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NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

HAS KIM JONG UN MADE SUNSHINE MOONSHINE?

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Despite dreaming that the inauguration of Moon Jae-in as the new president in South Korea would lead to an improvement in North-South relations, events over the summer of 2017 precluded any semblance of reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula. In the context of Kim Jong Un's aggressive pursuit of the North's ballistic missile and nuclear weapon programs, Moon's olive branches were consistently rebuffed while Kim exchanged bombastic rhetoric with US President Donald Trump and thumbed his nose at the UN Security Council. By summer's end, there was little prospect for a return to the "sunshine" era in the South. Instead, South Koreans were increasingly interested in having their own nuclear weapons and the South Korean military openly talking about a decapitation unit to deal with the North Korean leadership.

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Introduction

In his famous dystopian novel *Brave New World*, published in 1932 when talking pictures (“the talkies”) were still new, Aldous Huxley imagined a future in which movies had become pan-sensory, including “the smellies” and “the feelies.” As the Internet similarly keeps expanding its range, perhaps the bells and whistles on *Comparative Connections*’ new website might include an all-action video of this author, kicking himself.

Wishful thinking is a constant temptation, especially to those of us optimistic in temperament. Yet after almost half a century watching North Korea, I should be old enough to know better by now. I also temporarily forgot that elementary precept of diplomacy: it takes two to tango.

To be concrete: when the last issue of this journal was published in mid-May, South Korea’s hardline President Park Geun-hye had been dismissed after the Constitutional Court confirmed her impeachment. Writing immediately after the election of her liberal successor Moon Jae-in in early May, I had assumed that the new ROK leader’s firm intention to revive the “sunshine” policy and re-engage the DPRK – as practiced during the decade 1998–2007 by the late Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, the latter of whom Moon had served as chief of staff – meant this would automatically come to pass. So I eagerly anticipated having more to write about, after almost two years of North–South mutual hostility during which inter-Korean relations had shriveled virtually into non-existence.

That assumption was not unreasonable. It was the South – specifically Kim Dae-jung – that had devised “sunshine,” persuading an initially skeptical North to play ball. And it was Seoul again that turned sunshine to sunset a decade later, when Roh’s conservative successor Lee Myung-bak reneged on the expanded cooperation that Roh had agreed with Kim Jong Il at the second North–South summit in Pyongyang in October 2007. After Lee, Park Geun-hye at first offered “trustpolitik” but later hardened. In February 2016, she abruptly shut the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC), the last surviving inter-Korean joint venture, after North Korea’s fourth nuclear test that January. Given the North’s nastily vituperative attacks on both Lee and Park for these retreats and their

hard line overall, one might have expected a modicum of enthusiasm in Pyongyang for a new leader in the Blue House keen to mend fences.

Not so, or at least not for now. 2017 is not 2007, and Kim Jong Un is not Kim Jong Il. This Kim has other fish to fry. On his watch and especially since last year, North Korean ballistic missile (BM) and nuclear tests – both banned under successive UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions – have come thick and fast; and ominously, ever more successful. The numbers are telling. The DPRK’s tested its first missile in 1984; 14 more followed in the last decade of Kim Il Sung’s life. His son Kim Jong Il’s 17 year reign (1994–2011) saw 16 such launches, all but one of them in 2006 and 2009, also the years of the DPRK’s first two nuclear tests. By contrast, in less than six years Kim Jong Un has overseen no fewer than 87 missile launches, including 24 last year and 21 (so far) in 2017. The pace of nuclear testing has quickened too, from every three years to two tests in 2016 alone and one this year. Since July Pyongyang has successfully launched two ICBMs, and exploded its first hydrogen bomb. Kim Jong Un is a man on a mission; even if his precise purpose, or the balance of his motives, remains [obscure](#).



