

# “Besieged by Imperialists”: North Korea’s State Media in English, 1998-2003

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## Abstract

Outside observers may find North Korea’s English-language state media, such as the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), easy to dismiss due to its exaggerated declarations, obvious falsehoods, and mundane content designed to promote the regime’s accomplishments to an unclear audience. However, a careful reading of its content reveals that the English-language content, the KCNA in particular, serves a role of promoting the regime’s foreign and inter-Korean policies, especially when a change of approach is underway. This study evaluates the KCNA’s content during the presidency of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) in South Korea, particularly ahead of the policy shifts that led to the inter-Korean summit of 2000, the Japan-North Korea summit of 2002, and the withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in early 2003. It reveals that the KCNA prepared for each of these events through an influx of content justifying these changes, including by attempting to demonstrate international support for them. In this way, the KCNA can be said to function as the justification mechanism for North Korea’s decisions of international import, including foreign and inter-Korean policies.

**Keywords:** North Korea, Propaganda, Inter-Korean relations, US-North Korea relations, Japan-North Korea relations, North Korean foreign policy

## Introduction

On August 18, 2009 the Korean Central News Agency in Pyongyang issued a news release of exactly one sentence: “Kim Dae-jung, ex-president of south<sup>1</sup> Korea, regrettably passed away on Tuesday while getting treatment in Severance Hospital of Yonsei University of south Korea” (KCNA 2009a). Three days later, the KCNA announced that Supreme Leader Kim Jong Il would send a wreath for the late president’s memorial, along with “words of condolences” to his family, via a special envoy (KCNA 2009e). On August 23, the envoy attended as South Korea laid to rest Kim, its president from 1998 to 2003 (KCNA 2009d). Despite the sharp decline in relations between the two Koreas in the preceding year, the envoys had a half-hour of “serious but amicable” talks with the incumbent Lee Myung-bak administration in Seoul. “Even in death, Kim Dae-jung unites Koreans,” announced an *Associated Press* headline from the event (Lee 2009).

On the same day they reported Kim’s death, the KCNA published a report titled “Lee Myung Bak<sup>2</sup> Group’s Anti-reunification Moves Assailed,” quoting a pair of Middle Eastern groups with sympathetic-sounding names, the “Arab Committee for Solidarity with Korean People” and “Supporting the Reunification of Korea in Jordan,” who called the Lee administration a “group of traitors” accustomed to “submission to outsiders and fratricidal war” (KCNA 2009c).

Then, on the day of the Kim funeral, the agency quoted a South Korean group that “flayed” the Lee administration for its moves “reviving the fascist dictatorship,” a favorite of their pejoratives for

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1 The KCNA, along with other English-language North Korean media, does not capitalize the “s” in “South Korea” or “n” in “North Korea,” reflecting the view only one Korean nation exists.

2 How the North chooses to Romanize names varies, with them sometimes hyphenating, sometimes not, and in Lee’s case varying even the English spelling. This article will, unless quoting the KCNA, observe the South Korean custom for South Korean names—a hyphenating of given names with the third syllable starting with a lower-case letter (e.g., Lee Myung-bak not Lee Myung Bak)—and the North Korean standard for North Korean names, e.g., Kim Il Sung, not Kim Il-sung.

South Korean governments (KCNA 2009g). The negative coverage continued, with Lee regularly called a dictator and a traitor until the end of his term in early 2013. North Korean state media assailed Lee's successor, fellow conservative, and first female president of South Korea Park Geun-hye in similar terms, while also adding gender-coded insults, calling Park everything from a "bitch" to "an old spinster" to a "babbling" old woman (York and Sugarman 2014).

By contrast, after his passing, North Korean state media would reference Kim Dae-jung with restraint, if not much enthusiasm. In reports lightly praising the late president and proudly declaring the Northern leadership's enthusiasm for reunification, the KCNA continued to mark the anniversaries of the historic 2000 summit between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il, agreements they signed (KCNA 2004), as well as continuing contact between the Pyongyang government and Kim's widow (KCNA 2014). To a lesser extent they did the same for Kim Dae-jung's successor, Roh Moo-hyun (KCNA 2012), who continued Kim's conciliatory diplomatic approach to the North, complete with a second inter-Korean summit in 2007. They have also added an occasional call to punish Lee Myung-bak for Roh's 2009 suicide, blaming prosecutors' investigation into a corruption scandal involving Roh family members and aides (KCNA 2009b).

What purpose does North Korea's English-language state media serve, and what role do individual outlets such as the KCNA serve in that process? This paper argues that it serves a specific purpose, one that readers may easily overlook when observing the often exaggerated, mundane, and patently false statements seen in such outlets. In fact, it serves a distinct purpose when compared to the regime's Korean-language media, in that it serves as a window into Pyongyang's thoughts on the world. To demonstrate this, this paper will look at three diplomatic incidents taking place during the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003): the inter-Korean summit in June 2000, the summit with Japan in 2002, and North Korea's decision to leave the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in January 2003. Each of these

constituted a change in an official North Korean diplomatic stance, and each of these moves were telegraphed by, and justified through, North Korean state media content, especially the KCNA. Therefore, the KCNA serves as a mechanism for justifying North Korean foreign policy decision-making to the outside world.

Big data studies of state media content have been employed to attempt predictions of North Korean provocations (Whang et al. 2017), but the different functions of individual state media outlets rarely feature as objects of analysis—as opposed to how the North Korean personality cult develops through state media (Trifoi 2017), and how state media provides a window into North Korean nationalism (Lee and Bainer 2009). The KCNA functions as a wire service, allowing other news services to pick up its reports (though they rarely do so without commentary of their own). The state’s primary newspaper is the *Rodong Sinmun* (*Workers’ Newspaper*) and assorted web portals such as *Naenara* (*My Country*) and *Uriminzokkiri* (*Among Our (intra-Korean) Nation*) provide additional commentary on issues like tourism to improve the national image.

In the non-academic press, the messages taken from its content tend toward superficiality, with histrionic declarations used as a sign of the North’s eccentricity. North Korean state media’s inflammatory descriptions of enemies and threats to obliterate the United States if provoked also serve as evidence either that it is not to be taken seriously or that it represents a looming threat. These, furthermore, are the bits plucked from a far larger stream of reports: the cascade of news praising North Korean athletes for success in obscure foreign sporting events, noting the reprinting of Kim Jong Il’s or national founder Kim Il Sung’s works in a foreign country, or praise for the leaders by obscure foreign groups, etc. are typically ignored as irrelevant.

This study uses the archives from KCNA Watch, a site that monitors KCNA reports and contains each of its publications dating back to December 1996, when the KCNA’s website launched. Its focus is

KCNA reports<sup>3</sup> from the beginning of 1998 to spring 2003, during and just before the administration of Kim Dae-jung. This juncture is a critical one in North Korea's contemporary history for many reasons, as in this period the North emerged from the "Arduous March," the famine beginning in 1994 and which claimed, at minimum, hundreds of thousands of lives. Here Kim Jong Il, son of national founder Kim Il Sung, emerged as the public face of the North Korean leadership, after spending three years out of the public eye, ostensibly mourning his father's 1994 death. These were also the final years of the "Agreed Framework" between the US and North Korea, struck in 1994, in which regular shipments of aid and security guarantees were provided to the North in exchange for a freeze on its nuclear activities.

