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Undersea Cybersecurity: Countering Gray Zone Operations and Strengthening the Digital Resilience of Subsea Cables for Taiwan¹

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Abstract

Subsea cables are critical infrastructure for digital communications, economic stability, and national security. This undersea infrastructure, which was previously relegated to the periphery of public awareness, has emerged as a target of geopolitical conflict and hybrid threats, particularly through gray zone operations. This study highlights incidents involving subsea cable security in 2024 and 2025 throughout the Indo-Pacific and Europe, revealing a pattern of low-intensity, deniable operations aimed at disrupting transoceanic communications. The methods by which malicious actors leverage legal ambiguity and maritime vulnerabilities to damage subsea cables are analyzed through the case study of Taiwan. In this context, traditional deterrence by punishment approaches, such as legal penalties, are insufficient to stop state-sponsored aggression. Instead, a compound strategy is proposed for impairing hostile actors' access to key resources and preventing their ability to achieve strategic objectives. The case of Taiwan demonstrates a need for a timely and context-based approach to alternative methods of managing subsea cable attacks that are contingent upon the particular geopolitical context in which a country is located. A shift in strategic mindset is required: rather than deterrence by punishment alone, digital resilience depends on the ability to disrupt the execution and deny adversaries from achieving the objectives of gray zone operations.

Keywords: Cybersecurity, Cyberspace, Subsea cables, Submarine cables, Gray zone, Hybrid threats

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Introduction

In the 21st century, information and communications technology plays a foundational role in global society. The seemingly borderless and ubiquitous flow of information requires global communications infrastructure, which is largely invisible to the public eye and discussed primarily within small-scale technical communities. Notably, most information traffic is carried by submarine systems rather than satellites. Subsea cables (also referred to as submarine cables) transport most internet data across oceans (Starosielski 2015, 1). As noted in a statement by the United Nations, “fiber optic submarine cables transmit most of the world’s data and communications and, hence, are vitally important to the global economy and the national security of all States” (UN General Assembly 2010, 6). Hence, these cables, submerged at the bottom of the ocean, increasingly surface in conversations on global security.

On January 3, 2025, the Chinese-operated and Cameroon-registered cargo ship *Shunxin 39* allegedly caused anchor damage to the Trans-Pacific Express (TPE) submarine cable within Taiwanese territorial waters off the coast of Keelung in northern Taiwan (Davidson 2025). The TPE is a joint venture facilitating transnational communication between Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, the United States (US), and China. Because of the location of the cable damage, only international communications in Taiwan were affected. Negative geopolitical interactions between Taiwan and China have spiked since August 2022, when then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan (Wu and Baptista 2022). Notably, the subsea cables that were cut connect Taiwan proper to the offshore island of Matsu. Taiwan was forced to rely on backup satellite links and microwave technology to maintain communications with Matsu during the cable failures in early January and February 2025 (Focus Taiwan News 2025). In early 2023, submarine cables were also damaged because of illegal dredging carried out by Chinese ships in the Taiwan Strait, causing internet

disruptions for over 50 days and garnering substantial media attention (Taiwan News 2023).

Similar security challenges have emerged in Europe amid the Russian government's growing hostility toward European countries. In December 2024, the Estlink 2 power transmission cable between Finland and Estonia, as well as four nearby communication cables, were damaged by the Russian vessel *Eagle S*, which was subsequently detained by the Finnish Coast Guard at Porvoo Port for investigation (Reuters 2024). On January 20, 2025, the British Royal Navy made a rare public accusation against a Russian Yantar-class reconnaissance vessel, claiming that it entered UK waters with threatening intent vis-à-vis UK critical infrastructure. The Royal Navy immediately dispatched the frigate *HMS Somerset* and patrol ship *HMS Tyne* to track and monitor the suspicious activities of the Russian vessel (Hughes 2025). By January 22, 2025, in an unprecedented move, the UK Navy also publicly acknowledged deploying a submarine that surfaced and escorted the Russian ship to send a clear visual warning. In a later Parliamentary session, UK Defense Secretary John Healey accused Russia of mapping the UK's underwater critical infrastructure in preparation for future gray zone operations, stating: "We see you. We know what you are doing" (Al Jazeera 2025).

These events are not random incidents. Rather, they reflect growing geopolitical upheaval and threats to global cyber infrastructure in both the Indo-Pacific and the Baltic Sea in Europe. Although the Russo-Ukraine War has underscored the necessity of robust external communication infrastructure in contingencies, the smooth operation of transatlantic or transpacific communications frequently relies on the security of undersea cables. On March 14, 2025, the G7 countries recognized the importance of such infrastructure in a joint statement on maritime security and prosperity that highlighted "a growing concern that undersea communications cables, subsea interconnectors and other critical undersea infrastructure have been subject to critical damage through sabotage, poor seamanship or irresponsible behaviour..." (US

Department of State 2025).

However, the Baltic Sea is surrounded by NATO members, and access to it from the Atlantic is easily controlled by geographical entry points held by Sweden and Denmark. By contrast, Taiwan is surrounded by open water, and few in the region have well-known, active, operational security collaboration with Taiwan. The above distinction presents Taiwan as a challenging case to explore the possibility of policy responses. In addition, while some scholars' work has paid attention to the European context (Bueger and Liebetau 2021; Ganz et al. 2024; Besch and Brown 2024b), very few have investigated the case in the Indo-Pacific (Cannon 2025). As such, in this article Taiwan is used as a case study to investigate potential policy responses to hybrid threats and methods for strengthening digital resilience in subsea cable communications. Specifically, this study focuses on possible countermeasures to confront the challenge of malicious state actors leveraging gray zone operations to damage subsea cable communications. The main argument of the paper is that, rather than deterrence alone, digital resilience could be enhanced with a better ability to disrupt the execution and deny adversaries from achieving the objectives of gray zone operations.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The first section presents an overview of the literature on the conceptual relationship between strategy, gray zones, and hybrid threats to establish an analytical framework. Next, the role of subsea communications within Taiwan's security context is examined in depth. The subsequent section outlines the limitations of international norms and regulations within this domain. In addition, Taiwan's current efforts to deter malicious actors are reviewed. Finally, the last two sections before the conclusion propose a detailed potential strategy incorporating compound elements and steps forward for future discussion and dialogue about this issue.

Conceptual Connections: Gray Zone, Hybrid Threats, and Strategy

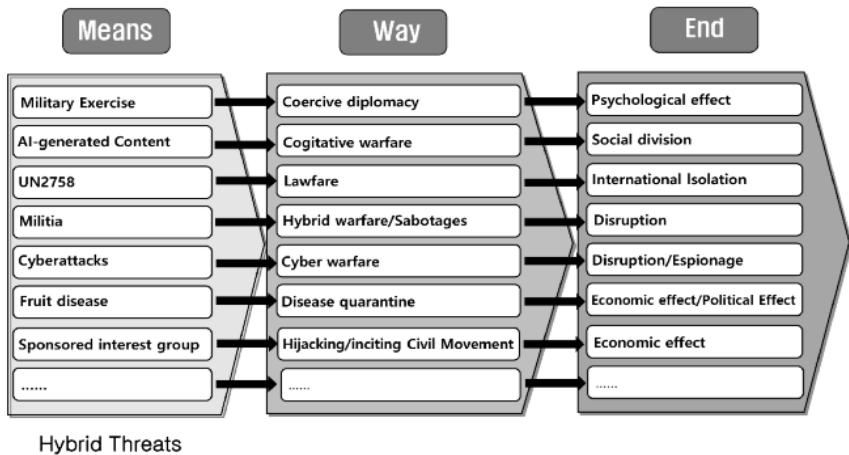
Gray zones are established through the implementation of diversified capabilities to achieve a particular objective (Mazarr 2015), which commonly involves exerting high pressure without it constituting an overt declaration of war. In this sense, gray zone operations render peacetime more violent without creating the conditions of a hot conflict. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu argues that “though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays,” and “there is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare” (Sun Tzu 2009, 7). As a form of long-term competition, gray zone operations contradict this supposition. Gray zone operations may manifest as a form of salami slicing in which gradual steps are taken to achieve specific goals, resulting in a “boiling the frog” effect rather than instigating an immediate reaction from opponents. Malicious state actors engaged in gray zone operations are familiar with international norms, which assist them in circumventing them. When such norms are lacking, gray zone operations can exploit this socio-political reality.

In the 21st century, states may exercise statecraft through gray zones. Gray zone strategies can be understood within the widely applied ends–ways–means framework: depending on attackers’ **ends**, they may adopt various **ways** of reaching their goal (e.g., military exercises, economic coercion, sabotage, or cognitive warfare) through traditional and nontraditional **means** (i.e., assets, such as military force, mercenaries, digital technology, media, and civilian ships) to circumvent accusations of waging a hot conflict. However, attackers may nonetheless harbor the ambition to engage in a hot conflict, for which gray zone operations may set the stage and shape the operational environment. In contrast to Clausewitz’s framing of war as an extension of politics by other means during conflict, gray zone operations often emerge during peacetime, transforming politics into an extension of war by unconventional means.

State actors employ this strategy to increase violence during peacetime and exploit ambiguities in international law, which can hamper responses from other states. Hence, traditional and nontraditional hybrid **means** are a defining feature of gray zone operations. This operational concept is mentioned by the chief of Russia’s general staff, General Valery Gerasimov, when he states that all available means, including military, technological, informational, diplomatic, economic, legal, and cultural tools, should be used to accomplish strategic goals, a position later controversially referred to as the “Gerasimov Doctrine” (Bartles, 2016).

A gray zone is also similar to the asymmetric warfare concept described by two officers of China’s People’s Liberation Army, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui. These officers argued that information technology has fundamentally changed the nature and means of war, and consequently they proposed 24 forms of conventional or unconventional warfare tactics for conflict with other superpowers (Qiao and Wang 1999). Hybrid threats are the primary means in gray zone strategies. The conceptual relationship between gray zone operations and hybrid threats is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
 FRAMEWORK OF GRAY ZONE OPERATIONS

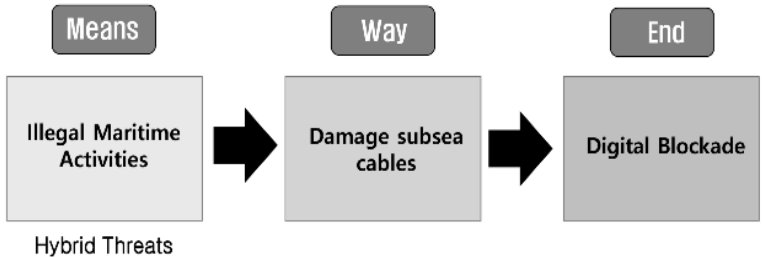


In short, gray zones normalize what may otherwise be considered exceptional behaviors. Hence, when gray zone operations may violate existing international norms, attackers attempt to establish plausible deniability to avoid being accused of violating global norms and exerting coercive pressure; meanwhile, in the absence of explicit international norms, attackers typically attempt to exploit this legal vacuum and conduct their activities more openly. Gray zone strategies can reduce political costs but do not always account for economic factors.

On the basis of this conceptual framework, the overall strategy of gray zone operations on subsea cables can be broken down into three key components: the end (strategic objective), ways (methods), and means (resources). Hence, as depicted in Figure 2, for the case of the Taiwan Strait, malicious state actors, such as China, may use *means*, such as illegal maritime activities, to leverage subsea cable damage as a *way* to achieve the *end* of a digital blockade. As will be explained in the latter part of the article, subsea cables are particularly important for the external communications of an island state. Hence, opponent state actors can attack Taiwan’s subsea cables to achieve the goal of increasing violence during peacetime, thus wearing down resilience without immediate escalation into a hot conflict.

Figure 2

GRAY ZONE STRATEGY FOR ATTACKING SUBSEA CABLES



Strategic Importance of Transoceanic Communication

International submarine cables present bountiful opportunities for malicious actors to leverage gray zone strategies to profoundly affect a target's external communication efficiency. Present-day flows of transoceanic information are typically fixed along fairly narrow cables, which are manufactured within the small, highly specialized cable industry to ensure the safe transit of media and communications through turbulent environments. The first cross-sea cable was installed between England and France in 1850, with this followed by the first transatlantic cable in 1857. As of 2025, over 300 submarine cables have been laid worldwide. They carry more than 98% of cross-border internet traffic globally (DHS 2024). The crucial role of subsea cables in digital infrastructure is highlighted in a *New York Times* report: "People think data is in the cloud, but it's not. It's in the ocean" (Satariano 2019). In the contemporary highly digitized world, any disruption to subsea cables necessitates emergency rerouting of traffic through an alternative path, potentially causing data congestion at critical bottlenecks, intensified communication delays, or service interruptions. Subsea cable disruption may even result in the outright failure of voice- and data-based communication, video streaming, financial transactions, and international trade (Palmieri et al. 2013). Consequently, the global topology of submarine cables has emerged as a matter of pressing geopolitical concern.

Unlike ships over high seas, which are governed by flag-state jurisdiction, submarine cables are typically jointly installed by consortia of private telecommunications companies from multiple countries (Bueger and Liebetrau 2021, 398). The US, as the world's largest data provider, has historically been the dominant destination of international submarine cable networks. However, under the increasing global fragmentation of tech regulations, data localization requirements, and the strategic calculations of private businesses,

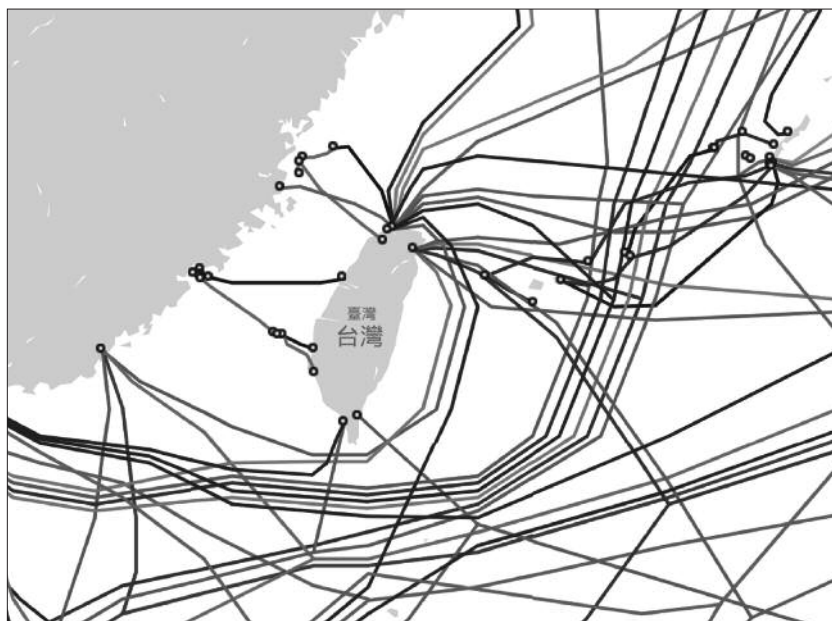
major internet content providers, such as Google and Meta, have begun investing in submarine cables connecting data centers outside the US to improve user experiences through closer access to distributed data (Carter et al. 2023, 4).

The aforementioned strategic characteristics of subsea cables have distinct implications for Taiwan's digital survival, given its location within the western Pacific Ocean. Because Taiwan has a relatively friendly regulatory environment for telecommunications companies, strong demand for transnational network traffic, and a strategic location within the cable topology of the western Pacific, the number of data centers operated by Google, Amazon, and Microsoft located in Taiwan has increased. Moreover, the Bashi Channel in southern Taiwan is the only exit route for subsea cables traveling through the South China Sea and has thus become a crucial transit point for international submarine cables. Taiwan's centrality within subsea cable networks is exemplified by the aftermath of the 2006 earthquake in Hengchun, southern Taiwan, which not only disrupted Taiwan's external connections to Southeast Asia but also affected global communications in Hong Kong and transcontinental data links in China because of damage caused by undersea landslides to subsea cables within the Bashi Channel (Saito 2019, 109).

As of 2025, Taiwan proper relies on 14 international submarine cables to communicate with the world and 10 domestic cables to communicate with offshore islands (TeleGeography 2025). Likewise, as indicated in Figure 3, much of the international network traffic across the Pacific is carried along submarine cables southeast of Taiwan. Numerous internationally operated subsea cables pass through waters adjacent to Taiwan, connecting Northeast Asia and points south and west that run through Taiwan. Hence, disruptions around Taiwan could affect Southeast Asia, South Korea, and Japan. An attack on the subsea cables around Taiwan is a global communication issue that goes beyond the Indo-Pacific region.

Figure 3

SUBSEA CABLES SURROUNDING TAIWAN



Source: <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/country/taiwan>

Limitations of International Norms Regarding Subsea Cable Protection

International law offers limited protections for subsea cables, attacks on which are typically discussed from the angles of *jus in bello* (the ways through which warfare is conducted) and *jus ad bellum* (the conditions under which states may resort to war) in relation to legal complications.

Regarding *jus in bello*, submarine cables are in practice legitimate targets for military conflict. A historical example of this phenomenon is the destruction of the German Empire's subsea cables by the British during World War I (Ryan 2024, 21). In a contemporary case, Russian operatives cut Georgia's external communication cables during its 2008

military intervention in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Deibert, Rohozinski, and Crete-Nishihata 2012, 6). Although malicious state actors are aware of international norms, this is typically in order to ensure they can effectively circumvent these norms. That is, their use of gray zone operations often reflects an instrumental rather than normative view of international law. In the case of subsea cables, attacks on this infrastructure during wartime are somewhat uncontroversial; as such, gray zone attacks on subsea cables primarily require exploitation of the legal ambiguity of *jus ad bellum*.

Consequently, as regards the discussions in the context of *jus ad bellum*, the most commonly referenced international law is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Article 112 of which allows states to lay cables in international waters. Notably, submarine cables pass through territorial waters, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and the high seas. The legal implications of the territorial distribution of cables afford states complex judicial responsibilities in dealing with disruptions. For example, states have full authority to stop and investigate a ship, regardless of its nationality, in their territorial waters, but only flag states can exercise such authority once ships are over the high seas, as specified in UNCLOS Articles 113 to 115. Threats to subsea cables encompass natural causes, such as earthquakes or fish bites, and human actions, such as fishing activities or sabotage (Bafoutsou, Papaphilippou, and Dekker 2023). Within the context of the need of *jus ad bellum* in identifying the origin of the attacks, the public cannot immediately determine whether damage resulting from human activities is a careless accident or a malicious attack, an issue exacerbated by the stovepiping within the government agencies investigating such incidents, resulting in a challenge to identify the source of the actual cause in a timely manner. Although Article 100 of UNCLOS encourages all states to cooperate in addressing maritime criminal activities, states' actual conduct remains a topic of debate. The fragmentation of legal authority to identify attackers creates attribution difficulties related to *jus ad bellum* when subsea cables may be attacked

over territorial waters, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and the high seas.