1Launch of a Pukguksong-2 medium-range ballistic missile from North Korea on May 21 (Yonhap)

Yet even such a relentless pursuit of WMD, squarely aimed at the US in all senses (militarily and diplomatically) and as such discussed elsewhere in *Comparative Connections*, need not have ruled out a positive response to Moon Jae-in’s olive branches, described in more detail below and in the chronology. A subtler, or more confident, Northern leader might have made nice with Moon, cynically taking whatever Seoul offered – which could have been quite a lot, materially and otherwise – in order to discomfit the South’s more hardline US ally and thus drive

a wedge between Seoul and Washington. That ploy worked well for Pyongyang early this century during the era of high “sunshine,” when President George W. Bush looked askance at Kim Dae-jung and especially Roh Moo-hyun’s soft line toward the North. Donald Trump, with his penchant for bad-mouthing US allies, was ready to rerun this history, at least twice accusing Moon of appeasement – just as, with an eagerness his wiser predecessors abjured, he chose to validate North Korea’s Tom and Jerry worldview by embracing the angry Pyongyang assigned him of the big dumb angry cat, forever outsmarted by the wily little mouse.

Trump’s sneer is not only insulting but inaccurate. Moon Jae-in did hope to rekindle “sunshine,” but Kim Jong Un’s belligerence has forced him into an uncomfortable hawkishness, hard to distinguish from his predecessors. As missile test followed missile test, the new ROK president, knowing that a substantial minority of voters – and, in all probability, the bulk of his own military establishment – mistrusted him as being soft on the North and would be vigilant for any sign of weakness, sought to sound and act as hardline as he could. That led to some misjudgments. Eyebrows were [raised](#) when Moon said on Aug. 17 that “if North Korea completes an intercontinental ballistic missile and weaponizes it with a nuclear warhead, I will consider that a red line.” He spoke of the DPRK “approaching” that line; yet many if not most experts, including the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), reckon Pyongyang has already [crossed](#) it. Moon did not spell out what consequences would follow for the DPRK, merely reiterating his mantra that “there will be no war again on the Korean Peninsula.”

Is Germany germane?

Given the North’s unresponsiveness, it seems pointless to enumerate a long list of Southern offers all of which were rebuffed, so this will be left to the chronology. Suffice it here to sketch the main contours. Our last update covered Moon’s background and known views on North Korea, plus some of his early appointments of key personnel with a strong background in dealing with Pyongyang. Yet as Leif-Eric Easley of Ewha University put it in an aptly headlined [article](#), “Moon assembles dream team, but North Korea unwilling to play.” Another US academic based in Seoul, John Delury of Yonsei University, referenced Moon’s avowed wish to put South Korea in the driving seat on the North

Korea issue with an [article](#) headlined “Backseat Driver.” That sounds unkind, yet is an accurate summary of how Moon is struggling to gain any traction for Seoul to influence matters, much less revive “sunshine.”

The new government swiftly allowed Southern NGOs to resume contact with the North (Park Geun-hye having progressively, or rather regressively, banned almost all such outreach). Yet though many such organizations had years of experience of the North in the “sunshine” era, contributing aid worth millions of dollars, Kim Jong Un – unlike his father – has ignored or rebuffed these kindly and patriotic souls, just as he scorns their government.



2Angela Merkel and Moon Jae-in in Berlin (Reuters)

On the official level, the centerpiece of Moon Jae-in’s outreach to the North, like so many of his predecessors (he was at least the fifth ROK president to do this), was a big policy [speech](#) delivered in Germany, in his case, to the Körber Foundation in Berlin on July 6. Given the manner of German reunification, it takes a rather baffling tin ear for any South Korean leader, left or right, to suppose that choosing this of all nations as a venue could ever appeal to North Korea. That said, some do it better than others. Ruediger Frank of Vienna University, who has the advantage (analytically speaking) of having grown up in the former East Germany, is a good judge. Having been scathing about Park Geun-hye’s 2014 Dresden Declaration (his [article](#) was titled: “Fire the Speech Writers”), Frank was more impressed by Moon, whom he [characterized](#) as “navigating difficult waters.” This was indeed a careful, sincere, and reasonable speech – but it fell upon deaf ears, as did all Seoul’s efforts to put it into practice.

