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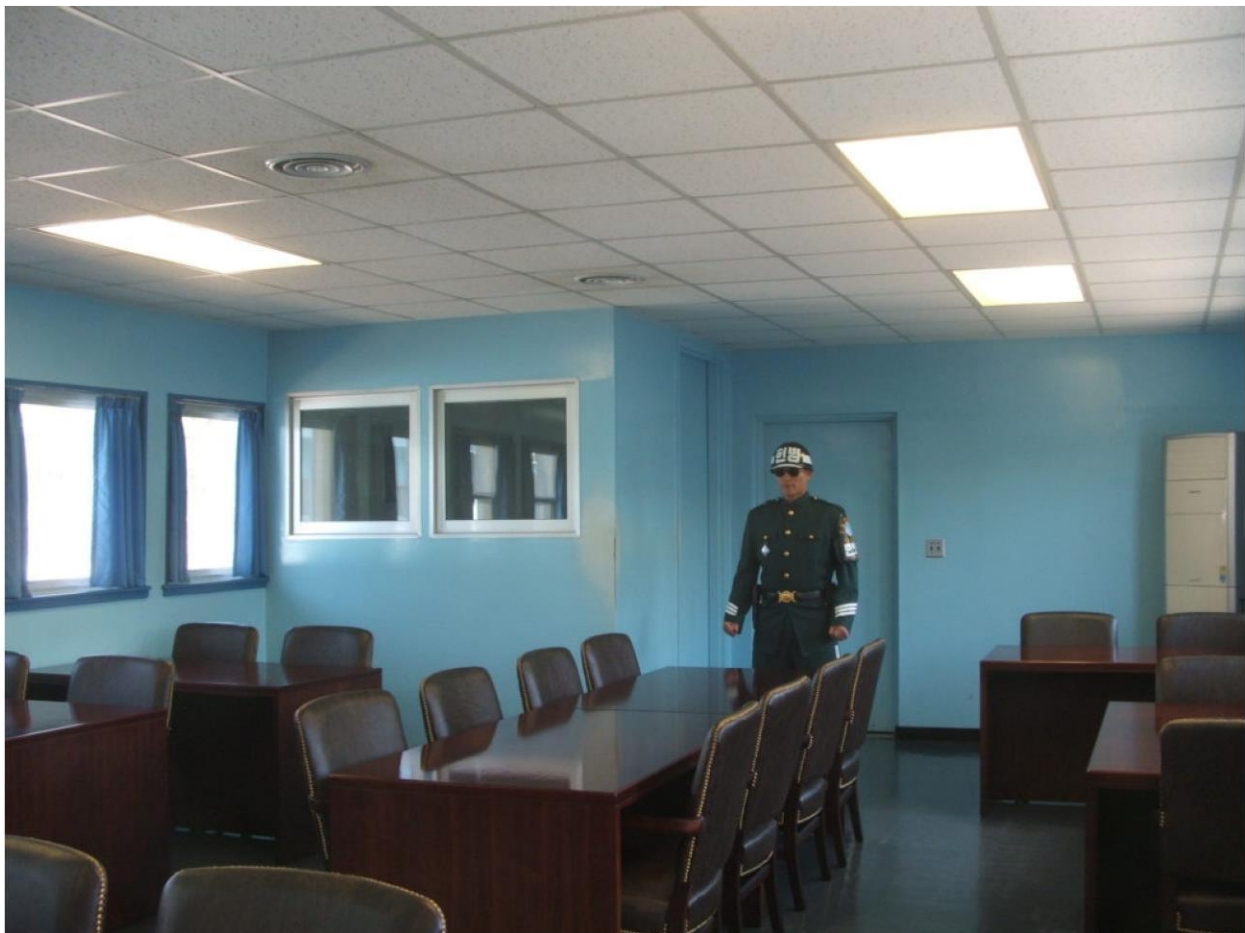
THE PENINSULA

Hotline Restored between North and South Korea; Seoul Sees Urgency for North-South Rapprochement

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On July 27, the Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) announced that “the top leaders of the north and the south agreed to make a big stride in recovering the mutual trust and promoting reconciliation by restoring the cutoff inter-Korean communication liaison lines through the recent several exchanges of personal letters.” The hotline was restored at 10

The restoration of the North-South communication link was announced and put into place on the anniversary of the signing of the armistice on July 27, 1953, ending hostilities in the Korean War. Both North and South annually mark the anniversary with special ceremonies and commemorations, and it seems clear that the announcement was made on July 27 for that reason.