Nevertheless, long before UNCLOS was drafted, several countries signed the 1884 *Convention for the Protection of Submarine Telegraph Cables*, which provides a limited foundation for states to enforce cable protection through military vessel authority (Besch and Brown 2024b). Article X of this convention allows officers of official ships to board suspected foreign ships and inspect their documentation to report to their flag states. States, like the US, view challenging the freedom of navigation and the right of innocent passage as a customary international norm within this particular legal context (Azaria and Davenport 2024, 16). This enforcement regime was first enacted in 1959, when a US destroyer, the USS *Roy O. Hale*, stopped a USSR trawler, *Novorossisk*, on the high seas on suspicion of damaging cables (Starosielski 2015, 152). A second incident likely took place in November 2024, when the Danish Navy detained the Chinese vessel *Yi Peng 3* on suspicion of damaging two Baltic Sea cables connecting Scandinavia and mainland Europe, the BCS East–West Interconnection and C-Lion1 (Besch and Brown 2024a). Although UNCLOS requires civilian vessels to be registered with a flag state, the economic incentive of low ship registration fees has caused widespread abuses of flags of convenience (Rajan 2024). Even landlocked countries such as Mongolia provide global vessel registration services. Consequently, if a submarine cable within Taiwan’s territorial waters is disrupted by a ship operating under a flag of convenience, malicious state actors have the plausible deniability to evade direct responsibility because of a lack of concrete evidence.

Hence, current international norms regarding subsea cables problematically allow malicious state actors to either exploit the ambiguity of law enforcement boundaries or leverage plausible deniability, enabling low-intensity gray zone attacks on these cables to flourish without crossing the threshold into warfare. Attacks occurring over the high seas can bypass accusations of engagement in the seven types

of aggression defined in UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 of December 14, 1974. These forms of aggression include military occupation, bombing, naval blockades, military attacks on another state's forces or civilian vessels, security treaty violations, the use of a state's territory by a third party to facilitate invasion, and irregular warfare on other states by armed forces or mercenaries (UN General Assembly 1974). In short, even if a submarine cable attack results in a digital blockade against a specific country, current international regulations hinder effective measures to address such incidents.

Hybrid Threats and National Cybersecurity

The problematic strategic and legal environment outlined in the preceding sections positions subsea cables as a convenient target for coercive statecraft practices. At the height of the Cold War, submarine cables were often used for military communication and became frequent targets for military action. A well-known attack on submarine cables was *Operation Ivy Bells*, which spanned 1971 to 1981, when the US Navy successfully tapped Soviet military cables made of copper in the Sea of Okhotsk. Notably, technological advancement kickstarted by the globalization of communication in the 1990s has resulted in the development of fiber optic cables that can transfer enormous volumes of data and have more protected designs. Underwater tapping is technically challenging, and therefore, in 2023, the European Union reported that threats to submarine cables stem primarily from technical defects, poor design, natural disasters, or sabotage rather than underwater espionage (Bafoutsou, Papaphilippou, and Dekker 2023). Although supplies for subsea cables had historically often been provided by specialized companies within an industry dominated by Western firms, by 2024 China's Huawei Marine Networks (HMN Technologies) aggressively expanded into submarine cable projects in developing nations, challenging the dominance of companies such as Alcatel

(France), NEC (Japan), and SubCom (US) (Ganz et al. 2024). To safeguard submarine cable networks in response to this development, numerous Western nations have endeavored to achieve more robust supply chain security, system design, and legal compliance mechanisms (Guarascio, Nguyen, and Brock 2024).

On January 26, 2025, a submarine cable across the Baltic Sea connecting Sweden and Latvia was severed under unclear circumstances. The prime minister of Latvia, Evika Siliņa, stated that the incident was likely the result of a use of external force. Alongside authorities from Sweden and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Latvia immediately launched a joint investigation into suspicious vessels in the area (Sytas and Ahlander 2025). These Baltic countries demonstrated the need for international collaboration regarding subsea cable protection because of their close proximity and the fragmented authority governing the Baltic Sea. However, Taiwan's submarine cable infrastructure is distant from the territorial waters of other countries. In addition, the number of Taiwanese agencies and regulations involved in subsea cable protection complicates this task. For example, if a security incident occurs within Taiwan's territorial land and waters, Article 72 of the Taiwanese *Telecommunications Management Act* and Chapter 25 of the Taiwanese *Criminal Code* provide the authority for law enforcement to prosecute the perpetrators of attacks on critical communications infrastructure. Additionally, the Taiwanese *Civil Code* authorizes the owner of the damaged infrastructure to secure relevant compensation from malicious actors through legal action. Furthermore, if security incidents occur 12 or more nautical miles beyond Taiwan's territorial waters, Taiwan has domestic legislation, the *Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf*, that specifies requirements for foreign maritime activities throughout the EEZ within 200 nautical miles of Taiwan. Nevertheless, for incidents on the high seas, only a ship's flag state has investigation authority under UNCLOS Articles 113 to 115. For a single-state actor, like Taiwan, the interconnectedness of subsea cables creates governance challenges in terms of coordination and legal

compliance.

In short, for Taiwan, the Ministry of Transportation regulates cable licensing, the Homeland Security Office of the Executive Yuan oversees infrastructure protection, the Ministry of Digital Affairs manages cybersecurity, the Ministry of the Interior enforces land-based telecommunications security, and the Ocean Affairs Council manages maritime security. Political scientist Graham Allison noted in *Essence of Decision* that institutional positions often shape stances among policymakers, leading to bureaucratic inertia and compartmentalized responses. Government bureaucrats often react to incidents on the basis of departmental norms instead of developing the most appropriate solution to a challenge (Allison 1971, 176). Hence, whether government employees follow organizational norms in managing problems is often prioritized over a problem's actual resolution. As such, Taiwan's lack of integrated interagency response mechanisms places it at risk of inefficiently reacting to foreign hybrid threats targeting its submarine cables.

Taiwan's Current Countermeasures Against Gray Zone Attacks on Submarine Cables: *Detering Malicious Actors*

As an archipelago in the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan heavily relies on subsea cables for domestic and international communications during both peacetime and wartime. Hence, strengthening the nation's digital resilience against external threats to subsea cables is a crucial priority of the Taiwanese government. Since late 2018, when extensive media coverage emerged regarding damage to Taiwan's subsea cables due to illegal dredging activities by Chinese ships (Turton 2025; Braw 2023), Taiwan has implemented both legal and technical deterrence measures to address similar threats.

Taiwan has modified its domestic regulations to impose stricter

penalties on illegal dredging around its territorial waters. In 2020, Taiwan's Legislative Yuan amended Article 18 of the Taiwanese *Law on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf*, which specifies the types of legal actions available in cases of violation (Huang and Chung 2020). Violators may be fined, have their operating license suspended, be charged with a civil lawsuit, or be pursued with criminal violations by the public office, depending on the severity of their behaviour. In 2023, the Legislative Yuan modified Article 36 of the *Sand and Gravel Excavation Act*, which specifies a fine for related misconduct (Hsieh and Chen 2023). Both of the modifications are aimed at deterring illegal activities. In addition to legal deterrence, Chunghwa Telecom owns and operates the majority of Taiwan's external subsea cables and has developed the Submarine Cable Automatic Warning System, with this system being a response to repeated damage caused by illegal dredging and trawling vessels under Chinese flags near Matsu and other outlying islands (Legislative Yuan 2023). This detection system, which serves as a technical support for deterrence, incorporates tracking signals from the shipboard Automatic Identification System (AIS), a standard safety and tracking system required by the International Maritime Organization and other management bodies enabling authorities to monitor vessels approaching Taiwan's subsea cables. When a suspicious vessel approaches a cable, an alert message is broadcast via the Navigational Telex system to the approaching ship. Taiwanese Coast Guard and law enforcement agencies are also notified of the incursion and can subsequently decide whether to take action.

Although these measures may discourage actors with general illegal intentions, they are unlikely to deter gray zone operations orchestrated by state-backed entities, as state-sponsored aggressors with strong strategic incentives likely switch off their onboard AIS or conduct GPS spoofing to conceal their identity and seek to damage subsea cables through all possible means. Defenders of these cables may only realize an attack has taken place after substantial damage has already been inflicted. Given the relatively high benefits of gray zone tactics, efforts

to reduce malicious actors' intention to engage in this behavior are met with considerable challenges, which highlight the limitations of employing traditional deterrence approaches that build digital resilience by raising law enforcement penalties against hybrid threats (Matisek 2017).

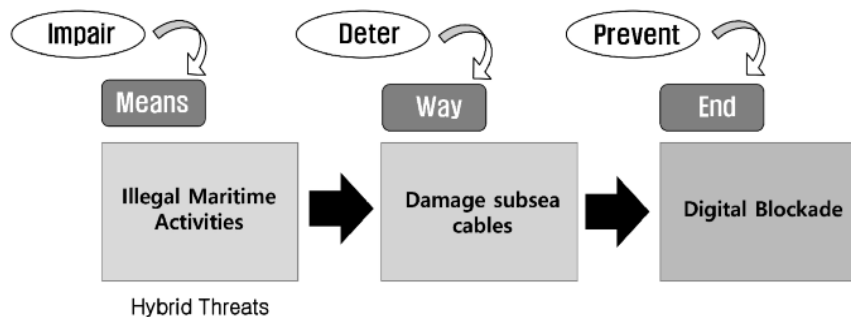
Nevertheless, the use of deterrence generally follows logics such as “deterrence by punishment” or “deterrence by denial” (Mazarr 2018; Snyder 1959). For deterrence by punishment, as explained above, the government of Taiwan has employed legal penalties to deter malicious intentions to damage subsea cables. However, legal deterrents are typically only effective for ordinary malicious actors rather than state-sponsored groups. Deterring state-sponsored sabotage is very difficult, as states always have resources, time, and incentives to achieve their eventual objective in an anarchic international environment. In addition, even if Taiwan broadens its strategy to “deterrence by denial” alone, this strategy would place excessive emphasis only on impairing the “means” of sabotage without creating conditions for preventing the adversary from trying to achieve the “end” of digital blockade by altering the adversary's perception regarding whether to do so is in its interest. Taiwan's action would be passive, ceding intent, time, and place to the adversary's actions. As such, this paper suggests that Taiwan should develop a compound strategy of going beyond “deterrence by punishment” and “deterrence by denial” by employing psychological/influence/information strategies that function as measures to undermine an adversary's vision of achieving a digital blockade via gray zone subsea cable activities.

In accordance with the conceptual framework depicted in Figure 2, for malicious state actors the success of a strategy relies on the simultaneous substantiation of the three elements of the strategic triad: ends, means, and ways. Consequently, the defender can disrupt the attackers' strategy as long as any element of the strategic triad is sufficiently undermined. While Taiwan has complicated legal tools to deter malicious actors from subsea cable attack, more emphasis should be placed upon *impairing* potential *means* and *preventing* adversaries

from achieving their **ends**.

In essence, this article proposes that Taiwan’s countermeasures should involve disconnecting the alignment of a gray zone strategy’s **ends**, **ways**, and **means**, such that the gray zone aggressor perceives the strategy as unlikely to work, rather than deterring states’ malicious intentions outright. Given the challenges of deterring malicious intentions and the necessary alignment of objectives, methods, and means for state actors’ successful gray zone strategies, Taiwan’s defense strategy should also focus primarily on impairing malicious state actors’ access to means (illegal maritime activities) and preventing adversaries from achieving their strategic end (digital blockade). Even if the **ways** (i.e., malicious state actors’ intention to damage cables) cannot be eliminated, successful impairment of the available **means** for illegal activities or prevention of malicious state actors’ **end** of staging digital blockades can mitigate the effects of gray zone attacks and strengthen digital resilience, as depicted in Figure 4. Accordingly, the following two sections outline recommended strategies for impairing means (*hybrid threats*) and preventing ends (*digital blockades*).

Figure 4
COMPOUND STRATEGY TO DETER AND COUNTER GRAY ZONE ATTACKS ON SUBSEA CABLES



Impairing Means (Hybrid Threats)

Rather than merely focusing on deterring malicious intentions through the threat of punishment, Taiwan can block access to potential resources that malicious state actors could exploit by proactively managing emerging threats and strengthening capacity across the following five domains.

First, boosting the capacity to monitor suspicious vessels and dark/shadow fleets: Given the risks to subsea cables globally, Taiwan could proactively confront incoming threats rather than simply responding to incidents. At the global level, given that there are known incidents of cable cutting in Europe and Asia, Taiwan could consider collaborating with countries in these areas in order to exchange information on the movements of dark/shadow fleet vessels around the world. At the regional level, while the risk of communication disruption to neighboring countries of Taiwan is more imminent compared to countries in other parts of the world, such proactive measures could include closer collaboration with like-minded countries to establish a blacklist of suspicious vessels, track and share their movements, and conduct joint policing. A concrete example is the Information Fusion Centre (IFC), operated by Singapore, for enhancing maritime security in the South China Sea. In addition, many of the suspicious vessels and dark/shadow fleets often operate in conditions of AIS or GPS spoofing, and it would be an opportunity for Taiwan to convince the neighboring countries to facilitate more cross-border collaboration for maritime surveillance. Finally, with the advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, the application of pattern recognition to ship surveillance data and AI-driven automated alert systems could also provide timely warnings whenever suspect vessels approach sensitive waters.

Second, establishing cable protection zones: Although the decision to board and investigate a foreign-flagged ship over the high seas is controversial, countries such as Australia have developed domestic legal tools to regulate maritime activities within their EEZ (Jacob 2020a4).

Taiwan can learn from these practices and designate cable protection zones within its jurisdiction to impair access to illegal maritime activities under the cover of fishing, dredging, and other commercial activities, which are often used by foreign adversaries.

Third, improving cross-agency coordination: Rather than mere legal infractions, attacks on subsea cables could be considered serious national security threats requiring cross-agency collaboration. Securing subsea cables, just like many other hybrid threats, requires public and private close partnership, as such attacks exploit the significance of private assets in national security. Taiwan understands that not only are many of the subsea cables operated by the private sector, but also, as argued in earlier parts of this paper, a gray zone attack on subsea cables very often treats politics as an extension of war by unconventional means. Hence, the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee, established by Taiwan on June 19, 2024, continues to promote ideas and develop procedures to enhance societal resilience via regular meetings every three months in principle. However, the reality is challenging. As Deng Xiaoping famously reflected on how the Chinese Communist Party won its conflict with Chiang Kai-shek, “[t]he reason we defeated Chiang Kai-shek is that we did not always fight in the conventional way. Our sole aim is to win by taking advantage of given conditions” (Weber 2021, 156). The Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee is an advisory body under Taiwan law with no actual administrative power, and standard operational procedures are often insufficient for managing hybrid threats. Hence, the government of Taiwan should not leave agencies to manage related challenges individually within their own areas of responsibility. Instead, a centralized command entity should be designated and given sufficient responsibility and authority to oversee coordination and response efforts in a timely manner.

Fourth, strengthening international cooperation: On September 25, 2024, the US led fourteen nations—including the UK, EU members, and key Indo-Pacific allies—to sign the New York Joint Statement on

the Security and Resilience of Undersea Cables, signifying an intention to increase investment in cable protections in response to growing security concerns (European Commission 2024). The joint statement was also endorsed under the Trump Administration in the G7 Foreign Ministers' Declaration on Maritime Security and Prosperity, which was released on March 14, 2025 (US Department of State 2025). Taiwan could leverage its strategic geopolitical position at the center of cables crossing the Indo-Pacific to deepen cooperation with allies and strengthen joint enforcement measures surrounding concerns over subsea cable security.

Fifth, protecting cable landing stations: Although focus has primarily been devoted to maritime activities, security measures should also extend to cable landing stations, which are subject to less jurisdictional ambiguity, are more accessible via land, and are even more vulnerable than subsea cables to physical sabotage and cyberattacks (Cannon 2025, 4). Taiwan must fortify the land-based physical and information security of these critical installations in light of their direct security implications for subsea cables.

Preventing Ends (Digital Blockades)

To counter gray zone operations, adversaries should be prevented from achieving a digital blockade. Prevention efforts can encompass both creating barriers to adversaries' strategic objectives and building capacity for rapid recovery. Suggested measures are as follows.

First, increasing the difficulty of digital blockade attempts: Taiwan could reinforce nearshore cables, which are highly accessible and more vulnerable to attacks than are other cables, with steel pipe casings that incorporate protective layers. Additionally, the sustainability of subsea communications often hinges on minimizing the mean repair time during the cable's operational service life. However, only a few specialized business actors are involved in cable maintenance, which substantially

increases the time and effort required to schedule repair work (Runde et al. 2024). Hence, Taiwan could increase the number of external subsea cables and promote related infrastructural investment, which may ultimately prove cheaper than the financial, political, and security costs of the maintenance required after an incident. In addition, the installation of new cables involves complex legal and administrative due process implicating numerous government agencies with fragmented authority. Thus, Taiwan could simplify its regulatory procedures for the installation of new submarine cables through proper digitalization, which can encourage investment, increase redundancy, and reduce the risk of single points of failure.

Second, reducing exposure to digital blockade risks: On the one hand, to the west of Taiwan, the Taiwan Strait is approximately 60 meters deep on average, and the shallow underwater terrain renders subsea cables in this region vulnerable to maritime activities. Taiwan could bury cables with better protection in this area, accepting the trade-off between maintenance and security, as well as adopt a more distributed cable network topology. Taiwan could avoid laying cables in geologically sensitive areas and ensure deployment of alternative communication methods, such as microwave and satellite technology, particularly within outlying islands such as Kinmen and Matsu. On the other hand, to the east of Taiwan, because of Taiwan's geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific, a vast number of international subsea cables travel through the fragile underwater terrain to the east and south of Taiwan without reaching the island's shore. Hence, land conduits or land-based infrastructure spanning northern to southern Taiwan can be developed to avoid these geographically hazardous areas. These efforts can encourage cable landing in Taiwan, thus improving subsea cable security and increasing Taiwan's digital resilience at the same time.

Third, minimizing the duration of disruptions: Given that submarine cables are private assets, their maintenance relies on zone-based agreements with international repair contractors with distributed domains of responsibility (Agarwal 2024, 120). Taiwan could streamline

entrance procedures and work permits for cable repair vessels operating within designated protection zones to minimize any communication downtime resulting from unnecessary administrative delays. Additionally, given the capital-intensive industry to which specialized ships for cable repair and laying belong, Taiwan could collaborate with like-minded countries (e.g., the US, the UK, and Japan) in joint ventures to improve cable-laying and repair capabilities. Backup communication mechanisms could also be strengthened. Satellite and microwave links, which have traditionally been used for emergency communication, have limited bandwidth. The rapid development of low-Earth orbit (LEO) satellite networks, such as Starlink, OneWeb, Telesat, and Kuiper, and the high demand for satellite distribution and inter-satellite communications, have provided new opportunities to improve backup connectivity. Taiwan could invest in redundant satellite communication mechanisms and establish offshore ground stations to ensure continuous connectivity during cable disruptions.

Conclusion and Implications for Policymakers

Global communications are facilitated by subsea cables, which are wired rather than wireless, territorial rather than borderless, and bottlenecked rather than distributed. The case of Taiwan presented herein illustrates that countering foreign threats to subsea cables requires alternative thinking and a compound approach, including impairing the ability of malicious actors to exploit key resources and preventing them from achieving strategic objectives. Policymakers must have a more nuanced strategic understanding and better technological literacy to contribute to the global conversation on security challenges to digital infrastructure. Given the growing global focus on submarine cable security, policymakers must actively shape this strategic terrain by participating in international dialogues, investing in technological advancements, and strengthening public–private partnerships and

international cooperation to safeguard critical communication infrastructure in order to live through this complex challenge in the 21st century.