Soon after Moon’s Berlin speech, in July the ROK formally proposed two items mentioned therein: a resumption of military dialogue and Red Cross talks. The former was chosen not only in hope

of reducing border tensions, but because Kim Jong Un had in the past made the very same proposal. Yet the dates offered by Seoul passed with no response from Pyongyang.

Death to Southern book reviewers!

Spurning the South's olive branches is one thing; threatening its citizens quite another. On Aug. 31, North Korea's official *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* carried the headline, "DPRK Central Court Sentences S. Korean Provokers to Death." This introduced a [report](#) that the Central Court of the DPRK had sentenced four named South Koreans to death: a journalist and the director of each of two rightwing Seoul daily papers, the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*. Their "crime" was to have written and published reviews of the Korean edition of [North Korea Confidential](#), a book originally published in 2015 authored by two Seoul-based British journalists, James Pearson (whom KCNA misspelt) of *Reuters* and Daniel Tudor, formerly of the *Economist*. Oddly, no such sentence was passed on the authors themselves for their *lèse-majesté*. Here is a sample of what caused offense:

... reeling off such sophism that "the north is a country where money has greater influence than in capitalist countries," "youngsters without mobile phones are treated losers," "army is unpaid labor unit" and that "those with money can get married to those of high positions in society any time."

They had the temerity of carrying a photo in which the red star, symbolic of the brilliant revolutionary traditions of anti-Japanese war engraved on the upper part of the national emblem of the DPRK, was replaced by \$ symbol and the name of the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea" was replaced by the "Capitalist Republic of Korea." They even committed such shuddering acts of replacing the title of the book called "North Korea Confidential" with "Capitalist Republic of Korea."

All this, apparently, merits death under Article 60 of the DPRK Criminal Code. Moreover, "the criminals hold no right to appeal and the execution will be carried out any moment and at any place without going through any additional

procedures ... We will track down to the end those who masterminded and manipulated hideous provocations of slandering and insulting the dignity of the DPRK and mete out death to them."

Pyongyang's ever-bellicose media have more than once threatened to bomb or otherwise destroy these two newspapers, which are overwhelmingly hostile to North Korea. However, this is believed to be the first time that named journalists have been threatened thus. While this is likely bombast, given the grim ends of both Kim Jong Nam and Otto Warmbier, it cannot be assumed either that foreigners or those outside the DPRK are safe. (Of course, neither Korean state officially regards the other's citizens as foreigners.)

This follows another rum case briefly cited in our last update, where North Korea claimed it had foiled a plot by US and South Korean intelligence agencies involving "state-sponsored terrorism against [our] supreme leadership with the use of bio-chemical substance." On June 30, KCNA carried a florid joint [statement](#) by the DPRK Ministry of State Security, Ministry of People's Security (political police) and Central Public Prosecutors Office. Amid much huffing and puffing, this announced death sentences on Park Geun-hye and Lee Byung-ho, her former intelligence chief, and demanded their handover. (No such threats or demands were made regarding the CIA or its operatives.) After much menacing rhetoric, the statement concluded: "Those who dare challenge the sun of the sky can never evade divine punishment." (sic).

In the wider debate on how to tackle North Korea, scholars of widely differing perspectives tend to deplore tabloid stereotypes of Kim Jong Un as a mad dictator; insisting *au contraire* that the DPRK is a rational actor, or at least calculates carefully. In some contexts this may be true – such as this war of words between Pyongyang and President Trump, whose own tweets and other comments (e.g. "fire and fury") by contrast often appear to be made off the cuff.