Yet on the Korean Peninsula the period is best-known for the summit between Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae-jung. The late South Korean president's summit with the North Korean leader in Pyongyang in June 2000, and subsequent series of inter-Korean ventures, is generally cited as either evidence of the late South Korean leader's success in diplomacy, or the gullibility and the corruption of his administration.<sup>4</sup> Bruce Cumings (2004), for instance, cites his approach as an example of the patience and dedication needed in the face of North Korean belligerence. B.R. Myers, on the other hand, has cited internally directed North Korean propaganda that paints Kim as an imperialist stooge who only agreed to favorable terms because he was awed by the North Korean leader's charisma. Myers (2010) uses North Korean propaganda to reveal a paranoid, ultranationalist regime maintaining a permanent war footing through

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<sup>3</sup> This study is the product of several years of observations taken from KCNA Watch. Through this tool it is possible to not only access material from KCNA archives, but also track their occurrences empirically. However, since Kim Jong Un, the current leader of North Korea, announced in spring 2024 that unification is no longer a desirable outcome, much of the content related to "unification" or "reunification" has been scrubbed from KCNA archives, making it harder to find some of the sources cited now, though many of them survive through sources such as the Korean News Service in Tokyo (<http://kcna.co.jp>).

<sup>4</sup> Chung Mong-hun, son of Hyundai founder Chung Ju-yung, committed suicide in 2003 after his indictment on the charges of funneling \$200 million in cash to the North Korean regime on behalf of the government.

continued tensions with outsiders and which cannot fundamentally change without risking collapse.

However, a reading of the KCNA during the Kim Dae-jung administration demonstrates a change in their approach, at least toward the South Korean president. For the first two years of his term,<sup>5</sup> North Korean state media regularly assailed Kim in much the way it did previous presidents, and in much the way it would later presidents such as Lee and, minus the sexist language, Park. They spoke of Kim as only the latest “fascist” and “puppet” of the US standing between the Korean people and their long-standing desire for unification. However, within the span of a fortnight, in the spring of 2000, their approach toward Kim promptly shifted, with the state media agency instead seeking justification for its upcoming cooperation with him and dropping all negative references to the South Korean “chief executive,” as they called him.

This paper does not seek to refute Myers so much as expand upon his arguments and provide a deeper understanding of what role North Korean English-language media has in the process of telling its story to the outside world. In fact, Myers has a point in stating that the general tenor of KCNA reports did not evolve, and generally espoused paranoid nationalism. Reports continued to excoriate the “US imperialists” and Japanese “criminals” who had never admitted to their “inhuman” acts against Koreans during their colonization of the peninsula before 1945. South Korean “reactionaries”—Kim Dae-jung’s political opponents—came in for their share of denunciations as well, accused of plotting to undermine unification efforts and desiring to submit to a new form of colonialism. Furthermore, the KCNA never treated Kim Dae-jung as a figure of admiration; it generally chose to refer to him as little as possible after their summit, giving credit for the diplomatic thaw to their leaders.

However, the KCNA’s English reports show a specific tendency in

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<sup>5</sup> Since 1987 South Korean presidents serve only a single five-year term.

this period that is worthy of attention in terms of their role of providing justification for shifts—or potential shifts—in foreign or inter-Korean relations. We remain in the dark as to what orders KCNA staff received ahead of these events, but a reading of its output ahead of Kim Jong Il's June 2000 summit with Kim Dae-jung, a man state media had spoken of harshly in the preceding years, shows that the KCNA not only toned down criticism of him but began gathering endorsements from foreign figures for the principles undergirding the meeting, while also stating that their national founder Kim Il Sung would have supported it. An unsuccessful attempt at normalizing relations with Japan in 2002 underwent a similar process, even though the KCNA had consistently demonized the modern Japanese state as no different from the imperial power that had colonized the peninsula from 1910 to 1945. No serious attempts at bringing Pyongyang and Washington together took place in this timeframe, but KCNA reports did demonstrate noticeable shifts in tone ahead of the North's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in winter 2003, portraying itself as a potential victim of a US nuclear attack and urging it to complete a “non-aggression” treaty.

All of this suggests that, despite its rhetoric of “independence” and bizarre statements, the North Korean regime gives plenty of thought to how it appears to the outside world, especially to those sympathetic to its cause. It wishes to portray itself as “besieged” by enemies out to exploit the Korean nation, as the Empire of Japan did, and destroy its socialist system, as South Korean conservatives would, and in need of extreme measures to defend itself from potential US attacks. Yet the North has no “quota” for hostilities; an improvement in relations with South Korea will not necessitate an upswing in ill will toward Japan or the United States. Some flexibility has been built into its approach. Writings on the national “philosophy” (scare quotes to be explained below) of Juche demand a militant outlook among the citizenry, but promise that a resolute rallying around the leader and the nation can force regime enemies into a less hostile posture (Kim and Marx 1983).

One role, this study will argue, that the KCNA serves is in helping to explain when such a vantage point has been reached.

Because of this focus on international relations and inter/intra-Korean relations—officially, Koreans on either side of the DMZ would say those are two different concepts—the object of analysis in this study will be the KCNA’s reports. The KCNA’s role is unique among the country’s state media, and especially so in the Kim Dae-jung years; the *Rodong Sinmun*, as its name suggests, targets Workers’ Party of Korea (Chosŏn Rodongdang) members and did not have an English edition until 2012; the *Chosŏn Sinbo* (*Korea Newspaper*) mainly targets Zainichi Koreans in Japan and is published in Korean and Japanese; the web portals *Naenara* and *Uriminzokkiri*, published in Korean and English and now widely cited, did not yet exist. The KCNA, however, has been published online in both Korean and English for decades and been online since 1996, meaning that its intended audience is much broader. It also frequently acts as a clearing house for other propaganda outlets, republishing *Chosŏn Sinbo* and *Rodong Sinmun* content and translating it into English. Furthermore, analyzing the KCNA’s English-language reports has its own value; it is, as Cumings (1982, 1983) writes, “the way KCNA wishes to present North Korea to the world in English.”

This paper will proceed first with a summary of how state media has been analyzed by other academic sources, followed by sections describing how North Korean English-language state media, particularly the KCNA, covered the run-up to the 2000 inter-Korean summit, the 2002 Japan-North Korea summit, and the January 2003 withdrawal from the NPT. It then concludes with observations of the KCNA and how it has documented changes, particularly in relations with South Korea and the United States since Kim Dae-jung’s departure, noting that its place of prominence in describing such shifts in policy remains largely in place.