Furthermore, many of the subsea cables that travel through Taiwan also pass by the contested geopolitical hotspot of the South China Sea. Considering the growing tension of territorial disputes in the area, some may worry that international telecom carriers could decide to avoid going through the South China Sea, which would accidentally marginalize Taiwan's status in international subsea communications. However, these claims often ignore that Taiwan's significance in international communication is not only due to its geolocation, but also the actual demand of network traffic from the numerous international data centers operated by Amazon, Google, Meta, and Microsoft on the islands. For the foreseeable future, as long as substantial network traffic needs to visit Taiwan, security over subsea cables around Taiwan remains a central issue of transoceanic communication and global cybersecurity.

Hence, rather than providing a prescriptive universal solution for all countries, this paper presents Taiwan as a case study to illuminate alternative methods of managing subsea cable attacks that are contingent upon the geopolitical context in which an individual country is located. The key contribution of this paper is the compound strategy proposed for strengthening the prevention of gray zone operations by malicious state actors and circumvention of their objectives to compensate for the limitations of the deterrence-based strategy currently in place to protect Taiwan's subsea cables. Amidst ongoing investments and regulatory changes worldwide due to submarine cable security becoming an international focal point, this paper offers the following three considerations for policymakers.

First, policymakers must actively track ongoing dialogues surrounding global subsea cable governance, including conversations on redefining governance norms under the UNCLOS framework and exploring whether subsea cables should be classified as global commons. Additionally, states should closely follow any future development of the New York Joint Statement on the Security and Resilience of Undersea

Cables in a Globally Digitalized World, which was initiated by the US in September 2024. In November 2024, the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience was established by the International Cable Protection Committee to improve global standards for submarine cable security (ITU 2024). Sustained participation in the development of relevant international frameworks is crucial for policymakers to ensure their strategies remain current and contextually appropriate.

Second, investment in the development of technological solutions for the protection of communications infrastructure is vital. Although subsea cables remain the backbone of global digital communications, policymakers should explore alternative technologies to mitigate the risk of digital blockades, including advancements in LEO satellite networks and high-frequency microwave communication. Additionally, unmanned systems can be deployed for communication relay, subsea cable inspection, maritime reconnaissance, and cable maintenance to address security gaps that cannot be mitigated through diplomatic or regulatory means.

Finally, public–private partnerships must be strengthened to promote subsea cable security. Although subsea cables are privately owned, threats to their security directly affect national stability. Thus, improvements must be made in terms of public–private collaboration, which may include efforts to strengthen cooperation between government agencies, maritime and fishery industries, and international telecommunications operators to establish rapid intelligence-sharing mechanisms. Furthermore, policymakers worldwide should promote joint efforts between regulatory bodies, telecommunications firms, and cable operators to develop security technologies and improve cable repair capabilities. Partnerships with international organizations and nongovernmental entities should also be strengthened to promote information-sharing and cross-border enforcement efforts.

Ultimately, states can learn from international best practices and adopt innovative approaches to boost the resilience of their submarine cable infrastructure and mitigate risks posed by foreign adversaries.

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

Rob York

Pacific Forum

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 south¹ 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 Bak² 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

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 reports³ 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.⁴ 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

³ 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>).

⁴ 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,⁵ 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

⁵ 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 1905'⁶ 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

⁶ 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),⁷ 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

⁷ 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 Graham⁸ 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

⁸ 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.

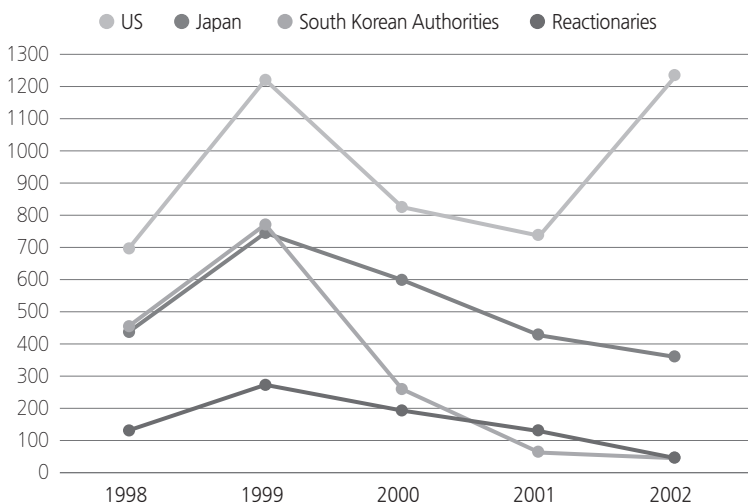
On June 15, the KCNA reported that the South Korean president gave a banquet in the honor of his hosts. Here, he not only thanked the

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

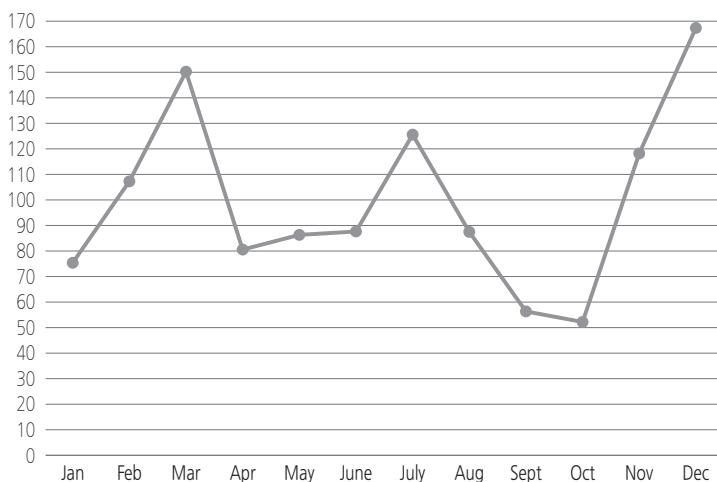
uranium enrichment program despite having signed onto the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 1985. The KCNA greeted Kelly's arrival (KCNA 2002j) and departure (KCNA 2002k) with succinct announcements providing little hint of the controversy they were about to set off. Yet, over the 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

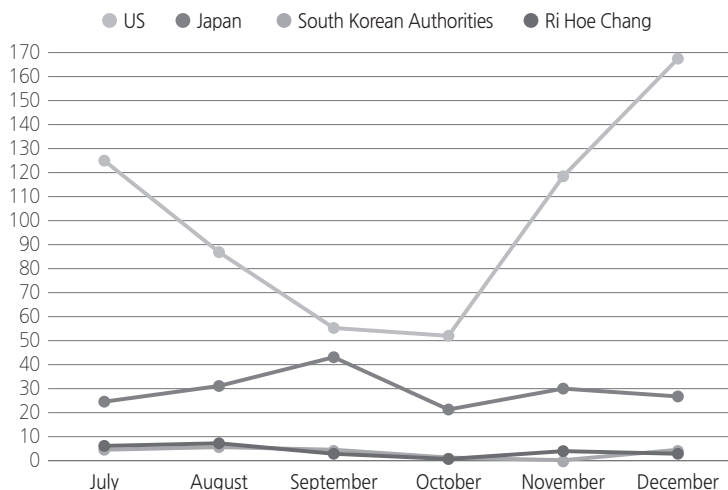


But starting in October, as the US claimed it had acquired an admission from the North that it had the enrichment program, the KCNA accused the US of running a “nuclear racket” (KCNA 2002m), threatening nuclear war (KCNA 2002s), and standing in the way of Korean unification (KCNA 2002r). Interestingly 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-chang⁹ was perilously close to winning the presidency. The North also made hay over a US military court’s late

⁹ 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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Image of the Chinese People among Japanese Citizens: The Effect of Need for Cognition (NFC)¹

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Abstract

In recent years, the relationship between Japan and China has been shaky. Along with rising tensions in the region, polls in Japan constantly indicate negative attitudes toward China among Japanese citizens. Recognizing the dire situation surrounding Sino-Japanese relations, the main goals of the present research are twofold. First, this study examines Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people rather than their perceptions of China as a state. Second, it analyzes Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people by relying on the notion of Need for Cognition (NFC), which has been mainly developed in the field of psychology. Applying the notion of NFC, this study presents two testable hypotheses. First, one can hypothesize that Japanese citizens who display high NFC are less likely to develop negative opinions of the Chinese people, as they can engage in complex thought processes. Second, Japanese citizens with low NFC tend to develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people since low NFC individuals rely on heuristics or cues. A statistical analysis relying on survey data from Japan generally verifies these hypotheses. This study makes a contribution to the international relations literature by dissecting the psychological mechanism through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people. This article also contributes to the fields of social and political psychology by revealing how individuals perceive others in a highly conflictual environment. Finally, this study provides critical implications that aid in understanding current Sino-Japanese relations.

Keywords: China, Japan, Need for Cognition, Social/political psychology

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Introduction

In recent years, the international system has been going through drastic changes. One of the most important factors that has induced these changes is the dramatic growth of China. The Chinese economy has continued to grow over the past several decades, and China is now the second-biggest economy in the world (BBC 2011). Along with economic growth, the Chinese military has continued to expand its capabilities, which can seriously disrupt the power balance in the international system (Layne 2018; Brown 2022). As China has gained more power, its foreign policy has increasingly become more belligerent. China's assertive behavior in the region continues to fuel the "China threat" perspective around the world (Zheng et al. 2004; Machida 2023).

Witnessing China's dramatic growth, Japan has become more anxious about the changing power relations in the region, amplifying the tension between these two states (Calder 2006). One of the most critical issues that has strained Sino-Japanese relations is a territorial dispute. Both Japan and China claim sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands (or Diaoyu Dao as China calls them), and neither side is willing to make concessions on this matter. When the Japanese government nationalized these islands in 2012, the tension between Japan and China escalated dramatically to a dangerous level, critically derailing Sino-Japanese relations (Horiuchi 2014). Massive anti-Japan protests broke out in China (Wee and Duncan 2012). Following these protests, many Japanese companies decided to withdraw from China, undermining economic relations between these two states (Shirouzu and Takada 2014; Foley et al. 2018). China's stance on the territorial dispute continues to be more aggressive, while Japan has become more defensively postured, thus making the region highly volatile. Furthermore, China's actions toward Taiwan have also induced significant tension in the region. Perceiving Taiwan as part of its territory, China continues to escalate its behavior regarding this matter (Maizland and Fong 2025).

Witnessing the growing power of China, observers in Japan warn of the danger of being involved in the conflict over Taiwan (Sasakawa Peace Foundation 2024).²

In addition to geopolitical conflicts in the region, other issues can put significant strain on the relationship between Japan and China. For example, the concern over “overtourism” has been a serious problem in Japan (Burtis and Wise 2025). Although the benefit of inbound tourism is certainly important (Paidí et al. 2021), massive numbers of tourists from foreign countries disrupt Japanese society, hampering the lives of locals (Burtis and Wise 2025). Accounting for a high percentage of foreign tourists in Japan, the issue of Chinese tourists has stirred intense controversies in Japan (Hamamoto 2019; Kyodo News 2025). These issues contribute to negative narratives about China and the Chinese people among Japanese citizens.

Consequent to all of this, public opinion in Japan reflects the strained relationship between Japan and China. Although Japanese citizens were not always hostile to China previously (Genron NPO 2022), recent polls have consistently displayed negative attitudes toward China among the Japanese public (Silver et al. 2022; Reynolds 2023). The sudden outbreak of the global pandemic exacerbated the image of China, which also led to negative perceptions of the Chinese people. According to Silver et al. (2022), more than 50% of the respondents in Japan associated the Chinese people with negative images. The Japanese media reinforce these images of China, widely broadcasting negative aspects of China and the Chinese people, thus constantly exposing Japanese citizens to these negative discourses (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). These situations underline deep animosity toward China and the Chinese people among the Japanese public. Considering that public opinion can significantly affect the direction of foreign policy (Horiuchi 2014; Chu and Recchia 2022), the current condition poses a critical challenge for Tokyo and Beijing, and could

² I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

potentially contribute to escalating tensions and even military conflict.

Recognizing the crucial relationship between public opinion and Sino-Japanese relations, this study examines the structure of Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Although numerous studies have examined public opinion toward China as a state among the Japanese population, the literature still suffers from several shortcomings. First, not many studies have systematically explored the Japanese public's attitudes toward the Chinese people as such, rather than toward the Chinese state or government. It is possible that individuals conceptually distinguish China as a state from the Chinese people (Hara and Shioda 2000, 5; Silver et al. 2022). While it may be inevitable that the Japanese public forms their opinions of China by relying on the media, there is a chance that Japanese citizens try to understand the Chinese people independently through various means. Therefore, it is important to systematically analyze individuals' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Second, very few studies have investigated Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people using a framework developed in the field of psychology.³ In shaping their attitudes toward the Chinese people, Japanese citizens are expected to go through several psychological processes. Since virtually no studies have systematically employed psychological frameworks to understand individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people, we have limited knowledge about the mechanisms through which individuals develop their opinions of the Chinese people.

Addressing the shortcomings of the existing literature, this study examines Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people by incorporating a framework developed in the field of psychology. The focus of the analysis is on the concept of Need for Cognition (NFC) (Cohen et al. 1955). Signifying the "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking," NFC is an important attribute that dictates individuals' cognitive motivation (Cacioppo and Petty 1982, 116). Scholars have

³ In the field of international relations, some studies have examined international conflict by employing social identity theory (Gries 2005; Sha 2021).

widely verified the critical impact of NFC in various domains (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996; Smith and Levin 1996; Nair and Ramnarayan 2000; Lin et al. 2006; See et al. 2009). Implications from these studies can be applied to account for Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people. One can expect that individuals with varying degrees of NFC try to understand the Chinese people differently. On the one hand, individuals high in NFC may engage in a complex thought process rather than adopting stereotypes that are widely diffused in society (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996; See et al. 2009). Consequently, Japanese citizens who demonstrate high NFC are less likely to hold negative perceptions of the Chinese people. On the other hand, however, individuals low in NFC are more likely to rely on cues and heuristics in developing their perceptions of the Chinese people (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993; Cacioppo et al. 1996; See et al. 2009; Peer and Gamliel 2012). Since the dominant discourse about China and the Chinese people in Japan is negative, one can expect that those low in NFC tend to associate the Chinese people with negative images.

To test these hypotheses, I conduct an original online survey targeting subjects (718 respondents) in Japan. Results from the online survey verify the hypotheses above. By incorporating the analytical framework from the field of psychology, this study contributes to the literature of international relations by revealing the mechanism through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people. Implications from this research are useful in comprehending recent dynamics surrounding China and the Chinese people in Japanese society. Beyond the practical implications in the region, this article also contributes to the fields of social and political psychology. Scholars in these fields have widely explored how individuals approach “out-groups” in various contexts (Tajfel 1974; Greene 1999; Howard 2000; Grunewald 2025). The case of Japan provides an optimal context in which researchers can effectively examine this issue since the Japanese

public largely considers China and the Chinese people as their out-groups. Therefore, findings obtained from the case of Japan are valuable in understanding human behavior in general in a highly conflictual environment.

This study proceeds as follows. First, it begins by exploring public opinion in Japan toward China and the Chinese people. The second section investigates the notion of NFC in the context of Sino-Japanese relations and presents the testable hypotheses. Third, I describe the research design that makes it possible to test the hypotheses. The fourth section implements the statistical analysis and reports the findings. Finally, the article concludes by summarizing the findings and discussing possible directions for future studies.

Public Opinion Toward China and the Chinese People

Recognizing the importance of Sino-Japanese relations, polls have been regularly conducted to examine how people in each country feel about each other. Although xenophobia in Japanese society has emerged as a serious issue in recent years (Nagayoshi 2016), public opinion in Japan toward China has not always been hostile.⁴ According to polls conducted by Genron NPO (2022), the percentages of Japanese respondents who expressed negative views toward China were only 37.9% in 2005 and 36.4% in 2006, respectively. However, Japanese citizens' views toward China significantly worsened in 2007, with 66.3% of Japanese respondents indicating negative attitudes toward China in 2007 (Genron NPO 2022). Consistent with this tendency, polls in Japan show that Japanese citizens generally embrace negative feelings toward China (Akito and Hara 2000; Ito and Zhu 2008; Kamise et al. 2010). More recent surveys conducted by Genron NPO (2023) also indicate

4 I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

that more than 90% of respondents display negative perceptions of China.⁵ Regarding this point, Akito and Hara (2000) suggest that Japanese citizens generally have “stereotyped” perceptions of China since they have little knowledge of China. Similarly, Yasuno and Enomoto (2020) maintain that Chinese “soft power” fails to improve Japanese citizens’ perceptions of China.⁶

One of the main reasons why Japanese citizens’ attitudes toward China have dramatically worsened is that tension over the territorial disputes has dramatically escalated in recent years (Genron NPO 2012). Closely related to this issue, many respondents are worried that China may not respect international laws (Genron NPO 2022). As political relations between Tokyo and Beijing continue to deteriorate, public opinion in Japan toward China tends to remain negative, with few signs of improvement (Silver et al. 2022; Reynolds 2023).

These negative perceptions of China go hand in hand with hostile perceptions of the Chinese people. In their survey, Kamise et al. (2010) find that respondents in Japan mention that the Chinese people are quick-tempered (*kisho ga hageshi*) and have a strong sense of patriotism (*aikokushin ga tsuyoi*). Similarly, Shibuya et al. (2011) find that many Japanese citizens tend to perceive the Chinese people negatively.⁷ Also, analyzing how internet users in Japan describe the Chinese people on Twitter (now X), Taka (2015) shows that most of the tweets are negative toward the Chinese people. Finally, Stokes (2016) has noted that the majority of Japanese respondents in the Pew survey in 2016 tended to associate the Chinese people with negative stereotypes. These studies consistently suggest that Japanese citizens largely hold negative

5 Although public opinion in Japan is overwhelmingly negative toward China, surveys show that some of the respondents mention that they respect Chinese history and culture (Genron NPO 2022). In the same vein, some perceive China’s economic growth positively (Genron NPO 2022). Also, more than 70% of Japanese citizens consistently consider Sino-Japanese relations “important” (Genron NPO 2023). I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

6 Regarding the notion of “soft power,” see Nye (2004).

7 Yet, Shibuya et al. (2011) also find that some of those Japanese citizens who have directly interacted with the Chinese people indicate favorable attitudes toward them.

images of the Chinese people (Kamise et al. 2010; Shibuya et al. 2011; Taka 2015; Stokes 2016).

The media in Japan reinforce these negative perceptions of China and the Chinese people. Through the analysis of popular TV shows in Japan, Yamamoto and Hagiwara (2003) suggest that the media descriptions of China and the Chinese people are mostly negative, and that many viewers in Japan tend to think the Chinese often commit crimes. Similarly, Shibuya et al. (2011) maintain that those respondents in Japan who watch TV shows about foreigners in Japan tend to have negative images of China and the Chinese people. Although the media at times do cover positive aspects of China and the Chinese people (Ito and Zhu 2008), this coverage in Japan is largely outnumbered by negative content (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). Consequently, one can assume that the Japanese public has been consistently exposed to negative images of China and the Chinese people in Japanese society.

