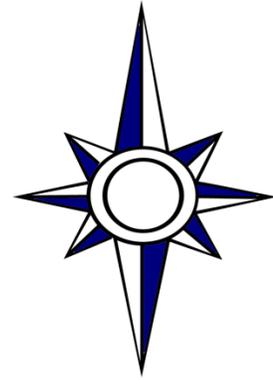


Comparative Connections

A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



South Korea-North Korea Relations: A Toxic Nuclear Tocsin

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The middle four months of 2016 were among the bleakest for inter-Korean relations in the 15 years that this writer has been covering that often rebarbative relationship for *Comparative Connections*. Indeed, as of early fall one might well pose the question: What relationship? Formally, matters remain as they were in our last update, published in May: frozen.

Or perhaps that is the wrong metaphor. The past quarter brought numerous fiery threats from Pyongyang, extreme even by their own standards, to nuke or otherwise blitz South Korea's President Park Geun-hye as well as the Blue House (Cheongwadae); not to mention the US and points further afield, from Guam to Manhattan. An accelerated flurry of ballistic missile launches over the past six months, followed on Sept. 9 by North Korea's second nuclear test this year, raised fears that Kim Jong Un was speeding up development of his strike capacity, such that one day such wild braggadocio might be a real menace, and not just empty bluster.

Nonetheless, as German sociologist Georg Simmel noted a century ago, conflict is a form of sociation. As of now the Koreans are not talking to each other, only at each other – or shouting, in the North's case. Yet this too needs reporting, and parsing. In fact North Korea did make a few new [proposals](#) for dialogue during the past four months; though it can hardly have expected them to be taken seriously, when the tone and content of most of its other statements – not to mention its actions on the WMD front – contradicted them so violently.

In this and other respects Kim Jong Un remains harder to fathom, in terms of his tactical or strategic goals, than were his father Kim Jong Il and grandfather Kim Il Sung before him. For South Korea, as for all North Korea's interlocutors (actual or potential), the Kim Jong Un factor adds an extra layer of anxiety to the already complex and concerning challenges posed by the DPRK. Given the latest Kim's youth – now [confirmed](#) by his aunt as 32: even younger than Kim Il Sung was when the USSR installed him in Pyongyang in 1945 – he could in principle be around for decades, despite wishful thinking to the contrary (discussed below).

Pyongyang goes ballistic

Being in the front line, South Korea was especially exercised by one notable trend this year: a marked acceleration in the pace of North Korea's ballistic missile (BM) tests. Japan is no less

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concerned, given its proximity and being the direction in which many recent BMs have been launched. Citing unspecified ROK government sources, the Aug. 19 *Nikkei Asian Review* [noted](#) that the DPRK carried out 16 BM tests during Kim Jong II's 17-year reign (1994-2011), averaging approximately one per year. But his son has already more than doubled that total in less than five years in power, presiding – often in person – over 33 BM launches so far. With striking defiance, 17 of those have occurred in the six months since March 2, when UN Security Council Resolution 2270 imposed the UN's toughest sanctions yet on the DPRK, while reiterating the ban on Pyongyang conducting any BM-related activities already mandated by four previous UNSC resolutions: nos. 1718 (2006), 1874 (2009), 2087 and 2094 (both 2013). A useful summary of each of these, including UNSCR 2270, can be found [here](#).

By early September the *Nikkei's* total was out of date. August 24 saw what outside experts reckoned was North Korea's first successful submarine missile (SLBM) launch, after several duds (some claimed as successes). This flew 500 kilometers, landing unprecedentedly inside Japan's air defense identification zone (ADIZ) – to alarm and anger in Tokyo. With what might be considered equal-opportunities offensiveness, less than a fortnight later it was Beijing's turn to fume. On Sept. 5, Kim Jong Un thumbed his nose at the G20 Summit, then being hosted by China in Hangzhou, with a volley of three missiles. These traveled some 1,000km, again eastward and again breaching Japan's ADIZ. The *coup de grace*, just four days afterward, was the DPRK's fifth nuclear test, discussed at the end of this article.

