

Notes on Strategy

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Imagining Pyongyang's Public Diplomacy

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A recent Gallup poll conducted in the U.S. showed that North Korea received the least favorable rating. Surveying 1,021 Americans in February 2020, 89 percent of the respondents expressed an “unfavorable” opinion of North Korea. North Korea ranked the lowest out of 18 countries.

It is not surprising that anti-North Korea sentiment is high in the U.S. But it is worth noting that Americans have not budged on their anti-North Korea stance, regardless of how the two countries are getting along.

Interestingly, a Gallup survey conducted two years ago found that only 14 percent of Americans identified North Korea as the “greatest enemy.” This unexpected figure, which fell by one-third from the previous year (51 percent), was a result of the 2018 Trump-Kim Jong Un Summit. At that time, Americans singled out Russia and China as their greatest enemies. In the same survey, however, 86 percent of Americans still perceived North Korea as an “unfavorable” country, which was still a significant majority of the population. The results of the survey reveal that Americans view North Korea as a reprehensible country and even something of a nuisance — not even an adversary on equal footing with Russia or China.

Emotions run high while Washington and Pyongyang stand still

U.S. aversion towards North Korea peaked in February 2018 at 92 percent. In early 2018, U.S.-North Korea relations had

reached a tipping point, with President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un playing the game of chicken with their nuclear buttons. At the time, Trump derided Kim Jong Un as “little rocket man” living in “fire and fury,” and North Korea lashed back by mocking Trump as a “dotard” and “barking dog.”

In stark contrast, the recent atmosphere in Pyongyang and Washington has been relatively restrained, even in light of recent events. U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken criticized North Korea's human rights violations during his recent visit to South Korea. DPRK Vice Minister of Foreign Office Choi Sun Hee reiterated her country's position firmly stating, “There will be no U.S.-North Korea dialogue without the withdrawal of Washington's hostile policy toward Pyongyang.” Yet neither side has escalated provocation, a decidedly different approach from past actions of North Korea that drew attention with nuclear and missile tests deliberately coinciding with U.S. presidential transitions. It is worth noting that the North once criticized then Vice President Joe Biden who urged North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons as a partaker of “shameless robbery.” Last year, Biden called the North Korean leader “a thug” during his televised debates with Trump.

Despite North Korea's dormancy, the result of this year's Gallup survey shows that Americans' anti-North Korea sentiment has barely improved from the level it was at three years ago, when the two countries were threatening each other with war. This implies that U.S. distaste for NK remains unchanged regardless of how their political relationship fluctuates.

The Cold War and U.S. Public Diplomacy

Most countries carry out public diplomacy to improve their national image in the international arena. The term appeared

in the lexicon half a century ago, but only recently have major countries focused their efforts on enhancing their public diplomacy. Key factors that brought about this trend are ICT-based globalization and changes in global diplomacy. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, non-state actors who had not been major players in traditional diplomacy, have been playing decisive roles in shaking up the existing international order. We live in a world that is fundamentally different from the past, where a single financial crisis now has global repercussions and can threaten the livelihoods of small businesses in countries that seem unconnected. Such changes in the political environment brought public diplomacy to the forefront, placing it at the heart of interaction between states.

The U.S. government has been spending a considerable amount of the national budget on public diplomacy toward North Korea. This signals a prioritization of the DPRK in matters related to East Asian public diplomacy and the broader Pacific region. According to the government-issued 2019 Annual Report by the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, U.S. public diplomacy focuses on Korean advocacy of Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA); in addition, emphasis is placed on programs that provide English education and opportunities to visit the U.S., specifically targeting North Korean defectors. This budget is also earmarked for diplomacy to dissuade North Korea from further developing nuclear and missiles programs.