Along with the TV industry in Japan, the internet shows a similar tendency. In recent years, cyberspace in Japan has been full of negative content about China and South Korea (Tsuji 2008; Tsuji 2017). Those internet users who are called “net-uyoku” (“internet right-wingers”) display extremely hostile attitudes toward these countries (Tsuji 2008; Furuya 2016; Tsuji 2017). Anonymous bulletin boards such as 2-chan in Japan are the main arenas where such users express an extreme form of xenophobia (Fujioka and DeCook 2021; Kim 2017). Hostility toward foreign states can easily escalate in cyberspace, thus stirring controversies over the issue of “hate speech” in Japanese society (Yamaguchi 2013; Miyagi 2016). Although studies suggest that the overall number of “net-uyoku” is only a small minority (Tsuji 2008; Tsuji and Saito 2018), the presence of “net-uyoku” clearly marks the changing nature of Japanese society. Rising levels of xenophobia in cyberspace can have a larger impact than the actual numerical size of xenophobes (Kurahashi 2021).

The sudden outbreak of the global pandemic in 2019 further

exacerbated popular perceptions of China. One of the most controversial issues was the origin of COVID-19. Witnessing the dramatic surge of COVID-19, it was widely reported that it was artificially created in a Chinese lab (Blake 2023). Although this issue has not been officially settled, surveys indicate that the majority of Americans believe that the origin of COVID-19 was a lab leak (Blake 2023). The global pandemic critically fueled hostility toward China around the world (Silver et al. 2020). It was not a coincidence that the number of hate crimes against Asians, notably aimed at Chinese, dramatically increased in the United States (Han et al. 2023). These negative perceptions of China were not confined to the US, as polls around the world widely indicate highly negative views toward China (Silver et al. 2020).

As shown above, Japanese society is full of negative images of China and the Chinese people, as Japanese citizens are consistently exposed to these negative narratives about them (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). However, one needs to be cautious about the way individuals develop their attitudes; not all Japanese citizens equally develop hostile attitudes toward the Chinese people (Hara and Shioda 2000, 5). In theorizing the processes through which individuals develop their perceptions of the Chinese people, it is important to analyze one's ability to distinguish perceptions of China as a state and those of the Chinese people (*ibid.*). Generally speaking, individuals tend to associate country images with people who live in these countries (Willis 1968). Accordingly, it seems that those who are exposed to negative narratives of China and the Chinese people tend to assume that these views truly apply to the Chinese people (*ibid.*). Yet, there is a possibility that this process may not be as direct as one would suppose. Indeed, some Japanese citizens are capable of conceptually differentiating in their mindsets China as a state and the Chinese people (Hara and Shioda 2000, 5). Regarding this point, Silver et al. (2022) note that "... people are generally referring to the country's leadership or government and their actions, or its economy—not the people—when thinking about China. Views of China's government are not

automatically conflated with views of China's people."⁸ As this point shows, popular understanding of China and the Chinese people is not entirely straightforward. Just because Japanese citizens are deeply immersed in negative narratives about China and the Chinese people does not automatically mean that they develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people. Some people attempt to understand the Chinese people without relying on media images that are widely diffused in Japanese society.

Why do some people develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people while others do not? This is a critical question for understanding the structure of individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. Despite the importance of this matter, very few studies have addressed it. This study fills that gap in the literature. More specifically, the research presented in what follows systematically analyzes the process through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people by employing a framework developed in the field of psychology. The next section addresses this by incorporating the concept of NFC.

Need for Cognition (NFC) and Perceptions of Chinese People

The research in this article examines the process through which Japanese citizens develop their perceptions of the Chinese people. This study approaches this issue by incorporating the concept of NFC, which has been recognized as a critical concept in various fields. NFC refers to individuals' "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking" (Cacioppo and Petty 1982, 116). According to Cacioppo and Petty (1982), those individuals high in NFC enjoy activities that entail complex thought processes. Research shows that high NFC individuals tend to invest

⁸ Silver et al. (2022) suggest this point in relation to data from the United States and Australia. Still, this structure may be relevant in other cases including Japan.

more energy in seeking more information in their cognitive processes (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993). Consequently, high NFC individuals are equipped to deal with complex tasks (See et al. 2009). Similarly, studies have shown that these individuals tend to display more stable attitudes. Smith and Levin (1996) demonstrate that individuals with high NFC are more likely to maintain their viewpoints even if they are exposed to a different framing. In the same vein, Lin et al. (2006) show that high NFC individuals are less likely to be affected by mood in evaluating risk-taking behavior. These insights suggest that people high in NFC can develop their attitudes by engaging in complex thought processes independently (Smith and Levin 1996; Nair and Ramnarayan 2000; Lin et al. 2006).

Unlike those individuals who enjoy thinking, those low in NFC show different attributes. Since low NFC individuals would not invest effort in complex thought processes, they are more likely to rely on cues and heuristics (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993; Peer and Gamliel 2012). Low NFC individuals are more likely to develop their opinions by employing sources that may not be credible (Kozuh and Caks 2021; Borah 2022). Accordingly, their perceptions tend to be rather simplified since low NFC individuals shy away from complex thought processes (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; See et al. 2009; Wu et al. 2014). Because this is the way they try to comprehend issues, low NFC individuals tend to develop rather simplified perceptions consistent with their patterns of thinking (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; See et al. 2009; Wu et al. 2014).

Since NFC regulates individuals' thought processes, it can inevitably influence their characteristics. For example, studies have examined the relationship between NFC and individuals' personalities. Cacioppo and Petty (1982) show that low NFC individuals tend to be "close minded." Sadowski and Cogburn (1997) indicate that NFC is positively associated with items such as "openness to new experience" and "conscientiousness." Some analyze the relationship between NFC and individuals' ability to engage in innovative behavior. For instance, Wu et al. (2014) indicate that NFC is related to innovative behavior, while Olson et al. (1984)

demonstrate that there is a significant relationship between NFC and curiosity. Some apply the concept of NFC to analyze consumer behavior. Haugtvedt et al. (1992) maintain that individuals scoring high on NFC are more likely to engage in thorough evaluations of products compared to those low in NFC.

Beyond the impact of NFC on people's daily lives, it critically affects individuals' behavior in the political arena. Research finds that NFC is a distinct analytical concept separate from similar ideas such as political interest (Denny and Doyle 2008; Sohlberg 2016).⁹ While political interest refers to individuals' desire to learn about politics, NFC touches on their dispositions to actively engage in thought processes (Denny and Doyle 2008; Sohlberg 2016). As such, previous studies widely verify the applicability of NFC in accounting for political issues. Studying the 1984 presidential election in the United States, Ahlering (1987) suggests that those high in NFC are more likely to engage in the political process surrounding the election. Similarly, Sohlberg (2016) indicates that high NFC individuals tend to be more politically active. In the same vein, Arceneaux and Wielen (2013) show that NFC, along with the affective dimension, can significantly influence individuals' perceptions of political parties. Inevitably, the issue of NFC is highly relevant in analyzing people's attitudes toward political candidates. Fahey et al. (2020) maintain that the emotional dimension, rather than the cognitive one, played a critical role in determining voters' choices in the presidential election in 2016. According to Ganzach et al. (2019), voters' verbal skills, which are related to their cognitive abilities, significantly determine voters' choices. Similarly, Fording and Schram (2017) find that degrees of NFC were one of the most important factors that accounted for voters' preferences in the 2016 presidential election. These studies suggest that NFC significantly establishes an analytical framework through which individuals perceive their political realities (Fahey et al. 2020; Fording and Schram 2017; Ganzach et al. 2019).

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

These insights have critical implications for understanding the relationship between NFC and individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. For this purpose, it is critical to analyze how individuals with varying degrees of NFC differently process information. One can gain critical insights by looking at the issue of gender stereotypes. Stanciu and Vos (2017) show that gender stereotypes can lead to negative attitudes toward out-groups among those individuals low in NFC. Also, Olshan et al. (2021) find that women high in NFC are less likely to see themselves in a way consistent with the gender stereotypes that view women as more emotional than men. Similarly, studying how individuals perceive women's body images, Peck and Loken (2004) maintain that individuals high in NFC are not bound by the sense of beauty that traditional gender stereotypes endorse. These studies suggest important insights regarding the relationship between NFC and the way individuals deal with stereotypes; those high in NFC tend to be less susceptible to the stereotypes that are widespread in society (Peck and Loken 2004; Stanciu and Vos 2017; Olshan et al. 2021).

In analyzing the relationship between NFC and information processing, it is imperative to discuss studies that explore the issue of misinformation about COVID-19. Utilizing samples from Slovenia, Kozuh and Caks (2021) show that those low in NFC tend to trust news on social media regarding COVID-19, even though content on social media can be dubious. In the case of the United States, Borah (2022) indicates that individuals high in NFC are less susceptible to misinformation about COVID-19. In the same vein, Leding and Antonio (2019) maintain that high NFC individuals are more willing to make efforts to analyze the information at hand, thus making them less susceptible to misinformation. Finally, relying on samples from China, Su et al. (2021) suggest that high NFC individuals who use social media platforms hosted in foreign countries are less likely to embrace conspiracy theories.¹⁰ As shown above, scholars consistently underline

¹⁰ However, Ozimek et al. (2022) show that those high in NFC are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories found on social media. For this finding, they speculate that NFC are closely related to one's willingness to accept new experiences.

the significant impact of NFC in enhancing individuals' willingness to invest more effort to understand the issues they face (Leding and Antonio 2019; Kozuh and Caks 2021; Su et al. 2021; Borah 2022).

These insights from previous studies are useful in theorizing how NFC affects Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people. One of the critical points here is the way individuals process the information they receive. As mentioned above, Japanese citizens are frequently exposed to negative content about China and the Chinese people in Japanese society. Therefore, it is reasonable that Japanese citizens would subsequently adopt negative images of the Chinese people. Yet varying degrees of NFC can differently affect individuals' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Previous studies show that individuals high in NFC are less likely to be affected by stereotypes than those low in NFC (Peck and Loken 2004; Stanciu and Vos 2017; Olshan et al. 2021). Also, these high NFC individuals can maintain the attitudes they formed without being affected by others (Smith and Levin 1996; Nair and Ramnarayan 2000; Lin et al. 2006). Evidence suggests that those high in NFC can actively try to obtain further information relevant to the issue they encounter (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). Since high NFC individuals tend to enjoy the process of "effortful thinking," they seek to look for more information about the issues in question (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993). Consequently, those high in NFC can comprehend complex tasks that require more thinking (See et al. 2009).

Applying these insights to the issue of China's image, it is possible to capture how high NFC individuals perceive Chinese people. Since high NFC individuals are willing to engage in complex thought processes (Cacioppo and Petty 1982; Cacioppo et al. 1996; See et al. 2009), negative media images of China and the Chinese people do not automatically translate into hostile perceptions of the Chinese people. Even when they are exposed to negative media images of China and Chinese people, high NFC individuals do not assume they truly apply to Chinese people. Rather, they can engage in independent thought

processes that are separate from media discourses. High NFC individuals will attempt to develop their understanding of the Chinese people by actively seeking more information from various perspectives (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993). Consequently, one can hypothesize that Japanese citizens high in NFC are less likely to embrace negative characteristics of the Chinese people.

While individuals high in NFC can make their own judgments regarding the Chinese people, those low in NFC display different characteristics. Those Japanese citizens low in NFC tend to rely on cues from other people in forming their perceptions of China (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993; Peer and Gamliel 2012). Put differently, low NFC individuals are not willing to commit additional time and effort in trying to understand the Chinese people (Verplanken et al. 1992; Verplanken 1993); consequently, they tend to assume that negative media images of China and the Chinese people are indeed real. Since Japanese society has been full of negative images of China and Chinese people, those individuals low in NFC assume that the Chinese people display negative attributes consistent with negative media images. Accordingly, one can hypothesize that those individuals low in NFC are more likely to perceive Chinese people negatively, consistent with the negative information they often receive. As these two hypotheses above indicate, one can expect that individuals with different degrees of NFC have divergent attitudes toward the Chinese people. The next section discusses the research design that makes it possible to test these hypotheses.

Research Design

To test the hypotheses above, this study conducts an online survey targeting subjects in Japan. To implement a valid statistical analysis, it is necessary to collect a sample of sufficient size. For this purpose, this study utilizes the service provided by CrowdWorks, one of the most

popular crowdsourcing companies in Japan.¹¹ CrowdWorks has a pool of potential subjects who are willing to take online surveys for compensation. There are two criteria respondents must meet to take part in the online survey for this study. First, respondents are at least 20 years old. Second, they need to reside in Japan at the time of the survey. Those subjects who meet these two criteria were allowed to take the online survey. The survey—which had 718 respondents—was conducted in December 2023. The composition of the sample is relatively well-balanced. 56.2% of the respondents are female, while 43.88% are male. The percentage of respondents who are older than 40 years old is 49.5%. In terms of educational attainment, 54.05% of respondents have at least a bachelor's degree or higher. Even though these characteristics are not entirely representative of the population of Japan, this should not undermine the results of the statistical analyses. Studies indicate that convenience sampling does not distort the results of the statistical analysis (Weinberg et al. 2014; Coppock et al. 2018).¹² If the analysis detects a significant relationship among the variables of our interest, the goal of this study can be achieved.¹³

The Dependent Variable: Perceptions of the Chinese People

The main goal of this study is to examine how NFC affects Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people. Therefore, it is important to accurately measure how respondents in Japan feel about the Chinese people. For this purpose, I employ the following questions from the Pew Global Attitudes Project of Spring 2016 (Pew Research Center 2016):

Which of these characteristics do you associate with the Chinese? The first is (INSERT). Do you associate this with

11 For details of the firm, see its website: <https://crowdworks.jp/>

12 I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

13 IRB approval #120123-1. The dataset includes a wide range of variables. Some of these variables are used for other research projects. The data for replication is available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VIWPMW>

the Chinese or not?

The Pew survey taps into respondents' perceptions of the Chinese people from various perspectives. Consistent with the Pew survey, this study tests Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people in terms of the following attributes:

- Violent
- Arrogant
- Dishonest¹⁴

Those attributes are inserted into the above statement to measure respondents' attitudes toward the Chinese people. Respondents are asked to choose one of the options: "Yes, associate" or "No, do not associate."¹⁵ I recoded respondents' answers so that those who associate the Chinese people with negative images are coded as 1 and otherwise 0. The main advantage of these questions is that they focus on the Chinese people rather than China as a state. Since this study hypothesizes that individuals with varying degrees of NFC respond differently to negative media images of China and the Chinese people, it is necessary to tap into these derogatory characteristics of the Chinese people.

Independent Variable: Need for Cognition (NFC)

To test the hypothesis above, it is necessary to capture the degrees of NFC that respondents display. Following Fording and Schram (2017), I utilize the following two questions:

- **Thinking is not my idea of fun.**¹⁶

¹⁴ This question was taken verbatim from Pew Global Attitudes Project Spring 2016 (Q28N). Although the Pew data provides several more options, I chose "violent" and "arrogant." Also, I modified "honest" into "dishonest" since this study measures how respondents perceive the Chinese people negatively.

¹⁵ In this study, respondents can also choose "don't know/refuse to answer." I combined the choices "don't know" and "refuse to answer" from the original options in the Pew survey. The option of "don't know/refuse to answer" was coded as a missing value.

¹⁶ Fording and Schram (2017) employ these questions from the January 2016 American National Election Study Pilot Survey (ANES). (nfc32).

- **I would rather do something that requires little thought than something that is sure to challenge my thinking abilities.**¹⁷

For these two questions, respondents are asked to choose one of the following options: “strongly agree,” “somewhat agree,” “somewhat disagree,” or “strongly disagree.”¹⁸ I recoded these answers so that higher numbers signify high NFC among respondents. Consistent with the method adopted by Fording and Schram (2017), I created an index by adding answers to these two questions. Consequently, the higher the value of the index, the higher NFC tends to be among respondents.

Control Variables: Threat Perceptions

To obtain accurate estimates of the key independent variable, it is necessary to control for potentially confounding factors. Since the dependent variables are negative perceptions of the Chinese people, the analysis needs to consider threat perceptions among respondents. Research shows that threat perceptions significantly lead to prejudice toward immigrants (Quillian 1995; Scheepers et al. 2002; Riek et al. 2006). Similarly, previous studies indicate that threat perceptions significantly affect the way individuals make decisions in foreign affairs (Gordon and Arian 2001; Machida 2014; Machida 2020). Building upon these findings, this study analyzes two types of threat perceptions (Machida 2023). First, the analysis considers respondents’ perceptions of China as an economic threat. Observers note that the dramatic growth of the Chinese economy can threaten other states in the region (Calder 2006). Second, I examine Japanese citizens’ recognition of China as a military threat. Scholars widely argue that the growing capabilities of the Chinese military seriously destabilize international relations (Layne 2018; Brown 2022). These two variables, capturing threat perceptions of China, are essential in the statistical analysis.

¹⁷ January 2016 American National Election Study Pilot Survey (ANES). (nfc23)

¹⁸ All the survey questions in this study have an option of “don’t know/refuse to answer.” This option was coded as a missing value. This rule was applied to all the survey questions.

Controlling for economic and military threats, the analysis can isolate the impact of NFC on Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people. I recoded these variables so that higher numbers indicate more serious threat perceptions of China.

Demographic Variables

In addition to threat perceptions, it is necessary to consider demographic variables. First, I consider the respondents' gender. Research on immigrants suggests that the relationship between gender and bias against immigrants is rather complex (Ponce 2017; Kobayashi and Tanaka 2024). It is reasonable to assume that gender significantly affects respondents' perceptions of the Chinese people. Second, the analysis investigates the respondents' age. Evidence suggests that younger generations in Japan tend to be more favorable toward China than their older counterparts (Sonoda 2024). Therefore, one can hypothesize that older respondents are more likely to perceive Chinese people negatively. Third, it is necessary to control for educational attainment among respondents. Studies show that education boosts favorable attitudes toward immigrants and minorities (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Wodtke 2012; D'Hombres and Nunziata 2016; Erhart 2016).¹⁹ Applying the insights from these previous studies, one can hypothesize that Japanese citizens with higher educational attainment are less likely to have negative perceptions of the Chinese people. The next section implements a statistical analysis with the variables specified above.

Empirical Analysis

To test the hypotheses above, it is necessary to conduct a statistical analysis. The dependent variables in this study are dichotomous. To

¹⁹ However, Xie and Jin (2021) argue that the relationship between education and attitudes toward China is complex, interacting with degrees of development in each state.

cope with the binary nature of the dependent variables, I conduct a probit analysis. The result of the probit analysis is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
PROBIT ANALYSIS ON JAPANESE CITIZENS' IMAGE OF THE CHINESE PEOPLE

Predictors	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	Violent	Dishonest	Arrogant
Constant	-1.09* (0.42)	-0.58 (0.42)	-0.84* (0.41)
Gender	0.22 (0.12)	0.15 (0.12)	0.07 (0.12)
Age	-0.002 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)
Education	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
China-Economic Threat	0.24** (0.09)	0.23* (0.09)	0.38*** (0.09)
China-Military Threat	0.46*** (0.09)	0.27** (0.09)	0.27** (0.09)
NFC	-0.20*** (0.05)	-0.13* (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)
Pseudo R-squared	0.1222	0.0651	0.0822
N	479	467	509

Estimated by Stata 15. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.
Parentheses show standard errors.