On the missile front, a UNSC Presidential [Statement](#) – issued with rare swiftness just one day after the latest BM test on Sept. 6 – not only condemned the DPRK's “flagrant disregard” of repeated UN censures but gave a full tally showing just how intense this year's BM flurry has been. It cited launches – some being multiple – on April 15, 23, 27 and 28; May 31; June 21; July 9 and 18; August 2 and 23 (*sic*: either an error, or US time) and Sept. 5.

Might Seoul go nuclear?

As South Koreans anxiously contemplated this unprecedented level of BM activity by the North, their reactions and the lessons they drew varied. Unsurprisingly, if worryingly to the ROK's allies and those keen to uphold nonproliferation principles, some concluded that the only way for Seoul to defend itself was to follow Pyongyang down the nuclear road. A few Southern politicians have long taken that view, notably [Chung Mong-joon](#); a billionaire Hyundai scion, long-serving lawmaker, sometime ruling party chairman, and former presidential candidate. Chung [reiterated](#) his stance after North Korea's January nuclear test, and he was [not alone](#): [polls](#) suggest that over half of South Koreans agree. Such calls can be expected to grow in the wake of September's second nuclear test this year. Even before 2016's events, a timely [study](#) by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)'s Mark Fitzpatrick of what he called *Asia's Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan* found that “if a new nuclear-armed state were to emerge in Northeast Asia, it would most likely be the Republic of Korea.”

Fortunately, there are also less knee-jerk reactions. The leading conservative Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* is a case in point. Its influential chairman Hong Seok-hyun, who served as ROK ambassador to the US under the liberal Roh Moo-hyun, once wrote an [article](#) with the arresting title “How Would the Buddha Handle North Korea?” On Aug. 27, soon after North Korea's

SLBM test, the *JoongAng* published an [editorial](#) bluntly headlined “Sanctions haven’t worked.” Criticizing claims that the Northern regime is shaky as “naïve wishful thinking” – more on this below – the paper called for a two-track policy: not only sanctions, but also diplomatic efforts to “draw North Korea to the negotiating table.” Similarly Kim Young-hie, the *JoongAng*’s [veteran](#) editor-at-large, wrote a [column](#) on July 4 – was the date coincidence? – headlined “Say no to Thaad.” (The THAAD issue, so critical currently, belongs chiefly under US-Korea relations and will not be covered here.) However, the jolt of September’s second DPRK nuclear test produced a change of tune. A Sept. 10 *JoongAng* [editorial](#), headlined “Bring US nukes back,” urged that “Seoul should persuade Washington to redeploy tactical nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula until the North Korean nuclear threat is removed,” adding, ominously, that “The South Korean president as well as the US president need to have the power to authorize the use of such weapons.” These debates will intensify going forward.

Gutter politics

Needless to say the DPRK’s bellicose rhetoric continued to scale fresh heights of wildness, while its personal insults of the ROK President Park plumbed new depths. Since *Comparative Connections* is in part a journal of record, in the past we have felt bound to report and indeed reproduce this garbage; it needs to be known. But of late the volume is so overwhelming that we must be selective. Thus searching *NKNews*’s invaluable [KCNA Watch yields](#) six recent statements where Pyongyang media called Park a prostitute, among many other rude names.

Suffice it to reproduce in full one such representative [diatribe](#), carried by four separate North Korean publications on Aug. 26 or 27. Comment would be superfluous, except to note that the name of the DPRK body issuing this vituperation is beyond parody:

Spokesman for National Reconciliation Council Calls for Eliminating Park Geun Hye

Pyongyang, August 26 (KCNA) -- A spokesman for the National Reconciliation Council Friday made public a statement to denounce Park Geun Hye regime of south Korea for making desperate efforts like a rabid dog to hurt the fellow countrymen in the north after being taken aback by the news about the successful test-fire of strategic submarine-launched ballistic missile.