## State Media and a *Juche* Foreign Policy

The roles of individual state media outlets have received little scholarly attention. Jana Hajzlerová (2012) appears to be the only scholar to have devoted attention to the KCNA itself, not as a tool for studying nationalism, the leadership cult, and/or foreign policy, and divorced from other state media outlets. Even her work has not been published in a journal or book, but as a conference paper shared with this author. In her work, Hajzlerová identifies the KCNA as the most important of the North's state media outlets, because, as the source that is exported to the outside world and which relies on interaction with friendly groups, the KCNA helps define the North Korean regime's place in the world and bolster its legitimacy.

Other scholars have paid the outlet considerable attention, though typically as a means to different ends, such as Cumings' (1982) use of KCNA reports to explain the North's "corporatist" leadership model. Balazs Szalontai (2013) uses it to describe shifts in its nationalistic tone, for example how its coverage of the 1987 South Korean presidential election avoided support for its preferred candidate—Kim Dae-jung, then making his second run at the office—so as not to harm his chances. Furthermore, he has noted how its state media establishes North Korea's positions on foreign affairs, particularly its complex relationship with terrorism in the Middle East (Szalontai 2015).

B.R. Myers' (2010) construal of state media outlets is perhaps the most controversial, labeling certain ones, like the KCNA and *Rodong Sinmun* as "export propaganda." The internal propaganda, especially found in fiction, drama, poetry, and art, contains a different, far more hostile and jingoistic message, he argues, consistently depicting outsiders, including "allies" in Russia and China, as less trustworthy. Myers has also harshly criticized Cumings and others who argue that *Juche* functions as a meaningful framework. Calling it a "sham philosophy" full of humanistic jargon, Myers argues that *Juche*'s true objective is to obscure the actual ideology of race-based nationalism and militarism (Myers

2015). Myers' position is understandable; much of what has been published under the names of Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il references *Juche* as if it had been sufficiently explained elsewhere.

In fact, a dictionary entry on *Juche* remains the closest thing to a canonical definition of the term. According to Myers' translation, *Juche Sasang* (Subject Thought) is explained as:

... man is the master of all things and decides all things ... The principle of implementing a creative method calls primarily for methods that depend on the masses, and methods that adjust to the actual circumstances. Methods that depend on the masses and methods that adjust to the actual circumstances are the most scientific and revolutionary methods, for they highly cultivate the masses' revolutionary fervor and creative positivity... (Myers 2015, 255-256)

Myers' and other foreign academics' scorn for *Juche* has not prevented its popularity internationally. Movements in the developing world, especially Africa (Young 2015), have been taken with its simple message that socialism must be applied according to the needs and conditions of each movement's environment. In the United States the idea found an eager audience in the Black Panther Party, who circumvented US prohibitions by visiting North Korea (Young 2015b) and whose self-styled "Minister of Information" Eldridge Cleaver wrote the introduction to a collection of Kim Il Sung speeches entitled, simply, *Juche!* Cleaver wrote:

The defeat of the United States' war of aggression against the Korean people was an important turning point in the history of the world struggle against imperialism. The great example of the Korean people's struggle against the United States is a beacon light of hope to all the peoples of the world who are struggling for liberation and national salvation (Cleaver 1972).

Remarks such as these do not only answer the question of why a simplistic idea such as *Juche* appeals to many, both inside and outside the North; it seems to answer the question of who the target audience for the KCNA's English reports is. Breathless KCNA declarations of their own successes and enemies' villainy, regular expositions of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il theories, and the steady stream of stories quoting international groups devoted to the Kims' ideas would not likely make them convincing to anyone but the converted. I would therefore argue that such groups are the intended readers of such reports and its reports appeal to their anti-US imperialism stance.

North Korea, from the 1960s, sought to cultivate its image as a leader of Third World nations and model of independence and self-sufficiency among not only independence movements in Africa and Asia, but the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Irish Republican Army. Through its state media, it has continued to tout its support by quoting groups, including obscure ones, from around the world. Verifying the existence of every group quoted in these reports—much less the extent of their membership—is difficult. Such groups do exist, do regularly reprint the words of North Korean propagandists, and do take part in a network that communicates with the regime in Pyongyang. This helps explain how the KCNA sought to justify its changes in direction regarding not only South Korea in 2000, but also Japan in 2002 and the NPT in 2003: not only did the North Koreans claim Kim Il Sung would support such efforts, they could quote favorable organizations supporting such moves for a like-minded audience.

## Scene I: The Inter-Korean Summit, June 2000

Upon Kim Dae-jung's inauguration in 1998, he announced his plan to help North Korea recover from its catastrophic famine by providing food aid, supporting its efforts to improve relations with the United States and Japan, and helping construct light water nuclear reactors in

the North. He also signaled willingness to consider an inter-Korean tourism project at Geumgang Mountain in the North, long suggested by Hyundai chairman Chung Ju-yung but dismissed by previous presidents.

Kim's new approach would be dubbed the Sunshine Policy and he announced its three planks during his inaugural address: 1) that the South had no intention to absorb the North, 2) Seoul would "actively push reconciliation and cooperation between the South and North beginning with those areas which can be most easily agreed upon," and 3) that the South would "never tolerate armed provocation of any kind."

Kim's offer placed the North in a dilemma. Still struggling with the effects of a devastating famine following the breakdown of its food distribution system, the aid the South Korean government promised, along with its help in constructing a light water reactor and inter-Korean industrial projects, would benefit the North greatly. However, the North had, since its founding, claimed to be the only legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula, and a too-eager acceptance of the South and its help risked legitimating the South and acknowledging the superiority of its system.

So, for the first two years the North Koreans gave no indication that they believed Kim's promises. State media greeted the year, as it usually does, with a joint editorial on the previous year's progress and the path forward. The North acknowledged hard times, yet it demonstrated no interest in opening to the outside world to solve these problems. It would rely, instead, on the "Workers' Party and people of [North] Korea": "Besieged by the imperialists, they have defended socialism by themselves and uplifted the dignity of Korea, the homeland of Juche, undaunted by serious natural disasters and economic difficulties," it said. The rhetoric coming from the South Korean president-elect left it unmoved:

No change can be expected from the mere alternation of "governments" and "presidents" in south Korea. The south Korean authorities

should change their policies and take the stand of national independence. By changing the anti-DPRK policy of confrontation into pro-DPRK policy of reconciliation, pulling down the concrete wall, abrogating the fascist “National Security Law” and dismantling the “Agency for National Security Planning” they should show their willingness to reunify the country. Their often told “improvement of inter-Korean relations”, “dialogue” and “unification” minus such practical measures will remain an empty talk. From this point of view, we will watch the future attitude of the south Korean authorities (KCNA 1998a).