First, the variable of interest is NFC. This variable indicates a statistically significant effect in Model 1 ($p < 0.001$) and Model 2 ($p < 0.05$). The negative coefficient of these variables suggests that high NFC individuals are less likely to report perceiving Chinese people as “violent” (Model 1) or “dishonest” (Model 2). Put differently, high NFC individuals are reluctant to perceive the Chinese people negatively in those two ways. These respondents with high NFC seem to be less susceptible to negative discourse about the Chinese people in Japanese

society. These results support the hypotheses above, highlighting the importance of NFC in shaping Japanese citizens' opinions of the Chinese people.

Unlike these variables above, NFC does not indicate a significant effect on the variable that captures respondents' perceptions of the Chinese people as "arrogant." One of the possible reasons for this result is that there have not been many discussions on Chinese people being "arrogant" in Japanese society. The focus of the Japanese media on China has been limited to a few aspects, including ample discussions on China being violent. This is especially the case regarding the issues surrounding the Senkaku Islands (Kyodo News 2023). Similarly, Japanese citizens have been widely exposed to the reports of China being "dishonest" (Hirata 2019; Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003). When the pandemic hit the world in 2020, it was widely reported that the Chinese government tried to hide the details surrounding the new virus (Feng and Cheng 2020). Amid the controversy over the origin of COVID-19 in the United States, Japanese citizens were deeply immersed in a similar discussion regarding the nature of the Chinese government (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2020). Accordingly, while NFC significantly reduces respondents' propensities to develop perceptions of the Chinese people as "violent" and "dishonest," NFC does not exert a significant effect on individuals' recognition of the Chinese people as "arrogant." Put differently, one cannot observe a statistically significant difference between respondents high in NFC and low in NFC regarding their perceptions of the Chinese people as "arrogant."

In addition to the main independent variable, it is important to analyze the impact of other variables. As expected, perceptions of China as an economic threat indicate a significant impact in all of the models ($p < 0.01$ in Model 1, $p < 0.05$ in Model 2, and $p < 0.001$ in Model 3). The direction of the coefficient is positive, suggesting that heightened levels of economic threat lead to more negative perceptions of the Chinese people. In the same vein, the variable capturing individuals' perceptions of China as a military threat displays a significant impact

($p < 0.001$ in Model 1, $p < 0.01$ in Model 2 and Model 3). The positive coefficient means that this variable contributes to negative attitudes toward the Chinese people. These results suggest that those Japanese citizens who perceive urgent military threats from China tend to develop more negative perceptions of the Chinese people. Consistent with findings from previous studies, threat perceptions are an essential element that is deeply related to individuals' attitudes toward others (Quillian 1995; Scheepers et al. 2002; Riek et al. 2006; Machida 2014; Machida 2020).

Unlike threat perceptions, none of the demographic variables show a statistically significant impact on the dependent variables. These variables, such as gender, age, and education, are not significantly related to Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Chinese people when NFC is considered in the models. Thus, overall, the analysis verifies that NFC is more important than demographic variables in determining respondents' attitudes toward the Chinese people, thereby underlining the importance of NFC in shaping individuals' perceptions in this regard.

Conclusion

The political relations between Japan and China have long been under strain. As China gains more power in the international system, its behavior in East Asia is increasingly becoming more belligerent. Consequently, the political tension between Japan and China has dramatically escalated (Layne 2018; Brown 2022). Along with the rising tension, the media in Japan have widely broadcast negative images of China and the Chinese people (Yamamoto and Hagiwara 2003; Shibuya et al. 2011). Inevitably, negative Japanese public attitudes toward China have been exacerbated. Polls in Japan have consistently indicated highly hostile opinions of China and the Chinese people (Silver et al. 2022; Reynolds 2023).

Recognizing the dire picture surrounding the relationship between

Japan and China, the research in this article has pursued two goals. First, I have systematically analyzed Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people, rather than China as a state. Since most of the existing studies investigate Japanese citizens' attitudes toward China, this study has specifically investigated how the Japanese public develops its perceptions of the Chinese people. It is possible that some Japanese citizens form their perceptions of Chinese people independently without relying on the negative media images of China and the Chinese people. Second, this study has addressed this research question by incorporating the notion of NFC, which has mainly been developed in the field of psychology. Representing individuals' "tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking," NFC is widely shown to influence individuals' attitudes and behavior in different fields (Cacioppo and Petty 1982, 116). By employing the notion of NFC, this work has dissected the mechanisms through which individuals establish their attitudes toward the Chinese people.

The statistical analysis relying on the survey data in Japan has revealed two main findings. First, NFC significantly reduces respondents' tendencies to recognize the Chinese people as "violent." Those individuals with high NFC are less likely to perceive the Chinese people as "violent." Second, the analysis has shown that those individuals with high NFC are less likely to recognize the Chinese people as "dishonest." These results have verified the importance of NFC in shaping individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. High NFC individuals seem to be more circumspect about accepting negative media images of Chinese people. One can speculate that high NFC activates critical thinking among individuals, and this subsequently serves as an antidote to negative media images. Accordingly, even in a situation where negative discourses of China and the Chinese people are dominant, it is possible that individuals who demonstrate high NFC can develop their understanding of Chinese people without taking cues from the media.

These findings make an important contribution to the international relations literature. Although few studies have incorporated the concept of NFC in analyzing Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese

people, this article has demonstrated the critical importance of NFC in individuals' perceptions of the Chinese people. Furthermore, findings from this study generate important implications in the fields of social and political psychology. The analysis has revealed how cognitive ability matters in understanding others in a highly conflictual environment. These contributions are important in comprehending human behavior in various contexts.

Lessons from this study are useful in understanding group dynamics in Japanese society. Observers note that xenophobia has been steadily rising in Japanese society. In the same vein, the problem of "hate speech" against foreigners has emerged as a serious problem that requires attention in Japanese society (Yamaguchi 2013; Miyagi 2016). Inevitably, hostility against the Chinese people will continue to grow as China gains further strength in the region. Given these situations, it is imperative to accurately understand the structure of Japanese citizens' attitudes toward the Chinese people. The analytical framework in this study, incorporating the concept of NFC, is conducive to analyzing how Japanese citizens behave vis-à-vis the Chinese people.

While this study generates important findings, it still has some limitations. One of the limitations is that this study did not control for specific situations where Japanese citizens perceive the Chinese people. For instance, concerns about territorial disputes may significantly affect the way Japanese citizens approach the Chinese people. Given the gravity of this issue, even those with high NFC may develop negative attitudes toward the Chinese people if they perceive an imminent threat from China due to a territorial dispute. Therefore, future studies need to analyze how NFC can shape individuals' perceptions under these types of intense circumstances. More specifically, survey experiments that can manipulate different scenarios may more effectively analyze this issue. Since the critical importance of NFC is demonstrated, it is necessary to systematically investigate its applicability in different contexts.

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“Getting Asia Right” With a More Strategic US-South Korea Alliance

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Abstract

The US-South Korea alliance has historically focused on North Korea, but the critical long-term task is strategic clarity about China. Existing analyses overemphasize the role of contrasting leaders and parties in Seoul and Washington driving different approaches toward Pyongyang. This article explains predominantly shared US-South Korea interests in deterrence and peace and in addressing nuclear weapons, missiles, drones, cybersecurity, and human rights. Both countries would be better served by an “alliance first” strategy rather than protectionist trade policies or nationalist pursuits of autonomy. There is more agreement than previously recognized in Washington and Seoul regarding the “China challenge” involving technological competition, economic security, and freedom of navigation. Without greater leverage over Beijing, it will be difficult to address Russia’s military interventions and apply sanctions to clinch a security agreement with North Korea that would eventually allow economic engagement. Expanding the international scope of the alliance, including trilateral cooperation with Japan, will support a stable rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: China geopolitics, Economic security, Indo-Pacific security diplomacy, Trilateral cooperation with Japan, North Korea denuclearization, US-South Korea alliance

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Introduction

In 2022–23, North Korea conducted an unprecedented number of missile tests while the international community faced deadlock in diplomacy and denuclearization efforts with Pyongyang (Thomas-Greenfield 2024). In 2023–25, the Kim Jong-un regime increasingly aligned with Russia to profit financially and technologically from Vladimir Putin’s war of aggression against Ukraine. In September 2025, Kim and Putin stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Xi Jinping, watching a massive military parade at Tiananmen Square in an unprecedented show of trilateral solidarity. These developments have rekindled perennial debates about the effectiveness of the US-Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) alliance for dealing with North Korea. Concerns about the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella even led some in Seoul to discuss the possibility of South Korea developing nuclear weapons (Herzog and Sukin 2023). However, the alliance continues to be reinforced with political reassurance, advanced capabilities, and defense exercises for extended deterrence. A greater challenge than North Korea’s latest missile launch or long-anticipated seventh nuclear test—or even Washington and Seoul’s difficult negotiations over trade deficits and alliance cost-sharing—is how to address long-term, strategic challenges involving China. These issues include Beijing’s deepening technological rivalry with competitors, growing revisionism versus the status quo order in Asia, and its enduring support of the Kim regime’s political narrative, diplomacy, and economy (Easley and Chow 2024).

Conventional wisdom expects that US-ROK relations face greater difficulties when there is a hardline conservative leader in one capital and a pro-engagement progressive in the other (Snyder 2023). Yet, even when Washington and Seoul prefer different approaches, reasonable compromises can be reached if each ally compensates for the other’s less-than-strategic tendencies that are the product of domestic politics rather than national interests. The progressive Moon Jae-in administration’s strained but effective coordination throughout Donald Trump’s first-

term North Korea policy—from “fire and fury” to personality-driven diplomacy—is testimony to the alliance’s durability (Fuchs and Lee 2020). Joe Biden and Yoon Suk-yeol came to office from different sides of the political spectrum, but were closely aligned in responding to Pyongyang’s provocations. Diplomatic deadlock with North Korea has been the product of the Kim regime’s unwillingness to engage in negotiations since summitry with Trump collapsed (Easley 2020b). This could be attributed to North Korean disappointment in not being able to secure economic benefits without denuclearization, and then to its deepening self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic (UN OHCHR 2023). Others have argued that despite offers of humanitarian aid and economic cooperation, Yoon was too hardline on North Korea while increasing emphasis on the alliance and overcorrecting for the Moon government’s unrequited efforts for peace and cooperation (Park 2025). Yoon’s declaration of martial law in December 2024, leading to his impeachment and removal, was partially predicated on North Korean influence operations and worsened mutual distrust with Pyongyang.

What is lost in analytical contrasts of Moon’s and Yoon’s approaches is the consistency of North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons amidst the changing geopolitical environment on and around the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has focused its efforts on accelerating its tactical nuclear weapons capabilities, reflected in the claimed miniaturization of lower-yield nuclear warheads, missile tests of great diversity and intensity to practice evading missile defenses and preemptive strikes, and an updated doctrine threatening nuclear first-use and warfighting. In light of such threats, Yoon emphasized the need for strengthening extended deterrence. While the Biden administration was not in favor of redeploying US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, or of South Korea developing nuclear weapons of its own, it responded by increasing demonstrations of political will and defense capabilities via high-level visits and more complex military exercises, as well as creating the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) to facilitate senior-level discussion on nuclear and strategic planning (US Embassy in the ROK 2025). This

reinforced commitment, with frequent consultations and greater visibility of strategic assets, was spelled out in the Washington Declaration (ROK MOFA 2023), and has thus far been continued by the second Trump administration and that of Yoon's successor, Lee Jae-myung.

However, North Korea has also taken deliberate steps to deprioritize, devalue, and even deconstruct inter-Korean institutions, communication channels, and symbols of reconciliation. It rebranded or dissolved government agencies once tasked with managing inter-Korean dialogue. Military and diplomatic hotlines have been shut off, rail links and roads cut, and confidence-building overtures ignored. North Korea has labeled South Korea a hostile enemy state, declared itself an irreversible nuclear power, and claimed no interest or utility in inter-Korean exchanges (Kim 2024). These acts come as Pyongyang seeks to extract maximum benefit from its increased military cooperation with Moscow, for which it is suspected of receiving not only fuel, food, and financial remuneration, but also weapons technology and opportunities to upgrade its defense-industrial base. This transactional relationship was sealed in June 2024 when Kim and Putin signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in Pyongyang. While the Lee Jae-myung administration may be in the political lineage of engagers like Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Moon Jae-in, it is more likely to be cautious and pragmatic due to North Korea's hardening positions.

A maxim of US-South Korea alliance cooperation is that Washington and Seoul need to be on the same page regarding North Korea. This includes making progress toward denuclearization, pursuing economic engagement while enforcing sanctions, and promoting human rights. The common assumption of Pyongyang as a "problem" provides an analytical frame that leaves Washington and Seoul on the hook for a "solution," but then the alliance tends not to receive the credit it deserves for deterring North Korea because denuclearization is nowhere in sight. Yet, as long as North Korea is deterred, dealing with Pyongyang is actually not the hardest question for the alliance. The more serious long-term conundrum is getting on the same page about the People's

Republic of China (PRC). A calibrated approach toward Beijing is the imperative from which coordination with Japan and the broader region, especially regarding North Korea, will follow.

Washington and Seoul need a whole-of-alliance deliberation on how to deal with the China challenge. Toward that end, this article proceeds as follows. The first section identifies significant overlap in US and ROK national interests for maintaining and strengthening the alliance with shared strategic concepts. The second section examines how US and South Korean policymakers, analysts, and public opinion are increasingly aligned on technology and economic security, freedom of navigation and regional stability, and the defense of international order against North Korean and Russian violations. The third section analyzes Seoul and Washington's progress toward realizing a more strategic alliance, despite leadership changes in both capitals and in Tokyo. The article concludes that the allies can better embed their policies in the rules-based order in Asia, supported by a global network of like-minded partners.

Alignment of US and South Korean Interests

While in opposition, the now-ruling South Korean Democratic Party criticized the Yoon administration for putting too many eggs in the alliance basket and not enough toward the diplomatic engagement of North Korea and China (Lee 2023). After Trump's return to the White House, unpredictable and legally dubious tariff policies have shaken Seoul's confidence in Washington. Yet US-South Korea interests are much more aligned than daily commentaries in both capitals suggest. South Korea's security interests often lead to more emphasis on peace since it shares the peninsula with, and is within range of artillery fire from, North Korea. However, leaders from both sides of the South Korean political spectrum are serious about defense and deterrence. The Achilles' heel of the alliance is divergence on regional roles, a problem

that policymakers in the Moon administration did not seem to fully appreciate. South Korea often takes a cautious approach to regional issues to avoid offending Beijing (Easley and Park 2018), but the US expects Seoul to engage more in alliance cooperation beyond the peninsula.

Interestingly, Seoul's and Washington's policy disagreements arise more in the consultation phase than in implementation. Moreover, their differences are usually exaggerated in day-to-day media coverage. Although international laws and norms are contested not only by pariah regimes, but also by controversial US enforcement activities involving tariffs, drug-smuggling vessels, and Iranian nuclear sites, the US and South Korea broadly agree on a rules-based order for common security and shared prosperity. Public opinion polls show that a majority of both South Koreans and Americans see their alliance as based on shared security interests and values such as human rights and democracy (Friedhoff and Park 2021). A majority of the American public and the vast majority of bipartisan policy elites favor US-South Korea cooperation on the North Korea issue (Stangarone and Kim 2021). Eight out of ten South Koreans also believe that the alliance supports South Korea's security from Chinese pressure or attack (Lee 2019), and their views of China have become more unfavorable than those toward Japan (O. Lee 2021; Kim 2021b).

The allies' national interests are largely aligned on China. While Seoul is more inclined to take a conciliatory approach toward Beijing due to its economic dependence on and geographic proximity to its overwhelmingly larger neighbor, current policy differences with Washington are overstated. Public opinion in both countries is very similar in seeing China as an economic and security threat (Friedhoff and Park 2021). South Korean progressives are not so much pro-China as they are pro-autonomy. US populists, on the other hand, are not anti-alliance, but rather pro-burden sharing. These differing priorities produce friction on alliance issues, from the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiations on cost sharing for US troops stationed in Korea to Seoul

seeking Washington's endorsement for South Korea to complete the nuclear fuel cycle with enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. But putting domestic political rhetoric aside, China poses greater risks to South Korea's autonomy than the US (Yeo 2020), while South Korea is not free-riding on the alliance, even if its preoccupation with Pyongyang obstructs its off-peninsula contributions. Both allies need to be more reflective, less ad hoc, and more strategic to see their cooperation in the context of long-term national interests.

Prioritizing the US-South Korea alliance will allow Washington and Seoul to avoid the worst tendencies in their policies, such as counterproductive American tariffs or unnecessary Korean deference to Chinese interests. This is especially the case with North Korea. The "denuclearization first" approach of the United States tends to over-rely on sanctions, risk unwanted escalation with military pressure, and lose focus if a so-called "big deal" is not achieved. Meanwhile, South Korean progressives' "peace first" or coexistence inclinations and forward-leaning posture on engagement are easily rejected or exploited by Pyongyang while North Korea demonizes and refuses to deal with South Korean conservatives. Domestic political polarization also leaves South Korea susceptible to wedge-driving by the Kim regime.

An "alliance first" approach reduces the risks of Washington and Seoul falling into these various traps. The US-South Korea alliance is not made more vulnerable by an engagement-oriented or hardline policy on North Korea. Rather, the alliance is put under stress when one ally pursues engagement while the other wants to increase deterrence. South Korea is not always so pro-engagement, and there have been cases such as after North Korea's 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, where the US had to ask Seoul to be more restrained (Bermudez 2011). Similarly, South Korea under President Moon helped redirect the Trump administration away from a "bloody nose strike" against North Korea (Cha and Katz 2018). Better alliance coordination could help both sides maintain deterrence while staying engaged in measured, step-by-step diplomacy under clear strategic goals.

What are often portrayed as conflicting priorities in dealing with North Korea are actually simultaneously necessary objectives. An accountability strategy is needed for deterrence and denuclearization while engagement is needed for peace and humanitarian assistance. These goals are not in absolute disagreement, but challenges arise with sequencing and managing trade-offs. Like his predecessor, Yoon highlighted the importance of peace on the Korean Peninsula and in Asia. However, he maintained that peace is not only the absence of conflict and the presence of sustainable economic development, but must also be based on North Korea's denuclearization and the international protection of human rights. He pledged that Seoul would deal with Pyongyang multilaterally while increasing Korean contributions to global public goods as a "global pivotal state" (Yoon 2022). With a sustained "alliance first" approach, such efforts could have produced more positive outcomes. Yoon's undemocratic domestic actions ironically allowed autocratic North Korea to shift blame onto Seoul's foreign policy.

Conceptual clarity can be a foundation for alliance cooperation. Words matter to keep policymakers on the same page and avoid misguided or even self-defeating policies. For instance, despite the claims of some South Korean politicians and officials, Seoul is not a mediator between the US and North Korea. It is an interested party and important actor that cannot be an arbiter because it is a US ally (Talmadge 2019). As South Korea and the US are integrated security and economic partners (Snyder 2020), Seoul could assume the role of a market facilitator that helps the US and North Korea set reasonable asking prices for matching reversible and irreversible steps. In Trump's transactional logic, Seoul might be called upon to help pay for the implementation of a new deal with Kim. But South Korea must not be treated as a diplomatic ATM (Lankov and Ward 2025), because it is a primary stakeholder on the Korean Peninsula.

