



A PAPER SERIES

UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA

Understanding North Korea's Public Messaging:

An Introduction

Rachel Minyoung Lee

NCNK
THE NATIONAL
COMMITTEE ON
NORTH KOREA



Hyundai Motor-Korea
Foundation Center for
Korean History and
Public Policy

UNDERSTANDING NORTH KOREA SERIES

The Understanding North Korea roundtable series is a joint program of the National Committee on North Korea and the Wilson Center's Hyundai Motor - Korean Foundation Center for Korean History and Public Policy. The roundtable series was established to enable emerging scholars of North Korea to share their research ideas with peers and experts in the field, and to publish their findings in a format accessible to a general audience.

The National Committee on North Korea is a non-governmental, non-partisan organization whose membership reflects a broad range of perspectives and subject-matter expertise related to North Korea. NCKN serves to share information among its members, advance their work, and provide the broader public with substantive and balanced information about North Korea. NCKN was founded in 2004 by Mercy Corps, a global aid and development organization.

The Wilson Center Hyundai Motor-Korea Foundation Center for Korean History and Public Policy was established in 2015 with the generous support of the Hyundai Motor Company and the Korea Foundation to provide a coherent, long-term platform for improving historical understanding of Korea and informing the public policy debate on the Korean peninsula in the United States and beyond. The Hyundai Motor-Korea Foundation Center for Korean History and Public Policy brings Korea to Washington through advanced research and programming that is rooted in history, informed by scholarship, and in touch with policy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Minyoung Lee is a Nonresident Fellow with the 38 North Program at the Stimson Center. Lee was a North Korea collection expert and analyst with Open Source Enterprise (OSE; formerly known as Open Source Center) under the CIA from 2000 to 2019. During that time, she wrote on the gamut of North Korean issues, from leadership, domestic politics and economy, and foreign policy, to social and cultural developments. As Analysis Team Lead, Lee led a team of collection officers and analysts to track and analyze North and South Korean issues with implications for Pyongyang's regime stability and regional security. Since leaving OSE, Lee has been cited regularly by leading global media outlets, to include *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Financial Times*. Lee earned her B.A. in English literature and her M.A. in international law, both at Korea University.

This paper reflects the views of the author alone and not those of the National Committee on North Korea, the Wilson Center, or any other organizations.

Summary

In this paper, the author addresses the challenges that North Korea watchers face when trying to understand the intent of Pyongyang's public messaging. The crux of North Korean media analysis is separating the message from the noise in state propaganda. And the author proposes the "LATTE" method—Level, Audience, Timing, Tone, and Everything else—to build a profile of key elements and identify patterns in the North's public messaging so that North Korea watchers can better gauge the country's current thinking and future intentions. In addition, the paper highlights some key shifts in Pyongyang's media strategy in recent years and offers insight into what they may mean for analysts moving forward.

Introduction¹

Between September and October 2021, North Korea issued a flurry of media commentary and official pronouncements calling for the withdrawal of the United States and South Korea's "double-dealing" attitudes regarding North Korea's weapons tests.

It began on September 17 with international affairs analyst Kim Myong Chol's commentary dedicated to American "double-dealing" attitudes in the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).² His piece served as a prelude to a succession of official pronouncements, including from Kim Yo Jong and Kim Jong Un, that called on the United States and South Korea to withdraw their "double-dealing" attitudes. The Kim siblings explicitly laid down this withdrawal as a precondition for improving inter-Korean relations and, notably, raised the issue of military "balance."³ The campaign came to a hiatus on October 23, likely because the North felt it had done its part and was watching to see what came out of the Moon Jae-in administration's efforts to rekindle dialogue between Pyongyang and Washington.⁴

"Double standards" have been a constant source of complaint for Pyongyang but setting their withdrawal as a precondition for improved relations was a new development. An astute analyst of the North's intensive one-month campaign on "double standards" and, more subtly "balance," would have observed what was then a policy decision to return to diplomacy with South Korea and eventually the United States and North Korea's terms for diplomatic engagement. By paying attention to the media rollout, the analyst also would have discerned how the various entities played their part, targeting different audiences and laying the groundwork for the leader to put a final stamp on the policy in his speeches.

This brief case study is an example of why North Korean media analysis is important and why learning the tool of media analysis would be useful.

¹ The author is grateful to Robert Carlin for his invaluable suggestions and comments.

² "U.S. Double-Dealing Attitude Is Main Stumbling Block in Settling Korean Peninsula Issue," KCNA, September 17, 2021, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2021/202109/news17/20210917-18ee.html> (accessed October 9, 2021).

³ "Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK, Issues Press Statement," DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, September 24, 2021, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/view/article/13334> (accessed November 17, 2021); "Kim Yo Jong, Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK, Issues Press Statement," KCNA, September 25, 2021, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2021/202109/news25/20210925-16ee.html>; "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Historic Policy Speech 'On the Orientation of Present Struggle for a Fresh Development of Socialist Construction'," *Rodong Sinmun*, September 30, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-09-30-0007; and "Kim Jong Un Makes Commemorative Speech at Defence Development Exhibition," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 12, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-10-12-0005 (all accessed October 12, 2021 unless otherwise noted). Note that Kim Jong Un in his policy speech on September 29, 2021 stated his intent to restore inter-Korean hotlines. The hotlines were restored on October 4, 2021.

⁴ Kim Eun-jung, "(LEAD) FM Chung says N. Korea sanctions relief can be an option if it accepts dialogue offer," *Yonhap*, October 20, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211020005151325> (accessed April 18, 2022).

