



FALSE DAWN: THE RESUMPTION AND RE-ENDING OF THE INTER- KOREAN HOTLINE

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Summer 2021 saw a false dawn on the Korean Peninsula, hardly the first, but surely one of the shortest. On July 27 both North and South announced the reconnection of inter-Korean hotlines, severed for over a year. In Seoul, hopes were high that this signalled a fresh willingness by Pyongyang to engage, not only with South Korea but also the United States. Yet this “breakthrough” lasted barely a fortnight. When the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) began their regular August military exercises—albeit scaled back and wholly computer-based—North Korea snarled and stopped answering the phone. Inter-Korean relations remain frozen, as they have been ever since early 2019. With Moon Jae-in’s presidency due to end next May, any real melting of the ice looks increasingly like a challenge for his successor.

War Games: Shadow-Boxing?

To understand the hotline, first consider the politics behind US-ROK military exercises. Since Donald

Trump summarily cancelled upcoming regular US-ROK military exercises at his Singapore summit with Kim Jong Un in June 2018, the usual calendar of spring and summer allied drills has been much disrupted. Far from appreciating that olive branch, Kim saw this concession as a chance to press harder.

After several changes of name, these drills have waxed and waned, reflecting the state of relations between North Korea and its foes. Trump, soon followed by COVID-19, ushered in a new era of cancelled or smaller maneuvers. So Kim had less to worry about, but he chose to go for broke, insisting that to hold joint exercises at all, in any form or on any scale, is a hostile act. This has created a new cycle, where every spring and summer the allies must decide what kind of drills, if any, to stage.

With exercises due in August, Minister of Unification Lee In-young on June 6 [called](#) for “maximum flexibility,” insisting that joint drills “should never work in a way that causes or further escalates tensions on the Korean Peninsula.” That was tantamount to calling for their cancellation, which Lee could not do directly. This kicked off a fresh round of the perennial argument in Seoul about the right balance of stick and carrot, force readiness versus peace process, and so on. Besides playing out in the [media](#), politically more important was the debate inside the ruling Democratic Party (DP), and above all necessarily hidden discussions within Moon Jae-in’s government.

Arguably, the Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the military establishment, not to mention Washington, would not countenance complete cancellation (in 2018 Trump forced their hand). Even as public debate continued, planning and preparations were surely under way. Meanwhile, as we now know, at some point and in some form Moon and Kim began exchanging messages about reactivating inter-Korean hotlines, unused for a year after Pyongyang blew up the Kaesong joint liaison office in June 2020. Ever since then, the South has faithfully called as agreed at 0900 each day, but gotten no reply. (Talk of the lines being “cut” misleads: They still work, but the North chooses not to pick up.)

Lights! Camera! Action! They’re Talking Again!

Then, on July 27 and with much fanfare, the Blue House in Seoul and the official North Korean news agency *KCNA* in Pyongyang both announced the reconnection of inter-Korean hotlines. In a triumph of hope over expectation all too familiar in inter-Korean relations (but we never learn), hopes ran high that after a two-year hiatus that Pyongyang might finally be ready to engage again. Not only with Seoul, but also the not-so-new Biden administration.

For a week or two, inter-Korean ties seemed to flicker back into life. Beyond the formality of checking the lines daily, there were signs of substance. The two sides used the line to compare tallies and positions of Chinese vessels illegally fishing in the West Sea near the Northern Limit Line (NLL), the *de facto* inter-Korean maritime border, which the DPRK has never formally recognized. Besides sharing notes to repel intruders, such liaison in sensitive and sometimes contested waters would help avoid any risk of accidental clashes.

But it went no further. An eager Seoul broached concrete proposals—virtual talks, family reunions by videolink—but got no immediate reply. Then Kim Yo Jong weighed in. On Aug. 1, four days after the lines were restored, Kim Jong Un’s sister warned against “premature hasty judgment. What I think is that the restoration of the communication liaison lines should not be taken as anything more than just the physical reconnection.” In particular, the “unpleasant story that joint military exercises between the south Korean army and the US forces could go ahead as scheduled” would surely “becloud” inter-Korean prospects.

On Aug. 8 Seoul announced that joint drills would go ahead, albeit computer-based with no field exercises. This predictably prompted an angrier second salvo from Ms. Kim, attacking the “perfidious” South for this “unwelcoming act of self-destruction for which a dear price should be paid.” That was on Aug. 10. In the morning the hotlines still worked, but by 5 pm the North was not picking up. Nor has it done so since.

As You Were

What to make of this episode? The Blue House denied insinuations by Yoon Seok-youl—a contender for the conservative opposition People Power Party (PPP)’s

presidential nomination next year—that a secret deal lay behind the hotlines restoration. If that is true, then it fell apart in record time. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) claims the initiative came from Kim Jong Un. If that is the case, then one hypothesis is that Kim was testing Moon over the joint drills. Perhaps he thought this sop might tip the balance of the debate in Seoul. It did swell the ranks of those in the ruling party who favored cancellation, but not enough. Once it was clear the exercises would go ahead, Kim duly exacted punishment, reverting to noncommunication and the *status quo ante*.

Reading Moon’s mind is harder. Though an idealist on inter-Korean ties, he is also a canny politician whose time is running out: his successor will be elected on March 9 next year. He may have felt he had little to lose, and we don’t know what was said in the letters he and Kim exchanged. Unclear too is what input, if any, the foreign ministry or even MOU had in any of this. Reportedly, the Blue House handles dealings with Pyongyang itself, no doubt via the NIS. Did Moon reckon Pyongyang would not really mind the joint exercises, despite Kim Yo Jong’s clarity on the issue?

After Moon: More of the Same?

As a presidency winds down it is natural to try to peer into the future. With ROK presidents constitutionally limited to a single five-year term, less than half a year from now South Korea will have a new president, due to take office May 9.

Six months is a long time in politics, especially in Seoul. As of now, while Moon Jae-in is becoming a lamer duck (albeit with better poll ratings than most of his predecessors at this stage), the DP looks in better shape than the PPP. Within the DP, ongoing primaries have confirmed a front-runner: Lee Jae-myong, governor of Gyeonggi province which surrounds the capital (indeed, it has become a largely urbanized greater Seoul).

Though not personally or factionally close to Moon, ideologically Lee shares his [engagement](#) stance. He also favors conditional sanctions relief for the DPRK. So, if he is the next ROK president, expect policy continuity rather than change. The problem is that

Moon's approach has not worked, even if his government appears in denial on that score. At the very least, Lee (if it is he) will have to be more imaginative in finding ways to break the deadlock.

Postscript

The chapter from which this article is excerpted was completed early in September. There have been fresh developments since, notably two—one skeptical, the other more [positive](#)—by Kim Yo Jong to President Moon's [suggestion](#), made (not for the first time) in a speech to the UN General Assembly on Sept. 21, of a formal peace treaty to end the 1950-53 Korean War. We might therefore see a renewed bout of inter-Korean dialogue on Moon's watch after all. Precedent, not least the episode described above, suggests that hopes of a meaningful breakthrough are not high. But let us not prejudge. Prospects will be clearer when the next issue of *Comparative Connections* appears in January 2022. Watch this space!

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