Some analysts have quipped that Seoul's Sunshine policy (CRS 2001) of the early 2000s changed South Korea more than the North by

reducing the sense of threat from Pyongyang. With North Korean attacks on South Korea's naval vessel *Cheonan* and the offshore island Yeonpyeong in 2010, followed by years of aggressive nuclear and missile development, those threat perceptions rebounded. Then Moon sought to change those perceptions by persistently pursuing peace on the peninsula, and North Korea briefly allowed inter-Korean relations to improve. Nonetheless, the inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA) of September 2018 (ROK MOFA 2018) may have been less of a turning point for inter-Korean reconciliation than for reducing South Korean threat perceptions, especially since it was not fully implemented by North Korea, partially suspended by Yoon, and ultimately renounced by Pyongyang.

North Korea remains the primary physical threat to South Korea, but another important part of the dynamic is how South Korea's global economic and soft power successes threaten the Kim regime's legitimacy (Easley 2017). Diplomacy can try to smooth over these frictions, but South Korean policy will lose strategic clarity if it downplays the North Korean threat. In moves that were later reversed by Yoon, the Moon administration dropped certain terminology considered provocative by the Kim regime such as "kill chain" technology (Noh 2019), moved away from designating North Korea as the "enemy" (Song 2019), and discussed the concept of "threats from all directions" (ROK MND 2018). This conceptualization risked misreading the regional security landscape by underestimating the threat from North Korea, mischaracterizing challenges from China, and mismanaging the relationship with Japan (Glosserman and Snyder 2015). If such trends continued, they could have produced the misimpression that Seoul was accepting Pyongyang's perceptions and penchant for scapegoating regional powers, adversely affecting the US-ROK alliance, deterrence of North Korea, and coordination with Tokyo. President Lee's pragmatic diplomacy appears to incorporate lessons to avoid such pitfalls (ROK MOFA 2025).

Yet strategists in Seoul continue to overlook the fact that the Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and South Korea is not only

about North Korea (United States Forces Korea 1953). Pyongyang is understandably the short- to medium-term focus among regional security issues, but the rising and long-term risks emanate from Beijing. Washington and Seoul thus need to precisely define the China challenge in alliance terms. For example, the allies should decide whether to revise military operational plans (OPLANs) to include classified contingencies regarding China. For the US, the alliance is key for maintaining presence in Asia and a regional architecture that is not dominated by China. The alliance also helps South Korea defend its autonomy and punch above its weight internationally (Easley 2020a). The North Korean challenge is in many ways subsumed by the China challenge, and without the alliance, Washington and Seoul would both be in a weaker position vis-à-vis Beijing.

The China Challenge

US-China relations have been exacerbated by trade tensions, cybersecurity incidents, rare earths export controls, fentanyl precursors, recriminations over the pandemic, and nationalist media coverage. Competition over international economic security involves standards-setting and enforcement, but especially focuses on technology. On the regional security level, the China challenge encompasses unimpeded navigation and stability in the South China Sea, around the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and across the Taiwan Strait. It also includes China's sanctions enforcement and violations regarding North Korea (Easley and Park 2016). Lastly, in terms of global governance and the rules-based order, the China challenge involves competing political institutions, norms, and human rights values, as well as positioning on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

These issues narrow strategic options for South Korea, which is locked between its security ally and its largest trading partner. The Korean acronym, “안미경중” (*anmigyongjung*), is shorthand for the

dilemma of relying on Washington for security and Beijing for economic growth. During the Moon administration, US policymakers perceived a lack of support from Seoul in dealing with Beijing; this changed with the advent of the Yoon administration, but now some in Washington are concerned that the Lee administration will exercise greater caution regarding alignment with US policy on China. Under Moon, there may have been “strategic ambiguity” in South Korean foreign policy, but at the working level and day-to-day implementation of policy, there was tactical clarity. It could be argued that under Yoon, there was greater strategic clarity, until his self-defeating martial law declaration. Under Lee’s strategy of pragmatism, there could be more tactical ambiguity, whether on follow-through regarding supply chains or being vocal on regional security.

South Korean companies are also key actors, as the days of complementary economic structure between China and South Korea have largely passed (Zhang and Wu 2025). South Korea no longer enjoys large trade surpluses with China, and Korean firms do not benefit as much from outsourcing manufacturing to cheaper Chinese labor and factories. Indeed, there are frictions concerning intellectual property breaches as Chinese corporations rapidly catch up to the technological prowess of South Korean competitors. The dream of South Korean conglomerates securing large market shares in China is possibly over because lower-cost Chinese rivals have already captured the market, and Chinese industrial champions are now going after the market shares of Samsung, Hyundai, and Kia abroad.

South Koreans were uncertain about the US “Strategic Approach to the PRC” (National Security Council 2020) and initiatives that put pressure on Seoul to reduce trade reliance on, and supply chain interdependence with, China. South Korean companies were concerned about implementation of the US Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) Act of 2022, the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and export controls and other onshoring measures aimed at boosting domestic production (Luck, Murphy and Lim 2025). The informal “Chip

4 alliance” among South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and the US aims to ensure the stability and resilience of semiconductor supply chains, but Seoul remains cautious about disrupting trade links with China.

Even before Trump’s tariffs, US-South Korea bilateral relations had to cope with tensions between economic resilience policies and protectionism. Especially in light of pandemic disruptions and cases of Chinese economic coercion, the goal of increasing resilience by strengthening supply chain networks took on greater urgency. Rather than decoupling from China, many countries are seeking to de-risk and diversify their supply chains. American experts argue the US has been promoting multilateral cooperation rather than containing China (Green 2012), but that during the Moon administration South Korea was abstaining from multilateral efforts with the US, Japan, India, and Australia. Scholars also observed that Seoul’s “strategic ambiguity policy” gave it less, not more, leverage with China (S.H. Lee 2021). The US-South Korea security alliance, however, has long been complemented by economic and technological interdependence, and such efforts are not explicitly anti-China but rather aimed at reducing vulnerabilities to economic coercion and supply chain disruption, as seen in the South Korean decision to join the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). As the Trump administration has turned away from free trade, South Korea may have a growing interest in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) to continue regional economic architecture-building.

US and South Korean regional strategies remain mostly aligned. In May 2022, Biden hosted Southeast Asian heads of state at the White House, met South Korea’s new president Yoon in Seoul, visited Tokyo for a Quad summit with the leaders of Japan, Australia, and India, and launched IPEF. The May 2022 Yoon-Biden summit was the earliest meeting for a newly elected South Korean leader, also notable for the US president traveling before hosting in Washington and making Seoul the first stop in Asia. Many Biden-Yoon policies remain on the books in both countries, despite Trump and Lee’s different diplomatic styles and political priorities. Lee continues to prioritize the alliance, and to

the surprise of his critics, chose to expand cooperation with Tokyo while being cautious about diplomatic gestures toward Pyongyang, Moscow, and Beijing.

China has not yet given up all its economic coercive measures against South Korea regarding the USFK Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense deployment (Wong, Easley, and Tang 2023). When the US and South Korea decided to deploy THAAD in 2016–17 to counter North Korean missiles, China voiced concern over the radar’s ability to peer into its territory. China’s subsequent economic pressure against Korean businesses and industries imposed costs of over \$20 billion (Sutter and Limaye 2020). However, while Seoul struggled through the THAAD dispute, Washington did not take economic measures to support Seoul, leaving many South Korean experts uncertain of US assistance in the event of future coercion by Beijing. Such abandonment fears can undermine alliance cooperation, especially as China and North Korea seek to drive wedges between the US and its partners.

From a strategic standpoint, it is worth noting that Beijing also incurred damage from the THAAD dispute by harming its diplomatic ties with Seoul and thereby further encouraging US-South Korea security cooperation (Ernst 2021). Arguably, Beijing’s economic coercion failed because Seoul refused to cave in to pressure (Wong, Easley, and Tang 2023). China, however, still disrespected and punished South Korea for the THAAD dispute, for example by stymieing Korean pop-culture exports in China or cold-shouldering South Korea’s diplomats for years, including pausing the South Korea-China Vice Foreign Ministerial Strategic Dialogue (Cheng 2018). In November 2022, Xi held a summit with Yoon on the sidelines of the G20 after securing a norm-busting third term at the Communist Party Congress, but Beijing remained cool on cooperating with Seoul. Some Chinese scholars argued South Korea should keep its “choice avoidance” strategy, and the *Global Times* went as far as saying that stability for South Korea requires China’s cooperation “if Seoul does not want to end up like

Ukraine” (Lee 2022). The Yoon administration, however, stated it was not bound by the Moon administration’s “Three Nos” policy—no additional THAAD batteries, no Asia-wide missile defense network, and no trilateral alliance with Japan—indicating a shift away from “strategic ambiguity” toward greater clarity on the US-China rivalry (Gong 2022).

Nonetheless, Seoul’s economic and security dilemma remains (J.B. Lee 2021), and South Korea is often hesitant to join multilateral mechanisms with other democracies out of fear of offending China. Yet it is in Seoul’s interest not to opt out of the coalitional diplomacy among democracies since it would be more difficult to deal with Beijing alone (Stokes and Fitt 2023; Richey and Ohn 2024). While China’s role on the Korean Peninsula is marked with Sinocentric ambitions (Rozman 2021), multilateral efforts are crucial for strengthening the normative environment and cultivating international support for Seoul. It may thus be helpful for the US-South Korea alliance to pursue regional and global objectives that increase Seoul’s alignment with other democratic partners (Harris and Lee 2021).

Beijing is engaged in increasingly assertive behavior regarding its territorial claims. China has built up and militarized islands in the South China Sea, regularly sends air and maritime vessels to contest Japan’s control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, and conducts ever more provocative military flights and drills around Taiwan. While these gray-zone tactics are at the forefront of US concerns when it comes to regional security in Asia, Seoul faces similar challenges, as Beijing has built steel structures supposedly for aquaculture in the overlapping PRC and ROK Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) in the Yellow Sea.

During his administration, Yoon asserted that, like North Korea, Taiwan is a global issue (Kim, Park, and Shin 2023). Yoon said that Seoul will clearly be on the US side, but if China attacks Taiwan, there will likely be regional conflict with both China and North Korea (KBS World 2022). Washington thus needs to work closely with its partners on contingency planning. Lee Jae-myung has since implied that South Korea will stay out of a cross-Strait contingency, famously stating before

becoming president that he would say “*xie xie*” to both China and Taiwan without taking sides. While this may seem like a pragmatic option to many in Seoul, to some in Washington (like Undersecretary of Defense Elbridge Colby), South Korea’s unwillingness to support the US could be an alliance-breaker.

The 2021 US-Japan joint leaders’ statement explicitly mentioned the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, which elicited objections from the Chinese embassy in Washington (Brunnstrom et al. 2021). On the other hand, the 2021 US-South Korea joint statement (ROK MOFA 2021) focused on regional stability in more general terms even though it did mention Taiwan for the first time. A few days after the summit, however, South Korean officials made clarifying remarks (Kim 2021a) in an effort to assuage Beijing. While the 2022 Biden-Yoon joint statement outlined areas of US-South Korea functional cooperation in detail and identified human rights as a foreign policy priority, it did not mention China by name (White House 2022). Biden clearly wanted democracies to do more together, but Asia includes a wide range of governance systems, and American soft power for promoting values is diminished by political divisions at home and reduced support for international development and institutions.

To cope with that regional diplomatic landscape, Seoul actively pursued deeper cooperation with ASEAN under the Moon administration’s “New Southern Policy” and Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Moon administration’s efforts resulted in ASEAN-ROK dialogue on environment and climate change, as well as boosting South Korean investment in Southeast Asia and India by 73% (Kim 2022). In 2024, the ASEAN-ROK Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) further upgraded multilateral ties (ASEAN 2024). A Plan of Action that outlines goals of the ASEAN-ROK CSP for 2026–2030 includes freedom of navigation and overflight, a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, and increased trade and investment (ASEAN 2025). However, Seoul’s diplomacy with South and Southeast Asia tends to avoid direct mention of shared concerns

about China in terms of security or forms of governance.

The Yoon administration was vocal about North Korean human rights (ROK MOU 2024), but less so about human rights in the PRC. Seoul's restraint arguably allowed it to host a long-delayed China-Japan-Korea (CJK) summit, but it is unclear whether South Korea will be able to leverage further CJK trilateral cooperation following the Joint Declaration released in May 2024 (ROK MOFA 2024). Meanwhile, Beijing and Pyongyang are identifying the US as a common threat and presenting a united front against US military activities in the region, specifically US-South Korean combined exercises (Ng 2021). China and North Korea might also coordinate their provocations against Taiwan and South Korea (Cho and Mastro 2022). In addition, PRC-Russia combined exercises entered South Korea's air defense identification zone (KADIZ) multiple times without notice, including violation of airspace near Dokdo.

Another important regional issue is Beijing's economic leverage over Pyongyang. In early 2017, China's exports to North Korea increased despite a drop in North Korea's exports to China after new United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions. Beijing and Moscow continue to support Pyongyang's bypassing of sanctions, such as by vetoing a UNSC resolution that would have imposed further sanctions in 2022. China also still accounted for over 90% of North Korea's official total trade in 2023 and 2024 (Sokolin 2025). Meanwhile, trade with Russia has increased in violation of sanctions and without transparent statistics, giving Pyongyang all the less incentive to accept South Korean overtures or take steps toward denuclearization.

Pursuing North Korea's denuclearization is further complicated by China's tendency to exploit issue linkage in its foreign policy, including use of the North Korea issue as leverage against broader US regional agendas (Hwang 2022). At best, China's concepts of stability and influence lead it to provide material support for North Korea despite its interest in North Korean denuclearization. At worst, China is propping up one of the world's most human rights abusing regimes, enabling an

international security threat, and getting in the way of peaceful integration on the Korean Peninsula.

This leads to the third part of the China challenge concerning the rules-based and values-preserving order. Beijing's human rights violations include technologically sophisticated limitations on political expression and social organization, suppression of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, persecution of Uighurs in Xinjiang, forced cultural assimilation in Tibet, and crackdowns on actors who criticize Xi or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since the CCP is itself hostile to democratic values, there is little expectation that Beijing will deal with North Korea with human rights in mind. From Seoul's perspective, rules and standards are needed for delivering humanitarian assistance, strengthening inter-Korean engagement, and encouraging people-to-people exchanges. China, however, does not demand such standards and abstains from criticizing Pyongyang's political institutions and human rights violations (US Department of State 2020). This makes it difficult for any political actor to incentivize North Korean policy improvements in a process of engagement, much less hold the Kim regime accountable.

China's growing and often controversial international role affects other countries' domestic politics in ways that can complicate cooperation, and the ROK is no exception. South Korea's public opinion of China has soured over numerous spats between South Korean and Chinese netizens as well as Seoul's heightened threat perception of Beijing (The Economist 2021). According to the Pew Research Center, by 2020 75% of South Koreans held negative views of China, which was more than double the 37% in 2015 (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2020), demonstrating the effects of Beijing's THAAD-related economic coercion. In a 2021 survey, South Koreans gave China a mean score of 3.1 on a 0–10 scale (0 being least favorable and 10 most favorable) while Japan received 3.2 and North Korea 2.8 (Friedhoff 2021). Moreover, while South Koreans currently perceive North Korea as the main threat to their national security, studies reflect an opinion that Pyongyang will become

a lesser threat in 10 years, to be surpassed by China (Dalton, Friedhoff, and Kim 2022). In one survey conducted in 2025, South Korea was the only country where the share of adults with a favorable view of China dropped significantly compared to 2024, from 25% to 19% (Silver et al. 2025). Another 2025 survey put unfavorable attitudes toward China at 80% among respondents in their 20s, suggesting such perceptions may persist in the next generation (D.R. Lee 2025). Unfavorable views of China are prevalent among Koreans in their 20s and 30s as they are rethinking Beijing's role in the world (Shin, Gordon, and Kim 2022). Many in the region acknowledge the increasing economic and geopolitical power of the PRC but do not see Beijing as a responsible or trustworthy partner (ISEAS 2025), with most South Koreans (90.8%) seeing China as "the least trusted country" (Yoo, Jung, and Park 2022).

Anti-China sentiment in South Korea gave Yoon room to stand up to Beijing, despite China's economic importance. Yoon claimed that the Moon government pursued policies "skewed toward China, but most South Korean people, especially younger ones, do not like China" (Yoo, Jung, and Park 2022). Yoon perhaps attempted to stay popular on foreign policy because he faced severe domestic political challenges; his electoral victory was razor-thin, and the opposition continued to strengthen its control over the National Assembly. The People Power Party (PPP) proposed legislation to curtail Chinese residents' voting rights in local elections (Kang 2023), reflecting a growing suspicion toward and politicization of China, as Korean politicians attacked each other for being soft on Beijing. Yoon's martial law attempt was in part justified by himself and his supporters by claiming election meddling and espionage by North Korea and China. Such conspiracy theories were popular in far-right YouTubers' content, which Yoon was accused of consuming (Choe 2025).

Amidst domestic political drama, the war in Ukraine was a wake-up call of threats to international order (Richey and Easley 2022). While not a formal trilateral alliance, China and North Korea are clearly supporting Russia (Easley 2025a). It is not an option for South Korea

to seek neutrality in the US-China competition, not only because it relies on the US alliance for security but also because its economy relies on the international order. It is also not possible for Seoul to stay out of a Taiwan conflict, because Beijing complicates Seoul's ability to deal with Pyongyang and the kind of China that invades Taiwan is not the kind of China that is going to help South Korea on North Korea. "Getting Asia right" is not a question of containing China, but rather a matter of upholding a rules-based international order (Kang 2022).

A More Strategic Alliance

During Lee Jae-myung's August 2025 visit to Washington, he reaffirmed South Korea's approach to diplomacy as pragmatic and driven by national interests. He emphasized the importance of the US-South Korea alliance and said he is committed to opening a new chapter for the alliance based on mutual trust, prosperity, and advanced technology. Lee mentioned that South Korea is the largest greenfield investor in the US and suggested that South Korean firms can bring a "renaissance" to the American shipbuilding industry. He also expected further cooperation with Washington on energy and critical minerals. He pledged to increase South Korea's defense budget, and disavowed the old idea of relying on the US for security while relying on China economically. Lee said that given the level of confrontation between the liberal democratic camp and the countries led by China, as well as the reorganization of supply chains, South Korea cannot help but choose the United States (CSIS 2025).

On inter-Korean relations, Lee highlighted South Korea's enduring commitment to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and promised to engage Pyongyang while firmly responding to provocations. Lee stated that he and Trump had agreed to work closely to establish peace and achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, although no joint statement was published after the August 2025 summit with such

language. During the session in front of reporters, Trump exhibited a preoccupation with Kim Jong-un, arguably resulting in an unproductive focus on personal diplomacy at the expense of addressing North Korean denuclearization and coordinating policies toward China.