North Korean media analysis is, simply put, a process of separating the wheat from the chaff. Much of North Korean media content is routine propaganda, perhaps even meaningless noise. More often than not, trends and patterns that are key to understanding Pyongyang's intentions remain buried under meaningless propaganda, and it is the job of the analyst to filter out the noise and discern the message. Serious analysis of North Korea's public messaging requires the right methodology and a well-trained eye to apply it rigorously and systematically to decode the messaging. A smart data curating tool for speeding up and improving the accuracy of the analysis would be icing on the cake.

The objective of this paper is to introduce the basics of a propaganda analysis method to help both consumers and producers of North Korea analysis avoid the all-too-common pitfalls of cherry picking, comparing apples and oranges, and drawing conclusions based on the proximity of two events. In that vein, this paper will examine a) the significance of North Korea's public line for understanding Pyongyang's intentions; b) a time-tested analytic framework for propaganda analysis; and c) the key changes in the North Korean communications strategy since the U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi and potential implications for this analysis method.

North Korea's Public Messaging: Why It Matters

Before delving into the method, there are two important questions that must be answered: why should we place any weight on state-controlled North Korean media? Is it not just all propaganda?

These questions almost come across as a no-brainer, or even trick questions, because they are so obvious. The answer, however, may not be quite how one would have formulated it. Renowned North Korea expert Robert Carlin captures the essence of the matter here:

"Discussions appearing in controlled media are valuable precisely because they are controlled. That the discussions take place within a carefully constrained environment does not diminish their utility. It just requires the right lens to see clearly what is going on."⁵

North Korea's public line matters because closed regimes exercise complete control over their media to shape and manage public opinion both at home and abroad. Even small changes in terminology or media behavior can shed light on leadership intentions. As such, Pyongyang is extremely calibrated in its public messaging: what information it releases and how it frames that information, at what level, to whom, and when. By tracking patterns and discerning shifts in trends in the media, one can gain insight into the North Korean leadership's current thinking and future intentions.

⁵ Robert Carlin, "Turtle Shells Redux," 38 North, January 14, 2015, <https://www.38north.org/2015/01/rcarlin011415/> (accessed September 27, 2021).

In North Korea, the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD) of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) heads the country's control and surveillance apparatus in the propaganda realm. The PAD takes the lead in ensuring that all forms of propaganda, ranging from state media and fine arts to lectures at museums, support and fall in line with the regime's official policy line.⁶ Given the importance of the department's work, Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are widely known to have provided guidance to the PAD and reviewed higher-level statements or articles on sensitive issues prior to dissemination.⁷ Unless there has been a significant change from those days, we can assume that Kim Jong Un follows this practice.⁸

The Analytic Framework: LATTE Method

Propaganda analysis is a time-tested method of deciphering the underlying intentions of closed regimes like North Korea. It has a long history that goes back to World War II, when analysts used Nazi propaganda to draw inferences about German policy calculations.⁹ This methodology reverse engineers a regime's decision-making process—what decisions are made, when, and why—and contextualizes the circumstances under which the decisions are made.

Today, this method is known to some as LATTE, an easy-to-remember acronym coined by Robert Carlin.¹⁰ This methodology is made up of five key diagnostic elements: Level, Audience, Timing, Tone, and Everything else. Pyongyang's public communications require careful study from all five fronts. Singling out or overemphasizing particular elements from the start can mislead or confuse, although at times certain elements may end up being more relevant than others.

There are two important caveats to this methodology. First, this methodology should be applied rigorously, but it should not be applied mechanically. As with everything else, North Korean

⁶ 유영구, "북한의 신문·방송 연구" [Yu Young-ku, "A Study on North Korean Mass Media"], *Guksagwan Nonchong*, Vol. 70 (1996), pp. 254, 263, http://db.history.go.kr/download.do?levelId=kn_070_0080&fileName=kn_070_0080.pdf (accessed September 27, 2021), and 정성장, *현대북한의 정치 역사, 이념, 권력체계* [Cheong Seong-Chang, *The Contemporary North Korean Politics[:] History, Ideology and Power System*] (Seoul: Hanul Academy, 2011), p. 318.

⁷ For a former DPRK Radio and Television Broadcasting Committee employee's testimonial on Kim Jong Il's instruction to increase music content on state-run television to minimize leaks of sensitive information, see 장진성, "북한 언론을 읽는 방법" [Chang Jin-seong, "How to Read North Korean Media"], Radio Free Asia, August 27, 2013, https://www.rfa.org/korean/weekly_program/ae40c528-c77cac00c758-ac70c9d3acfc-c9c4c2e4/co-ji-08272013122609.html (accessed September 27, 2021).

⁸ For example, Kim Yo Jong issued a "press statement (*tamhwa*)" criticizing US-South Korea joint military exercises "upon authorization," presumably Kim Jong Un's, implying the leader's involvement. See "Kim Yo Jong, Vice-department Director of WPK Central Committee, Issues Press Statement," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 11, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-08-11-0002 (accessed September 27, 2021).

⁹ For a study of propaganda analysis, see Alexander L. George, *Prediction of Political Action by Means of Propaganda Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1955), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/P779.html> (accessed October 3, 2021).

