanges, but no subject was excluded and no preconditions were laid down.

Looking backward and forward, Ryoo noted that 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation in 1945 – a hint, perhaps, at holding joint commemorative events. He added that “the South and North will have to meet ... and discuss ways toward a peaceful reunification” – hardly the most immediate agenda item, but a reminder that Ryoo doubles as deputy head of the Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation (PCUP), an advisory body launched in July and chaired by the president. Indeed, rather oddly his message was sent in that capacity rather than on behalf of the government. If the North is minded to cavil about protocol, it could well take umbrage on that score. Pyongyang has been critical of Park's emphasis on unification, seeing this as a ploy to bring about German-style absorption.

Cabinet-level dialogue was routine during the “sunshine” era (1998-2007), but there have been no such talks for seven years. The high-level talks held in February, and agreed to but not held in October, were one rung lower than this, between vice-ministers. Proposing a more senior meeting thus looks like a concession in a bid to break the inter-Korean deadlock. That was how Seoul media interpreted it. *JoongAng Daily* (the English version of South Korea's leading newspaper, the center-right *JoongAng Ilbo*) had a blunt [sub-heading](#): “Park administration needs traction for its North policy in 2015.” The article averred that the coming year “could be the last time the president can achieve tangible goals from her North Korea policy,” like a summit with Kim Jong Un, as in 2016 the focus will shift to parliamentary elections in April.

The point goes wider. The ROK electoral timetable is relentless, and disabling. It reflects the sins of the fathers, literally in Park Geun-hye's case. Reacting strongly against efforts by past dictators like Park Chung-hee (1961-79) to hold on to power forever, the Constitution of the Sixth Republic, which restored democracy in 1987, restricts the president to a single five-year term; re-election is not an option. After a quarter century of experience, many now regard this as too restrictive as it renders all leaders lame ducks in their final year, and sometimes sooner. There is wide bipartisan support for a US-type system, allowing up to two terms of four years and synchronizing these with parliamentary elections, which are already on a four-year cycle.

President Park disagrees as she [slapped down](#) recent attempts to debate such a change, calling it a “black hole.” Yet with (one must be frank) few achievements to show after almost two years in office, she is already as the *JoongAng* implies a victim of the system she wants to retain. Be it North Korea, economic policy or whatever, 2015 is make or break year for Park Geun-hye. A [scandal](#) engulfing the Blue House, beyond our scope here but suggesting at the very least serious

factionalism among senior presidential staffers, is a further reason why Park – whose approval ratings hit new lows in December – may at last feel some sense of urgency; though that affair, if it continues, may also prove a distraction from a proper focus on policy issues.

A summit – on Kim's terms

At this writing, the North had yet to respond to the South's talks offer as such, despite several entreaties from Seoul. Instead, it riposted with a counter-offer – raise you! – just days later. Kim Jong Un devoted about a fifth of his New Year [speech](#) to inter-Korean relations. His offer of a summit, quoted above, made headlines as it was intended to. Yet this must be read in context. [Here](#) is the relevant section of Kim's speech in full:

Seventy years have passed since our nation was divided by outside forces.

In those decades the world has made a tremendous advance and the times have undergone dramatic changes, but our nation has not yet achieved reunification, suffering the pain of division. It is a deplorable fact known to everyone and it is lamentable to everyone. No longer can we bear and tolerate the tragedy of national division that has continued century after century.

Last year we put forward crucial proposals for improved inter-Korean relations and national reunification and made sincere efforts for their implementation. Our efforts, however, could not bear due fruit owing to the obstructive moves by the anti-reunification forces within and without; instead the north-south relations have been on a headlong rush to aggravation.

However complicated the situation may be and whatever obstacles and difficulties may stand in our way, we should unfailingly achieve national reunification, a lifetime wish of the President and the General and the greatest desire of the nation, and build a dignified and prosperous reunified country on this land.

"Let the whole nation join efforts to open up a broad avenue to independent reunification in this year of the 70th anniversary of national liberation!"- this is the slogan of struggle the entire Korean nation should hold up.

We should remove the danger of war, ease the tension and create a peaceful environment on the Korean peninsula.

The large-scale war games ceaselessly held every year in south Korea are the root cause of the escalating tension on the peninsula and the danger of nuclear war facing our nation. It is needless to say that there can be neither trustworthy dialogue nor improved inter-Korean relations in such a gruesome atmosphere in which war drills are staged against the dialogue partner.