The KCNA referenced the South Korean “chief executive” in seventy-five articles in 1998, never positively or in neutral terms—not the most for any year in the Kim Dae-jung administration, but still an amount that demonstrates a relatively high point in hostilities. They set conditions for better ties that were unrealistic for a president to do on his own in a constitutional republic: repeal the National Security Act frequently used to crack down on leftists, release un-rehabilitated North Koreans detained in the South for decades—some since the Korean War—and break off military cooperation with the United States. The KCNA reserved special condemnation for Kim Dae-jung’s efforts to maintain cordial relations with the Japanese, whom he had leaned on for support to help bail out South Korea during the 1997-1998 financial crisis. This they treated as a prime example of his sycophancy, accusing him of opening of the door for Japanese cultural infiltration.

On July 30 it published an editorial—“What does five months in S. Korea show?”—that took shots at the South’s “IMF-controlled economy,” using this as just one example of the Kim administration’s reliance on outsiders and lack of independence.

They should renounce the outdated policy of dependence on outsiders, the policy of anti-north, anti-reunification confrontation and make a policy switchover towards national independence,

alliance and reconciliation with the north and reunification (KCNA 1998b).

Other editorials mocked the administration's slow progress on economic recovery (KCNA 1998c), as 1998 would result in negative growth for South Korea for the first time since 1979, with recovery not seen until 1999.

Rage against South Korean authorities continued throughout the following year. A new policy of combined Korean script with Chinese characters in official documents and road signs became a favorite target of their ire. The North chose to condemn this move as a Japanese plot: "[t]his clearly shows once again that they are pro-Japanese traitors worse than the 'Five Traitors of 1905'<sup>6</sup> who sold off the country in the past" (KCNA 1999a). This and other alleged concessions to the Japanese would be the subject of several more editorials published by the KCNA in the weeks to come, with a March 24 editorial demanding Kim's resignation over their "moves to fling the door open for the Japanese militarists' reinvasion of Korea" (KCNA 1999b).

In July it compared Kim to then-Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui, the first leader in Taipei to express support for Taiwan's permanent separation from China following the rule of Chiang Kai-shek by his son Chiang Ching-kuo. "The ruling quarters of South Korea and Taiwan have been committing indelible crimes against their nations. the [sic] separatists against their countries and nations will face a stern judgement" (KCNA 1999d).

The KCNA published more than two-hundred articles referencing the "chief executive" of South Korea in 1999. All were critical, with Kim not only called "fascist" and a pawn of the Japanese and the US, but explicitly comparing actions undertaken by his regime to those by the Nazis (KCNA 1999f), while also accusing him of colluding with the

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<sup>6</sup> More commonly known as the Five Eulsa Traitors, the royal officials who signed the 1905 agreement that made Korea a protectorate of Japan, paving the way for annexation in 1910.

remnants of the “Yushin” regime of the 1970s (KCNA 1999c). This was a particularly egregious charge, as Kim had risen to fame in the 1970s opposing Yushin and strongman President Park Chung-hee, suffering many years of harassment and house arrest (plus a near-assassination in 1973 and near-execution in 1980) as a result. All forty-four articles referencing the “Sunshine Policy” that year were denunciations. In December, the KCNA held up Kim Dae-jung’s meeting with US generals and the American ambassador, affirming their close cooperation, as evidence of his servile nature: “[f]acts clearly indicate that the present chief executive is the dyed-in-the-wool colonial traitor who considers the U.S. as his master and an anti-DPRK fanatic who pursues confrontation with the north under the signboard of ‘sunshine policy’ and ‘engagement policy’” (KCNA 1999e).

In the first three months of 2000 it appeared references to Kim Dae-jung would remain steady, and in a tone consistent with previous declarations. Then, suddenly, the tone changed. On April 10, the two Koreas announced their plan for a June summit between their leaders, which the KCNA (2000a) announced thusly:

The north and the south of Korea, reaffirming the three principles of national reunification clarified in the historic July 4 North-South Joint Statement, reached an agreement aimed at accelerating national reconciliation and unity, exchange and cooperation, peace and reunification. The agreement says:

At the request of President Kim Dae-jung, he will visit Pyongyang from June 12 to 14, 2000. In Pyongyang a historic meeting between Kim Jong Il, General Secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea and chairman of the DPRK National Defence Commission, and President Kim Dae-jung will take place and inter-Korean summit talks will be held.

Both sides decided to have a preliminary contact to discuss procedural [sic] matters in the near day of April.

There had been no indication, based on a reading of state media, that such an announcement was forthcoming, unless one counts the fact that between April 1 and April 10 all negative references to Kim Dae-jung ceased. The summit announcement, in fact, was the only time his name would appear in the agency's English reports that month, with only two references to the "chief executive" of South Korea taking place.

This brings up two points of interest. First, while unfavorable coverage of Kim Dae-jung disappeared—never to return, in fact—the KCNA's references to him were hardly reverential. Indeed, the agency would present Kim Dae-jung's plans and endeavors over the months and years to come in a succinct, matter-of-fact way, while giving virtually all credit for the meeting to "the magnanimity and charisma of the great Kim Jong Il, the lodestar of national reunification" (KCNA 2000c). Even after he left office, and after subsequent South Korean presidents took a policy line far less favorable to Pyongyang, the closest the North came to praising Kim Dae-jung would be saying that he "regretfully" passed away in 2009. This is why seventy-five references in 1998 and two-hundred in 1999 indicate a hostile relationship; in better times, the KCNA would have little to say of him at all.

Second, the KCNA followed the North's decision to accept a visit from the man they had been lambasting in the media for more than two years with more than two dozen reports demonstrating international support for it. Reports from April onward would state that the upcoming summit would take place in accordance with the "Three Principles of Reunification" (KCNA 2000b),<sup>7</sup> a reference to a declaration from the "July 4" 1972 North-South Joint Statement during the Park Chung-hee administration that initiated talks between the governments of Korea, but which failed to result in a summit or furthering of ties. Over the next two months more than two dozen KCNA reports would cite groups

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<sup>7</sup> The three principles are independent reunification, peaceful reunification, and reunification that transcends "ideologies and institutions."

in countries around the world, as well as Asian regional associations devoted to studying *Juche* thought (KCNA 2000d), international student groups (KCNA 2000b), and even Rev. Franklin Graham<sup>8</sup> praising (KCNA 2000g) either the three principles or Kim Jong Il's efforts at achieving unification.

If this were not convincing enough, ahead of the summit the KCNA turned to the ideas of the Great Leader himself as justification for it. In a May 10 translation of a *Rodong Sinmun* editorial entitled "Kim Il Sung's idea of great national unity," it stated:

Kim Il Sung set forth the policy of reunifying the country by means of founding the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo, a unified state based on confederacy formula, with a deep insight into the nation's historic requirements for providing reasonable ways for reunification acceptable to both the north and south under the actual conditions where the two differing political systems, ideologies and systems exist. (KCNA 2000f)

On June 10 it grew more detailed, not merely promoting the Great Leader's vision for national unity via a confederation. In "Kim Il Sung's efforts for inter-Korean dialogue," the KCNA (2000e) provided a brief history of his efforts at establishing such a conversation with the South, noting that he had proposed them in 1971 and that Pyongyang had hosted members of the South Korean government in 1972. "In June 1994, the President met with the former U.S. President Carter on a visit to Pyongyang and expressed his will to meet the chief executive of South Korea without condition in any place any time, thus opening a bright prospect for the north-south summit talks," it wrote.

