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## Turning It Up to Eleven: Belligerent Rhetoric in North Korea's Propaganda

Mason Richey

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**ABSTRACT:** After contextualizing North Korea's capacity for belligerent rhetoric directed toward the United States and its northeast Asian allies, the author examines the contention that rhetoric from Pyongyang represents a conflict escalation risk or even a *casus belli*. The results of statistical tests indicate a negative correlation between Pyongyang's rhetoric and international diplomatic initiatives, but no correlation between North Korea's verbal hostility and its provocations.

Advances in North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile programs mark a qualitative change in the threat to the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Pyongyang's ability to fit a miniaturized nuclear warhead on a missile or rocket and deliver the payload is unproven, but many analysts argue that the capability is highly likely.<sup>1</sup> This capability alone represents a risk to geopolitical stability in northeast Asia as the region's powers, including the United States, will struggle to calibrate their responses to North Korea's provocations. Additionally, before, during, and after missile and nuclear tests in 2016, North Korea employed belligerent rhetoric—in English for international influence—that increased tension on the Korean peninsula particularly and in northeast Asia generally.

These locutions—threats to annihilate American bases overseas, turn Seoul into a sea of fire, and execute preemptive nuclear attacks against perceived adversaries—are well-known. Bellicose rhetoric has long been part of North Korea's international communication, but the combination of menacing words and capabilities to actuate the corresponding threats is new for long-range or nuclear attacks. In this vein, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov remarked after the first set of nuclear and missile tests in 2016 that Pyongyang's bellicose rhetoric

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1 David Albright, "North Korean Miniaturization," 38 North, February 13, 2013, <http://38north.org/2013/02/albright021313/>; David Albright, *Future Directions in the DPRK's Nuclear Weapons Program: Three Scenarios for 2020*, North Korea's Nuclear Futures, (Washington, DC: US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2015); Dan Lamothe, "U.S. General: North Korea Likely Can Build Miniaturized Nuclear Weapons," *Washington Post*, October 24, 2014; Jeremy Bender, "Top Norad General: North Korea Has a Nuclear-Capable Missile That Can Hit the US," *Business Insider*, April 10, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-general-north-korea-has-nuclear-capable-missile-that-can-hit-us-2015-4>; Choe Sang-Hun, "South Korea Says North Has Capacity to Put Nuclear Warhead on a Missile," *New York Times*, April 5, 2016; Jeffery Lewis, "Five Things You Need to Know about Kim Jong Un's Photo Op with the Bomb," 38 North, March 11, 2016, <http://38north.org/2016/03/lewis031116/>; and Lolita C. Baldor, "US Official Warns of North Korean Nuclear Capabilities," Associated Press, December 8, 2016.

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creates a legitimate *casus belli* for threatened states.<sup>2</sup> The same week, American intelligence agencies issued an assessment: “Threatening rhetoric from Pyongyang . . . suggests North Korea is preparing for a surprise military strike.”<sup>3</sup> This statement acknowledges a connection between North Korea’s hostile rhetoric and the country’s actions. These interpretations of North Korean statements may appear alarmist, but they are simply variations of analyses that Pyongyang’s rhetoric could lead to miscalculation by actors on and around the Korean peninsula and consequently escalation to war. Such claims appear frequently in media reports, government declarations, and messages from the international community, especially during and after periods of North Korean provocation.