To cling to nuclear war drills against the fellow countrymen in collusion with aggressive outside forces is an extremely dangerous act of inviting calamity.

We will resolutely react against and mete out punishment to any acts of provocation and war moves that infringe upon the sovereignty and dignity of our country.

The south Korean authorities should discontinue all war moves including the reckless military exercises they conduct with foreign forces and choose to ease the tension on the Korean peninsula and create a peaceful environment.

The United States, the very one that divided our nation into two and has imposed the suffering of national division upon it for 70 years, should desist from pursuing the anachronistic policy hostile towards the DPRK and reckless acts of aggression and boldly make a policy switch.

The north and the south should refrain from seeking confrontation of systems while absolutizing their own ideologies and systems but achieve great national unity true to the principle of By Our Nation Itself to satisfactorily resolve the reunification issue in conformity with the common interests of the nation.

If they try to force their ideologies and systems upon each other, they will never settle the national reunification issue in a peaceful way, only bringing confrontation and war.

Though the people-centred socialist system of our own style is the most advantageous, we do not force it on south Korea and have never done so.

The south Korean authorities should neither seek "unification of systems" that incites distrust and conflict between the north and the south nor insult the other side's system and make impure solicitation to do harm to their fellow countrymen, travelling here and there.

The north and the south, as they had already agreed, should resolve the national reunification issue in the common interests of the nation transcending the differences in ideology and system.

They should briskly hold dialogue, negotiations and exchanges and make contact to relink the severed ties and blood vessels of the nation and bring about a great turn in inter-Korean relations.

It is the unanimous desire of the fellow countrymen for both sides to stop fighting and pave a new way for reunification by concerted efforts. They should no longer waste time and energy over pointless arguments and trifling matters but write a new chapter in the history of inter-Korean relations.

Nothing is impossible if our nation shares one purpose and joins efforts. On the road for reunification the north and the south had got such charter and great programme for reunification as the July 4 Joint Statement, the historic June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration, thus demonstrating to the whole world the nation's determination and mettle to reunify the country.

We think that it is possible to resume the suspended high-level contacts and hold sectoral talks if the south Korean authorities are sincere in their stand towards improving inter-Korean relations through dialogue.

And there is no reason why we should not hold a summit meeting if the atmosphere and environment for it are created.

In the future, too, we will make every effort to substantially promote dialogue and negotiations.

The entire Korean nation should turn out together in the nationwide movement for the country's reunification so as to glorify this year as a landmark in opening up a broad avenue to independent reunification.

Clearly, Kim's offer – unlike the South's – is highly hedged. Creating the “atmosphere and environment” he requires would entail several steps unwelcome to Seoul – which of course is blamed, one-sidedly along with the US (aka “anti-reunification forces within and without”) for the poor state of relations at present. Conversely, the North's “sincere efforts” last year included calling the South's resident a prostitute and a comfort woman. And if anyone is creating a “gruesome atmosphere” on the peninsula, it is the North's relentless and unceasing bellicose rhetoric, which for decades has deliberately fostered a war atmosphere in the minds of its people and for external propaganda. By contrast, US-ROK “war drills,” though large-scale, are brief and localized, hardly impinging at all on everyday life in the peaceful South.

Telling the ROK to stop routine annual military exercises with the US, its founding ally, is a time-worn DPRK ploy going back to the days of Kim's grandfather Kim Il Sung. Park Geun-hye, having faced down such a demand when the North sought to attach it as a condition for family reunions – which Pyongyang cynically canceled in Sept. 2013, but eventually allowed in Feb. 2014 – is not about to accept this as the price of a summit with Kim Jong Un.

Should she, perhaps? In the mid-1990s, the then *Team Spirit* exercises were suspended three times as an incentive to encourage the North's denuclearization. (The Agreed Framework! KEDO! How long ago that all seems now, and indeed is.) Would allied readiness really be compromised if say one or part of the current two main annual sets of joint maneuvers, *Key Resolve/Foal Eagle* and *Ulchi-Freedom Guardian*, were scaled back or suspended? One may doubt it, but in the current climate the question is rhetorical. The view in both Washington and Seoul is that any such step could only come as a reward after Pyongyang evinced tangible sincerity and cooperation, especially on the nuclear issue. But at this juncture, not only is the DPRK as defiant as ever on that front, but the cyberattack on Sony Pictures and consequent US sanctions – the FBI having fingered North Korea as the culprit, a view not shared by all experts – mean there is no appetite to make concessions to Pyongyang in advance.