U.S. public diplomacy with North Korea using the media fully aligns with the Cold War modus operandi. For example, Voice of America (VOA) is a U.S. Congress-backed media organization traditionally used against the Communist bloc, having been in existence since the end of World War II. VOA deliberately broadcast in Russian to target the Soviet Union and was perceived to be the messenger of the free world; democratic bearer of good news to people under the communist regime long before the term ‘public diplomacy’

was coined, VOA was often portrayed as a secret channel in many spy movies.

And how does North Korea carry out its public diplomacy? The country has its own iteration of it — civilian diplomacy. The Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries and Overseas Koreans Aid Commission are the primary organs in the Workers' Party tasked with civilian diplomacy. They advocate cultural exchange with civic organizations to better promote bilateral relationships and under the guise of strengthening solidarity, they cultivate relationships with certain socialist countries.

With Kim Jong Un at the helm, there have been significant changes in North Korea's external propaganda, as evidenced in the state-sanctioned arts. In contrast to the Pochonbo Electronic Ensemble of the Kim Jong-il era, Moranbong band, which Kim Jong Un assembled, plays upbeat songs, features feminine dance routines and showcases trendy performances by shattering cultural norms set by his predecessors. The Rodong Sinmun even got a facelift right after Kim Jong Un assumed power, publishing its first colored edition that highlighted the New Year's address of North Korea's Supreme Leader. Newscasters of North Korean Central Television who were once confined to studios started reporting news on the ground. The format is not wildly different from South Korean shows. Kim Jong Un injected humor and levity into North Korean television, even showing a different side to iconic newscaster Ri Chun Hee, known for her aggressive speech, by having her make an appearance on a Chinese TV show celebrating the spring festival in 2012.

In Search of Bidirectional Communication and Soft Power

Yet the extent of North Korea's public diplomacy ends there. They lack the soft power they need to build a solid

foundation for public diplomacy. The positive impressions North Korea attempts to produce via social media are overused and stereotypical at best. It doesn't help that their press statements on international issues on and around the Korean Peninsula are not tactful or diplomatic. There is little appreciation for the importance of improving public perception through the media and North Korea seems intent on sticking to its belligerent and combative rhetoric. This is why North Korea's state-run media is often mocked as a "screaming machine."

Public diplomacy does not substitute but complements traditional diplomacy. The absence of diplomatic relationships should not preclude state actors from engaging in public diplomacy. In 1970, it was a 2.5 gram ping-pong ball that lifted the 'bamboo curtain'; baseball and volleyball played similar roles for Cubans under the socialist regime. This means that public diplomacy can patch up fissures between hostile countries. The scope and areas of public diplomacy are diversifying and expanding.

In the Biden era, Americans are still on their guard with China. Yet the U.S. is home to more than 350,000 Chinese students in the U.S., far surpassing any other nationality. In the same vein, Russia is depicted as an evil empire in the hit Netflix show 'House of Cards'; yet the popularity of the Bolshoi Ballet amongst Americans has unwavered. These cases prove that public diplomacy can be built on socio-cultural foundations.

Will a Pyongyang strategist emerge?

Pyongyang recently launched an English YouTube channel to introduce and share information on North Korea to a global audience. It is evident that North Korea is aware of the urgency of public diplomacy. North Korea's attempt to promote its own version of public diplomacy warrants the

attention of larger powers like China, who traditionally emphasized its blood alliance with North Korea, and multilateral institutions such as the UN. At the same time, Kim Yo Jong and North Korean party members need to reflect on what they gained and lost with their public diplomacy during the “spring of three years ago.”

Most noteworthy is Pyongyang’s willingness to engage with the world using diplomatic tools. There is no place for public diplomacy or even traditional diplomacy if North Korea does not rid itself of the doctrine of self-rehabilitation proclaimed at the Eighth Party Congress. The success of public diplomacy depends on how diplomatic messages are sent and received. Will there be a strategist who is able to master the language of public diplomacy in the Workers’ Party of Korea? Will Chairman Kim want to start a dialogue with President Biden leaving the ever-growing anti-North Korea sentiments in the U.S. intact?