Kim Dae-jung arrived in Pyongyang on June 13 and remained until June 15. The KCNA published extensively on the visit, as, accompanied

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<sup>8</sup> Franklin Graham's father, the Rev. Billy Graham, twice visited North Korea in the 1990s, becoming the first foreign Christian evangelist to preach there.

by his wife, he attended festivities with Kim Jong Il and Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly. As the South Korean president viewed events in the North Korean leader's honor, the coverage emphasized his impressions of the events, stating that he was awed by the performances and sights. During the summit on June 14, the reports emphasized the words of Kim Jong Il and Kim Yong Nam, both of whom said the unification of the country could be achieved through love of the Korean people, that this would be in keeping with Kim Il Sung's wishes, and that a unified Korea would prove a powerful global leader (KCNA 2000h).

Myers has used the North Korean novel *Encounter (Mannam)*, published the following year, as evidence of how the North attempted to discredit Kim, depicting him as a pathetic figure plotting to force North Korea to change, but unprepared for the charisma of Kim Jong Il, ultimately yielding to the North Korean Supreme Leader's wishes (Myers 2009, 158-160). This portrayal is not starkly different from that of the actual English-language report from the summit. The South Korean president gets the chance to speak after Kim Jong Il and Kim Yong Nam, and the only real difference from *Encounter* is one of degree, as he gushes with praise for his hosts:

He expressed his heart-felt thanks to Kim Jong Il, chairman of the National Defence Commission of the DPRK, President Kim Yong Nam and all Pyongyang citizens for their warm welcome accorded to him and his entourage.

I didn't expect Kim Jong Il to come to the airport personally and Pyongyang citizens to give such enthusiastic welcome to me, he said, adding these implied how ardent their aspiration for national reunification is and fully convinced everyone that the north and south are one and the same nation.

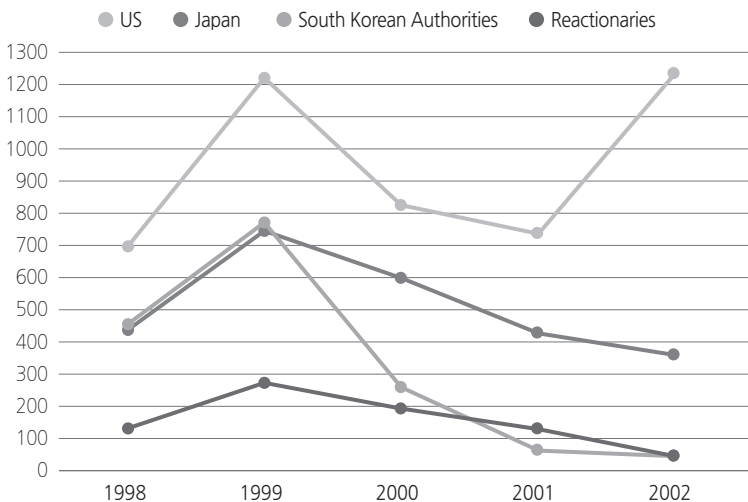
On June 15, the KCNA reported that the South Korean president gave a banquet in the honor of his hosts. Here, he not only thanked the

Supreme Leader for his generosity, but said he agreed with past Kim Jong Il statements that unification needed to be settled by Koreans, not outsiders, and even complimented him on his “filial piety,” demonstrated by his three-year mourning period following Kim Il Sung’s death (KCNA 2000i).

Having accomplished the summit and guaranteed South Korean support, even while demonstrating the superiority of its leadership, the post-summit period marked a change in the KCNA’s output. There would be periodic denunciations of South Korean government officials, unnamed though occasionally specified as belonging to agencies such as the prosecutors’ office. The agency referenced “Kim Dae-jung” ten times between January 1 and April 1, each reference negative, usually depicting his lack of agency in the face of imperialist American scheming. References to him spiked over the next three months, with twenty-one uses of his name, the majority coming during the June 13-15 summit, only now none were critical. Overall references to the South Korean president declined thereafter to eleven between June and October, and a mere three in the last three months of the year.

Chart 1

KEY THEMES IN KCNA LEXICON BY YEARS



Unnamed “South Korean authorities” remained figures of criticism throughout the year, though references dwindled as well, from 133 articles in the first three months to ninety-seven in the next three, eleven in the third quarter and twenty-two in the last. The term “chief executive” saw use in thirty articles in the first quarter, before the April thawing, declining to just nine in the second, and eight in both the third and fourth quarters. Most tellingly, only five (one each in the last two quarters) of these referred to the South Korean president, with the term applied in a negative manner to the Japanese prime minister and American president, and some positive references to foreign leaders with whom North Korea did not have antagonistic relations.

Even certain words North Korean propagandists had displayed a fondness for diminished in use in 2000. “Fascist,” a favorite description of the Seoul government, saw a notable increase in the second quarter from eighteen articles to twenty-nine, then disappeared almost entirely from the KCNA’s vocabulary, with no uses in the third quarter and three in the last (all used to describe Japan). South Korean conservatives would re-emerge as a hated target of the KCNA in the years to come, but even they received little attention in the latter half of the year, with the Grand National Party referenced only three times and leader Lee Hoi-chang (Romanized by the KCNA as Ri Hoe Chang) only twice all year. Increased attention to South Korea’s conservatives may be attributed to their gains in the 2000 legislative election, denying Kim Dae-jung’s party a majority, as well as Lee Hoi-chang’s skepticism regarding the Sunshine Policy (Dong-a Ilbo 2000).

Certain trends would not change for the rest of the Kim administration. For the twenty-five months starting from March 1998, his first full month in office, until April 2000, the “south Korean authorities” were referenced in a total of 1,342 articles, but only 216 in the twenty-five months that followed. Use of “chief executive” fell from 320 uses to fifty-six, “fascist” from 367 to seventy-three, and “puppets”—another favorite description of the South Korean government—declined from

133 to two (one of which referenced a literal puppet show). However, the KCNA's, and North Korea's, diplomatic strategizing did not end with better inter-Korean ties.

## Scene II: The Summit with Japan, September 2002

Myers argues that Pyongyang's survival strategy depends primarily on its ability "not to defuse tension but to manage it, to keep it from tipping into all-out war or an equally perilous peace" (Myers 2010, 167). "Managed" tensions evidently do not mean that a decline in tensions in one area requires an increase in tensions elsewhere: the KCNA referenced the US in 295 articles in the first quarter of 2002, saw it grow to 311 in the second quarter and then, in the third and fourth quarters, references to the US plummeted to just 119 and 108. Japan followed suit, though not as precipitously: 176 references in the first quarter, 163 in the second, 145 in the third, and 122 in the last. It also must be noted that many of the references in the third quarter were in fact positive, announcing that North Korea and Japan had begun negotiations on normalizing relations. They failed, however, and fourth quarter references were entirely negative.