¹⁰ For a synopsis of the LATTE method, see "Tea Leaves and Turtle Shells: Reading North Korea," 38 North, January 25, 2010, <https://www.38north.org/2010/01/tea-leaves-and-turtle-she-clls-reading-north-korea/> (accessed October 1, 2021).

media undergoes change over time, a fact that should be accounted for when the methodology is applied. Second, putting North Korea's current message through the LATTE method alone is not the conclusion of the analytic process. It establishes a *profile* of the current message—the "what." The next step is to establish a *baseline* -- to contextualize or understand the "so what"—by comparing and contrasting the current message to similar statements or events in the past.

The LATTE method concerns North Korea's public communications and thus the scope of analysis is the information North Korea disseminates via state media. Relevant outside media reporting on North Korea, such as reports of back channel diplomatic communications and North Korea's "internal documents," may—and in some cases should—be considered as part of the context (this falls in the "everything else" category of LATTE and is explained in more detail below). But such information would not be the main subject of this propaganda analysis. That said, there is a constant misperception that what the North says in public is "only words" and what it says behind the scenes is what really counts. Or a parallel problem: dismissing what the North says as only words and claiming that what really counts are actions. Public statements and private correspondence tend to work together, and one informs the other. The public channel, for example, might provide a sense of the envelope in which the policy can evolve, while the private channel may sound tough on specific points. The Kim-Trump correspondence between 2018 and 2019 and Pyongyang's public positions on the United States are a good example of North Korea's public statements and private correspondence forming a complementary relationship.¹¹

Level

The first element the media analyst should look for in North Korean public messaging is *who* is saying it—the communicator. Not all North Korean pronouncements are intended to carry the same weight. North Korea chooses carefully from a well-established hierarchy of communication vehicles depending on how strongly it wishes to attach itself to a message. In short, the level of message reflects the degree of regime commitment, or how seriously it wants external observers to consider the message. The higher the level of communication vehicle, the stronger the regime's commitment, and as a result the more carefully the language is reviewed. The lower the level of communication, the weaker the regime's commitment to the message.

For example, North Korea's reaction to the U.S. *Missile Defense Review* in 2019 consisted of one Party daily "analysis of the situation (*jongse haeso*)" and third-party news reports, which are respectively on the lower to the lowest level in North Korea's hierarchy of communication

¹¹ Robert Carlin, "The Real Lessons of the Trump-Kim Love Letters," *Foreign Policy*, August 13, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/13/north-korea-trump-kim-jong-un-love-letters-diplomacy-nuclear-talks/> (accessed November 17, 2021).

vehicles.¹² By contrast, Pyongyang issued a decidedly more authoritative Foreign Ministry "spokesperson's press statement (*taebyonin tamhwa*)" in reaction to the U.S. *National Security Strategy* in 2017.¹³ In 2018, the North responded to the *Nuclear Posture Review* in the form of a Foreign Ministry Institute for American Studies "spokesperson's answer (*taebyonin taedap*) to KCNA," which was a downgrade from 2017 but a higher level than 2019.¹⁴ The drastic downward shift in the level of North Korea's criticism of the United States in 2019 reflects diplomatic engagement that was well under way between the two countries by early 2019. Criticism of the United States did not altogether disappear, but Pyongyang put it into a decidedly lower-level vehicle, a move that in and of itself was meant to be consistent with and signal Pyongyang's continued effort to engage the Trump administration.

Higher-level communications are the most important because they are aligned more closely with official regime policies—those at the highest levels actually being policy statements in themselves—than lower-level pronouncements. That said, sometimes the lowest-level vehicles—direct or third-party news reports—may represent the country's highest-level reaction. For example, the North's response to the U.S. *Missile Defense Review* in 2019 indicated that North Korea felt sensitive enough about the document to react to it, but the use of lower-level vehicles reflected the leadership's intention to keep the momentum of diplomacy alive with Washington.

Lower-level messages can also foreshadow significant policy shifts depending on their content and the context in which they are issued. The aforementioned "commentary (*ronpyong*)" by "international affairs analyst" Kim Myong Chol is a classic example of an ostensibly routine media commentary that in fact set the stage for a policy shift. Although it was a signed commentary, which is rare on KCNA and thus meant to receive special attention, it technically fell in the media commentary basket, which is lower level in the traditional hierarchy of North Korean vehicles. The importance of Kim's commentary may need to be revisited, however, depending on his future publications (see the next section, "Shifting North Korean Propaganda Strategy: Some Thoughts Going Forward," for more information).

¹² For North Korea's initial reaction, see "랭전사고방식을 버릴것을 미국에 요구" ["US Called on to Do Away with Cold War Way of Thinking"], *Rodong Sinmun*, January 26, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-01-26-0050 (accessed October 10, 2021). For the Party daily's analysis, see 손소연, "미사일방위검토보고서발표로 심화되는 모순" [Son So-yon, "Deepening Contradictions Due to Release of the Missile Defense Review"], *Rodong Sinmun*, February 5, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-02-05-0053 (accessed November 18, 2021).

¹³ "조선민주주의인민공화국 외무성 대변인담화" ["DPRK Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Press Statement"], *Rodong Sinmun*, December 23, 2017, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Rodong News Team*, "Answer of Spokesman for Institute for American Studies of DPRK FM," *Rodong Sinmun*, February 9, 2018, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-02-09-0017 (accessed November 18, 2021). In November 2017, North Korea proclaimed that it completed building its state nuclear forces with the launch of Hwasong-15, and by early 2018, it had shifted to a policy of diplomatic détente. The downgrade in the level of North Korea's criticism of the US in February 2018 was in line with that trend.