While that stance is understandable, it is also a recipe for continued stalemate. The DPRK is capable of bold gestures, as seen in October's troika visit. The challenge for Park Geun-hye, as for all North Korea's interlocutors, is to foster similar creativity in seeking to cut the Gordian knot. The ticking electoral clock is one incentive to do so, but her instinctive caution pushes the other way. My bet would be that neither side trusts the other enough, and that the summit idea – and perhaps the South's talks offer as well – will sink in a sea of mutually unacceptable preconditions attached by one side or the other. But it would be nice to be wrong.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations September – December 2014

Sept. 1, 2014: Lim Byeong-cheol, spokesman of South Korea's Unification Ministry (MOU), [reiterates](#) that “there is no change in the government's basic position with regard to the May 24th Measures”; meaning sanctions will remain unless North Korea formally apologizes for sinking the corvette *Cheonan* in 2010. He hopes nonetheless that the North will agree to a fresh round of family reunions “before it gets too cold” this winter.

Sept. 2, 2014: An MOU spokesman [says](#) the South will share the cost of the North's taking part in the 17th Asian Games (Asiad) soon to be held in Incheon, ROK, and that the gap between the two sides on who should pay for what is "not wide." No figures are given. He reiterates that the North is welcome to bring cheerleaders.

Sept. 3, 2014: MOU and two other ROK ministries, Justice (MOJ) and Security and Public Administration (MOSPA), jointly launch an integrated database on legal issues likely to arise during and after Korea's reunification. It can be found at www.unilaw.go.kr. (Korean only)

Sept. 3, 2014: North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong Un, as often, [attends](#) a concert by the [Moranbong Band](#), a modish all-female combo he created. Thereafter Kim is not seen in public for over a month, prompting feverish speculation abroad as to his whereabouts and fate.

Sept. 9, 2014: In a speech on the 66th anniversary of the DPRK's founding, Premier Pak Pong Ju [declares](#): "We will do our best to improve North-South relations." He does not elaborate.

Sept. 11, 2014: The leading Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* [calls](#) on the North to allow more reunions of separated families, adding also that "Our government needs to be more flexible."

Sept. 11, 2014: The first batch of DPRK participants in the Asian Games [flies](#) directly from Pyongyang on their national airline Air Koryo to Incheon International Airport (IIA). This 94-strong group includes Vice Sports Minister Jang Su Myong. The rest of the North's 273-strong contingent arrives over the next few days, including Sports Minister Kim Yong Hun on Sept. 16.

Sept. 11, 2014: MOU [confirms](#) a decision by the Asiad organizers to remove flags of all 45 competing nations from public streets, after right-wing groups threaten violence against the DPRK flag – whose display is illegal under the ROK's National Security Law. A day later it [adds](#) that Southern spectators will not be allowed to fly the Northern flag in stadiums, either.

Sept. 11, 2014: MOU [confirms](#) that North Korea sent back via Panmunjom a South Korean man aged 52 who had illegally entered the DPRK via a third country, despite his plea to stay in the North and have his family join him.

Sept. 12, 2014: ROK government panel [confirms](#) 69 more South Koreans as having been abducted by the North during the 1950-53 Korean War. This brings the total number officially recognized as abductees to 3,375; other estimates run as [high](#) as [83,000](#).

Sept. 16, 2014: North Korea's official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* [reports](#) (full text): "The delegation of the DPRK Olympic Committee led by Chairman Kim Yong Hun, minister of Physical Culture and Sports, and the DPRK players group led by Kim Pyong Sik, vice-minister of Physical Culture and Sports, left here Tuesday to take part in the 17th Asian Games." It does not mention that their destination is Incheon in South Korea.

Sept. 19, 2014: The 17th Asian Games (XVII Asiad) open in Incheon. A full team of athletes from the DPRK is among the 45 states participating.

Sept. 23, 2014: President Park Geun-hye makes a keynote [speech](#) at the UN Climate Summit in New York. She criticizes North Korea for its record on nuclear weapons and human rights.

Sept. 23, 2014: ROK Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se is among the speakers at the first-ever ministerial [forum](#) held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), organized by the US. The topic of the brief half-hour meeting is North Korean human rights abuses, which Yun, US Secretary of State John Kerry, and others criticize.

Sept. 23, 2014: Both [North](#) and [South](#) Korea, separately, say there are no plans for their two foreign ministers to meet while both are in New York for the UNGA.