The US and Japan received regular criticism from the KCNA, though not in as many reports as in the first quarter of 2001. One explanation for this is that many of the negative references to the US and Japan in the first half of the Kim administration concerned Kim's supposedly subservient relationship with the "Yankee imperialists" and Korea's former colonial masters. As such, an overall decline in negative references to the South resulted in fewer references to the other two of the North's *bêtes noires*.

Despite the overt hostility toward Japan in its media, Tokyo represents a special dilemma for the North. As a global economic power, the Japanese remain ideally situated to bestow aid and

diplomatic legitimacy; Seoul managed to parlay its own 1965 deal with Tokyo, which included generous grants and loans as compensation for the colonial period, into a successful program for economic revitalization. This colonial past offers the North the same moral case to pursue reparations from Japan that Seoul received, yet at the same time would require abandoning one of North Korean propaganda's most useful villains, as Japanese colonization is regularly cited as the historical incident inspiring the North's military preparations. South Korea's successful establishment of ties with the North's historical allies in Moscow and Beijing in the 1990s appears to have forced Pyongyang's hand, though, as it began taking part in negotiations with Tokyo starting in 1990.

Though an evident push toward normalization can be seen in those late-2000 negotiations, references to Japan in the KCNA after that were almost entirely negative, and this would continue throughout mid-2002. As late as July 2002 the KCNA denounced Japan for considering remilitarization as inconsistent with having "Self-Defense Forces" (KCNA 2002c). It also quoted a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry who said the two did not have regular relations due to Japan's failure to "[redeem] its inglorious past," though he noted there would be an additional meeting on the 31st (KCNA 2002d).

Then August arrived, and suddenly the KCNA began running declarations that productive talks between Tokyo and Pyongyang were in the North's best interests. Its reports quoted North Korean sources, including the *Rodong Sinmun* and the lesser-known *Minju Chosŏn* (*Democratic Korea*) (KCNA 2002), as well as acceptable Japanese ones such as the 26th national meeting of Japanese teachers for the study of the *Juche* idea (KCNA 2002a). Doing so, these sources announced, would result in benefits for both sides and help resolve historical issues between them.

However, they did not back off in their criticism of Japan entirely, declaring that Tokyo had the responsibility to redeem itself for its prior offenses such as the sexual enslavement of Korean women and forced

conscripted Korean laborers, and failure to properly treat Korean victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This emphasis on Japan's misdeeds may not have been aimed only at securing compensation, but also at maintaining a favorable "balance of guilt." The preparations for the summit also included a trip by the Japanese Red Cross to North Korea to investigate Japanese citizens suspected of being abducted by the North between 1977 and 1983. One KCNA report even acknowledged the presence of "missing persons" in the North, though it did not admit any fault (KCNA 2002d).

In September, its coverage of the summit between Kim Jong Il and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi contained some of the same formalities as during the inter-Korean summit in 2000, but without the extensive coverage of the visiting leader's visits to various sites and personal impressions of Pyongyang. This was not a fellow Korean acknowledging the greatness of Pyongyang's culture; the emphasis was on settling historical grievances, with the North's issues regarding Japan acknowledged via the KCNA's publication of the DPRK-Japan Pyongyang Declaration, in which Japan admitted to past harm against Koreans (KCNA 2002g).

However, part of the reason the summit took place at all was because Koizumi, and the Japanese public, wanted resolution regarding the abduction of Japanese civilians by North Korean operatives in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Several times (KCNA 2002e) in the previous year the KCNA had stridently (KCNA 2002a) denied (KCNA 2001d) that the North had abducted any Japanese civilians, calling Japan's complaints a distraction from settling the real issues between the two. Now, very close to achieving diplomatic recognition and support from Japan, Kim Jong Il acknowledged that the Japanese civilians had been taken due to the "adventurism" of certain members of the North Korean armed forces. After so many strident denials, the KCNA handled this acknowledgment through a vaguely worded statement that made no admissions as to how they had arrived in the North. It also painted the abductions as a regrettable by-product of "abnormal relations" that were

finally coming to an end:

The DPRK Red Cross Society notified the Japanese side of the fact that it has confirmed the whereabouts of missing Japanese on the list requested by the Japan Red Cross to ascertain. We take this serious [sic]. It is regretful that these issues surfaced in the past as a product of the abnormal relationship between the DPRK and Japan. We will prevent such things from happening in the future (KCNA 2002f).

However, the issue had not come to an end. The North allowed the five Japanese abductees to return to Japan on the condition that they return after ten days. When the ten days expired and abductees did not return, the KCNA devoted much of October to a series of editorials calling on the Japanese to act “in good faith,” return the abductees, and finish negotiations. When Tokyo refused and Japanese public disdain for the North torpedoed the talks, the agency took an angry tone in November, criticizing them for their “insincere” attitude (KCNA 2002o), blaming them for botching the opportunity (KCNA 2002p), and attempting to turn the tables by criticizing the Japanese for forcibly conscripting Koreans during the colonial occupation (KCNA 2002l). However, this message had been received by the North’s supporters reading the KCNA, and the actual diplomatic mission failed.

### Scene III: Exit from the NPT, January 2003

Even as the North began excoriating the Japanese for the failed normalization process in October, its focus had already begun to shift back to the US. That month US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly arrived in Pyongyang to discuss allegations that the North had begun a

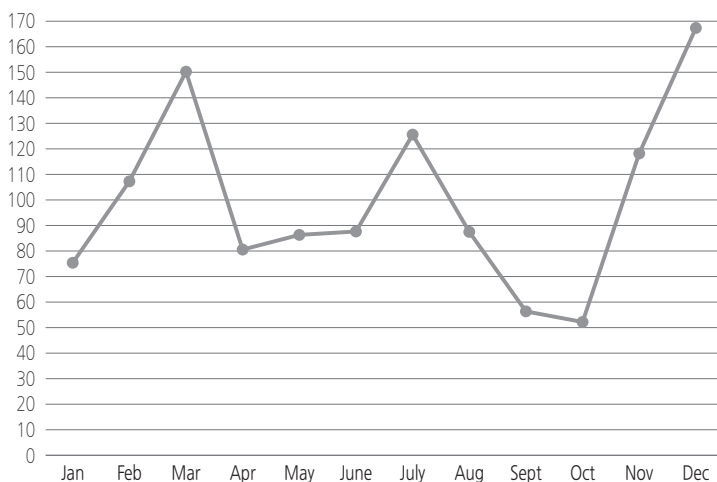
uranium enrichment program despite having signed onto the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1985. The KCNA greeted Kelly's arrival (KCNA 2002j) and departure (KCNA 2002k) with succinct announcements providing little hint of the controversy they were about to set off. Yet, over the next several months the US, long the primary target of KCNA criticism, became the overwhelming focus of the North's state media, dwarfing all other targets.