As soon as she heard the news on August 24 Park appeared at a frontline unit of the puppet army, being stunned by it, and cried out for a “resolute counteraction”, the statement said, and went on:

Intolerable is that traitor Park Geun Hye dared hurt the dignity of the supreme leadership of the DPRK, a hideous provocation, in the wake of her nonsensical talk about “economic difficulties in the north” and “its vacillation.”

This is treason that deserves punishment by Heaven as it is an intolerable insult to the service personnel and people of the DPRK.

The powerful revolutionary Paektusan army is waiting for the moment when the final order is issued to blow up Chongwadae, with the will to eliminate the mad woman of Chongwadae working hard to get the sun eclipsed by the palm.

It is the unanimous demand of all Koreans and the order of the nation's history to cut off the windpipe of Park Geun Hye at an early date as she wags her tongue nonstop, not content with her desperate efforts to create conflicts and antagonism within the nation wherever she goes and to inflict misfortune and disaster of a nuclear war on the nation.

Traitor Park Geun Hye should bear in mind that she can never escape the miserable fate under all Koreans' curse and denunciation though she goes frantic to get rid of destruction with impudent sophism and confrontation.

All Koreans aspiring after national reconciliation and unity should beat hard and bury Park, traitor for all ages, and preserve peace and security on the Korean peninsula and bring earlier the country's reunification.

Collapsism redux

One sympathizes with Park Geun-hye as the victim of such filth, and in having to deal with a regime so infuriating and intractable. Nonetheless, hard questions must be asked about her handling of North Korea. How did things get quite this bad for a president who started out preaching what she called "Trustpolitik" with Pyongyang? Is current policy working? And is the current ROK government's assessment and treatment of the DPRK the only one possible?

Because this is our job, *Comparative Connections* has tracked the ups and downs of inter-Korean relations minutely ever since Park took office in 2013 – just as we did for all three of her predecessors since 2000: Kim Dae-jung (in office 1998-2003), Roh Moo-hyun (2003-08) and Lee Myung-bak (2008-13). Frankly, of all these, Park has been the hardest to read. As described in detail in past issues of this journal, it was difficult to see how the various elements in her approach to the North constituted a coherent whole. In particular, the outreach strand – Trustpolitik, or 2014's Dresden Declaration – jarred with her growing enthusiasm for unification, conceived as a happy event rather than an endeavor in partnership between the two existing Korean states. While making no excuse for the North's behavior or language, it seems likely that Pyongyang has found Park hard to read as well. What does she really want?

All that is history as 2016 has brought a new, harsh clarity. One may wonder, as we did in our last update, exactly why a leader who early in her term worked patiently and successfully to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), after the North withdrew its workforce, would summarily shut down this last flickering candle of North-South cooperation. But the deed is done. Park has finally had it with Kim Jong Un, and the sentiment is mutual.

Yet this bleak immediate vista is in no sense the last word in, or for, inter-Korean relations. As noted, Kim may be around for a while yet – though Park begs to differ. After a recent high-level defection, on Aug. 22 she **told** her National Security Council that "as the North Korean regime has been repressing its people with its continued reign of terror while ignoring the livelihoods of its citizens, even the loyalty of elites has begun to crumble ... As signs of serious cracks emerge, the likelihood of unrest in the regime is increasing."

Well, maybe. The DPRK's demise has been confidently predicted by many – including this writer, in the past – for a quarter century since communist rule collapsed in the USSR and

Eastern Europe. Not a few saw German reunification as a model for Korea. One suspects that is Park's underlying view – and that the North suspects this is her view too.

Collapse can never be ruled out, and Kim's rule is indeed harsh. But there is a risk of wishful thinking here. The DPRK has been stable under harsh rule for decades, including far worse times than now (e.g. the “Arduous March” of the 1995-98 famine). While the defection of Thae Yong Ho from the DPRK Embassy in London is notable, it is premature to proclaim this as heralding a wider trend. Other senior defections are rumored, but none is confirmed (they may of course be being kept secret to protect the persons involved, but who knows?)