Sept. 27, 2014: Also in New York for the UNGA (which he [addresses](#) the same day), DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Su [tells](#) the *Voice of America* that the South had not suggested meeting, adding: “Even if it did, I do not intend to meet Minister Yun given his behavior.”

Sept. 27, 2014: *KCNA* [reports](#) that the DPRK athletics team at Incheon held an “evening longing for respected Marshal Kim Jong Un,” with songs and speeches pining for the Leader.

Sept. 27, 2014: The Policy Department of the DPRK National Defence Commission (NDC) strongly [attacks](#) President Park for various comments during her recent US trip.

Oct. 4, 2014: The Asian Games conclude in Incheon. The closing ceremony is unexpectedly attended by three of North Korea’s most senior leaders: Vice-Marshal Han Pyong So, Choe Ryong Hae, and Kim Yang Gon. Meeting South Korean ministers (but not President Park), it is agreed to hold high-level talks within a month. The visitors fly home the same day.

Oct. 6, 2014: MOU [says](#) that despite North Korea’s sudden conciliatory gesture in sending a high-level delegation, it has no plan to lift economic sanctions imposed in May 2010 after the *Cheonan* sinking: “Our government's basic position is that the May 24th Measures can be lifted only after North Korea takes a responsible step that the South Korean people accept.”

Oct. 7, 2014: ROK foreign minister [queries](#) claims by the US-based Institute for Science and International Security that North Korea has temporarily shut down its plutonium-producing nuclear reactor at Yongbyon.

Oct. 7, 2014: MOU [says](#) that the North’s delegation paid part of the charges for its stay in the Incheon athletes’ village before returning home, and that the South will cover the rest from its official Inter-Korean Cooperation Fund (IKCF).

Oct. 7, 2014: ROK Defense Ministry [tells](#) a parliamentary audit that “after declaring 2015 the year of completing unification, North Korea has been prepared for full-scale wars” (sic).

Oct. 7, 2014: ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [report](#) that patrol boats of the two Koreas’ navies exchanged fire for 10 minutes at 0950 near Yeonpyeong Island. The South fired back, and the Northern boat retreated. Neither side sustained casualties or damage.

Oct. 9, 2014: Rep. Yoon Sang-hyun of the ruling conservative Saenuri Party [says](#) the total area of the five main concentration camps in North Korea's gulag is 1,248 sq km, more than twice the size of Seoul (605 sq km). The notorious Yodok alone covers 552 sq km.

Oct. 10, 2014: The two Koreas [exchange](#) machine-gun fire after the North apparently tries to shoot down propaganda balloons. Spent rounds are found near Yeoncheon in the South, which fires back after issuing warnings. No casualties are reported, or intended.

Oct. 13, 2014: The South proposes Oct. 30 as the date for high-level inter-Korean talks.

Oct. 14, 2014: KCNA [reports](#) visits by Kim Jong Un to the newly built Wisong Scientists Residential District and the Natural Energy Institute of the State Academy of Sciences. This is the DPRK leader's first public appearance for six weeks, since Sept. 3.

Oct. 16, 2014: KCNA [releases](#) an "open report" on "the whole story of how the north-south emergency contact in Panmunjom on Wednesday ended without any fruit."

Oct. 16, 2014: MOU [says](#) it will pay 550 million won (\$520,000) or some 70 percent of North Korea's costs for participating in the Incheon Asiad. The North already paid \$191,682.

Oct. 18-19, 2014: On consecutive days, near Cheolwon and then Paju in the central and western zones respectively, groups of KPA [soldiers](#) approach the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) which bisects the DMZ. They retreat when the South fires warning shots; on Oct. 19 the North returns fire.

Oct. 20, 2014: MND says Pyongyang sent a telephone message claiming its DMZ patrols are routine and legitimate, and threatening reaction if Seoul fires at them again.

Oct. 21, 2014: Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-Jae [tells](#) the [South] Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation: "If the South and the North hold talks, almost all issues can be resolved." Pyongyang has not responded to Seoul's proposal to meet on Oct. 30.

Oct. 22, 2014: Two ROK business organizations involved in inter-Korean commerce [call](#) on the South to lift its sanctions. One says that 2,000 Southern firms used to do business with the North, "but now it is even impossible to exactly determine who is still afloat."

Oct. 23, 2014: South Korea's Foreign Ministry (MOFA) says it has [invited](#) North Korea to an upcoming (Oct. 28-30) forum in Seoul to discuss and advance President Park's Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI). Pyongyang does not respond, much less attend.

