

Hotline Between Two Koreas: Status, Limitations and Future Tasks

Chung-in Moon

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Introduction

In this paper, Moon Chung-in provides historical context on the hotlines linking South and North Korea and points to the lessons that can be learned from the decades-long effort.

A podcast with Moon Chung-in and Philip Reiner can be found [here](#)

Moon Chung-in is a distinguished professor emeritus of political science at Yonsei University. It is published simultaneously [here](#) by Asia Pacific Leadership Network, [here](#) by Institute for Security and Technology and [here](#) by Nautilus Institute and is published under a 4.0 International Creative Commons License the terms of which are found [here](#).

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Overview

On September 22, 1971, the first hotline between the two Koreas was installed at the Panmunjom - 26 years after the telephone line between Seoul and Haeju was cut off by the former Soviet army immediately after liberation on August 26, 1945. At the time, the two Koreas had installed two telephone lines between the South's 'Freedom House' and the North's 'Panmungak' upon sharing the need for communication channels at the first inter-Korean Red Cross preliminary talks held on September 20 of the same year, which was organized to prepare for the inter-Korean Red Cross talks proposed by the then Korean Red Cross President, Choi Doo Sun. Since then, the channel has played a central role as a regular liaison system for the authorities of the two Koreas under Article 7 of the Framework Agreement between the two Koreas, which went into effect in February 1992¹.

When the Kim Dae-jung administration came into office, the inter-Korean relations, which had been previously marked by a series of confrontations and antagonisms, changed into one of reconciliation and cooperation. Accordingly, more hotlines were installed in relevant fields. Starting with the opening of a direct telephone line between the Incheon International Airport and Sunan Pyongyang International Airport aviation control centers, under the 1997 inter-Korean and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) agreements, additional hotlines between the South's National Intelligence Service (NIS) and the North's United Front Department were installed in 2000. Along with it, military communication lines in 2002 to 2003, maritime communication lines between maritime authorities in 2005, communication lines for the inter-Korean joint committee of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in 2013, and communication lines for the inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office and also one for the leaders of the two Koreas in 2018. The two Koreas conducted regular check-ups at agreed upon times unless special circumstances arose.

¹ Article 7 of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement stipulates that "the South and the North will stop confrontation and competition on international stage, cooperate with each other, and make joint efforts for the dignity and interests of the people." Article 13 also states that "the South and the North will establish and operate direct telephone lines between the military authorities of the two sides to prevent occurrence and expansion of unintended military clashes"

As such, the hotline between the two Koreas has repeatedly been suspended and resumed since its opening in 1971 due to changes in the inter-Korean relations and international affairs, but it has been used for a wide-range of cooperation efforts to improve the inter-Korean relations and promote exchanges in various areas, including inter-Korean talks, prevention of accidental military conflicts and information exchanges, and consultations on humanitarian aid.

Current Status of the North-South Hotline

The inter-Korean hotline is operated by the Ministry of Unification (MOU), the Ministry of National Defense (MND), the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT), the United Nations Command (UNC), the NIS, and the Blue House, as shown in Table 1 below. Based on media reports and government announcements, so far the hotlines between the two Koreas consist of 33 direct lines via Panmunjom (5 lines for the inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office, 21 lines for Seoul-Pyongyang conference support, 2 lines for air control cooperation between Incheon and Pyongyang, 2 lines for maritime authorities in Seoul and Pyongyang, and 3 lines for the inter-Korean joint committee of the Kaesong Industrial Complex) and few other lines that do not pass through the Panmunjom, including 9 lines for military communication, 6 lines for the direct telephone connection for the inter-Korean joint train operation, 1 line connecting the NIS and the United Front Department, and 1 line installed on April 20, 2018 between the inter-Korean leaders (the Blue House-Worker's Party Headquarters line). These lines add up to a total of 50 lines.² In addition to this, as of 2005, 1,300 optical fiber cable lines existed between the Korea Telecom Corporation's (KT) Munsan branch and the Kaesong Industrial Complex for the purpose of supporting video reunions for separated families as well as for companies operating in the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Of these, around 700 lines were reportedly in operation before the suspension of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.³

² "ye-ki-nun phyeng-yang, pi-ka nay-lin-ta, nam-pwuk phyeng-hwa pa-lo-mi-the 'has-la-in'uy yek-sa," *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (April 20, 2018).