Similarly, regular ROK reports of DPRK purges cannot be taken as gospel. Most recently, the Unification Ministry (MOU) claimed on Aug. 31 that Kim Yong Jin, the North's vice-premier for education since 2012, had been executed, supposedly for showing disrespect by slumping in his seat at the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA, the rubber-stamp parliament) on June 29. Intriguingly for inter-Korean relations, MOU spokesman Jeong Joon-hee added that Kim Yong Chol, the hardline general now handling South Korea as head of the United Front Department of the ruling Workers' Party (WPK), was one of two Party officials recently forced to undergo “revolutionary measures” – a month on a farm; it could be worse – as punishment for his “overbearing demeanor.” (The US Director of National Intelligence can attest to that; James Clapper has [spoken](#) of ill-tempered finger-jabbing at an unlikely dinner he had in November 2014 with Kim, at that time head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB) of the Korean People's Army (KPA), and as such presumptively responsible for the then recent cyber-hack of Sony Pictures. Clapper had [flown](#) to Pyongyang to collect two US detainees, Kenneth Bae and Matthew Todd Miller.)

These rumors [may or may not be true](#). (Execution for bad posture sounds extreme, even for North Korea.) For obvious reasons, South Korean intelligence is better placed than most to probe the North's secrets. Yet they do get it wrong sometimes, a notorious recent case being former KPA Chief of the General Staff (CGS) Ri Yong Gil; in February, Seoul said Ri had been executed for corruption, but he [reappeared](#) in a new post at the WPK Congress in May. No less importantly, Seoul has an axe to grind. The ROK government is in no sense a [neutral](#) source. What it chooses to reveal – or allege – about the DPRK at any given time has to be seen in the context of its overall policy toward the North, and the state of their relationship.

Not so crazy

There are also issues of judgment here. President Park reacted to September's nuclear test by accusing Kim Jong Un of “maniacal recklessness.” It is hard to argue with reckless – but is Kim really crazy? That is a frequent trope in Western media coverage of the DPRK, especially the more tabloid elements for whom “mad dictator” is an easy, lazy cliché, endlessly trotted out. Yet the opposite may equally be true. Far from insane, what Kim Jong Un is doing may be [rational and calculated](#) in terms of his regime's perception of its own interests.

Sad to say, if loyalty is crumbling anywhere in Korea, it is in Seoul rather than Pyongyang. Regardless of whether Park Geun-hye is calling the North right (and I fear she is not), her own days in power are numbered thanks to the South's relentless democratic calendar; five years,

then you're out. This renders all ROK presidents lame ducks in their final year. For Park this has come sooner, since in-fighting in her conservative Saenuri party saw it lose its majority in the National Assembly in parliamentary elections in April. Separate presidential elections are due in December 2017, and Park's successor will take over Feb. 25, 2018.

Whoever that successor is, he or she is likely to try to reengage North Korea. If it is one of several possible liberal contenders – such as Moon Jae-in, who ran a close race against Park in 2012 – then all are committed to such outreach in varying degrees. Or even if Saenuri retains power, it is worth noting that the [front-runner](#) in opinion polls, though formally [undeclared](#), is none other than Ban Ki-moon. Now courted by the conservative camp, the UN secretary general served as foreign minister under the liberal Roh Moo-hyun during 2004-06. Right now he is performe in condemnatory mode over the latest nuclear test, but when he dealt with the North in the Roh era and in his UN role (which ends this year) he has often expressed interest in being a peacemaker on his native peninsula, though he has never quite made it to Pyongyang.

The wider political fallout from North Korea's latest nuclear test will take time to emerge. For the new hawkish conventional wisdom that has taken root in Seoul and Washington this year, the only solution is to punish Pyongyang more – or try to. Yun Byung-se, President Park's long-serving foreign minister, [called](#) on Sept. 10 for further sanctions and pressure to apply “unbearable pain on the North to leave [it] no choice but to change.” That is easier said than done. A day earlier, the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that “if the North harms us with nuclear arms we will directly target, punish and retaliate against the North Korean leadership, including its war command,” adding that the South can hit targets as small as a window.