These statements assume North Korea’s inflammatory rhetoric means something; however, if the rhetoric fits no behavioral pattern, then other countries’ populations, media, and governments should discount the insults, threats, and crisis-mongering emanating from Pyongyang. Consequently, these aggressive locutions would not function as sources for miscalculation and even less as a *casus belli*. In short, is North Korea’s belligerent rhetoric cheap talk or a meaningful signal of tangible events affecting tension on the Korean peninsula and in northeast Asia? After examining the background of North Korea’s recent progress toward capabilities threatening the United States, South Korea, and Japan, this article describes the mixed results of a study comparing Pyongyang’s belligerent rhetoric to events involving North Korea and major actors in northeast Asia and discusses the policy implications of these findings.<sup>4</sup>

### North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs

North Korea’s conventional arms are inferior to those of its adversaries—the United States, South Korea, and Japan. The consensus is North Korea would rapidly lose a conventional war against any combination of these alliance partners, and consequently, the Pyongyang regime would fall quickly. Traditionally, North Korea has relied on two strategic asymmetries to reduce this gap: a garrison-state sociopolitical organization, with an armed force disproportionately large in comparison to the state population and constructed to endure major attrition and therefore dissuade attack and artillery deployed along the demilitarized zone allowing for quick, widespread, economically devastating destruction of Seoul and environs. Recently, North Korea developed programs for cyberwarfare and nuclear weapons to compensate for conventional arms inferiority. The nuclear weapons program is both a direct threat to the security of the aforementioned alliance partners and a means for Pyongyang’s leaders to engage in provocative, destabilizing behavior ranging from attack to proliferation on the Korean peninsula, the northeast Asian region, and beyond. Indeed, tension in northeast Asia increased significantly following the nuclear and missile tests in 2016.

2 Chad O’Carroll, “Russia: N. Korean Threats Becoming Legal Grounds for Military Force,” *NK News*, March 8, 2016.

3 Bill Gertz, “U.S. Says North Korea Rhetoric a Prelude to Attack,” *Washington (DC) Free Beacon*, March 14, 2016, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/u-s-says-north-korea-rhetoric-a-prelude-to-attack/>.

4 Request statistical output, including descriptive statistics and data files, from the author at the following e-mail address: [mrichey@hufs.ac.kr](mailto:mrichey@hufs.ac.kr).

Under Kim Jong Il during the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs succeeded in developing a nuclear warhead and a fissile material production process based on plutonium removed from the country's Yŏngbyŏn facility. Additionally, North Korean scientists pursued, and apparently achieved, weapons-grade uranium enrichment. The Pyongyang regime also built strategic and tactical missile and rocket programs. Recently, other improvements to research and testing facilities, launch capabilities, and nuclear command-and-control have also been observed.

Current consensus on North Korea's atomic arsenal estimates six to eight plutonium-based weapons and four to eight uranium-based bombs.<sup>5</sup> Thus the nuclear arsenal is likely 10–16 working devices, with a retained capacity to produce an unknown number of nuclear weapon equivalents through plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment. Pyongyang recently advanced the quality of its nuclear arsenal, focusing on both yield and size. North Korea claims it detonated a thermonuclear weapon in the first 2016 test, although most assessments dispute this assertion, finding a boosted fission bomb more likely. North Korea also claims to have miniaturized nuclear warheads to fit on short-range, medium-range, intermediate-range, and long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles—an accomplishment considered realistic according to independent analysts, US Army General Curtis M. Scaparroti, and the South Korean government.<sup>6</sup>

Parallel to its nuclear program, the Pyongyang regime developed functional missiles and rockets ranging from the reliable Nodong-series to more unreliable long-range and intercontinental ballistic missiles. North Korea is also developing road-mobile KN-08 and KN-14 intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The country's thousand-strong missile arsenal is capable of striking counterforce and countervalue targets on the Korean peninsula, in Japan, and in the western Pacific. More speculatively, North Korea's small number of intercontinental ballistic missiles could likely strike much of the United States mainland, although experts are skeptical about the missiles' reliability and accuracy.<sup>7</sup>

A functional, miniaturized nuclear warhead combined with delivery systems gives North Korea a crude nuclear deterrent. Current scenarios for 2020 predict a low-end estimate of 20 weapons and marginally improved delivery systems; a medium estimate of 50 weapons, with emergency operational KN-08s and KN-14s for strategic objectives, and a variety of missiles (including possibly Musudan intermediate-range ballistic missiles) for theater objectives; and a high-end estimate of 100 weapons and normally operational KN-08s, KN-14s, and Musudans.<sup>8</sup>

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5 Albright, *Future Directions*; and Joel S. Wit and Sun Young Ahn, *North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy*, North Korea's Nuclear Futures (Washington, DC: US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2015).