³ "pwuk, '1tan-kyey co-chi' ku nay-yong-un?," <https://www.etoday.co.kr/news/view/319950>.

Table 1: The South-North Hotline Operation Status

Operating Entity		Purpose	Inauguration	Notes
Ministry of Unification		Inter-Korean Liaison	1971	Severed after the Kaesong Industrial Complex shut down; resumed by high-level inter-Korean talks in 2018; unilaterally terminated by North Korea on June 2020.
		Conference Support	1972	Severed after the Kaesong Industrial Complex shut down; resumed by high-level inter-Korean talks in 2018; unilaterally terminated by North Korea on June 2020.
		Maritime Authorities	2005	Suspended by the '5.24 Measure'.
		Inter-Korean Joint Committee of the Kaesong Industrial Complex	2013	Unilaterally severed after the Kaesong Industrial Complex shut down.
		Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office	2018	Operational after the inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office was inaugurated in September 2018; terminated when the office was blown up in June 2020.
Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport		Air Traffic Control	1997	Operational
Ministry of National Defense	East Sea District	Military Telecommunications	2003	Severed after the Kaesong Industrial Complex shut down; resumed by high-level inter-Korean talks in 2018; unilaterally terminated by North Korea on June 2020.
	West Sea District		2002	
United Nations Command		Armistice Management	1998	Severed by North Korea's declaration of nullification of armistice in 2013; resumed by improvement of North-US relations in July 2018.
National Intelligence Service		Information Agency	2000	Established after the Summit in 2000; suspected to be operational.
Blue House		South-North Leaders	2018	Established by the Panmunjom Declaration in 2018; unilaterally terminated by North Korea on June 2020.

The hotlines operated by the Ministry of Unification can largely be categorized into inter-Korean liaison, conference support, maritime communication, the Kaesong Industrial Complex support, and the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office. Among these, the inter-Korean liaison lines were the first direct call lines between the South and North to be installed in the Panmunjom, and conference support lines are used to exchange opinions regarding various inter-Korean talks. In addition, the wire communications network installed in the South's Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Office in the Ministry of Unification and the North's Ministry of Land and Maritime Transport, respectively, is in accordance with the Inter-Korean Agreement on Maritime Transportation, which took effect on August 1, 2005. It has been used as a means of

communication between the maritime authorities of the two Koreas, for purposes such as applying for permission to operate a ship or sending notices regarding urgent patients.⁴

The three inter-Korean military telecommunication lines were first opened on September 24, 2002, to ensure a safe passage through the South-North Joint Administration Area, as mandated by the ‘Military Assurance Agreement’⁵ signed at the 8th Inter-Korean Military Working Group Meeting. Then, on December 5, 2003, three military telecommunications lines in the East Sea district were installed. Following the passage of the ‘6.4 Agreement’⁶ in 2004, on August 13, 2005, three additional lines for military telecommunications were installed to prevent accidental conflicts in the West Sea district. Since then, North Korea has repeatedly suspended these communication lines due to tense inter-Korean relations. In 2018, the military communication lines in the West Sea district that were suspended due to the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex were normalized on July 16, 2018, whereas the lines in the East Sea district were normalized on August 15, 2018 - both due to the Panmunjom Declaration and the agreement reached at the 8th inter-Korean general-level military talks. However, as of June 9, 2020, North Korea's unilateral suspension of the military communication lines has blocked all lines. The inter-Korean military telecommunication lines are used as communication channels for purposes such as support of safe passage through the South-North Joint Administration Area, notification of no-fly zone entries, prevention of unintended clashes, by exchanging information on illegal fishing boats in the West Sea or by means of correspondence exchanges between the inter-Korean military authorities.⁷

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport also maintains a hotline between the two Koreas. In accordance with the agreement between the two Koreas and the ICAO, the two Koreas originally established two lines for air traffic control between Daegu and Pyongyang.