Audience

This element refers to whom a North Korean public message is being directed—the intended target. North Korea targets different pockets of the audience to maintain policy flexibility or shield certain parts of the audience from sensitive information while voicing or even reinforcing its message to intended recipients.

The two broad categories of the audience are internal and external. Messages intended for the domestic audience are available on domestic media outlets such as radio, television, and newspapers. The North Korean authorities understand that these media outlets are monitorable by outsiders. Therefore, any information that they deem to be too sensitive for outsiders' consumption—for example, any events or news that signal people's noncompliance with the law or regulations—is disseminated via the "Third Broadcast," a nationwide cable radio network that cannot be accessed from the outside.¹⁵ Messages targeting external audiences are transmitted via KCNA and various North Korean-run websites, as well as social media platforms like YouTube. The average North Korean does not have access to the Internet and these communications.

The central question revolving around "audience" is: was this information carried domestically as well as externally, or just externally? This question is important because when the regime disseminates information externally but not internally, it usually means the message is too sensitive for domestic consumption, the regime wants to maintain flexibility in policy, or both. Disclosing a message to the domestic public leaves the regime with less maneuvering space for its next course of action. North Korea's domestic silence should not be confused with an issue's importance. North Korea often carries authoritative statements or important commentary for external audiences only.

For example, only North Korean external outlets like KCNA¹⁶ and the Foreign Ministry website reported on Kim Jong Un's meeting with a North Korean delegation that had just returned from the United States in the lead-up to the second U.S.-DPRK summit.¹⁷ In this case, Pyongyang wanted to signal to Washington that Kim was satisfied about the delegation's visit but apparently deemed the subject too sensitive or the timing too soon for domestic consumption. In July 2021, North Korea's announcement on reconnecting the inter-Korean hotlines was transmitted via

¹⁵ For more information on North Korea's Third Broadcast, see Martyn Williams, "New Life for the Third Network," 38 North, February 11, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/02/new-life-for-the-third-network/> (accessed October 6, 2021).

¹⁶ KCNA is essentially an externally oriented media outlet, transmitting its items through feeds for outside subscribers or posting them on its websites, one run out of Tokyo (kcna.co.jp) and one Pyongyang (kcna.kp). North Korea's domestically oriented print media like the party and government dailies regularly carry KCNA-bylined news reports and articles that are appropriate and necessary for the internal public, but KCNA items referred to in this article are content reserved for South Korean and international audiences.

¹⁷ "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Meets Delegation to 2nd DPRK-U.S. High-level Talks," KCNA, January 24, 2019, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2019/201901/news24/20190124-01ee.html> (accessed October 11, 2021).

external outlets only, giving Pyongyang the flexibility to disconnect them again if needed.¹⁸ Sure enough, North Korea stopped answering South Korea's calls when South Korea proceeded with its joint military drills with the United States as planned.¹⁹ Finally, the North's first few media commentaries and official pronouncements on "double standards"—mention at the outset of this paper—were only disseminated externally, which seemed to suggest the North was leaving room for maneuverability. However, Kim Jong Un's affirmation of the policy in his speech to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), which was carried domestically and externally, indicated the policy was fixed.

North Korea sometimes uses esoteric language to target certain segments of the domestic population, presumably the top elite of the regime, for highly sensitive political themes.

Timing

When North Korea reacts to an issue or event—and North Korea tends to be reactive rather than proactive—the speed of its reaction can be important. This speed, or "timing," runs the spectrum of fast, normal, and slow and indicates the sensitivity that North Korea has over a certain event or issue. The faster the response, the more sensitivity North Korea has, and the slower the reaction, the less sensitivity. For example, in April 2019, just as North Korea started resuming weapons tests after the breakdown of the Hanoi summit, it issued a statement three days after U.S.-ROK joint aerial exercises began.²⁰ The statement was followed by a missile launch nine days later.²¹ In August of the same year, Pyongyang released a statement and carried out a missile launch one day after U.S.-ROK joint military drills began, reflecting the country's hardening line.²²

Whether a reaction is "fast" or "slow" can be determined by first ascertaining the "normal" speed of North Korean reaction to an issue or event. This must be done by tracking historical patterns or, as mentioned previously, by establishing a baseline. For example, a review of Pyongyang's

¹⁸ "KCNA Report on Re-operation of Inter-Korean Communication Liaison Lines," KCNA, July 27, 2021, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2021/202107/news27/20210727-14ee.html> (accessed October 11, 2021).

¹⁹ Choi Soo-hyang, "(2nd LD) N. Korea refuses to answer S. Korea's hotline calls for 2nd day," Yonhap, August 11, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210811002553325> (accessed October 11, 2021).

²⁰ "남조선당국의 배신적행위는 북남관계를 더욱 위태로운 국면으로 떠밀게 될것이다 조국평화통일위원회 대변인담화" ["South Korean Authorities' Traitorous Act Will Push North-South Relations to a More Perilous State -- Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland Spokesperson's Press Statement"], *Rodong Sinmun*, April 25, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-04-25-0023 (accessed October 11, 2021).

²¹ "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Strike Drill of Defence Units in Frontline Area and on Eastern Front," *Rodong Sinmun*, May 5, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-05-05-0002 (accessed October 11, 2021).

²² "Spokesperson for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of DPRK Issues Press Statement," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 6, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-08-06-0002, and "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Watches Demonstration Fire of New-Type Tactical Guided Missiles," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 7, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-08-07-0009 (both accessed October 11, 2021).

reaction to high-level U.S. officials' comments or United Nations resolutions concerning North Korea in recent years will show that a one- or two-day lag between an issue or event and the North's reaction is the norm.