6 Albright, "North Korean Miniaturization"; Lamothe, "U.S. General"; Choe, "South Korea"; and Lewis, "Five Things."

7 Bender, "Nuclear-Capable Missile"; "North Korea," Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), <http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/> (accessed June 10, 2016); and John Schilling, "North Korea's Large Rocket Engine Test: A Significant Step Forward for Pyongyang's ICBM Program," 38 North, April 11, 2016, <http://38north.org/2016/04/schilling041116/>.

8 Wit and Sun, "Nuclear Futures."

That is, over the last decade Pyongyang has made incremental, ongoing improvements to its nuclear arsenal, substantially changing the strategic situation in northeast Asia. Indeed, following the 2016 nuclear and missile tests, the international community's response reflected the significance of the developments with the stiffest sanctions ever targeting key industries, institutions, and individuals.

The threat of North Korea's nuclear capability is exacerbated by confusion about Pyongyang's nuclear strategy and doctrine. Regime diplomats confidentially say North Korean leadership regards the nation's nuclear deterrent as modeled on mutually assured destruction, which is a multifariously problematic strategy in the North Korean context. First, the strike-counterstrike dynamic underlying mutually assured destruction is absent in the North Korea-United States nuclear dyad, as Pyongyang lacks credible retaliatory capability. With such a primitively developed nuclear arsenal, the incentive would be for the regime to use its weapons before losing them to a putative strike. Second, the regime has articulated a "no first use" policy and a "defensive use only" policy while also claiming the right to launch a preemptive nuclear attack if its deterrent capability or regime survival were threatened.

Uncertainty regarding this doctrine and strategy complicates attempts to answer even the basic question of why North Korea has developed a nuclear arsenal at all considering the tremendous cost of economic and diplomatic isolation. Strategically, the emphasis seems to be a mixture of political, diplomatic, and military objectives that include leveraging coercive diplomacy and international negotiations; framing potential North Korea-South Korea unification favorably; provoking international tensions on the Korean peninsula to divide the United States, Japan, South Korea, and China; possessing a deterrent against conventional attack; and securing the ability to escalate to limited nuclear conflict in the case of imminent regime collapse to counter loss in conventional conflict (an "escalate to de-escalate" strategy).<sup>9</sup>

The latter objective—entailing the use of short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles, rather than strategic missiles—implies a distinction in the Pyongyang regime's thinking about strategic, theater, and operational nuclear missiles and therefore the heightened possibility of making first use of the weapons for tactical (warfighting efficiency) or "escalation to de-escalate" reasons.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to recall that the weapons developments outlined above were accompanied at every step by both conciliatory and coercive diplomatic engagement by all parties: from North Korea's accession to the Nonproliferation Treaty (1985), to the Agreed Framework (1994), the Four-Party Talks (1997), the Sunshine Policy (1998–2008), withdrawal from the Nonproliferation Treaty (2003), and the Six-Party Talks

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9 Nikolai N. Sokov, "Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-escalation,'" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 13, 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>; and Shane Smith, *North Korea's Evolving Nuclear Strategy*, North Korea's Nuclear Futures (Washington, DC: US-Korea Institute at SAIS, 2015).

10 Van Jackson, "Nukes They Can Use: The Danger of North Korea Going Tactical," *38 North*, March 15, 2016, <http://38north.org/2016/03/vjackson031516/>; and Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

(2003–9).<sup>11</sup> Of course, North Korea claims its weapons programs are a response to security threats from the United States and its allies. This stance is certainly reflected in the regime's domestic and internationally directed political rhetoric, which, regardless of the level of belligerence, consistently draws attention to the overall context of hostility in relations between North Korea and the United States, South Korea, and Japan.