⁴ “nam-pwuk hay-sa-tang-kwuk-kan yu-sen-thong-sin-mang kay-thong,” *Joongbu Ilbo* (August 13, 2005).

⁵ ‘Military Assurance Agreement on the East Sea District and West Sea District Inter-Korea Joint Administration Area Configuration, South-North Railroad and Road Construction’ (September 17, 2002).

⁶ ‘Agreement on the Prevention of Unintended Clashes and Discontinuation and Removal of Propaganda Activity Near the Military Demarcation Lines’ (June 4, 2004).

⁷ Ministry of National Defense, report to the National Assembly (July 16, 2020).

When Incheon International Airport was inaugurated on September 9, 1997, Incheon was connected to the Sunan Pyongyang Airport Control Center instead of Daegu. However, these lines only control aircrafts passing through the Pyongyang Flight Information Region (FIR) and would therefore be a stretch to regard these as liaison lines.⁸

The core of the inter-Korean hotline is a direct telephone line that connects the NIS in the South and the United Front Department in the North. Neither Korea has officially revealed the existence of this hotline, but according to the autobiography of President Kim Dae-jung and the memoirs of the former NIS chief Lim Dong-won, President Kim suggested establishing a hotline between the two Koreas at the Pyongyang Summit on June 14, 2000. Chairman Kim Jong-il accepted this suggestion and a hotline was installed between the NIS and the United Front Department. In fact, it is believed that this hotline played an important role at multiple crises in the inter-Korean relations.⁹ However, this hotline – between the NIS and the United Front Department – cannot be considered as a communication channel between the two leaders, as it is one between the Director of the NIS and the Director of the United Front Department. The first hotline between the two Korean leaders was installed between the Blue House and the Worker’s Party Headquarters for the first time on April 20, a week before the Panmunjom meeting on April 27, 2020. Call quality tests have also been completed.

Direct telephone lines between the UNC and the North Korean military at the Panmunjom are also in operation. This direct line was installed in accordance with the ‘Agreement on the Procedure for Hosting General-Level Talks between the UNC and the North Korean Armed Forces’ on June 8, 1998 and connects the UNC and the North Korean armed forces at the UNC Generals office in the South and the Panmungak in the North, respectively.¹⁰ Then, in July 2018, the line was restored after five years, due to an easing of tensions between the South-North

⁸ “ye-ki-nun phyeng-yang, pi-ka nay-lin-ta, nam-pwuk phyeng-hwa pa-lo-mi-the 'has-la-in'uy yek-sa,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (April 20, 2018).

⁹ Kim Dae-jung, *Autobiography 2* (Seoul: Samin, 2010); Lim Dong-won, *Peacemaker: Twenty Years of Inter-Korean Relations and the North Korean Nuclear Issue* (Stanford: Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2012).

¹⁰ “pwuk-han-uy ceng-cen-hyep-ceng payk-ci-hwa cwu-cang-un mo-swun,” *Yeonhap News* (March 7, 2013).

Koreas and the United States. The UNC regularly conducts daily communications tests with the North Korean military.¹¹

In addition, apart from North Korea, South Korea installed and is operating a hotline with the United States and Japan to prevent military contingencies and diversify communication on regional security issues. Currently, direct telephone lines have been installed and is operating between Korea's 1st Master Control & Remote Center (MCRC) and China's Northern Theater Command. It has been confirmed that China notified Korea of the flight route and purpose when it entered the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) on October 29, 2019.¹² Besides, South Korea is also negotiating the installment of a military hotline with Russia.