The South Korean government proposed going even further once the hotline was restored. The South Korean Minister of Unification, who deals with issues involving North Korea and inter-Korean affairs, made a formal proposal to set up a video conferencing system between North and South. Unification Minister Lee In-young suggested that it would be helpful to have a system in place for virtual talks so that North and South could have “safe in-person talks” at any time. Thus far, the North has not responded to this proposal.

Hotline Cut Thirteen Months Ago

In June 2020, the Hotline communication link between South and North was abruptly and unilaterally severed by the North. At that same time, the North Koreans destroyed the North-South liaison office in Kaesong where both Koreas maintained offices for joint communication. North Korean media said the liaison office was “tragically ruined with a terrific explosion.” Describing it as “tragically ruined” was hypocrisy, since North Korea deliberately and unilaterally destroyed the building. The two-year-old structure was built by South Korea at a cost to the South of some \$70 million. It housed offices for officials from both North and South who worked on cooperative issues between the two countries.

Kim Jong-un’s sister Kim Yo-jong, who plays a leading role in her brother’s regime, was the principal official North Korean critic of South Korea. She issued a furious denunciation of the South for failing to stop South Korean human rights organizations from sending leaflets critical of the Pyongyang regime via balloon across the two countries’ common border. Kim Yo-jong demanded that the Seoul prohibit such balloon launches and issued thinly veiled threats: “I would like to ask the south Korean authorities if they are ready to take care of the consequences of evil conduct done by the rubbish-like mongrel dogs who took no scruple to slander us while faulting the ‘nuclear issue’ in the meanest way at the

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Just hours after Kim Yo-jong’s anti-balloon polemic was issued, the government of President Moon Jae-in responded that it would take immediate steps to prohibit all such actions by human rights groups. The legislative changes required a bit of time, but in December legislation was adopted by the South Korean National Assembly prohibiting the sending of balloons and leaflets into the North. South Korean human rights groups were outspokenly critical of the Moon government’s legislation, and human rights groups in the United States and elsewhere also voiced strong criticism.

Human rights groups in the South have continued to send balloons carrying leaflets into the North despite the legislative ban, and media reports suggest that this flaunting of the new law is being done quite openly. South Korean government officials are taking actions to enforce the law, but there is no indication that enforcement has been fully effective. Thus far, however, North Korean criticism about enforcing the balloon ban has not been particularly strident as it was in the past. This suggests that South Korean compliance with North Korea’s demands may not be the principal reason behind Pyongyang’s decision to take steps to improve relations with the South by reviving the hotline.

Reasons North Korea Restored the Hotline

It is likely that the North’s gesture to reopen the hotline may have more to do with serious internal problems currently troubling North Korea than with a desire to improve North-South relations. The COVID pandemic represents a real threat to Pyongyang because of the fragility and lack of resources of North Korea’s medical system. The draconian measures taken by Pyongyang to limit pandemic contagion in the North suggests serious vulnerability.

The North still has officially reported no cases of COVID-19, although international health experts have expressed skepticism about that claim. To prevent spread of the disease, North Korea’s borders have been tightly shut. Even North Korean defectors/refugees who have been detained when arrested by Chinese police are currently not allowed to return. Reports indicate that defectors China has sought to return have not been accepted by the North since early 2020, though there have been reports that a small number were returned in the last month.

The North Korean economy is in serious difficulty in part as the result of United Nations
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sanctions against the country for its nuclear and missile programs. The United States and other UN member states have been quite aggressive in enforcing the UN Security Council sanctions in an effort to limit the North's nuclear and missile programs.

Earlier this year Kim Jong-un reported the economy was failing and he told the party leadership that the country must prepare for another "arduous march"—the phrase linked with the disastrous famine of the mid-1990s his father Kim Jong-il. Unusually harsh weather conditions have cut back food production, and Kim Jong-un told the party leaders in June that "the people's food situation is now getting tense." The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) said the North's "food security situation is expected to deteriorate in the next four months" and a food shortage of some 860,000 tons (a fifth of what is needed) is expected this year.

Because of the pandemic and border tightening to mitigate its spread, bilateral trade with the North's largest trading partner, China, has plunged. Recent economic analysis from the South Korean central bank indicate that in 2020 the North Korean economy suffered its largest contraction in 23 years as a result of UN economic sanctions, the economic impact COVID-19, and unusually harsh weather.

In the past, South Korea has been a principal source of foreign assistance to the North, particularly under the "Sunshine Policy" espoused by presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008). Current President Moon Jae-in was Chief of Staff to President Roh. The hope for food, medical assistance in this COVID era, in addition to other forms of economic assistance from the South, may well be a very important consideration in Pyongyang's decision to reopen the hotline.