### North Korea's Political Rhetoric

One overarching thread has remained true over the long period of North Korean nuclear weapons development and the various iterations of carrot-and-stick diplomacy that have accompanied it: for both the public at large and the leaderships of the United States, South Korea, and Japan, threat perceptions of a potentially nuclear-armed North Korea have been heightened by Pyongyang's belligerent rhetoric. The regime's Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) is infamous for English-language propaganda ranging from insulting to bellicose to ludicrous.

A few examples include Kim Young-Sam, former South Korean president, referred to as a "thrice-cursed shabby US toady"; Japan's government officials "are epileptic mentally deranged wretches"; George W. Bush, former US president, was a "cowboy buffoon"; South Korean President Park Geun-Hye "was a venomous swish of skirt"; North Korea will "turn Seoul into a sea of flame"; the North Korean military will "mercilessly annihilate the US"; and "Japan is planning nuclear attacks on the DPRK."<sup>12</sup>

Over the study period (1997–2006), North Korea uttered 790 insults against the United States, South Korea, and Japan; issued 302 threats against them; and made 130 claims of being under imminent attack by the alliance partners. The United States was the referent for 788 of these instances; South Korea, 550; Japan, 96.<sup>13</sup>

Although the insults and crisis-mongering are problematic because they raise tensions on the Korean peninsula and undermine diplomacy, the threats are worse as they foment miscalculation and escalation such as Lavrov's aforementioned *casus belli*. Denny Roy starkly outlines this as well: "Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program likely increases the danger that Pyongyang's brinkmanship could lead to war. . . . With what they believe is a nuclear deterrent against US or South Korean attack, North Korea's leaders may feel emboldened to make more bellicose threats or to continue carrying out lethal provocations against

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11 The Sunshine Policy began in earnest in June 2000 and was comprised of inter-Korean leadership summits, interministerial meetings, North-South aid, and improved trade and investment. The policy improved relations between the two Korean states led by Kim Dae-Jung (Republic of Korea) and Kim Jong Il (North Korea). It remained in effect, despite behavioral evolution by the two Koreas, until the presidency of Lee Myung-Bak (Republic of Korea) beginning in 2008. The latter half of the policy period was accompanied by the Six-Party Talks, which focused on halting and later reversing North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

12 "Shabby Toadyism," KCNA, June 27, 1997; "Japan's Bid to Internationalize 'Abduction Issues' under Fire," KCNA, April 27, 2005; "Bush Administration's Korea Policy Accused," KCNA, April 6, 2003; "Army and People of DPRK Pledge Revenge on Enemies: CPRK Secretariat," KCNA, March 29, 2013; "Indignation Meetings of Youth and Students," KCNA, December 11, 1998; "Anti-U.S. Sentiment Running High," KCNA, March 27, 2002; and "Japanese Militarists Criminal Acts under Fire," KCNA, December 25, 2006.

13 The author analyzed hyperbolically insulting, threatening, crisis-mongering rhetoric disseminated in English by the Korean Central News Agency from 1997 to 2006. Articles targeting multiple countries create inequality between the total instances by rhetoric type (1,222) and target country (1,334).

South Korea. This in itself could easily escalate to general war.”<sup>14</sup> This analysis reflects conventional wisdom regarding the North Korean threat and thus merits examination. In particular, the analysis relies on the foundational points that intentions matter for threat perception and that the Pyongyang regime’s intentions can be extrapolated from its bellicose rhetoric. Can the intentions be extrapolated, however, or might North Korea’s belligerent international propaganda be a noisy red herring? Put differently, instead of assuming that this incendiary messaging is significant, investigate the patterns of English-language rhetoric produced by the KCNA for international consumption to determine if it is a meaningful signal.