Trump's aggressive tariff threats, part of a reshaping of American trading relationships with allies and rivals alike, have distracted policymakers from managing alliances and addressing geopolitical rivalries. South Korea negotiated down the rates of Trump's threatened tariffs. However, the promise of South Korean investments in US-based manufacturing—on the order of \$350 billion—was complicated by an immigration enforcement incident. In September 2025, in the largest immigration raid since Trump's second inauguration, more than three hundred South Korean citizens helping construct an LG-Hyundai electric vehicle battery factory in Georgia were arrested. Although they returned to South Korea without formal deportation or being banned from re-entry, the incident damaged Korean public opinion and had a chilling effect on the business community (CRS 2025). Negotiating the new bilateral trade framework was further complicated by operationalizing the details of Trump's demands while Seoul sought flexibility on the scale and speed of investments and assurances regarding foreign exchange risks and regulatory continuity.

For Washington and Seoul to adapt their alliance to the fast-changing geopolitical and geoeconomic environment, policymakers need to be on the same page about China and North Korea. Implementing a shared strategic vision will involve greater analytical precision, deepening trilateral coordination with Japan, and expanding the scope of alliance cooperation to address pressing global challenges according to shared values and interests. By prioritizing the alliance, each side can also help mitigate the short-term errors or counterproductive policies of the other. For example, Seoul did not immediately retaliate against Trump's tariffs or respond nationalistically to the immigration raid in Georgia; instead, it pursued mutually beneficial investment projects and sought cooperation on visa policies. Many Americans then recognized that US immigration

policies need to be updated to support economic policies, which should dovetail with security strategies, including the alliance with South Korea (Sherman 2025).

To strengthen their alliance, the US and South Korea need more coherent approaches toward China. The Biden administration's China strategy could be summed up as "invest, align, compete" (Asia Society Policy Institute 2022), whereas the Trump administration has pursued tariffs, selective decoupling, and negotiation, while pressuring allies economically at the risk of eroding support geopolitically. The Yoon administration's Indo-Pacific strategy stated that "with China, a key partner for achieving prosperity and peace in the Indo-Pacific region, we will nurture a sounder and more mature relationship as we pursue shared interests based on mutual respect and reciprocity, guided by international norms and rules" (ROK MOFA 2022b). But Beijing still partially retained its post-THAAD economic coercive measures, grey zone tactics in the Yellow Sea, and diplomatic cold shoulder toward Seoul.

Upon taking office, the Lee administration changed ROK foreign policy less than expected (Easley 2025b), maintaining a focus on mutual respect and reciprocity, but perhaps emphasizing the pragmatic pursuit of interests over being vocal about international norms and rules. By potentially bringing together Trump and Xi, the autumn 2025 APEC summit in Gyeongju provides Lee an opportunity to turn the corner with Beijing without deprioritizing the alliance with Washington. Staying clear-eyed about China means not scapegoating or exaggerating the threat, while not underestimating Beijing's capabilities and intentions. It makes sense to seek partners in Beijing on stability and denuclearization, but the US-South Korea alliance should have no illusions about the Chinese Communist Party's self-interest in maintaining division on the Korean Peninsula and trying to weaken the US in the region (Mastro 2021). To improve leverage over North Korea, it is essential to prevent China from short-circuiting sanctions, inter-Korean engagement, and US-ROK-Japan cooperation.

The US and South Korea could conduct a strategic review of their alliance, hold detailed conversations on possibilities and types of economic assistance for North Korea, and coordinate incentives and demands (KEIA 2021). While continuing to maintain the capabilities and conduct the defense exercises necessary for deterrence, the allies also need to strengthen combined responses for emerging threats. Seoul and Washington recognize dangers posed not only by North Korean reconnaissance drones but also by armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and naval drones that Pyongyang claims to be arming with tactical nuclear weapons (Van Diepen 2023). The Kim regime's drone capabilities are no longer aspirational bluster after integrating technology and warfighting experience acquired from Russia's war against Ukraine. The US-ROK alliance is also far from adequately addressing cyber threats, despite mounting evidence of North Korean and Chinese hacking operations against South Korean government platforms and the severe breach of US telecommunications networks during the "Salt Typhoon" attacks (Rashid 2025; Neuberger 2025).

It is crucial to recognize that the future of South Korea's military transformation is regional, not just North Korea-focused. While South Korean officials say the government and military are preparing to deal with China, including air and sea incursions, they are careful not to talk about it in public. For clarity in regional strategies, the alliance should adopt a national security concept (Dohner et al. 2021) that integrates their various partnerships for protection against assertive Chinese influence (Brooks and Leem 2021). This includes pursuing joint R&D programs for AI, 6G, big data, maritime domain awareness, outer space, biotechnology, and quantum computing. What the US needs is an all-of-South Korea alliance, including on economic security and technology, expanding on how South Korea joined IPEF and is building semiconductor and battery plants in the United States. Seoul, meanwhile, needs reassurance from Washington that there will be no unilateral drawdown of US forces in South Korea and that a new bilateral economic framework will provide stability for trade, investment, and technological

cooperation.

Washington and Seoul's strategies in Asia would be severely handicapped without close cooperation with Tokyo. Under the framework of US integrated deterrence, the three countries can take a comprehensive, united approach to address various threats and challenges (US DOD 2022). But this is complicated by enduring irritants between Japan and South Korea (Easley 2022), such as wartime labor and other history issues (Arrington and Yeo 2019), the Dokdo islets claimed by Japan as Takeshima (Roehrig 2021), and the release of treated water from the tsunami-damaged Fukushima nuclear plant (Baek and Jarvis 2024). The Yoon administration understood the need to be sensitive about history without being hostage to it, and was willing to do more trilaterally with Tokyo.

Biden, Yoon, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met on the sidelines of the November 2022 ASEAN meetings in Cambodia and issued a joint statement agreeing to share real-time warning data of North Korea's missile launches (ROK MOFA 2022a). In addition to intelligence sharing, the three governments deepened security cooperation in terms of maritime exercises, anti-submarine capabilities, and contingency planning. In May 2023, the three leaders committed to advancing economic security cooperation and tightening sanctions against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, and reflected those goals in the Hiroshima G7 Communiqué (Japan MOFA 2023). The US, South Korea, and Japan were also encouraged to pursue more concerted trilateral cooperation on confronting Chinese economic coercion, reforming the World Trade Organization (WTO), and working together on infrastructure investment projects supported by the Development Finance Corporation (Fujisaki et al. 2021). The three governments looked to expand environmental and energy partnerships in the Mekong sub-region as part of their broader Indo-Pacific strategies (ROK MOFA 2022a). Finding a way forward on WTO reform and development cooperation might be made more difficult, but also more important, after Trump 2.0 tariffs and restructuring of USAID.

At a historic summit at Camp David in August 2023, the US, South Korea, and Japan expanded the trilateral partnership, based on the shared norms and values of their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. The three leaders agreed on a commitment to consult, to regularize various trilateral meetings, and to coordinate responses to regional threats and provocations. The Camp David joint statement reaffirmed “the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community,” and called for a “peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues” (White House 2024). In July 2024, the three defense ministers signed a memorandum on the Trilateral Security Cooperation Framework (TSCF), further institutionalizing trilateral security cooperation (US DOD 2024). To continue enforcement of Security Council sanctions on North Korea after Russia vetoed the renewal of the UN panel of experts, Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo supported the new Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team.

The Lee administration has notably continued cooperative relations with Japan as well as trilateral coordination. Lee met Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba within his first month in office at the June 2025 Canada G7 Summit, and, in a first for a South Korean leader, visited Tokyo before Washington to hold a standalone summit with Ishiba before meeting Trump. The 60th anniversary of normalized South Korea-Japan relations involved events with high-level political participation, celebrating people-to-people exchanges and functional cooperation. Trilateral foreign ministry meetings and military exchanges—including annual Trilateral Chiefs of Defense (Tri-CHOD) meetings—were held as planned. Trilateral multi-domain defense exercises continued as well, with the third round of the Freedom Edge drills in September 2025 (M. Lee 2025). Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo sought to advance defense interoperability, critical and emerging technologies, and a trilateral secretariat for institutionalizing and implementing cooperation.

Before leaving office, Ishiba visited Busan for a third summit with Lee, highlighting the endurance of “shuttle diplomacy” that was

reestablished under Kishida and Yoon. Ishiba's likely successor, Sanae Takaichi, may take more conservative positions on North Korea and history issues than Seoul would prefer, but US-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation should remain a priority. A trilateral foreign ministers' joint statement said the three countries are committed to the "complete denuclearization of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (US Department of State 2025), rather than the more diplomatic phrasing of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. The statement reiterated previous trilateral language regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan, indicating the Lee administration's alignment with US Indo-Pacific priorities.

Instead of considering off-peninsula coordination as payment of alliance dues, South Korea-US cooperation can become more embedded in multilateral processes such as Quad working groups with Australia and India, AUKUS Pillar II technology cooperation, and other cross-regional security activities that could be less controversial for Seoul than alleged anti-China coalitions. In May 2022, South Korea joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, the second Asian country to do so after Japan. Yoon also attended NATO summits in June 2022, July 2023, and July 2024, along with Japanese Prime Minister Kishida, to increase US allies' support of Ukraine in its resistance against Russian aggression. At their summit marking the 70th anniversary of the US-South Korea alliance, Biden and Yoon jointly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine (US Embassy in the ROK 2023). This demonstrated efforts to fit each country's Indo-Pacific approach into a larger strategy of international order defense, including by increasing cooperation through NATO-IP4 (NATO 2025).

In the process of enhancing its trade networks, South Korea can overcome its old strategic flexibility and entrapment concerns. For example, the angst in South Korea in early 2020 over a possible maritime security mission to the Strait of Hormuz demonstrated the sensitivities over alliance pressure and comparisons to the US-Japan alliance. The protection of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) for

trade and energy security is clearly in the interest of a middle power and major trading state. At issue is not only maritime security but also sanctions enforcement, as demonstrated by Iran's extortionary seizure of a South Korean tanker and its crew in early 2021 (Bozormehr and Song 2021). South Korea is now a significant enough player that it has to move its own geopolitical chess pieces, rather than just play for business opportunities under the top table of international politics. Freedom of navigation deserves a similar level of South Korean government attention as stability along the DMZ.

Conclusion

By getting on the same page about China, the US-South Korea alliance can align long-term priorities, despite different parties and presidents taking office in Washington and Seoul. Paths to more successful policy involve better alliance coordination, while paths to failure involve divergence between allies. Domestic political polarization is a potential threat to the alliance, as swings in leadership can produce "America first" policies or Korean nationalist autonomy campaigns (Snyder 2023). Basing strategy on a strong alliance foundation is not only prudent but also produces more effective and sustainable foreign policy, especially while including trilateral initiatives with Japan. Multilateral talks with Pyongyang are worth pursuing, but even when the Kim regime is willing to reengage, political leaders will be sorely disappointed with efforts to compartmentalize North Korea as an issue for cooperation with Beijing. Washington and Seoul should not wait for US-China relations to improve to deal with North Korea; they cannot allow national interests to be hostage to getting along with Beijing. The US and South Korea must instead strategically upgrade their alliance beyond the peninsula in order to "get Asia right" and "go together" in the Indo-Pacific.

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North Korea's Quest for Crypto: Implications for Cyber Policy and Regional Security

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Abstract

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) has repeatedly deployed hacking groups to pursue disruption, espionage, and data theft. Since the latest round of economic sanctions took effect in 2017, its cyber operations have increasingly focused on financially motivated attacks. The ambiguous legal status of cryptocurrencies, coupled with limited international regulation, has made them an attractive target for the DPRK. To obtain foreign currency, North Korea has adopted creative cyber tactics—from approaching crypto-exchange employees on social media to hijacking personal computers for cryptocurrency mining. By continually evolving methods and shifting targets, DPRK hackers have adapted quickly to geopolitical developments. This article recommends updating cryptocurrency and cybersecurity regulations and deepening multilateral cooperation in cyberspace to counter the rise of North Korean financial cybercrime and bolster regional security and stability.

Keywords: North Korea, Cryptocurrency, State-affiliated hacking, Cybersecurity, Cyber policy

Introduction

Access to cyberspace has opened the door to a diverse set of state and non-state actors who adopt and deploy new technologies faster than regulation can keep pace. Cryptocurrency (or virtual currency) is one such example. In a white paper, Bitcoin's creator, the person(s) known as Satoshi Nakamoto (2008), described it as a "system for electronic transactions without relying on trust," contrasting it with conventional transactions that pass through a third party and retain the possibility of reversal. The decentralized nature of cryptocurrency has been described as "fundamentally aimed at reducing the power of a centralized government" (McShane 2021). While most governments have now introduced cryptocurrency regulations—ranging from recognizing it as a legal medium of exchange to issuing outright bans on trading and mining—the decentralized, peer-to-peer blockchain system has also been exploited for money laundering, cybercrime, and the financing of illicit activities (Frankenfield 2024).

One state has fully embraced this dimension: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea). DPRK-affiliated hacker groups are known for rapidly adopting cyber techniques for espionage and disruption, but financially motivated operations have carved out a distinctive niche for the regime as a prominent state actor in cyberspace. A seeming contradiction arises between the common image of North Korea as an economically isolated state—where most citizens lack access to the global internet—and the reality that its hackers are among the quickest to adopt new techniques, from spear-phishing via social media to marketing a fake cryptocurrency business. According to Dmitri Alperovitch (co-founder of CrowdStrike), DPRK groups are more creative and aggressive than their Russian, Chinese, and Iranian counterparts (Johnson 2021). They are willing to cross boundaries of accepted state behavior for two reasons: (1) effective retaliation in cyberspace is difficult, especially against North Korea, given its isolation from global networks; and (2) sanctions-induced

economic isolation has incentivized the regime to seek revenue elsewhere and to evolve its cyber tactics.

Using content analysis, this article traces the evolution of North Korea's cyber capabilities and explains how the misuse of cryptocurrencies fits within the regime's broader geopolitical strategy. It addresses two questions: (1) how and why did North Korea develop such versatile tactics for cyber-enabled financial theft?, and (2) what role does DPRK hacking play in the global cybersecurity landscape?

The article proceeds as follows. First, an overview of North Korea's activity in cyberspace provides background for understanding the dynamics of DPRK hacking groups and the regime's strategic goals. Next, the analysis turns to DPRK cyberattacks for financial gain—particularly successful cryptocurrency operations—in the context of economic isolation. Finally, the article assesses how these attacks affect regional security and offers policy recommendations—grouped into cryptocurrency-specific measures, general cybersecurity practices, and DPRK-focused policies—to ensure mechanisms are in place to mitigate North Korea's cyber activity and, by extension, the threat landscape in East Asia.

Overview of North Korea's Cyber Activity

This overview of North Korea's cyber tactics, units, targets, purposes, and techniques provides background for the analysis of its exploitation of cryptocurrency. Although DPRK teams use versatile, up-to-date toolsets, their operations against cryptocurrency largely reuse the tactics and techniques they have deployed for espionage and data theft. Since the inception of North Korea's cyber program in the early 2000s, its hackers have become some of the world's most skilled and aggressive.

Kong et al. (2019) suggest that North Korea's cyber operations are conducted by the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB) and divisions of the General Staff Department (GSD). While the GSD primarily plans

wartime cyber strategy, the RGB focuses on clandestine activity in peacetime. The RGB reports directly to the State Affairs Commission and Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un, underscoring its strategic importance. Unlike many other states that actively employ offensive cyber capabilities, North Korea's hacking units are organized to minimize overlap and maximize efficiency by amplifying distinct skill sets.

There is no consensus on group naming, in part because it is unclear whether teams act independently or as subdivisions of a larger entity. The infamous Lazarus Group first surfaced as “Guardians of Peace” during the Sony Pictures hack and is also known as Hidden Cobra (by the US government), Labyrinth Chollima (by CrowdStrike), and Diamond Sleet or ZINC (by Microsoft). Some analysts split Lazarus into two components: a financial unit, Bluenoroff (also called BeagleBoyz by the US government, APT38 by Mandiant/FireEye, and Stardust Chollima by CrowdStrike), and a South Korea-focused unit, Andariel (Silent Chollima at CrowdStrike). Another group, APT37—also referred to as Reaper, Scarcraft, Group123, or Ricochet Chollima—targets private-sector firms and industries primarily in South Korea but also in Japan, Vietnam, and the Middle East. Kimsuky (Kaspersky; Velvet Chollima at CrowdStrike) is a leading global espionage unit. To avoid confusion, this article refers to three widely recognized names: Lazarus Group (encompassing both sub-units), Reaper, and Kimsuky.

According to earlier South Korean intelligence estimates, roughly 6,800 IT professionals were operating under state-affiliated organizations (Kim H. 2021), with later figures rising to about 8,400. Dispersed across China, Russia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, many pose as freelance developers available for coding gigs or full-time remote work (Caesar 2021). Such arrangements compound already thorny jurisdictional problems when nationals of Country A conduct an attack on Country B from the territory of Country C. With no comprehensive agreement on cybercrime, both non-state and state-affiliated entities—including DPRK hackers—exploit third-country residency to shield malicious activity.

Before North Korea turned to cryptocurrency theft, its hackers

primarily targeted South Korea, the United States, and Japan, occasionally striking countries with weaker cybersecurity. They also engaged in espionage against Russia's defense industry in 2020, an operation attributed to Kimsuky (RIA Novosti 2020). Typical targets included government services, research institutions, private firms, and individuals—particularly North Korean defectors. The purposes of state-affiliated operations have included espionage and data theft, financial gain, and ideologically driven psychological attacks, as in the Sony case.

Given severely limited domestic internet access, computer network operations (CNOs) likely constitute the bulk of DPRK cyber activity. CNOs are commonly categorized into computer network attack (CNA), computer network defense (CND), and computer network exploitation (CNE). Many CNAs begin as CNE because intelligence collection precedes effective attack. CND comprises measures to protect networks and devices against infiltration and disruption.

Because relatively few devices in North Korea are internet-connected, the country has only two primary external routes: a China Unicom (China United Network Communications) link and Russia's TransTeleKom (TTK). The TTK path was widely thought to have been added after US Cyber Command launched a denial-of-service operation against the RGB in 2017, severing the DPRK's only then-visible route. TTK officials, however, have stated that a connection to North Korea existed as early as 2009 (Pashinskaya 2017), with DPRK traffic previously appearing under TTK's general routing because it lacked a designated autonomous system. Telecommunications services were not included in UN Security Council Resolution 2375, which imposed the 2017 sanctions (Pashinskaya 2017). The second link gave Pyongyang redundancy against future disruptions and could plausibly increase the speed of its outward operations. More broadly, North Korea's poorly integrated network architecture reduces exposure to outside cyberattacks.

Since the early 2000s, North Korean cyber strategy has aimed to operate below the threshold of armed conflict (or outside it altogether), denying principal victims—chiefly South Korea and the United States—

clear justification for conventional retaliation. Cyberspace thus offers the regime a “low-risk, high-return” channel to pursue its goals. The absence of widely accepted norms and enforceable rules likewise benefits Pyongyang.

Tactics have evolved markedly from early website defacements of South Korean government portals. As international pressure mounted on traditional revenue streams—such as narcotics and counterfeit-goods smuggling—the regime pivoted toward cryptocurrency as a new lifeline (Ryall 2025). To trace how tactics shifted alongside cybersecurity changes, it is useful to review notable incidents formally attributed to DPRK actors by national agencies (primarily in South Korea and the United States) and leading cybersecurity firms.