This could be because despite its years of antagonism with the US and consistently negative portrayals of Washington in its state media, the North's decision to withdraw from the NPT took some justification. Despite its reputation for isolationism, the North has proclaimed its international diplomatic achievements, particularly its UN membership in 1992, and touted them in its state media. Though the North, as stated, has a long-standing relationship with the PLO, and also with Hezbollah, which it justifies through its commitment to anti-colonialism, it used its status as a "dignified UN member" to condemn "terrorism" by al-Qaeda well before the September 11th terrorist attacks, as well as those by Chechen rebels in Russia (Szalontai 2015). In the aftermath of 9/11 the KCNA published its only references to the US in a neutral tone during this period: one in which it reported the events of the attacks in a straightforward manner (KCNA 2001c), and another in which it condemned all terrorism (KCNA 2001b).

Overall references to the US remained negative, though. The meeting with Kelly came more than eight months after President George W. Bush listed the North alongside Iraq and Iran in the "Axis of Evil," at which point Bush became a target of their ire, along with his "undisguised order to overthrow the legitimate regime in Iraq" (KCNA b). Yet the North's inclusion in the axis, along with the US plans for regime change in another member, would not by themselves prompt the North to leave the NPT. And after peaking in March (and to a lesser extent July), references to the US were actually on the decline until their confrontation with Kelly.

Chart 2

## KCNA MENTIONS OF US BY MONTH, 2002

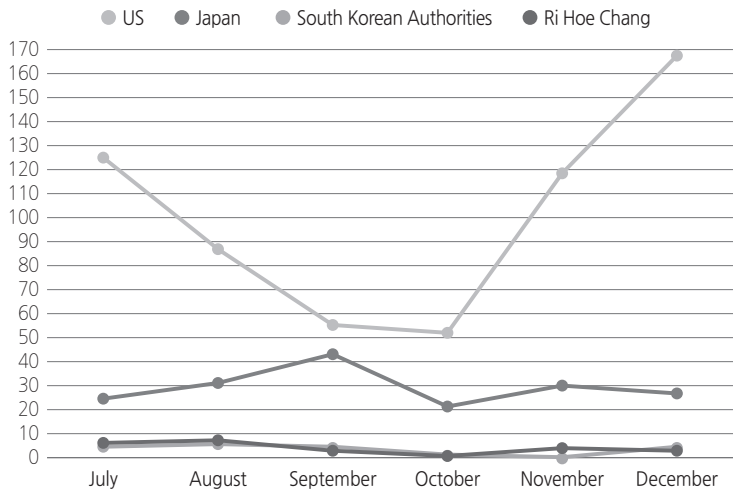


But starting in October, as the US claimed it had acquired an admission from the North that it had the enrichment program, the KCNA accused the US of running a “nuclear racket” (KCNA 2002m), threatening nuclear war (KCNA 2002s), and standing in the way of Korean unification (KCNA 2002r). Interestingly enough, it also began repeated calls (KCNA 2002t) for a non-aggression pact between the two countries (KCNA 2002n). After two months of relatively few references to the US, the KCNA saw a dramatic upswing in articles referencing the US, more than doubling between October and November, and tripling between October and December. This came even as references to most of its usual targets—South Korean authorities and Japan—remained steady, as did its critiques of conservative leader Lee Hoi-chang, whose campaign for president in December 2002 would have threatened progress between the two Koreas, if successful.

As with how it had dealt with South Korea in 2000 and Japan just a few months earlier, this months-long process appears to have been preparation for a dramatic move by the North. Only, instead of a summit

Chart 3

HOSTILE REFERENCES IN THE KCNA: JULY-DECEMBER, 2002



with diplomatic talks and the hopes of closer relations, the North, by increasing its criticism of the US even as it offered a non-aggression treaty, appears to have been preparing to withdraw from the NPT. The KCNA began the week after Kelly’s arrival, responding directly to Kelly’s visit by claiming it had “confirmed the fact that the U.S. administration keeps pursuing a hardline hostile policy aimed to bring the DPRK to its knees by force and high-handed practice.” As a result, the report said, the North would have to take “every necessary counter-measure” (KCNA 2002h).

The rapid rise in references to the US during this period should not be interpreted to mean that each reference pertained to the nuclear issue; the North had other complaints, such as a report that faulted it for allowing little freedom of religion, and a staunchly anti-North and pro-US (KCNA 2002q) Lee Hoi-chang<sup>9</sup> was perilously close to winning the presidency. The North also made hay over a US military court’s late

<sup>9</sup> This was not entirely fair; Lee was not opposed to joining along in harshly criticizing the US on many issues if it would serve him politically, as David Straub (2015) has documented in *Anti-Americanism in Democratizing South Korea*.

November acquittal of American servicemen in the accidental deaths of two South Korean school girls struck by a military vehicle. Still, references to the US untrustworthiness on the nuclear issue steadily rose from late October, when the North began calling for a non-aggression pact (KCNA 2002i).

Articles referencing the US doubled from October to November and tripled from October to December. Throughout the first two of these three months, reports lambasting the US over its nuclear policies and calling for a non-aggression treaty almost exclusively referenced internal sources, mainly *Rodong Sinmun* reports, but that changed in December. Joint student organizations in South Korea (KCNA 2002u), political and governmental organizations in Africa (KCNA 2002v), Bangladesh (KCNA 2002w), Peru (KCNA 2002x), and Bulgaria (KCNA 2002ab) endorsed the pact idea. The KCNA quoted a Russian military source dismissing the US concerns (KCNA 2002ad). It quoted a South Korean professor stating essentially that the US wanted to disarm the North because it had genocidal aims (KCNA 2002z). An Asian group supporting Korean unification pointed to the Axis of Evil declaration as justification for the North's position (KCNA 2002y), and the KCNA quoted the South African Communist Party as "sternly denounc[ing] the U.S. for its double-dealing tactics proved by the fact that it is dead-set against the DPRK's proposal for the conclusion of a non-aggression treaty, though it is talking a lot about 'no war' and 'peace' on the Korean Peninsula and 'dialogue'" (KCNA 2002ac).

Since no negotiations took place one can only speculate what form a "non-aggression" treaty would have taken. If the North had demanded the departure of the US from South Korea as a condition of such a treaty—as its state media had consistently demanded—one can confidently predict that it would have been rejected. The North may truly have been concerned that, after 9/11 and the "Axis of Evil" declaration, the US had a serious interest in regime change in Pyongyang; if so, they clearly believed that the US had no intent to honor the security commitment it had made during the Agreed Framework, which included

a condition that the US would not attack Pyongyang. Either way, the North's repeated pleas were either intentionally unrealistic, misleading, or they were demanding a redundancy. One thing they did accomplish was giving the North an excuse to withdraw from the international treaty on nuclear nonproliferation, claiming its entreaties had gone unanswered.

The withdrawal itself took place on January 10, 2003, with the KCNA (2003a) blaming the move on the US, citing the "Axis of Evil" speech and the dismissal of the treaty proposal, as well as claiming plans for an imminent US attack.