North Korea’s frequent use of internationally directed belligerent rhetoric is atypical. There is good reason for this uniqueness: a state’s regular use of insulting, threatening, bombastic international messaging has high costs and functions poorly. First, inflammatory rhetoric carries high audience costs.<sup>15</sup> Second, interlocutors increasingly discount their counterparts’ messages unless diplomatic belligerence and hyperbole are acted upon. Consequently, making such statements translates into lost credibility and poor reputations for regimes.

Despite dissuasive reasons, three standard answers purport to explain why North Korea persists with intemperate rhetoric: the Pyongyang regime—particularly the Kim leadership circle—is crazy and acts irrationally; the North Korean leadership does not face audience costs because it is a dictatorship; and the regime does not care about the loss of international credibility and the degraded reputation arising from its rhetorical disposition. These responses are mistaken.

First, North Korean leadership is not crazy: it is idiosyncratic—and predatory—but it is not insane, at least not concerning international strategy. The proof is in the survival of North Korea’s governing institutions despite many shocks: the end of the Cold War and loss of Soviet patronage, the transformation of Chinese economic ideology (accompanied by Beijing’s calls for North Korea to initiate reforms), two domestic dynastic transitions, the significant loss of its population due to famine, the deleterious effects of globalization on the state’s information monopoly, as well as the consequences of international sanctions. Throughout it all, the leadership in Pyongyang has consistently managed to wrangle aid from negotiation partners (including the United States, South Korea, and Japan) in exchange for dubious agreements to halt its nuclear weapons programs. Indeed, American and South Korean negotiators speak of the acumen of their North Korean counterparts, especially given North Korea’s weak bargaining position.

Second, the top Pyongyang leadership does not face audience costs like those of democratic governments, as totalitarianism undeniably means even lower audience costs than those of other authoritarian regime

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14 Denny Roy, “Strategic Ramifications of the North Korea Nuclear Crisis,” in *The North Korea Crisis and Regional Responses*, ed. Utpal Vyas, Ching-Chang Chen, and Denny Roy (Honolulu, HI: East West Center, 2015), 66.

15 James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 577–92, doi:10.2307/2944796; and Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 35–64, doi:10.1017/S0020818308080028.

types.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, even totalitarian regimes have factional fighting, and the North Korean inner circle potentially does face audience costs (e.g., the military has both the means to effect change via a coup and an organizational/cultural disposition biased toward strategically sound kinetic action) for unrealized belligerent rhetoric. Moreover, invoking audience costs involves merely a permissive reason for belligerent rhetoric, not an obligation. In the case of North Korea, the fact of its low audience costs cannot positively explain why it engages in such rhetoric (but rather only that it lacks a political factor that would incentivize it not to engage in such rhetoric).

Third, North Korean leadership is concerned about its international reputation. Indeed, North Korea maintains a significant, constructive presence in numerous international organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum; the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; the World Health Organization; and the International Maritime Organization. High-ranking defectors report that North Korea's leadership is sensitive to its international image, and the country's nuclear, missile, and rocket development projects partially aim at securing internal regime legitimacy by gaining external respect for deterrence capabilities.<sup>17</sup> In fact, there are several possible reasons why North Korea diffuses insulting, bellicose, hyperbolically crisis-mongering English-language propaganda internationally. The author tested three particularly relevant possibilities for understanding Pyongyang's rhetorical hostility as well as informing policies and positions regarding North Korea.

First, such rhetoric may be a strategy for negotiations occurring during such meetings as the Six-Party Talks, inter-Korean ministerial meetings (such as the Sunshine Policy), and Japan-North Korea normalization talks. Hypothesis 1 (H1) represented increased belligerent rhetoric from North Korea corresponding with negotiation sessions of major diplomatic efforts as a tactic for extracting better terms of a potential deal. Hypothesis 1A (H1A) represented decreased belligerent rhetoric from North Korea corresponding with major diplomatic negotiation sessions as a sign of genuine *détente*.