Yet it is hard to see rationality in such ravings as the above. What are these threats meant to achieve? Regarding state terrorism, let alone biochemical substances – recall how Kim Jong Nam died: the trial of the two young women accused of his murder in Kuala Lumpur is set to begin on Oct. 2 – the pot is blatantly calling the

kettle black. Sentencing non-North Koreans to death – for a book review! – is itself state terrorism. Having a DPRK court do so undermines any *bien-pensant* claims, still occasionally heard, that what passes for a legal system in North Korea is remotely worthy of the name or has any real autonomy. No one is fooled, no one is impressed, and hopefully no one is scared. Perhaps Pyongyang just wanted to signal that it really, *really* isn't interested in dialogue with Seoul. Message received, loud and clear.

Most South Koreans want nukes too

One ominous, if predictable, result of Kim Jong Un's relentless pursuit of WMD has been to strengthen demands in some quarters for the ROK to also possess nuclear weapons. Opinion polls have long shown a majority of South Koreans supporting this view, but hitherto only a minority of the political elite and opinion-makers.

It is well-known that Northeast Asia's three democracies – South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan – are each technically capable of building nuclear weapons should they so decide. On this, a very useful [book](#) came out in early 2016: the aptly titled *Asia's Latent Nuclear Powers: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan* by Mark Fitzpatrick of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). Noting that in the 1970s the US discovered and quashed a top-secret effort by the ROK's then military dictator Park Chung-hee to go nuclear, Fitzpatrick views South Korea today as being “the most likely candidate to emerge as a new nuclear-armed state”. His carefully worded [summary](#) is worth quoting in full. I leave it to readers to ponder how far the balance of forces, and therefore the likely decision-making in Seoul, remain today as described herein last year:

If a new nuclear-armed state were to emerge in Northeast Asia, it would most likely be the Republic of Korea (ROK). This observation is not meant to predict that South Korea will choose nuclear armament. Steadfast in its adherence to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the government in Seoul firmly rejects the pro-nuclear arguments posed by a few politicians and commentators. Officials understand well the downsides that those advocates ignore: the damage that nuclearisation would cause to the

nation's economy and international status due to direct and indirect sanctions, and the huge security risks in jeopardising its alliance with the US. Going nuclear would undermine US relations at the same time as it made South Korea more vulnerable. Yet these demerits are not readily apparent to the general public, two-thirds of whom voice support for nuclear weapons in polls. Such polls suggest that the non-proliferation norm is still shallow in South Korea. Twice in the 1970s, the country pursued nuclear weapons – albeit under an authoritarian government. More recently, South Korean nuclear scientists transgressed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards in conducting enrichment and reprocessing experiments. A nationalist desire to possess the rights to sensitive nuclear technology that Japan enjoys could eventually see South Korea moving purposefully towards a recessed weapons capability. Seoul is very unlikely to cross the nuclear-weapons threshold, however, as long as the US defence commitment remains credible.



3THAAD deployed in South Korea (National Interest)

In fact, rather than any ROK bid for nuclear *Juche* (so to say) against Washington's wishes, what we are seeing is a call for the US to once again base tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, as it did for decades until President George H W Bush removed them in 1991. This is now a formal policy plank of the conservative main opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP), and is supported by 68 percent of the South Korean public.

More surprisingly, the current ROK defense minister appears to endorse this view. Briefing lawmakers on Sept. 4 about a recent meeting with his US opposite number, Song Young-moo was [quoted](#) as saying he had told Jim Mattis that, “The redeployment of [US] tactical nuclear weapons [in South Korea] is an alternative worth a full review.” With the White House later chiming in to suggest it would not rule out such a redeployment were the ROK to request this, a somewhat irritated but perhaps beleaguered Blue House insisted on Sept. 10: “There is no change in the government’s policy principle of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and we have never reviewed a re-adoption of tactical nukes.”

Can Moon hold the line, if Kim keeps on provoking? Watch this space. Meanwhile, at a time when peering into the abyss and thinking the unthinkable as regards apocalyptic scenarios on the peninsula have alas become necessary, here is one such, if only fictional: a different twist, offering scary food for thought. South Korea’s most successful novel ever (over 4 million copies sold; a film was also made), is *The Rose of Sharon Blooms Again*, a 1993 blockbuster by Kim Jin-myung. Replete with pan-Korean nationalism, well before the “sunshine” era, this postulates the two Koreas pooling their nuclear technology to strike the real enemy – Japan.