The U.S. went so far to instigate the IAEA to internationalize its moves to stifle the DPRK, putting its declaration of a war into practice. This has eliminated the last possibility of solving the nuclear issue of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful and fair way. It was due to such nuclear war moves of the U.S. against the DPRK and the partiality of the IAEA that the DPRK was compelled to declare its withdrawal from the NPT in march [sic] 1993 when a touch-and-go situation was created on the Korean Peninsula.

In this initial reaction, the KCNA insisted there still were no plans for production of nuclear weapons. Yet, just five days later, it issued an ominous statement that it, too, had the "option" now that it had withdrawn from the NPT.

There is a limit to its patience and self-control. By making the bold political decision to withdraw from the NPT, the DPRK put its option into practice. This showed to the world once again that the DPRK does not play on words but practices what it says. The DPRK's option is guaranteed by its powerful military capacity. It is its unshakable revolutionary stand and mode of independent counteraction to respond to a hard-line with the toughest one and to a bullet with a shell. (KCNA 2002aa)

Also in that month, the North stated that the US had “mocked” the UN and international community by not delivering on its promises of aid during the Agreed Framework and begun targeting the North for nuclear attack after the “Axis of Evil” declaration (KCNA 2003b), as well as unleashing the “threat of nuclear disaster to humankind” at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (KCNA 2003c). As the US prepared for the next stage of its counterterrorism strategy in Iraq, the North took a giant step toward preparing a capability that would prevent such an invasion from happening to them; all the while portraying themselves as the aggrieved party and the upholder of peace and international norms.

## Conclusion: 2003-Present

As the KCNA directed its critical fire toward the US in January and February of 2003, Kim Dae-jung received no attention at all. His successor Roh Moo-hyun took office at the end of February, and the KCNA subjected the Roh administration to a rocky first month, stepping up its criticisms of the “South Korean authorities,” particularly over their plan for joint military drills with the US (KCNA 2003e), but also for their willingness to dispatch personnel to assist with the war on Iraq (KCNA 2003d). This would pass, however; Roh did not face anything approaching the two-year hazing to which his predecessor had been subjected, and none of the references to him by name or as “chief executive” contained the invective Kim faced.

Not that Roh had a charmed presidency. Dogged not only by the red-baiting Kim Dae-jung faced, but by persistent criticisms of incompetence and a lack of preparation for the presidency, Roh’s agenda stagnated in a legislature dominated by the Grand National Party, who successfully passed a measure to impeach him in 2004 before the Constitutional Court overturned it, returning Roh to the presidency. Negative mentions of the Grand National Party in the KCNA exploded, with more than 770 during the Roh years, a nearly

seven-fold increase from Kim's term, as the North appeared to recognize that the opposition party in the South, even more than the US, represented an obstacle to continued good relations and external support.

If so, they were proven correct. Faced with a slowing (by South Korean standards) economy, which resulted in disproportionately high unemployment among young men, Roh's term ended with his approval rating in the single digits and his party suffering so badly in polling that it fractured and both factions ultimately chose to rebrand under different names. The Grand National Party found a standard-bearer in former Hyundai executive and Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-bak, who quickly emerged as the frontrunner. Despite failing to unify the conservative bloc—1997 and 2002 election runner-up Lee Hoi-chang elected to pursue the presidency on a third-party ticket—Lee Myung-bak won the election handily.

The English KCNA attacked Lee—who they referred to as “Ri Myong Back” throughout 2007, switching to the more common Romanization in April 2008—with more vigor than they had Lee Hoi-chang in 2002. It published nearly two-dozen editorials in English quoting South Korean student groups, labor unions, *Rodong Sinmun* editorials, etc. denouncing Lee's criticisms of the Sunshine-era food aid, his “sycophancy and submission to the U.S.,” and so on. Their editorials urged the South Korean public to “struggle” against his party (KCNA 2007b) and called for the GNP's dissolution (KCNA 2007a). The tone did not improve upon his election; of all the references to him, or to the “chief executive,” the very few occurring when he met with the North Korean envoy at Kim's funeral constitute the only ones where the tone even rose to the level of civility.

The tone grew especially harsh after incidents in which South Korean lives were lost. The agency accused Lee of unpardonable slander (KCNA 2010a) in early 2010, when the *ROKS Cheonan* vessel sank in the Yellow Sea, killing forty-six, which Seoul blamed on a North Korean torpedo. Following a bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island, also in the Yellow Sea, that resulted in four deaths in November 2010, the North

blamed the Lee government for hosting live-fire drills in the area that it called a prelude to invasion (KCNA 2010b). The North continued appealing to the South Korean public to repudiate Lee—and his successor Park Geun-hye—however, and naming groups, both inside and out of North Korea, it identified as sympathetic to its cause.

The period since 2017 has been one of considerable transition for North Korea and its relations with the outside world, including the United States and South Korea. In 2017, with the election of Donald Trump, North Korea for the first time in decades faced the prospects of both military action by the United States during Trump's 2017 "fire and fury" stage, but also direct negotiations via a summit with Trump, as well as then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in, a progressive like Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. The KCNA remained an important mouthpiece for the regime in this period. Kim's notorious denunciation of Trump as a "mentally deranged dotard" that Kim would personally "tame... with fire" originally circulated via the agency (KCNA 2017), but the agency also promoted their 2018 summit eagerly (BBC 2018). The failed 2019 follow up proved a more difficult matter for the regime—post-summit analysis indicated that the regime's primary television station indicated its disappointment by having the summit reported by someone other than their most venerable anchor (NK News 2019). More directly, Kim announced, via a party gathering reported on by the KCNA, at the end of 2019 that his regime would shift toward "offensive measures" after the failure of US negotiations (BBC 2019). Since then, analysis has suggested that this foreign policy shift will be permanent, and that North Korea no longer sees reconciliation with the US as attainable, or even desirable (Carlin and Hecker 2024). The KCNA would be the venue for publicizing perhaps an even more startling shift in early 2024, when Kim formally renounced intent to reunite with the South (Foster-Carter 2024).

The latter shift took place during an especially tense time in inter-Korean relations, with South Korea led by the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol administration, who had taken perhaps the hardest line on

inter-Korean ties since Syngman Rhee's "March North" policy of the 1950s. The US, led by the Biden administration, was also less interested in dealing directly with North Korea than Trump had been, instead focusing on getting South Korea and Japan to close ranks on Indo-Pacific strategy, especially toward the People's Republic of China. These factors prompt questions as to how serious Kim's decision to forswear unification with the South are, or if they are a temporary calculus while Kim deepens cooperation with Russia and waits for more favorable external conditions. Such conditions may have arrived as of 2025, now that Trump has returned and his administration has signaled interest in confidence-building measures (NK News 2025a), and South Korea has just elected a progressive government that signals an interest in coexistence (NK News 2025b) rather than reunification.

As of fall 2025, it is unclear whether either of these developments will prompt Kim to rethink his stances on either the US or South Korea. If he does, however, outside observers can count on the KCNA to be a venue where the change is announced.

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