The second possibility considered North Korea's rhetoric to be a functional response to perceived threats from adversaries, particularly the United States and South Korea. Hypothesis 2 (H2) posited increased belligerent rhetoric from North Korea corresponding to major US-led military exercises involving South Korea or Japan as well as US overseas military operations Pyongyang perceived as threatening. This response would indicate escalation tolerance. Hypothesis 2A (H2A) posited decreased belligerent rhetoric from North Korea corresponding to the aforementioned threatening US military activity as an indication of genuine fear of or irritation with counterparty aggression.

Third, the belligerent rhetoric may be a coordinated complement to North Korea's provocations, such as nuclear and missile tests or attacks on South Korea. Hypothesis 3 (H3) postulated increased belligerent

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<sup>16</sup> Weeks, "Audience Costs."

<sup>17</sup> Jang Jin-sung, *Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea* (New York: First 37 Ink / Atria Books, 2015); and Eric Ballbach, "Producing Boundaries: Identity and North Korean Foreign Policy" (dissertation, Universität Trier, Germany, 2016).



rhetoric from North Korea corresponding to its provocations as a strategic signal of escalation tolerance and an associated deterrent effect with respect to the United States, South Korea, or Japan. Hypothesis 3A (H3A) postulated decreased belligerent rhetoric from North Korea corresponding to its provocations as a strategic signal that the provocation-rhetoric cycle is an overture to diplomacy.

An analysis of insulting, threatening, hyperbolic rhetoric in English-language news articles disseminated over the period 1997–2006 via the Korea Central News Agency and targeting the United States, South Korea, and Japan is instructive with respect to these hypotheses. During this period, belligerent rhetorical statements in the articles trended downwards overall. Insults and threats diminished marginally, while statements claiming North Korea was imminently under attack by the United States, South Korea, or Japan, which compose a small number of total observations, clearly increased. The decline in rhetoric directed against South Korea roughly coincided with an increase against the United States and the initiation of the Sunshine Policy. Curiously, despite efforts at multilateral diplomacy, North Korean rhetoric claiming imminent attack by the United States, South Korea, and Japan increased by 170 percent after 2000.

An ordinary least squares regression shows that the two major diplomatic efforts initiated by the international community—the Sunshine Policy and the Six-Party Talks—have a statistically significant, negative correlation with North Korea’s inflammatory rhetoric. In other words, diplomatic efforts are associated with a lower probability of inflammatory rhetoric by the Pyongyang regime (see table 1). The reverse occurs—bellicose rhetoric increases—when Pyongyang’s leaders consider American and South Korean actions aggressive.

Two classes of events are important: US overseas military operations, or expressions of hawkishness potentially leading to operations, that might indicate Washington’s appetite for strikes against rogue states like North Korea and US-led military exercises in the Asia-Pacific, particularly exercises involving the United States and South Korea. These two “US hawkishness” variables explain 20 percent of the variation in North Korea’s bellicose rhetoric. This is less than the independent variables indexing conciliation, but the coefficients are larger, which indicates greater effect intensity.

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	R2	Coefficient (p-value)	Corresponding Hypothesis
Six-Party Talks	Aggregate Rhetoric	0.490	-0.211 (<0.01)	H1A
Sunshine Policy	Aggregate Rhetoric	0.094	-0.148 (<0.01)	H1A
US Military Operations	Aggregate Rhetoric	0.130	0.370 (<0.01)	H2
US-led Exercises	Aggregate Rhetoric	0.070	0.142 (<0.05)	H2
North Korean Provocations	Aggregate Rhetoric	0.030	0.090 (>0.10)	H3/H3A
North Korean Provocations	Threat Rhetoric	0.030	0.030 (>0.10)	H3/H3A
North Korean Provocations	North Korea as Attack Target Rhetoric	0.004	0.008 (>0.10)	H3/H3A