Decapitation: heady talk

As *Comparative Connections* went to press, the *New York Times* on Sept. 13 and other media [reported](#) a new (or renewed) development, hardly conducive to better North-South ties. Once again, the source was Defense Minister Song. In the same Sept. 4 briefing cited above, Song also told lawmakers that a Special Forces brigade known as a “decapitation unit” would be operational by the end of this year. Its avowed aim: to kill Kim Jong Un and other DPRK leaders if war broke out. This idea, and even the name, are not new. Such a unit was reported back in [January](#) as being in the works – but with rising tensions its formation, set originally for 2019, has been accelerated.

While forward military planning *par excellence* should ideally be bipartisan, insulated from the vicissitudes of “regime change” in a democracy, this surely is one legacy from the Park Geun-hye era that Moon Jae-in would gladly have ditched or at least kept quiet about, had his renewal of

sunshine gone as hoped. It is a measure of how boxed in Moon must feel that such an extreme measure is still being hyped up. While sympathizing with his dilemma, one may still query the assumed psychology. The NYT quoted retired Gen. Shin Won-sik, until 2015 the ROK military’s top operational strategist: “The best deterrence we can have, next to having our own nukes, is to make Kim Jong Un fear for his life.”

Really? Fixated as he is (to the exclusion on South Korea) on the US, with its far bigger and more deadly arsenal, will the Northern leader really sleep less easy knowing what he no doubt assumes in any case: that in case of war his foes would do their damndest to kill him? Or does Seoul mean to signal that it does not rule out a pre-emptive strike? Or at least want Kim to be afraid of that? To be sure, Kim Jong Un’s reckless ramping up of tensions is what has brought matters to this pass. Unless there is some sudden change of tack and tactics from Pyongyang – which could still happen, as it has in the past – even Moon Jae-in apparently risks getting mired in the prevailing tit-for-tat of threat and counter-threat.

Not only is this not “sunshine,” but it risks a darkness beyond the blackest black. In August, the *Economist* ran a [cover story](#) with the heads of both Trump and Kim swirling in a mushroom cloud, under the headline “It could happen.” An accompanying [article](#) gamed one scenario of how the US and DPRK might stumble into nuclear war, even if neither actively intended to do so. In this scenario, if just two short-range nuclear-armed Northern missiles penetrated ROK defenses, 300,000 people would die at once in South Korea (by no means all of them Korean, of course), with further deaths from radiation to follow – not to mention a prolonged global recession, and more. As the *Economist* summed up: “Everyone would lose.”

Put like that, it is beyond belief that irresponsible talk of military options still emanates from some in Washington – but in Seoul, not so much. One can only hope that, by January and the next issue of *Comparative Connections*, wiser counsels will have prevailed and current tensions may have eased into a much-needed diplomatic track, be it bilateral or multilateral. Yet as of now, frankly, it is hard to be optimistic. Scorned alike by Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump, Moon Jae-in simply lacks political traction to pull the peninsula back from the brink. It is difficult to see how he might find a workable way to do that.

CHRONOLOGY OF NORTH KOREA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2017

May 5, 2017: Pyongyang media [report](#) Kim Jong Un's conducting a field inspection of the Korean People's Army (KPA)'s Southwestern Front Command on Changjae and Mu Islets, close to South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island which Northern artillery shelled in November 2010, killing four. Calling that "the most delightful battle after the [sc 1953] ceasefire", Kim examines "the plan for fire strike" and commands his troops "to break the backbone of the enemy once ordered."

May 5, 2017: In a long statement, shrill even for Pyongyang and carried [in full](#) by the BBC, DPRK Ministry of State Security accuses US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and South Korea's 'Intelligence Service' – presumably the National Intelligence Service (NIS) – of a plot to kill its supreme leadership using a "biochemical substance."