Ashes to ashes

Escalating such rhetoric, on Sept. 11 South Korea uttered threats so specific and lurid as to make headline news even on the UK's *BBC Radio 2*, whose main fare is AOR not politics. In language the like of which this writer cannot recall from Seoul before, under the headline “S. Korea unveils plan to raze Pyongyang in case of signs of nuclear attack,” the quasi-official news agency *Yonhap*, quoting (as so often – too often) an anonymous source, claimed that the South “has already developed a plan to annihilate ... Pyongyang through intensive bombing in case the North shows any signs of a nuclear attack.” The military source spelled this out, “Every Pyongyang district, particularly where the North Korean leadership is possibly hidden, will be completely destroyed by ballistic missiles and high-explosive shells as soon as the North shows any signs of using a nuclear weapon. In other words, the North's capital city will be reduced to ashes and removed from the map.”

This was glossed as the content of a plan called Korea Massive Punishment & Retaliation (KMPR), disclosed to the National Assembly by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) after the North's nuclear test. For good measure, *Yonhap* cited another source as saying the ROK military has recently launched a special operational unit “dedicated to targeting the North Korean leadership and launching retaliatory attacks on them.”

Threats of indiscriminate preemptive strikes, reducing whole cities to ashes: these are the dreary tropes of North Korea's shrill and overblown rhetoric. It is truly depressing to find South Korea

– though sorely provoked – responding in kind, even verbally. One wonders who in Seoul thought this was a good idea, and how come. This can only crank up tension further.

With any luck the current tensions will pass, as other such moments have. If Park Geun-hye will not reconsider her approach – though who knows what opportunism she may be tempted to if the North made a halfway serious offer – her successor surely will. Tightening the screws is not succeeding, and there are few screws left. Dealing with the DPRK means finding the right mix of stick and carrot. Dropping the carrot entirely was never going to work, just as dropping the stick never could. Fresh diplomatic initiatives are all the more urgent after the North's latest nuclear test. China has always called for such an approach, and debate is raging in policy circles in Washington. South Korea too needs to honestly re-evaluate whether its current policies are effective, and what might work better. The state that formally claims legitimate sway over the whole peninsula needs to be a leader, rather than playing catch-up.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations May – August 2016

May 1, 2016: A month after the latest bout of jamming of Global Positioning System (GPS) signals, blamed on North Korea, South Korea [says](#) it will revive a plan to develop a backup system less vulnerable to interference.

May 2, 2016: The ROK Ministry of Unification (MOU) [says](#) South Korea is “on alert for the possibility that the North may try to abduct our citizens or conduct terrorist acts abroad”, in reprisal for the defection – which Pyongyang claims is an abduction – of its 13 restaurant workers from Ningbo (hereafter the Ningbo 13) in China in April.

May 5, 2016: With a detailed [graphic](#) comparing the two Koreas on 22 separate indicators, *The Economist* considers unification prospects. It costs this (conservatively) at \$1 trillion.

May 6-9, 2016: Seventh Congress of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) is held in Pyongyang: the first such of its kind since the Sixth Congress in 1980. Kim Jong Un gets a new title as WPK chairman.

May 7, 2016: Headline in *Rodong Sinmun*, the WPK daily, [reads](#): “Park Geun Hye Group Had Better Stop Recklessly Grumbling about DPRK's Nuclear Deterrence Any Longer: CPRK Spokesman.” CPRK is the North's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea.

May 8, 2016: *Rodong Sinmun* [quotes](#) Kim Jong Un as saying: “Both the North and the South should respect each other and open a new page ... as partners in unification. [They] should alleviate the current military tensions and resolve all matters through communication and negotiation.” In the first instance, the two sides' militaries should hold talks.