Prolonged silence can be significant if North Korea remains mum on an issue to which it has historically responded. Prolonged silence almost certainly is deliberate, and it can mean Pyongyang is exercising restraint, waiting to see how events unfold, undecided on what to say, or storing up a sea of negative rhetoric for the right time to unleash it. For example, in a break with past practice, North Korean media remained silent on Lee Myung-bak's election (2007) and inauguration (2008) as South Korean president. Then, a little over one month after Lee's inauguration, North Korea issued a rare, authoritative "*commentator (ronpyongwon)*" article refuting point by point the Lee administration's North Korea policy and warning it to "not miscalculate our patience and silence thus far."²³ This article marked the beginning of an anti-Lee media cycle.

Tone

If we liken a North Korean message to a packaged item, the first three elements of LATTE deal with the information on the outer packaging—the sender (level), recipient (audience), and the date stamp (timing) on the package. The fourth element, "tone," leads us to examine the article inside: the content or substance of the North Korean message. Substance covers language, omissions of language, placement, and if available, photos. Language is wording: formulations, adjectives, adverbs, conjugations, and conditionality.

²³ 론평원, "남조선당국이 반복대결로 얻을것은 파멸뿐이다" [Commentator, "What the South Korean Authorities Will Gain Through Anti-North Confrontation Is Only Ruin"], *Rodong Sinmun*, April 1, 2008, p. 2.



A picture is worth a thousand words (1): Screen capture of Rodong Sinmun's March 26, 2021 hardcopy shows Kim Jong Un's economic visits carried on the front page (left), while a report on a missile test-launch was published on page 2 (right). The placement of these reports, and the fact that Kim was not present at the missile launch site, sent a clear signal to the reader that the economy took precedence over weapons development and testing.



A picture is worth a thousand words (2): A photo carried in the Party daily on October 12, 2021 shows Kim Jong Un at the National Defense Development Exhibition. Although Kim's speech at the event did not play up his leadership in the field of weapons development, it did not have to: that message was made abundantly clear in the walls of the exhibition hall, which were covered with portraits of Kim Jong Un.

Examining tone requires knowing what language to key in on, building a baseline of historical patterns, and comparing and contrasting to similar past events or statements.

For example, the wording in the Kim leader's telegrams to the Chinese president on major occasions is a good indicator of the state of bilateral relations. Compare these two passages from Kim Jong Un's telegrams to Xi Jinping marking the 55th and 60th anniversaries of the DPRK-China Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in 2016 and 2021, respectively (*bold added by the author for emphasis*):

2016: "It is the consistent stand of our party and the government of the DPRK to consolidate the bilateral relations of long historical roots."²⁴

2021: "... [I]t is the fixed stand of the WPK and the DPRK government to ceaselessly develop the friendly and cooperative relations between the DPRK and China as required by the new times and as desired by the peoples of the two countries."²⁵

Compared to his plain and straight-forward letter to Xi in 2016, Kim's telegram in 2021 was warmer in its depiction of bilateral relations and expressed a stronger resolve to develop them, reflecting the significant improvement of ties between the two countries since the five Kim-Xi summit meetings in 2018 and 2019.

Sometimes what appears to be tough rhetoric is just a cover for a shift toward a softer stance. For example, a *Rodong Sinmun* report on North Korea's destruction of the inter-Korean joint liaison office in Kaesong contained tough language on the prospects of inter-Korean relations. However, it concluded with wording that made the North's next moves conditional, suggesting the country was preparing to de-escalate: "We will watch the South Korean authorities' attitude and will be deciding the level and timing of action for our successive anti-enemy action measures depending on their next behavior and handling of affairs hereafter" (*bold added by author for emphasis*).²⁶ Kim Jong Un suspended the operation a week later.²⁷ Likewise, what only seems like routine rhetoric can sometimes contain formulations pointing to a new or stronger policy turn. An

²⁴ "Kim Jong Un Congratulates Xi Jinping," KCNA, July 11, 2016, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2016/201607/news11/20160711-23ee.html> (accessed October 9, 2021).

²⁵ "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Sends Greetings to President Xi Jinping," KCNA, July 11, 2021, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2021/202107/news11/20210711-01ee.html> (accessed October 9, 2021).

²⁶ 조선중앙통신, "북남관계총파산의 불길한 전주곡 북남공동련락사무소 완전파괴" [KCNA, "Ominous Prelude to Complete Ruin of North-South Relations -- Total Destruction of North-South Joint Liaison Office"], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 17, 2020, http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-06-17-0008 (accessed October 9, 2021).

²⁷ Political News Team, "Preliminary Meeting for 5th Meeting of 7th WPK Central Military Commission Held," *Rodong Sinmun*, June 24, 2020, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-06-24-0001 (accessed November 11, 2021).

example of this is the aforementioned Kim Myong Chol commentary that set the stage for Pyongyang's "double standards" campaign.

Everything Else

Here we come to the final element of the LATTE method: everything else that was not covered by the first four diagnostic elements and is important for understanding North Korea's behavior. Simply put, "everything else" is the context in which North Korea's perceptions are formed and decisions are made and rolled out. Context, to be specific, entails examining domestic and external factors and connecting the dots of ongoing trends and patterns to understand what may be driving North Korea's behavior. North Korea does not issue statements or engage in actions in a vacuum. Hence, taking a single North Korean behavior and parsing it in isolation without seeing the bigger picture could lead analysts astray.