In fact, when the Minister of Unification proposed setting up a video conference system after the hotline was restored, he emphasized that this would permit the two Koreas to hold talks without having to be concerned about coronavirus concerns. At the same time he also said that the Ministry will resume approving requests from civil society organizations to provide assistance to North Korea. He said that during that very afternoon the hotline was reopened, the Ministry would consider private assistance proposals to provide aid to the North: "The decision was made considering the consistent requests from civil organizations for humanitarian assistance and the North's situation,

especially on the urgency of assistance related to public health and nutrition."
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It could be that as the North Koreans are feeling the economic pinch of sanctions, COVID impact, and weather issues, they may be showing a greater willingness to engage with the United States as well as South Korea. The head of South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) reportedly told members of the National Assembly in Seoul that Pyongyang would be willing to discuss denuclearization with the United States if UN Security Council sanctions are lifted on North Korean mineral exports and on its imports of refined fuels and other necessities. Of course, the North also would insist that sanctions be lifted on luxury goods that are making life less comfortable for the elite.

The proposal is that Pyongyang would be willing to sit down to talk about denuclearization if the United States and the international community make all the concessions up front. As President John F. Kennedy said in a speech to the American people during the 1961 Berlin crisis, you cannot begin negotiations if the other side starts from the position that "what's mine is mine and what's yours is negotiable." But the restoration of the hotline with South Korea may simply be an indication that North Korea is feeling the pinch of current economic conditions, and there may be room for negotiations to begin.

Moon Jae-in and Presidential Legacy

Moon Jae-in has now served over four years as President of South Korea, and his tenure will end in May 2022. South Korea has a constitutional limit of a single five-year term for any president. With only nine months remaining of his presidential tenure, Moon's immediate concern is "legacy"—how will future generations look back on his stewardship? Improving relations with the North was clearly a principal focus of his presidential tenure, but at this point his success in inter-Korean relations is modest at best.

Moon has met with North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-un on four separate occasions. [iii] Two of his presidential predecessors, both of the Democratic party, met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il—Kim Dae-jung in June 2000 and Roh Moo-hyun in October 2007. This clearly places Moon in the lead in terms of efforts to improve relations with the North.

Nonetheless, President Moon's inter-Korean summits did not result in significant improvement in North-South relations. Moon managed to meet with Kim Jong-un and make significant steps to seek better relations with the North while also maintaining

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positive relations with the United States, something his two Democratic Party predecessors were not able to do. In fact, Moon played a critical role in bringing about the first meeting between then President Trump and Kim in Singapore, and the three leaders—Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump—met at Panmunjom with Moon as the matchmaker.

Under President Moon, efforts to improve North-South ties have not come at the price of deterioration in relations between South Korea and the United States, but North Korea has not made that easy. The latest North Korean disruptive demand is the call for cancelling “hostile war exercises”—the annual military exercises involving forces of South Korea and the United States.

On August 1 Kim Yo-jong, sister of North Korea’s Supreme Leader and one of the most authoritative voices on North-South issues, warned Seoul against conducting the routine August military drills with US forces. She explicitly linked the restoration of the hotline to her call for the exercises to be cancelled, concluding:

“I think it will be an uninteresting prelude of seriously marring the will of the inter-Korean summits who want to take a step again for confidence rebuilding and of wrecking the future of the inter-Korean relations all the more. Our government and army will pay sharp attention to whether the south Korean side would stage hostile war exercises again in August or make a bold decision. Hope or despair? Choice is not made by us.”[iv].

A statement in response to the pronouncement from Kim Yo-jong from South Korea’s Ministry of Unification said the South will deal with the issue of joint military exercises in a “wise and flexible manner” so as not to heighten tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Military exercises certainly could be scaled back because of the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic with the Delta variant, and that would be understandable. But backing down on necessary periodic defensive military training in response to Madame Kim’s latest outburst would be inappropriate, and would only encourage more such intemperate outbursts and threats from Pyongyang.

A statement from the office of the President Moon Jae-in emphasized the importance of maintaining direct communication channels through the newly reopened hotline in a response to the outburst calling for cancellation of the joint military training: “South-North communication lines, restored under an agreement between their leaders, should be maintained for stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

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[i]. North Korea does not capitalize “North and South” when referring to the two Korean states.

[ii]. English translation from KCNA.

[iii]. April, May, and September 2018, and June 2019 in a joint meeting with Kim Jong-un and then U.S. President Donald Trump at Panmunjom.

[iv]. North Korean translation into English.

Return to the Peninsula