May 5, 2017: -- North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Country (CPRC) [condemns](#) the South's "puppet Ministry of Unification" for planning a "south-north human rights dialogue." Choice insults include: "The 'idiots of the ministry', who are reduced into living corpses and being treated like a mange-affected dog" – and much more.

May 9, 2017: On the eve of the ROK election, *Rodong Sinmun*, daily newspaper of the DPRK's ruling Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), [urges](#) South Korean voters to "judge the puppet group of conservatives, accomplices with Park ... as they punished Park."

May 9, 2017: South Korea holds its 19th presidential election, seven months ahead of the normal schedule because of Park Geun-hye's impeachment. The main opposition candidate, Moon Jae-in of the Minjoo Party (Democrats), [wins](#) overwhelmingly.

May 10, 2017: Moon Jae-in is [sworn in](#) as the ROK's 19th president. In his inaugural speech he expresses willingness to go anywhere for peace, including Pyongyang.

May 10, 2017: Two of Moon's first [appointments](#) highlight North Korea. New NIS director [Suh Hoon](#) lived there for two years, working for the former KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) consortium; he later helped arrange the two inter-Korean summits. Im Jong-seok, Moon's Blue House chief of staff – one of [two](#), it later transpires – was jailed in his youth for organizing an illegal visit to Pyongyang by a fellow-student.

May 12, 2017: DPRK Central Public Prosecutors Office [says](#) it will demand the extradition of those behind the alleged "bid to commit state-sponsored terrorism against its supreme leadership." It names three ROK NIS operatives, including the agency's outgoing director.

May 17, 2017: South Korea's Unification Ministry (MOU) [calls](#) for restoration of the inter-Korean hotline at Panmunjom. Set up in 1971 and periodically suspended since, this has been inactive – meaning the North refuses to answer the South's daily calls – since February 2016.

May 28, 2017: *Yonhap* [quotes](#) an unnamed official source as saying the Moon government plans additional financial support for not only Southern firms impacted by closure of the KIC, but also those harmed by suspension of tourism to Mount Kumgang since 2008 and by Lee Myung-bak's 2010 ban on non-KIC trade with and investment in North Korea.

May 31, 2017: South Korea [returns](#) six Northern fishermen whose boats drifted into ROK waters on May 27. The North refuses two different phone calls at Panmunjom – one direct, the other via the UN Military Armistice Commission – so the South has to communicate its plan via loudspeaker across the DMZ. A DPRK guide vessel duly receives the six men and one boat (the other was damaged beyond repair) at the east coast marine border, whose demarcation unlike that on the west coast is agreed and not disputed.

June 2, 2017: Reacting to a string of DPRK ballistic missile tests this year, the UN Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passes another [resolution](#) criticizing North Korea, its seventh since 2006. UNSCR 2356 censures such activity and further tightens economic sanctions.

June 5, 2017: MOU [approves](#) four more applications by Southern NGOs to contact North Korea, bringing the total of such approvals to 15 in less than a month since Moon Jae-in took office. Park Geun-hye, by contrast, had ended up banning all civilian contacts. The same day two of these organizations say the North refuse to let them visit, in protest of Seoul's support for the latest UN sanctions against the DPRK.

June 6, 2017: South Korean preparatory group [says](#) there will be no joint celebrations of the anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit meeting on June 15, 2000. North Korea has yet to invite them to Pyongyang, but the group also said, "it is regrettable that the [Southern] government has not presented a clear stance over its approval."

June 13, 2017: President Moon nominates [Cho Myoung-gyon](#) as Minister of Unification. A career official with 28 years' service in the MOU, Cho had key roles at KEDO and the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) in 2004-06, before serving the late President Roh Moo-hyun as secretary for unification, diplomacy and security in the Blue House during 2006-08.

June 15, 2017: On the 17th anniversary of the first North-South summit, MOU [calls](#) for peace and reconciliation. For its part, North Korea blames the South for the absence of any joint celebrations this year, and accuses Seoul of "reading the face of the US."