For example, Kim Jong Un's speech at the SPA in September 2021 announced the restoration of the inter-Korean hotlines for "earlier recovery of the North-South relations"—significant progress from his report at the Eighth Party Congress eight months before, where he said that "at the present moment we do not need to show goodwill to the South Korean authorities unilaterally."²⁸ This turnabout may be confusing to some, because there was no meaningful change, at least on the surface, between the two Koreas. Here, it is important to view the shift in policy as part of a continuum of events and signals since Kim's party congress report in January 2021.

First, Kim Jong Un and the South Korean President Moon Jae-in began exchanging letters in April 2021, signaling a shift in Pyongyang's approach to Seoul.²⁹ Then, in a speech at a party meeting in June, Kim mentioned "dialogue"—progress from his report to the January party congress—and called for "creating a favorable external environment on [our] own initiative."³⁰ These formulations seemed to suggest Pyongyang was positioning itself for diplomatic reengagement.³¹ North and South Korea restored their hotlines in July, but this reconciliation

²⁸ Political News Team, "Great Programme for Struggle Leading Korean-style Socialist Construction to Fresh Victory[:] On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Congress of WPK," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 10, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-01-10-0004, and Political News Team, "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Historic Policy Speech 'On the Orientation of Present Struggle for a Fresh Development of Socialist Construction'," *Rodong Sinmun*, September 30, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-09-30-0007 (both accessed October 11, 2021).

²⁹ Seo Young-ji, "Moon, Kim exchanged multiple letters since Moon reached out first in April," *Hankyoreh*, July 28, 2021, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/1005574.html (accessed November 18, 2021).

³⁰ 본사정치보도반, "조선로동당 중앙위원회 제 8 기 제 3 차전원회의 3 일회의 진행" [Political News Team, "Third Plenary Meeting of the Eighth WPK Central Committee Held"], *Rodong Sinmun*, June 18, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-06-18-0001 (accessed October 11, 2021).

³¹ "Kim Carefully Nudges the Dialogue Door Open Wider," 38 North, June 18, 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/06/kim-carefully-nudges-the-dialogue-door-open-wider/> (accessed October 11, 2021).

came to a pause after two weeks, when the United States and South Korea proceeded with their scheduled joint military exercises. The hotlines were restored again in early October, shortly after Kim's announcement at the SPA.³² The North's announcement on the restoration of inter-Korean hotlines in July tied Kim Jong Un to this arrangement by saying "the top leaders" of the two Koreas agreed to "make a big stride in recovering the mutual trust and promoting reconciliation."³³ The explicit reference to Kim's commitment indicated that any hiccups would only be temporary and not a complete reversal, and that is what happened with the North's handling of the hotlines between July and October. Of course, economic difficulties at home, which Kim publicly acknowledged on multiple occasions, and the fact that South Korea's Moon administration, which is keen on revitalizing inter-Korean ties, was soon ending, likely figured into Pyongyang's calculus.

Failure to contextualize North Korea's publication communications often results in cherry picking or drawing conclusions based on the proximity of two events that may not be connected. For example, multiple media outlets picked up on a North Korean TV cartoon that mentioned obesity and encouraged exercise, implying that the cartoon was connected to Kim Jong Un's weight loss by drawing the reader's attention to the program being aired shortly after Kim shed a significant amount of weight.³⁴ North Korea for years has carried health- and obesity-related articles and programs in print and broadcast media. Hence, the connection between the TV cartoon's moral lesson and Kim's weight loss seems tenuous, unless the cartoon contained unique rhetoric worth further examination, or the volume of obesity-related programming increased around the time of Kim's weight loss.

Many Western media reports interpreted Kim Jong Un's brief call for an "Arduous March" at a WPK meeting as warning of an economic crisis similar to the famine in the mid- to late 1990s.³⁵ This is a classic example of taking words out of context, one of the most common problems in media coverage of North Korea. Kim's appeal—made during a closing speech and not even during the main part of the event—said the WPK and the WPK's cell secretaries would wage

³² "KCNA Report," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 4, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-10-04-0002 (accessed November 18, 2021).

³³ "KCNA Report on Re-operation of Inter-Korean Communication Liaison Lines," KCNA, July 27, 2021, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2021/202107/news27/20210727-14ee.html> (accessed October 11, 2021).

³⁴ https://www.google.com/search?q=kim+jong+un+weight+cartoon&biw=1536&bih=714&tbn=news&sxsrf=AOaemvJqbQ7v7UayAxJ3iXvbYy8ZQFWvg%3A1637650254175&ei=To-cYY6UCtX8wAOI_qOABw&oq=kim+jong+un+weight+cartoon&gs_l=psy-ab.3...383037.390836.0.391126.35.25.1.1.1.0.258.2809.0j13j3.16.0...0...1c.1.64.psy-ab..17.16.2479...0i512k1j0i22i30k1j33i10i160k1j33i22i29i30k1j33i160k1.0.QQuX3fdm1VE

³⁵ https://www.google.com/search?q=North+Korea+worst-ever+situation&sxsrf=ALeKk00YI3FoFlx_HkGTzcszfac0mvt_yg:1618300912565&source=lnms&tbn=news&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiAsqHY4PrvAhXQdn0KHUvCacQ_AUoAXoECAEQAw&biw=1366&bih=625

"another more difficult 'Arduous March'."³⁶ Kim's call on the *party* to wage an "Arduous March" was clearly different—both in terms of scale and significance—from 1996, when North Korea presented "Arduous March" as a policy guideline for the *entire country* for the year in the New Year's joint editorial.³⁷ The "Arduous March" did not escalate into a national movement following Kim Jong Un's speech.