May 8, 2016: MOU [dismisses](#) Kim Jong Un's call for North-South talks as “merely [a] propaganda drive with no sincerity” (the English is by *Yonhap*).

May 9, 2016: South Korean companies that had invested in the KIC, and some 50 of their business affiliates and partners, file suit with the ROK Constitutional Court, claiming that the zone's closure by Seoul was illegal. Yonhap [quotes](#) them as saying: "Our own government violated our property rights by shutting down the Kaesong complex with no legal basis."

May 10, 2016: Symantec [reports](#) that Microsoft has patched a vulnerability issue in Internet Explorer recently used in cyberattacks targeted on South Korea, where almost everyone uses that browser rather than others. (Note: The link is strictly for the technically minded.)

May 12, 2016: MOU's annual white paper on its work in 2015 [reveals](#), *inter alia*, that 1,276 DPRK defectors reached the ROK last year, the smallest figure since 2001. Southern aid to the North "soared" to 25.4 billion won (\$21.8 million), a six-year high. Cumulative output at the Kaesong zone in its eleven years of existence totaled \$3.23 billion.

May 12, 2016: Relatives of the Ningbo 13 demand their return on [CNN](#). One woman says: "Even now my sister is suffering in the accursed South Korea, starving and unconscious.... Those South Korean puppet criminals, I want to tear them to pieces!" Seoul has rebuffed Pyongyang's charges that some of the group are on hunger strike or in solitary confinement.

May 9, 2016: South Korean companies who had invested in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), together with some 50 of their business affiliates and partners, file suit with the ROK Constitutional Court, claiming that the zone's closure by Seoul was illegal. Yonhap [quotes](#) them as saying: "Our own government violated our property rights by shutting down the Kaesong complex [in February] with no legal basis."

May 16, 2016: South Korea's foreign ministry (MFA) [calls](#) a meeting of major tour firms and urges them to discourage travel to parts of China bordering North Korea, citing safety fears. A day later MFA says two ROK citizens are [missing](#) in the border area.

May 17, 2016: Seoul High Court [upholds](#) a three year jail sentence on a South Korean man named only as Park, convicted of planning to kill the senior North Korean defector Hwang Jang Yop. Hwang died of heart failure in 2010 before the plot could be carried out.

May 23, 2016: South Korea's Defense Ministry (MND) [rejects](#) the North's proposal of inter-Korean military talks as "a bogus peace offensive for bogus peace that lacks sincerity", since it does not mention the nuclear issue. MOU chimes in: "Now is not the time for dialogue."

May 26, 2016: Institute for Unification Education (IUE), an affiliate of MOU, [says](#) it has indefinitely postponed or diverted some 30 of its regular tours to parts of China which border North Korea, following an ROK government advisory warning of terrorism and kidnap risks.

May 26, 2016: South Korea's defense (MND) and technology (ICT) ministries [say](#) they are discussing the creation of a cybersecurity reserve force in case of a national network emergency.

May 27, 2016: Kim Jong Un's maternal aunt Ko Yong Suk, who looked after him during his Swiss schooldays, gives her first [interview](#) since she defected to the US with her husband in 1998. *Inter alia* she reveals that her nephew is 32 (born in 1984), not 33 as hitherto thought.

June 2, 2016: MOU [confirms](#) that three more ex-staffers at DPRK restaurants in China have recently defected and reached Seoul. Unlike for the Ningbo 13, no further details are given, but the two are thought to have been working in Xian.

June 13, 2016: South Korea's National Police Agency (NPA) [claims](#) that from July 2014 through Feb. 2016 North Korea hacked two major chaebol, SK and Hanjin. 42,608 documents were stolen and later deleted, including the wing design of the *US F-15* jet fighter (made by Hanjin's affiliate Korean Air). Altogether 140,000 computers at 160 Southern firms were [hacked](#), with malicious code planted in a long-term plan to launch a massive cyberattack. Nonetheless the NPA concludes that overall ROK security was not compromised.