Table 1. North Korea's belligerent rhetoric and independent variables

Most people only notice North Korea during episodes in which Pyongyang executes some form of provocation, such as nuclear bomb or ballistic missile tests, artillery bombardments of South Korean islands, attacks on South Korean navy vessels, and violent incursions on the southern side of the military demarcation line. Media reports about and government reactions to such actions are overwhelmingly accompanied by references to North Korea's inflammatory rhetoric, particularly the threats. But is the incendiary rhetoric meaningfully associated with provocations, or does Pyongyang's intemperate rhetoric merely appear correlated because popular attention focuses on the Korean peninsula only during such incidents?

The data presented in table 1 suggest the latter is the case, as indeed there is no statistically significant relationship between North Korea's provocations and belligerent rhetoric. This perceived correlation, as opposed to actual correlation, is true of all types of belligerent rhetoric taken together as well as threats and claims of imminent attack against North Korea taken individually.

## Conclusion

The least surprising and least policy-relevant result of this study is the correlation between American-led military exercises and North Korean bellicose rhetoric. There was already a strong presumption of this phenomenon, although the effect is small, and American decision-makers are disinclined to cancel or alter military exercises in northeast Asia due to Pyongyang's predictable rhetorical response. More significant is the result relating North Korea's inflammatory rhetoric to US operations overseas and their related activities. One might expect North Korea to employ more sober rhetoric vis-à-vis

events such as the beginning of the Iraq War or axis-of-evil speeches, a risk-averse approach counting on status quo inertia to prevail. Yet the opposite is the case, as the Pyongyang leadership is relatively tolerant of escalating risk, increasing its bellicose rhetoric when the United States shows aggressiveness. North Korean leaders appear genuinely afraid of possible US attacks and send signals internationally that they are prepared to fight. One speculates that North Korea counts on US and global media to disseminate its messages in the hopes of deterring American leaders from seriously considering an attack that much of the US population would not support because it would be afraid of an “aggressive,” “crazy” adversary.

The results concerning North Korea’s provocations are interesting, even counterintuitive, as Pyongyang’s aggression and weapons testing seemingly coincide with heightened bellicose rhetoric that forms a multidimensional crescendo of saber rattling. The intemperate rhetorical aspect of the artful saber rattling, however, is a noisy red herring. North Korea’s indulgence in belligerent rhetoric, as much during provocative episodes as during other times, fails to support the ideas of the remaining hypotheses: namely, the messages serve as a coordinated complement, either positively or negatively correlated, to other North Korean provocations. The scholars and foreign policy practitioners who posit North Korean rhetoric during provocation periods is an escalation risk, an invitation for misperception, and a possible *casus belli* are correct. But the lesson of this study is that, absent other corroborating signs of belligerence, we can and should prevent misperception and miscalculation by discounting such rhetoric.

Why does the Pyongyang regime use belligerent rhetoric so frequently? It may be that employing such messaging is a strategic choice to create a pervasive sense of an irrational and thus uniquely unpredictable and dangerous regime in the consciousness of other states and the international community. Another possibility is that North Korea’s intemperate rhetoric is misinformation clouding perceptions of its domestic and international activities: it is a form of psychological warfare obscuring Pyongyang’s objectives.

This interpretation has some support from high-ranking North Korean defectors who report the nation’s diplomacy is inextricably linked to psychological warfare.<sup>18</sup> Finally, perhaps the consistent use of inflammatory rhetoric is part of a strategy to have a cheap bargaining chip to play in relations with the United States, South Korea, Japan, and the international community in general. Pyongyang’s leaders can, for example, agree to calm the rhetoric when necessary to promote goodwill with interlocutors.

## Recommendations

Considering all of the above, several policy recommendations emerge. First, US civilian and military decision-makers should greatly discount North Korea’s threat rhetoric unless it is accompanied by other signs of bellicosity that would lend credibility to the hostile statements. The importance of this judiciousness is particularly true when assessing

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18 Jang, *Dear Leader*.