June 22, 2017: ROK's official National Unification Advisory Council (NUAC) publishes a [survey](#) it conducted on June 9-11. 77 percent of South Koreans polled support a resumption of North-South dialogue; 22 percent disagree. NUAC finds a similar divide (74 vs 23) on whether Seoul should allow private business inter-Korean contacts. 48 percent expect North-South relations to improve.

June 23, 2017: With President Moon watching, the ROK successfully [test-fires](#) a Hyunmoo-2 missile, whose 500 mile range – the maximum currently allowed under an accord with the US – means it can strike anywhere in the DPRK.

June 29, 2017: ROK National Assembly [approves](#) Cho Myoung-gyon as unification minister. The conservative main opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP), keen to block Moon's Cabinet nominees – the new foreign minister, Kang Kyung-wha, [failed](#) to get parliamentary approval, which is not mandatory – concedes that Cho has no "major ethical lapses."

July 2, 2017: [Report](#) published by the Korea Development Institute (KDI), an ROK state think-tank, notes that the only sphere of North-South socio-cultural exchanges still ongoing is sports. It suggests using this as an icebreaker for wider inter-Korean relations, given Kim Jong Un's personal interest in this field.

July 3, 2017: Cho Myoung-gyon formally [starts work](#) as the 39th minister of unification. He succeeds Park Geun-hye's appointee Hong Yong-pyo, who had served since February 2015.

July 6, 2017: In a major [speech](#) given at the Körber Foundation in Berlin, President Moon calls on North Korea to choose peace and cooperation. He insists that, "We do not wish for the collapse of North Korea, and we will not pursue any form of unification by absorbing the other ... [or] unification by force."

July 10, 2017: MOU [says](#) South Korea will seek fresh inter-Korean talks once it gauges North Korea's reaction to President Moon's Berlin speech.

July 13, 2017: *Yonhap*, the ROK's quasi-official news agency, [quotes](#) an unnamed senior official as saying there is no evidence that monies the DPRK received from the joint venture Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) went to fund its nuclear program. Such a link was alleged by the Park Geun-hye administration as one reason for closing the KIC in February 2016.

July 16, 2017: DPRK website *Uriminzokkiri* features a video [interview](#) with Jon Hye Song, a young woman who defected to the ROK in 2014. Known there as Im Ji-hyun, she was a well-known figure on TV shows featuring DPRK defectors. Like previous such returnees, she now tearfully repents and begs the motherland's forgiveness. Some in Seoul [claim](#) she must have been abducted. (Note: The *Uriminzokkiri* video is very slow-loading. Until recently this could also be watched on [YouTube](#), but in an act of gratuitous [censorship](#) YouTube has recently shut down this and other DPRK accounts.)

July 17, 2017: South Korea's Ministry of National Defense (MND) [proposes](#) inter-Korean military talks to reduce border tensions on July 21 at Tongilgak, North Korea's main building at the Panmunjom. Separately, the ROK Red Cross suggests talks on Aug. 1 about resuming family reunions. Both dates pass with no reply from Pyongyang.

July 17, 2017: MOU [says](#) it called the DPRK liaison office at Panmunjom, but no one answered. Inter-Korean communication channels were cut by North Korea in February 2016 after the South closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

July 19, 2017: Responding to barely veiled [criticism](#) from the US that a resumption of inter-Korean dialogue is untimely, MOU [insists](#) this is distinct from the denuclearization issue – and helpful in promoting humanitarian contacts and reducing tensions.

July 20, 2017: Dismissing Seoul's call for better inter-Korean ties as “nonsense,” *Rodong Sinmun* [tells](#) South Korea to end its “submission” to the US: “Ditching confrontation and hostility is a precondition for opening the door for the two Koreas' reconciliation and unity.”

July 27, 2017: South Korea, and the UN Command, each hold events to mark the 64th anniversary of the 1953 [Armistice](#), which ended the Korean War. MOU again [urges](#) North Korea to respond to the South's overtures, adding that there is no deadline.