June 15, 2016: Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), affiliated to the ROK Ministry of Trade, Industry & Energy (MOTIE), [reports](#) that North Korea's trade fell by 18 percent in 2015, ending five straight years of growth. The main cause is falling prices for coal and other key exports to China, by far the DPRK's largest market. However these figures exclude inter-Korean trade, which despite comprising solely the KIC [bucked](#) the trend: rising 15.8 percent to \$2.71 billion in its final full year before Seoul shut down the zone this Feb.

June 19, 2016: Meeting fishermen on the ROK's northwestern border island of Yeonpyeong, Yoo Jeong-bok, mayor of Incheon, [pledges](#) to head off illicit Chinese fishing by pushing for a "system under which our fishermen receive fish from North Koreans in (waters between the two Koreas) and sell them (in the South or elsewhere)."

June 21, 2016: A closed-door hearing at Seoul Central District Court, in a *habeas corpus* case brought by the left-leaning Lawyers for a Democratic Society (Minbyun), is [suspended](#) when the Ningbo 13 all fail to appear, despite a [subpoena](#) to do so. Counsel for the NIS say they refused to attend because of fear for their families' safety in North Korea; adding that the former waitresses had applied for ROK citizenship, and were granted this on June 3.

June 29, 2016: Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), the DPRK rubber-stamp parliament, holds its [annual one-day session](#). The National Defense Commission (NDC) is replaced as the top executive body by a new State Affairs Commission (SAC). The Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK) is replaced by the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRC). It is unclear what this change in nomenclature portends.

July 4, 2016: *JoongAng Daily* reports that [malaria](#) rates in South Korea, near the border with the North, rose 80 percent from 2013 to 2015. A joint inter-Korean anti-malaria project had seen cases in Gyeonggi province fall from 1,007 in 2007 to 490 in 2008 and 382 in 2011, when Seoul ended support from this program. Since then the rate has gone up again. (NB: A graphic in this report in fact shows a less clear linear relationship than the article implies.)

July 6, 2016: DPRK [offers](#) a new, albeit tough, five-point plan for denuclearization (not only its own). This is widely [ignored](#), being overshadowed by the US levying its first ever sanctions (a) on Kim Jong Un personally and (b) on human rights rather than WMD grounds.

July 19, 2016: ROK government source [says](#) that, for the first time in 16 years, on July 15 Radio Pyongyang broadcast mysterious numerical codes. In the past these were thought to be instructions to agents, but this time some experts [reckon](#) the North is just sowing confusion. Similar signals have also emanated from Seoul, as recently as 2011; the NIS has no comment.

July 22, 2016: Bank of Korea (BOK) publishes its annual [estimates](#) on North Korea's economy. It reckons Northern GDP fell 1.1 percent in 2015 from 2014, with shrinkage in all sectors except construction. Total DPRK output was a mere 2.2 percent of the ROK's; per capita gap was 22:1. The South's total trade (the numbers here are known, but exclude inter-Korean commerce) was 154 times greater than the North's.

July 27, 2016: The ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) [reveal](#) that on July 22 guard troops near Gimpo collected "scores of tightly air-filled vinyl bags carrying North Korean leaflets" from the Han River. The "[shoddily printed](#)" leaflets celebrated the North's "victory" in the Korean War, and threatened to attack the South with *Musudan* missiles. This is the first time the DPRK has sent water-borne propaganda, rather than by air.

Aug. 9, 2016: The world swoons at a smiling "[selfie](#)" of two young female Korean gymnasts competing at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro: the South's Lee Eun-ju and the North's Hong Un Jong. (No prizes for guessing whose phone it was.)

Aug. 16, 2016: ROK [media](#) quote Brazil's former ambassador in Pyongyang as contradicting official DPRK [claims](#) that Choe Ryong Hae, one of Kim Jong Un's closest aides, who visited Brazil for the Rio Olympics during Aug. 4-10, met and talked with Brazil's acting President Michel Temer on Aug. 5. Brazilian sources deny that any such meeting ever took place.