Oct. 25, 2014: Ignoring warnings from North Korea and objections by local residents in the Paju area, who initially block their passage with tractors, anti-DPRK activists again [send](#) balloons carrying critical leaflets across the DMZ into North Korea

Nov. 6, 2014: North's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland (CPRF) [says](#) that Park Geun-hye's plan to unveil a new charter for reunification in 2015 "demonstrates the South's pursuit of unification by absorption."

Nov. 11, 2014: MOU [says](#) North Korea has asked for Ebola detection devices at the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC). Other foreign visitors to the DPRK must serve a 21-day quarantine, even diplomats. South agrees to lend three thermal image scanners for the purpose.

Nov. 12, 2014: CPRF [attacks](#) the South's *Hoguk* war games – the largest ever with 330,000 troops, running Nov. 10-22 – as a prelude to war and proof that Seoul does not want dialogue.

Nov. 12, 2014: The New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), South Korea's liberal main opposition party, [moves](#) a bill that would require cross-border leafleteers to obtain prior government permission.

Nov. 18, 2014: Hyun Jeong-eun, chairwoman of Hyundai Group, [returns](#) from Mt. Kumgang after visiting to mark the 16th anniversary of Hyundai's tours there, suspended since 2008.

Nov. 26, 2014: MOU [says](#) the South returned 10 Northern fishermen and their boat found drifting with engine trouble near Dokdo on Nov. 23.

Nov. 26, 2014: Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-Jae [urges](#) the ROK National Assembly to pass a bill on North Korea's human rights abuses to create a legal basis for "systemic" efforts to address the problem, and give a ray of hope to North Korean people.

Dec. 4, 2014: (North) Korean Council of Religionists (KCR) says a [plan](#) by the Christian Council of Korea (CCK) to erect a Christmas-tree shaped tower on top of Aegibong, a front-line hill in Gimpo, west of Seoul, aims to use religion to fuel confrontation. A previous tower which stood for 43 years was taken down as unsafe by the ROK military, but on Dec. 2 Seoul gave permission for another. In the event the CCK decides not to go ahead.

Dec. 16, 2014: MOU [says](#) North Korea has refused to accept a faxed letter protesting its scrapping a 5 percent annual wage rise cap and other unilateral revisions of working conditions for around 53,000 employees at the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC).

Dec. 19, 2014: The ROK MOFA [welcomes](#) the plenary UNGA's adoption Dec. 18 of a strongly worded resolution on DPRK human rights, including encouraging the Security Council to consider referring the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Dec. 19, 2014: In an unprecedented ruling, the ROK Constitutional Court [orders](#) (by 8-1) the dissolution of the small far-left Unified Progressive Party (UPP).

Dec. 23, 2014: MOFA [says](#) it expects the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)'s new field office, dedicated to monitoring human rights abuses in North Korea, to open in Seoul in the first quarter of 2015.

Dec. 24, 2014: Two ROK delegations, from Hyundai Group and the Kim Dae Jung Peace Center (KDJPC) visit Kaesong, invited by Kim Yang Gon to thank them for a wreath in memory of Kim Jong Il delivered a week earlier (Kim's deputy Won Dong Yon had thanked them at the time).

Dec. 29, 2014: Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-jae [announces](#) that South Korea has sent a faxed message to the North proposing minister-level talks in January, without preconditions.

Dec. 30, 2014: [Uriminzokkiri](#), a website run by the North's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), [blasts](#) a recent trilateral intelligence-sharing pact between South Korea, Japan, and the US as a "military provocation" aimed at "invading our country."

Dec. 31, 2014: MOU [says](#) that in 2015 it will provide North Korea with \$620,000 in aid via the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), as part of a \$4.17 million technical assistance and training program ongoing since 2006.

Dec. 31, 2014: In a New Year video message uploaded to *YouTube* and also posted on her [Facebook](#) page, President Park [says](#) she will "open the path toward unification by laying substantial and specific groundwork [and] ending a seven-decades-long division."

Jan. 1, 2015: Kim Jong Un says in his New Year [address](#): "... it is possible to resume the suspended high-level contacts and hold sectoral talks if the south Korean authorities are sincere in their stand towards improving inter-Korean relations ... And there is no reason why we should not hold a summit meeting if the atmosphere and environment for it are created."

Jan. 2, 2015: President Park [tells](#) a meeting of top officials that "unification is not idealism or a dream," and says her government "will try its utmost on practical preparations needed for tangible and real [unification] to be realized." ROK officials cautiously assess the DPRK's offer as positive.