Pyongyang's threat rhetoric surrounding its provocations, as there is no statistical evidence connecting the threats to actual kinetic attacks.

Second, US civilian and military decision-makers should make sustained efforts—both during North Korean crises and otherwise—to communicate with US journalists, especially those specializing in security affairs, to clarify the nature of the regime in Pyongyang and how it uses hostile rhetoric. This media influence would lessen alarmist coverage about North Korean rhetoric. Public diplomacy should also include efforts to place civilian and military interviewees on media outlets not only to diffuse fear but to attach names and faces to the messages. Both cases would ideally facilitate a calmer debate about various policy advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to North Korean threats.

Third, negotiators in the international community can assume, absent contrary evidence, diplomatic negotiations in which Pyongyang diminishes its hostile rhetoric are negotiations that the regime takes seriously. The converse is also true: if Pyongyang does not make that sign of good faith, then it is not likely to treat the negotiations seriously. Moreover, negotiators should not accept the North Korean offer to diminish hostile rhetoric as a meaningful first step in any diplomatic process. As the statistical evidence shows, this is a step North Korea is likely to take anyway, so there is no reason to grant them the virtue of a necessity.

Fourth, Pyongyang's threat rhetoric mostly has the character of "redlines," such as when the "US encroaches even [by] .001 millimeter" North Korea "will mercilessly destroy the aggressors."<sup>19</sup> Often redlines are intended to be dissuasive or fix limits to a putative future commitment to counter action should the redline be violated, but they can indirectly and unintentionally encourage an adversary's behavior below the threshold.<sup>20</sup> That is, redlines can send a message that action below the threshold is *not unacceptable*. It is a way of articulating some action is unacceptable, and although a similar action is also disliked, allowing it serves as a token of good faith that the unacceptable action will not occur, which would, in fact, result in unfavorable consequences.

In the case of North Korea and its adversaries, particularly the United States and South Korea, this scenario fits North Korea's discourse and actions with respect to US-led military exercises. No one doubts that Pyongyang hates the drills (as they oblige North Korea to mobilize its own troops to combat readiness status, which is inconvenient and expensive), but paradoxically, North Korea's hypothetical, hyperbolic threats against the US-led exercises may function to send a message that the Kim regime is willing to accept the practice, as long as there is reassurance of the action's limit: the military exercise will not immediately threaten North Korea's sovereign territory or leadership survival.

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19 The Korea Central News Agency published several articles illustrating Korea's redlines on December 4, 1998; July 28, 2001; May 2, 2002; September 29, 2003; April 8, 2006; November 28, 2008; March 14, 2010; and May 21, 2014.

20 Bruno Tertrais, "Drawing Red Lines Right," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 7–24, doi:10.1080/0163660X.2014.978433.

Finally, the fact that declines in North Korea's belligerent rhetoric correlate with negotiation periods, such as the Sunshine Policy and Six-Party Talks, presents a policy conundrum. Call it the Sunshine Paradox: on the one hand, lower levels of North Korean belligerent rhetoric are desirable, as they translate into lower escalation risk; on the other hand, the lower levels of belligerent rhetoric from Pyongyang during the study period (1997–2006) coincided with the regime's seminal success developing a nuclear arsenal.

Perhaps North Korea's rhetorical strategy during this period was, consistent with buying time through Sunshine Policy-era negotiations, a disguise on its true objectives. This prospect casts a pall over the value of détente, both rhetorical and otherwise. There is a possibility of a trade-off: lower North Korean rhetoric, and thus lower escalation risk with the burgeoning nuclear power, could be achieved through resuming negotiations, but the cost would be that the United States and its northeast Asian allies would face the possibility that Pyongyang's leaders would use the opportunity to advance their nuclear weapons arsenal. Weighing costs and benefits of the two courses would be challenging.