Aug. 17, 2016: The *Hankyoreh* [reports](#) that the Ningbo 13 have been "released into South Korean society" from the NIS Defector Protection Center. Amid claims from Pyongyang that they were being held under duress, the left-leaning Seoul daily had repeatedly raised concerns about the NIS's refusal to let them meet the press or be interviewed by independent lawyers.

Aug. 17, 2016: MOU [reveals](#) that Thae Yong Ho, a long-serving DPRK diplomat in London, has defected to the ROK with his family. The story is widely [carried](#) by global media.

Aug. 20, 2016: North Korean media [denounce](#) Thae Yong Ho – not named, but [referred to](#) as a "human scum" and "the above-said *bete noire*," alleging that he was under investigation in Pyongyang for embezzlement, selling secrets and "rape of a minor."

Aug. 22, 2016: *Ulchi Freedom Guardian*, the annual summer joint US-ROK military exercise, [begins](#), continuing through Sept. 2. As always DPRK media complain, continuing even [after](#) the maneuvers end, that this is a disguised rehearsal for invasion.

Aug. 23, 2016: The NIS [claims](#) North Korea recently ordered the adult children of diplomats posted abroad to return home, but says this was not a factor in Thae Yong Ho's defection.

Aug. 24, 2016: South Korean vessel [rescues](#) a North Korean clutching a styrofoam float near Yeonpyeong island. Three more Northerners defected in a fishing boat earlier in August.

Aug. 27, 2016: In an [editorial](#) headlined "Sanctions haven't worked," the *JoongAng Ilbo* – widely regarded as South Korea's leading newspaper – criticizes claims that the Northern regime is shaky as "naïve wishful thinking." It calls for a two-track policy: not only sanctions, but also diplomatic efforts to "draw North Korea to the negotiating table."

Aug. 30, 2016: Visiting Kazakhstan, ROK Unification minister Hong Yong-pyo [claims](#) that sanctions are squeezing Kim Jong Un's ability to raise the funds he need to secure his rule.

Aug. 31, 2016: Citing "a Seoul official", *Yonhap* [claims](#) that Kim Yong Jin, North Korea's vice premier for education, was executed by firing squad in July for slouching at June's SPA meeting; and that Kim Yong Chol, Pyongyang's point man on South Korea, received a month of revolutionary re-education on a farm for his overbearing attitude and abuse of power. Some experts cast [doubt](#) on the genesis, motives and reliability of such announcements by the ROK.

Sept. 1, 2016: *Yonhap* [reports](#) "a source" – just that; no further identification – as claiming that a diplomat engaged in trade activities at the DPRK consulate general in Vladivostok defected to Seoul in August, bringing his family and "huge holdings of foreign currency."

Sept. 9, 2016: DPRK conducts its fifth [nuclear test](#) since 2006 and its second this year. Pyongyang media exult; Seoul, and the rest of the world, sharply condemn the action.

Sept. 11, 2016: A dozen South Korean security and nuclear experts [launch](#) a new think-tank to discuss how the ROK could be armed with nuclear weapons.

Sept. 11, 2016: *Yonhap* [quotes](#) "a military source" as claiming, in lurid tones more usually associated with the North, that South Korea "has already developed a plan to annihilate ... Pyongyang through intensive bombing in case the North shows any signs of a nuclear attack the North's capital city will be reduced to ashes and removed from the map."

Sept. 12, 2016: At a fractious two-hour meeting with heads of the three main political parties – "Leaders snarl at each other at the Blue House" is the *JoongAng*'s [headline](#) – Park Geun-hye rejects new Minjoo Party chairwoman Choo Mi-ae's proposal that she send a special envoy to Pyongyang. Park Jie-won, acting head of the People's Party, says that unlike Park's government and the ruling party, the two liberal opposition parties believe "sanctions and dialogue must be implemented simultaneously." They also oppose deployment of THAAD.