Over-parsing and reading into a single data point will often lead the writer or analyst to take missteps, which unfortunately can generate unproductive speculation and misinform the public. One example is when Kim Jong Un's "30-day absence" touched off a flurry of media speculation on Kim's possible health issues.³⁸ Granted, it marked the longest absence since 2014, when he was out of the public eye for 40 days. At that time, however, there was legitimate concern about Kim's health as he had been shown limping on state television since July of that year. This time, the reports were published despite the South Korean intelligence agency's confirmation that Kim Jong Un remained healthy.³⁹ A changed pattern of Kim's public profile also makes the current context different from the situation in 2014. Since mid-2020, Kim Jong Un has made public appearances on a selective basis, attending major meetings and minimizing field guidance. In 2014, Kim Jong Un appeared in public much more frequently, constantly paying field inspection visits around the country.

Shifting North Korean Propaganda Strategy: Some Thoughts Going Forward

North Korea's propaganda strategy has become more practical, timelier, and receptive to new techniques and ideas under Kim Jong Un. The following passage from Kim Jong Un's letter to a national conference of propaganda officials in the spring of 2019 encapsulates his view of propaganda:

"In holding high the principle of our state first, a banner of patriotism in our time, [we] should be vigilant against abstract propaganda.... What is important in greatness education is to have [the people] deeply understand that the leader is not a being who is removed from the people but is the leader of the people who shares the people's joys and

³⁶ "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Makes Closing Address at Sixth Conference of Cell Secretaries of Workers' Party of Korea," *Rodong Sinmun*, April 9, 2021, http://rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2021-04-09-0002 (accessed November 11, 2021).

³⁷ "'Worst-Ever Situation' or Not," 38 North, April 14, 2021, https://www.38north.org/2021/04/worst-ever-situation-or-not/#_ftn4 (accessed November 11, 2021).

³⁸

https://www.google.com/search?q=kim+jong+un+30+days+absent&sxsrf=AOaemvKcFN3IPrk1AAEqO67bucEBGoxw7A:1637650728661&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewiB_cmv9K30AhXts1YBHYGkCn0Q_AUoAHoECAEQAg&biw=1536&bih=714&dpr=1.25

³⁹ Lee Haye-ah, "(3rd LD) N.K. leader loses 20 kilograms, has no health issues: Seoul's spy agency," *Yonhap*, October 28, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211028010953315> (accessed November 11, 2021).

sorrows and sacrifices himself for the people's happiness. If [we] mystify the leader's revolutionary activities and traits in the name of highlighting his greatness, [we] end up hiding the truth.... Absolute loyalty springs up when one is captivated by the leader as a human being and comrade."⁴⁰

Accordingly, it is no longer shocking to see the leader publicly criticizing officials or acknowledging shortcomings or for state television to show potentially unfavorable conditions without the usual advance vetting, like real-time relays of on-site flood reports. Economic news reports that have a direct bearing on the people's daily life have progressively taken the place of articles singing the praises of the Kim leaders, long-time staples that graced the front page of the Party daily. A festival-like night military parade that evoked images of political events in Western countries, and Kim Jong Un's ground-breaking speech there, where he omitted the usual tributes to the late leaders and instead uttered apologetic words to the people in tears, broke new boundaries in a media landscape that had already undergone a sea change.⁴¹

There has been a dual development following the Hanoi summit in 2019 with potential implications for the application of the LATTE method: a dramatic cutback in official and media commentary on international and foreign policy issues for the domestic audience and a renewed foreign policy propaganda campaign targeting external audiences.

Official statements (including Kim Jong Un's comments) and media "commentaries (*ronpyong*)" are the two main vehicles by which Pyongyang influences domestic and foreign public opinion on key international and foreign policy issues.⁴² Since late 2019—following the breakdown of the U.S.-North Korea working-level talks in Stockholm and as North Korea's year-end deadline loomed for the Trump administration to change its approach to nuclear diplomacy—official statements on foreign policy issues have decreased dramatically in domestic media outlets, and commentaries have virtually disappeared from domestic publications. The party and government dailies, the two most authoritative domestic media sources, altogether ceased publishing commentaries as of October 23, 2019, resuming their publication only during the three-week anti-South Korea campaign in June 2020. The dailies continue to publish short

⁴⁰ 조선중앙통신, "경애하는 최고령도자 김정은동지께서 제 2 차 전국당초급선전일군대회 참가자들에게서한 《참신한 선전선동으로 혁명의 전진동력을 배가해나가자》를 보내시었다" [KCNA, "Respected and Beloved Supreme Leader Comrade Kim Jong Un Sent the Letter 'Let Us Redouble Source of Power for the Revolution's Advance Through Novel Propaganda and Agitation' to the Participants of the Second National Conference of the Party's Primary Propaganda Functionaries"], *Rodong Sinmun*, March 9, 2019, http://rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2019-03-09-0001 (accessed October 11, 2021).

⁴¹ "Kim Jong Un's October 10 Speech: More Than Missiles," 38 North, October 13, 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/10/kjuspeech101320/> (accessed October 11, 2021).