July 27, 2017: Unseen for the past 15 days, Kim Jong Un [re-emerges](#) on what the DPRK celebrates as Victory Day to pay tribute to the fallen in Pyongyang's Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs Cemetery.

July 28, 2017: DPRK test-fires another claimed [ICBM](#), its second this month.

July 30, 2017: Leif-Eric Easley of Ewha University in Seoul neatly [sums up](#) the current inter-Korean situation: “Moon assembles dream team, but North Korea unwilling to play.”

Aug. 1, 2017: *Rodong Sinmun* [condemns](#) South Korea's “commemorations with July 27 as an occasion” (the word armistice is not mentioned) as a “disgusting burlesque” by “traitors” and “lackeys.” It warns that if provoked again, “[our] army and people will wipe out the enemies to the last one so that there would be no one left to sign a document of surrender.”

Aug. 13, 2017: After Pyongyang threatens to fire missiles at Guam, ROK Vice Unification Minister Chun Hae-sung [says](#) Seoul is “considering all necessary steps to reduce tensions on the peninsula” and “will leave the door open for dialogue with the North.”

Aug. 15, 2017: On Liberation Day (from Japan in 1945: a holiday in both Koreas), Moon Jae-in [vows](#) to prevent a new Korean war “at all costs.” He insists: “Military action on the Korean Peninsula can only be decided by the ROK and no one may decide to take military action without the consent of the ROK.” The main opposition LKP accuses Moon of “running about in confusion,” voicing fears that South Korea “will be relegated into an observer country.”

Aug. 21, 2017: Annual *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* US-ROK war games, which are mainly computer- rather than field-based, [begin](#). This year's exercise is slightly [smaller](#) than in 2016, but US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis denies that this is a gesture to Pyongyang. Unimpressed DPRK media as usual shrilly [excoriate](#) these maneuvers as a rehearsal for invasion.

Aug. 27, 2017: *Yonhap* [says](#) the Moon administration is seeking to ensure that North Korea participate in the upcoming Pyeongchang Winter Olympics next February, hoping this will help ease inter-Korean tensions.

Aug. 31, 2017: As the *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* exercise ends, US and ROK [conduct](#) an aerial show of force in response to North Korea's latest missile test on Aug. 29.

Aug. 31, 2017: *KCNA* carries a [proclamation](#) by North Korea's Central Court sentencing four named Southern journalists to death for reviewing a book deemed insulting to the DPRK. No such sentence is passed on the book's British authors. MOU at once [condemns](#) and dismisses this as “absurd.”

Sept. 3, 2017: DPRK conducts its sixth, and much the most powerful, nuclear test since 2006. Most observers accept Pyongyang's claim that this was a hydrogen bomb. In response, the ROK on Sept. 4 holds a live-fire ballistic missile drill.

Sept. 10, 2017: Reacting to an [NBC report](#) that the US does not rule out moving tactical nuclear weapons to the ROK if Seoul so requests, the Blue House [denies](#) any such plans: "There is no change in the government's policy principle of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and we have never reviewed a re-adoption of the tactical nukes."

Sept. 11, 2017: Responding to North Korea's Sept. 3 nuclear test, the UN Security Council passes – unanimously, as ever – its eighth major resolution since 2006 censuring North Korea. UNSCR 2375 (full text [here](#)) further tightens economic sanctions against the DPRK, which as ever [denounces](#) these measures – even more vitriolically than usual.

Sept. 12, 2017: *New York Times* [reports](#) that the ROK military is accelerating formation of a "decapitation unit", originally planned under Park Geun-hye as a medium-term project, to target Kim Jong Un in the event of war.

Sept. 14, 2017: President Moon firmly [rules out](#) any nuclear option for South Korea, whether the return of US tactical weapons or autonomously. But he accepts that the ROK must "develop our military capabilities in the face of North Korea's nuclear advancement."