Limitations and Future Tasks

It has been 50 years since the first inter-Korean direct telephone line opened in 1971. The inter-Korean hotlines have helped to improve the inter-Korean relations and prevent accidental military clashes. In particular, the role of these hotlines during the Second Battle of Yeonpyeong on June 29, 2002 was notable. According to the memoirs of Lim Dong-won, the North sent a message via hotline to inform us, "This incident was not deliberately planned or intended. We confirm that people of lower ranks on the local level were solely responsible for this unintended clash. We regret this has happened," and they added, "Let's work together to never let it happen again." Their Message was such that the high-level leaders of the North were not involved in the incident-it was a localized incident. Expressing apology, the North side did not want an escalation of the incident.¹³ In addition, the inter-Korean hotlines occupy an important position

¹¹ "nam-pwuk kwun thong-sin tan-cel-ey-to yu-eyn-sa-pwuk-han-kwun cik-thong-cen-hwa-nun ka-tong," *The Seoul Economic Daily* (June 19, 2020).

¹² "cwung kwun-yong-ki, has-la-in-u-lo ches thong-po-hwu i-e-to KADIZ cin-ip," *Yeonhap News* (October 29, 2019).

¹³ Lim Dong-won, *Peacemaker: Twenty Years of Inter-Korean Relations and the North Korean Nuclear Issue* (Stanford: Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2012), p.320.

in inter-Korean relations, as it has recent been used to dispatch the Moon administration's envoys to North Korea and the Kim regime's special envoys to South Korea.

However, as can be seen from North Korea's unilateral decision to suspend direct calls between South and North Korea, the inter-Korean hotline has repeatedly been shut down then resumed whenever North Korea reacted – sensitively – to internal and external conditions. In fact, North Korea has been prone to blocking direct inter-Korean lines for various reasons. Ever since North Korea opened a direct inter-Korean telephone line in 1971, it has shut down and announced termination of all telecommunications between the North and South in seven separate occasions, totaling in 12 years: the Panmunjom axe incident in 1976, suspension of the working group for the inter- Korean prime ministerial talks in 1980, South Korea's co-sponsorship of the North Korea human rights resolution at the 63rd UN General Assembly in 2008, the South's 5.24 measures in 2010, UN Security Council sanctions in 2013 and joint ROK-US military exercises, the Kaesong Industrial Complex suspension measures in 2016, and last June 9, when all inter-Korean communication lines were blocked.¹⁴

On top of these environmental limitations, North Korea's telecommunications infrastructure is also lacking and obsolete, rendering effective communication difficult. Since most of the inter-Korean hotlines are composed of copper cables, the quality of communication is not only poor, but also intermittent. Video conferencing is also impossible. For now, the separated family video reunions and the firms at the Kaesung Industrial Complex, the inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office, and military communication lines are connected using optic fiber cables. In fact, the South and the North “shared the awareness of the need to improve the existing communications networks between the inter-Korean authorities and will actively cooperate in the future” at the inter-Korean communication working group held at the North-South Joint Liaison Office on November 23, 2018.¹⁵

¹⁴ Materials distributed to the Ministry of Unification press corps, “Past cases of North Korea's suspension of direct telephone lines” (June 9, 2020).

¹⁵ “nam-pwuk, tang-kwuk kan thong-sin-mang 'kwang-khey-i-pul kyo-chey' hyep-lyek-khi-lo,” *Hankyoreh* (November 23, 2018).

In conclusion, the inter-Korean hotline has been used as an important means to build trust between the two Koreas by promoting inter- Korean reconciliation and cooperation and preventing military contingencies. However, it is also true that the inter-Korean hotline has failed to achieve all of the expected results due to the strategic environmental uncertainties - such as the recent declaration of North Korea's “disposal of the inter-Korean hotline” - and the technical constraints of the outdated communication infrastructure. Therefore, for the inter-Korean hotline to play its role as a medium for building trust between the two Koreas, risks in the strategic environment and technical constraints will need to be overcome.