⁴² The North Korean party and government dailies do not label "commentaries." Labels of vehicles can be confirmed by checking the *Rodong Sinmun* website or the website of the Tokyo-based DPR Korea Media (KPM), which hosts full texts of North Korean newspaper and journal articles on behalf of North Korea.

articles and news reports on international issues that in most cases do not provide a meaningful window into the regime's foreign policy intentions.

In contrast to the reduction or sunseting of official and media commentary on foreign policy issues for the domestic populace, North Korea has continued to carry official pronouncements—mostly "press statements (*tamhwa*)" attributed to various individual officials—on external outlets, such as the KCNA and the Foreign Ministry websites. In fact, North Korea has further stepped up its foreign policy campaign targeting external audiences by revitalizing and revamping the Foreign Ministry website. Since mid-2021, North Korea has used this platform to state its positions or comment on major international and foreign policy issues that it is reluctant to discuss via official media channels at home, such as the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S.-ROK joint military exercises, and more recently the war in Ukraine. By diversifying the levels and types of commentary targeting exclusively external audiences, North Korea has been able to convey its opinions on key international and foreign policy issues while preserving flexibility in its policy toward Washington and Seoul.

For now, these developments, though significant, appear to be more or less part of North Korean media's natural evolution. They do not seem to point to a fundamental recalibration of the media's function in the overall North Korean system that would require a sweeping review of or major adjustments to the LATTE method. Hence, the LATTE method remains valid for North Korean media analysis, but the latest changes will need to be factored in as we continue to run the LATTE comb through North Korea's public messages.

Specifically, the diversification of vehicles may require adjustments to the existing hierarchy of authoritativeness. The broadened range of vehicles *per se* is not a new development under Kim Jong Un. The depth and breadth of the changes in North Korea's foreign policy communications since the 2019 Hanoi summit, however, require closer examination for their potential implications.

First, North Korea started issuing "press statements (*tamhwa*)" attributed to individual officials on a regular basis in April 2019, shortly after the breakdown of the Hanoi summit. Their number started rising in the lead-up to the Stockholm working-level talks, and today, these pronouncements, including Kim Yo Jong's, make up the majority of North Korea's official statements. "Press statements" issued in individuals' names—rarely seen before April 2019—are generally viewed as less authoritative than those attributed to institutions, because theoretically they enable the regime to maintain some nominal distance from the message. That said, whether this rule of thumb remains valid when statements attributed to individuals seem to be the new norm, requires closer examination. Moreover, although these statements are issued by senior-level officials, they are not all at the same level of seniority or authority and therefore their

pronouncements are not equal measures of North Korean policies. For example, Kim Yo Jong's "press statements" have generated strong interest given her proximity to Kim Jong Un. Her title as vice director of a party department is not high in the official leadership hierarchy, and the authoritativeness of her statements should be commensurate with her official rank. However, Pyongyang likely understands the special status the world affords her and appears to be using her platform to send targeted messages.

Second, in the absence of the traditional "commentaries (*ronpyong*)" published in the party and government dailies, understanding how the North Korean Foreign Ministry uses various vehicles on its website and on what issues and how closely these messages align with Pyongyang's official policy line has become important for gaining insight into regime stance on key international and foreign policy issues. For example, strictly from the standpoint of "level" in LATTE, an article written by a Foreign Ministry institute researcher and an unsigned article probably do not carry the same weight.

Third, certain writers' commentaries or articles, generally for external websites, may need to be reevaluated for their authoritativeness. For example, as mentioned earlier, Kim Myong Chol's commentary was a prelude to North Korea's campaign on United States and South Korea's "double-dealing" attitudes. Commentaries published on external websites are low in the hierarchy of media vehicles, but this is only in general terms. If an author is constantly setting the stage for a major North Korean campaign, his or her importance needs to be reexamined.

Conclusion

North Korea is a perennially tempting target of analysis for experts and nonexperts alike. A nuclear-armed country with a reputation for colorful threats and displays of fancy weapons, not to mention being headed by a leader known to have health issues, any action by, or development in, North Korea may be presented as having potential security implications and therefore makes for a worthwhile writing topic.

Tackling the "what" equation of the question tends to be the easier, more straightforward part. Identifying the "so what" and then analyzing its significance becomes a much more elusive task. This is particularly true in the field of North Korea: without an understanding of its unique media environment and an analytic framework with which to decipher regime intentions, one can easily be led down a rabbit hole that can result in misreading or missing Pyongyang's often obscure signals.

Serious analysis of North Korea is not impossible. It just requires a rigorous application of the right system, and the LATTE method has proven to be a solid guide for controlled media analysts for the past 80 years.

This methodology, however, is a living tool. North Korean media is constantly changing, in ways big and small, and the tool designed to analyze the media should adjust to those changes accordingly. The longer-term implications of key changes in North Korea's post-Hanoi communication strategy need to be tracked closely. As of now, there is no indication that these developments will fundamentally change the function of the media in the North Korean system, but that may not always be the case. After all, North Korea does surprise us from time to time.

NCNK
THE NATIONAL
COMMITTEE ON
NORTH KOREA



Hyundai Motor-Korea
Foundation Center for
Korean History and
Public Policy

Cover Image: View of Pyongyang from North Korea's capital.
Photo by Omer Serkan Bakir via iStock

Copyright © 2022 by the National Committee on North Korea and the Wilson Center's Hyundai
Motor - Korean Foundation Center for Korean History and Public Policy.
All rights reserved.