The timeline of malicious activity—including Kimsuky campaigns, the Sony hack, and WannaCry 2.0—has been documented elsewhere (Kim and Polito 2019; Kong et al. 2019). These illustrate three broad categories of state-affiliated operations: cyber-terrorism/vandalism, information theft (including espionage), and financially motivated attacks. While earlier operations emphasized disruption of adversary networks and devices, the past five years have seen a pronounced shift toward financial operations. Espionage, present from the outset, has also broadened in scope and targeting. Although responsibilities are relatively delineated across groups, their toolsets overlap: distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, spear-phishing, and exploitation of zero-day vulnerabilities are common.

DDoS (Distributed Denial-of-Service). DDoS attacks, used to paralyze victim networks, are a staple of DPRK cyber-terror campaigns. Reported early operations in 2009 struck targets in South Korea and the United States, including the South Korean Presidential Office, the National Assembly, the White House, and the Pentagon. Subsequent campaigns hit NongHyup Bank’s systems in 2011, and the 2013 “DarkSeoul” operation knocked all three major South Korean broadcasters offline (Kim and Polito 2019).

Zero-day exploitation. North Korean actors frequently exploit newly

discovered vulnerabilities in widely used software (e.g., Adobe Flash Player) and South Korea-specific formats (e.g., .hwp files) (Osborne 2018). WannaCry 2.0 leveraged a Windows vulnerability disclosed shortly beforehand by the Shadow Brokers (Schneier 2017). Reaper has repeatedly used zero-days to gather intelligence from South Korean government and private-sector networks, including via Windows Trojans enabling remote surveillance (Osborne 2018).

Spear-phishing and smishing. DPRK units are meticulous in target selection and may spend months preparing. Victims include defectors, cybersecurity professionals, private-sector employees, academics, and government officials. Tactics have evolved from basic email lures to prolonged engagement over social media to build rapport and trust. North Korea also employs “smishing,” compromising Android devices through malware-laden packages targeting primarily SMS (Mun 2021).

Decoy documents. Decoy PDFs and Word files—often related to North Korea’s nuclear program—exploit document vulnerabilities and appear in Korean, English, or Japanese (Glover 2021). Pyongyang adapts quickly to political developments—as shown by a phishing campaign launched one week after Yoon Suk-yeol’s attempted martial law episode, using the lure “Disclosure of Defense Counterintelligence Command Martial Law Documents”—and can scale from highly targeted approaches to broad campaigns, such as one blasting 126,000 phishing emails across 30 promotional formats (Park 2025).

Sectoral targeting. DPRK hackers range widely and add new targets as geopolitics shift. Since 2018 they have targeted the aerospace industry following South Korea’s successful test of a homemade booster engine. By mid-2020, alongside government agencies, defense units, transportation, financial institutions, and heavy industry, they increasingly struck biotech companies, universities, and research facilities working on COVID-19 (Kim N. 2021). The media outlet *Daily NK*, which has sources inside North Korea, reported the creation of a new unit, Bureau 325, tasked specifically with pharmaceutical and biochemical espionage to obtain COVID-19 data (Jang 2021).

Pre-crypto financial operations. Before pivoting to cryptocurrency theft, North Korea stole from banks in Vietnam, Poland, the Philippines, Turkey, Taiwan, and Mexico, with a well-known Bangladesh Bank heist as its most lucrative (Caesar 2021). Exploiting weaknesses in cybersecurity, the attackers stole SWIFT credentials and sent fraudulent transaction requests. From 2014 to 2018, Lazarus also executed ATM “cash-out” schemes across 30 countries in Asia and Africa using malware that, according to Symantec, infected “servers controlling the ATMs, allowing them to intercept their own fraudulent transaction requests and withdraw cash” (Porter 2018). Collectively stealing more than \$2 billion from financial institutions, DPRK hackers demonstrated detailed knowledge of banking systems and transaction protocols as well as advanced technical skills. In 2022, North Korean ransomware victims included six US hospitals and healthcare companies, as alleged in the indictment of Andariel operative Rim Jong Hyuk (US Department of Justice 2024). The filing describes laundering through China-based facilitators and the redirection of proceeds into further intrusions—including against US Air Force bases, NASA-OIG, defense contractors in Taiwan and South Korea, and even a Chinese energy firm—suggesting Pyongyang’s willingness to target broadly, including its main ally.

North Korea’s cyber activity stands out for several reasons. First, despite strict sanctions and limited access to advanced technology, Pyongyang has cultivated a major state presence in cyberspace through careful selection and rigorous training of cyber professionals. Second, with constrained access to global networks and isolation from economic and governance processes, state-affiliated groups can pursue aggressive tactics that complicate timely attribution. And, because cyber operations generally fall below the use-of-force threshold, they often avoid punishment. For similar reasons, North Korea faces fewer incentives to invest heavily in domestic cyber defense; the geographic dispersion of its operators further complicates retaliation. Third, DPRK hackers adapt rapidly to new defensive protocols and shift targets quickly, exploiting unpatched vulnerabilities; during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example,

new units were established to focus on vaccine-related espionage, likely under orders from the State Affairs Commission. Finally, traditional bank heists (e.g., Bangladesh Bank) required extensive research, long lead times, and physical cash-handling, meaning the regime's turn toward more straightforward cryptocurrency targets was only a matter of time.

The next section examines North Korea's evolving cryptocurrency-theft operations and the regime's growing reliance on them.

North Korea's Cybercrimes for Financial Gain

In addition to providing privacy—where transaction details are known primarily to counterparties—a decentralized, highly encrypted virtual currency that bypasses traditional financial institutions can interfere with a state's legal and financial systems unless regulatory measures are introduced. The legal status of cryptocurrencies remains unsettled: although designed as virtual money, they can be classified as property or as financial assets (Bolotaeva et al. 2019). Agreement on a common status is difficult, because it would invite governments to regulate crypto as an analogous object. Moreover, since the transaction logic is embedded in software, states tend to regulate the actors and intermediaries involved in transactions and mining rather than the transactions themselves.

Regulatory approaches vary widely across states, leading to gaps in control over cross-border activity. China banned cryptocurrency transactions in 2021, officially targeting the facilitation of financial crime (Mathis 2021). Yet it does not prohibit circulation or possession, effectively recognizing crypto as commodity/property protected from seizure under Chinese law, while Hong Kong positions itself as crypto-friendly and Chinese investors continue to use exchange-hosted wallets (e.g., Binance, HTX/Huobi) and the stablecoin Tether (Chen and Liu 2021). The United States—currently the center of Bitcoin mining—

has begun tightening oversight, including a \$41 million fine against Tether for misstatements about dollar-tied reserves (Nover 2021). South Korea considered an outright ban but instead imposed strict exchange requirements: cybersecurity certification and bank partnerships to enforce real-name verification, with non-compliant exchanges subject to closure (Reuters 2021).

South Korea's stringent crypto rules and comparatively complex internet banking can be attributed in part to North Korean threats: it was among the first to suffer DPRK crypto-focused attacks. A 2017 Bloomberg taxonomy grouped illicit crypto activity into money laundering, contraband transactions, tax evasion, and extortion (Kethineni and Cao 2019). North Korea had long been accused of drug trafficking, counterfeiting, and money-laundering schemes (Westcott 2014). After the WannaCry ransom did not yield proceeds as large as expected, Pyongyang began using cryptocurrency not only as a payout mechanism but as a direct target, rapidly adapting and evolving its tactics.

DPRK actors have compromised multiple exchanges by infiltrating internal networks with the same spear-phishing techniques used for espionage. In March 2019, they breached Singapore-based DragonEx via a meticulously planned social-engineering operation: the attackers built a fake wallet company with a website and LinkedIn personas that persuaded senior managers to install a "trial" trading bot—actually malware that yielded the wallet keys (Alper 2020). Other large-scale thefts attributed to North Korea include: Upbit (2019, \$41 million), KuCoin (2020, \$275 million, later mostly recovered), Ronin Bridge (2022, \$600 million), and Atomic Wallet (2023, \$100 million) (Tidy 2025).

Although the Lazarus Group has expanded globally, South Korean exchanges bore the brunt of the DPRK's early crypto campaigns. In 2017, Bithumb—then South Korea's largest exchange and fifth largest worldwide—lost approximately \$30 million in crypto after months-long infiltration that began with compromising an employee's home computer, exposing thousands of transactions and customer records. Lazarus then

demanded \$16 million to delete the data. Weeks earlier, Coinrail suffered losses exceeding \$30 million, and Yobit ultimately shut down after losing 17 percent of its coins in a cyberattack.

DPRK operators have also engaged in cryptojacking. South Korea's National Intelligence Service reported malware designed to locate and hijack South Korean computers to mine the privacy-focused coin Monero, with proceeds routed to servers at Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang (Lee 2018). Two additional tactics were launching an alternative coin ("HOLD") and promoting a fraudulent ICO, Marine Chain (a platform offering virtual tokens for partial ownership of marine vessels), which shut down after six months and disappeared with investor funds (Rotaru 2019).

As tactics evolved from zero-day exploitation to sophisticated social engineering, the victim set broadened. After initially striking decentralized projects with lower security barriers, DPRK actors in 2024 mounted successful attacks against centralized exchanges, including Japan's DMM Bitcoin and India's WazirX (once the country's largest, later filing for restructuring after the breach) (Japan Times 2025). Most notably, in February 2025, Lazarus stole a record \$1.5 billion in digital tokens from Dubai-based Bybit by abusing Safe—a multi-signature wallet layer intended to enhance security (Ryall 2025). These attacks underscore the "low-risk, high-return" nature of targeting crypto reserves amid persistent regulatory ambiguity.

Although blockchain flows can be traced and some stolen assets have been recovered (US Department of Justice 2022), DPRK actors employ effective obfuscation: mixers and peel-chains (breaking funds into smaller tranches), chain-hopping across assets and blockchains, and over-the-counter (OTC) brokers. Because privacy coins like Monero lack liquidity for very large transfers, Lazarus has also turned to decentralized finance (DeFi) protocols such as THORChain to swap stolen Ether into Bitcoin, particularly when Ethereum-based assets risk being frozen (Morton 2025). They further refine laundering by using decentralized exchanges (DEXs) and privacy-enhancing tools while orchestrating

hundreds of false accounts and identities—often a more intricate endeavor than the initial theft (O’Neill 2020).

On end-use, a 2019 UN report estimated DPRK cyber operations had netted about \$2 billion—including roughly \$300 million in cryptocurrencies—to fund nuclear and ballistic-missile programs (Nichols and Satter 2021). While other illicit revenue streams persist (e.g., illegal coal trade, remote IT work, and more recently, weapons sales to Russia), several factors suggest that cyber-derived funds support nuclear and missile programs: (1) the theft units are state-affiliated, so proceeds accrue to the regime; (2) despite sanctions that should constrain hard-currency access for nuclear-supply payments, the programs continue; (3) Lazarus’s pivot from disruptive operations to financial heists signals shifting regime priorities; and (4) even if funds are not used directly for procurement, they “free up” (Chiang 2023) other resources by covering debts and imports. Crypto also affords operational autonomy, reducing reliance on China and Russia, and an additional channel for transactions with them, while intimidating adversaries.

As governments tighten virtual-currency rules, North Korea adapts, attacking the very mechanisms designed to insulate crypto from state interference. Core attributes—blockchain settlement and user-level privacy—are leveraged to Pyongyang’s advantage: encrypted transactions obscure treasury holdings; transaction finality can preclude reversals even after exchange compromises; decentralized mining enables hijacking of foreign devices; and the absence of a central authority denies victims a direct avenue of appeal. These features, together with the DPRK’s targeting of private firms and individuals for profit, place its activity alongside criminal actors rather than typical state conduct.

The regime identified the opportunity quickly, turning a technology built for privacy and decentralization into both a target and a means for state criminal activity. Its move away from the disruptive, demonstrative operations of the early 2010s reflects a keen grasp of cybersecurity practice and fast responses to geopolitical change—contributing to the

weaponization of virtual currency for ransomware groups. Two factors, above all, shaped the evolution from opportunistic, ideologically tinged operations into one of the most creative and versatile theft-and-launderships in cyberspace, stealing and washing more than \$2 billion in crypto.

Centralized state hacking system. As discussed earlier, DPRK tactics are diverse, inventive, and aggressive. After numerous successful data-theft campaigns—from military intelligence collection to industrial espionage—the regime recognized it could target financial reserves using similar tradecraft. Operations involving SWIFT and ATM cash-outs made the eventual pivot to crypto logical: crypto heists are cheaper, often require no physical access, and malware can be repurposed against other exchanges. They also tend not to trigger urgent interstate responses given legal ambiguity and irreversible settlement. State affiliation confers further advantages: effectively unlimited attempts and timelines with low prosecution risk abroad. Internally, discipline may be harsher than any foreign sanction, adding pressure to succeed. Current DPRK campaigns involve careful target selection after months of preparation, spear-phishing of specific employees via platforms like LinkedIn, and credible corporate-style personas—though English remains a relative weakness.¹ For a time, South Korea’s public and private sectors were priority targets, aided by linguistic proximity and a surge in domestic crypto use—South Korean users tripled in the first four months of 2021 to 5.87 million (Yoon 2021)—incentivizing attacks despite tighter exchange security. Through constant iteration, DPRK teams have mastered both technical tools and social-engineering tradecraft. The RGB’s rigid hierarchy under the State Affairs Commission and clear division of responsibilities keep operations aligned with national strategy without inter-unit interference.

Isolation from international processes. After the UN Security Council’s

¹ Personal communication with an IT professional targeted in a North Korean social engineering campaign.

2017 sanctions banned exports of coal, iron, lead, and seafood (De Luce and Mitchell 2019), cryptocurrency became essential to regime survival along with fraudulent vessel identities, ship-to-ship transfers of illicit cargo, and changes of visa types for its workers abroad (Lee and Hwang 2025). Beyond exchange hacks and crypto-denominated ransom, North Korea is believed to mine crypto domestically. Although coal exports to China were banned, cheap domestic coal can still generate electricity for mining—even amid periodic power shortages—and thus monetize a restricted resource without technically exporting it. Sanctions aimed at halting nuclear and missile programs have coincided with more frequent missile tests since 2017. State-affiliated hackers thus serve a dual role: tasked to steal sensitive technology and to finance its implementation. Earlier, Pyongyang timed cyberattacks to symbolic dates (e.g., the “Fourth of July” campaign or the DDoS attacks on the 63rd anniversary of the Korean War outbreak, or to protest the imposition of sanctions (such as Operation DarkSeoul in 2013). More recently, it has used missile tests to answer US–ROK strategic moves, shifting from ideological signaling toward practical revenue generation with its cyber operations.

The DPRK floated the idea of a state cryptocurrency, but with no visible progress—especially after the US banned transactions in Venezuela’s “petro” (Wroughton and Alexander 2018)—it likely prefers intermediated channels. Despite mounting regulations, several countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe still allow crypto-to-cash conversion for a fee. A typical route reportedly moves ransomware takings from South Korea to Russia for black-market cash-out, which nonetheless reduces profitability due to intermediary fees (Kim H. 2021). Similarly, splitting Bitcoin into numerous small transfers through instant-exchange services incurs high cumulative fees, a burden individuals cannot bear but a state actor can absorb.

Thus, to sum up, DPRK targets, scope, and toolkits diverge from many other state-sponsored operations. While most state-affiliated actors prioritize espionage, industrial espionage, data theft, influence,

disinformation, and service disruption, North Korea also targets crypto exchanges and wallets for profit, and runs cryptojacking at scale. Because decentralized systems lack a central regulator, these activities occupy a legal gray zone. Few other state-affiliated actors conduct cyber operations purely for financial gain. The DPRK's conduct therefore resembles cybercriminal groups and illustrates how an isolated regime has no compunction about deploying cyber theft alongside traditional state operations. Building on this analysis, the next section considers the implications of North Korea's cryptocurrency campaign for regional security and global cyberspace.

Implications for Regional Security and Policy Recommendations

Under the conditions of North Korea's continuous cyberattacks and cryptocurrency theft, the effectiveness of sanctions imposed on the DPRK regime has been questioned. By extension, the ability of the North Korean regime to circumvent sanctions by relying on its cryptocurrency reserves to build its nuclear and ballistic missile programs has implications for regional security. By excluding the DPRK from international processes in which other states regularly participate, disengagement with North Korea as a nation-state has seemingly signaled to the regime that it is acceptable not to behave according to norms and to instead engage in illicit activity typically associated with non-state actors. In the case of cryptocurrency theft, hacker groups and hacktivist collectives might act in line with a state's interests but are rarely affiliated with state structures (unlike hackers conducting espionage and influence operations).

By using stolen cryptocurrency to develop its military programs and intelligence networks, North Korea further blurs the line between cyber and physical threats and between state and non-state activity in cyberspace. Another point of concern for regional security is North

Korea's growing reliance on practices and connections from the broader international cybercriminal ecosystem. For example, the Andariel subgroup, which until 2020 had only targeted South Korea, is "suspected to have operated as an initial access broker or affiliate for the Play ransomware operation, which is believed to have links to Russia" (Milenkoski et al. 2025). In the context of rapprochement between the two regimes, with North Korea sending its troops to participate in the war against Ukraine, such activity can indicate closer cooperation in other areas and at different levels, including cyberattacks targeting other states in the region. Tighter cooperation with Russia could mean there will be even fewer instruments to curtail DPRK activity in cyberspace, as its spectrum of tactics and tools grows enough to increase attacks on both South Korea and Japan.

While maintaining a minimal level of dialogue with the North Korean regime, policymakers could work on introducing comprehensive frameworks that protect cryptocurrency transactions and at the same time do not infringe on users' rights. All policy recommendations can be divided into three groups: cryptocurrency-specific measures, general cybersecurity practices, and North Korea-related policies. This approach will help ensure that regulatory mechanisms account for all actors—individual users, cryptocurrency businesses, financial institutions, and state systems—and contribute to regional and global cybersecurity.

First, there is a need for agreement on the legal status of cryptocurrency, which is currently recognized as property, commodity, or financial asset (but not money), or not recognized as an object of regulation at all. This causes confusion and legal hurdles in implementing effective policy mechanisms: a clear status would allow legal systems to treat cryptocurrency as a comparable object for which regulation is already in place, enabling prosecution of perpetrators in cases of cryptocurrency theft. Ideally, this should be done at the international level and applied by global financial institutions, which are still hesitant to recognize cryptocurrency as a legitimate financial object.

While controlling encrypted peer-to-peer, blockchain-based

transactions would be a complicated task for state-level regulatory agencies, requiring cryptocurrency exchanges to adopt a clear set of rules could help guard against money laundering and prevent large losses in the event of an exchange compromise. While privacy-focused cryptocurrencies like Monero benefit from inflows linked to illicit transactions, identifying trends and patterns of fraudulent activity can help prevent transfers into Monero at early stages. Possible requirements for businesses could include mandatory real-time identity confirmation for transactions exceeding a set amount, limits on the number of transactions within a period, storing a larger share of funds in cold wallets that are less vulnerable to hacking, and reserving the right to block all transactions in the event of suspicious activity. Although fully securing virtual currency against cyberattacks is impossible, exchanges can provide greater protection for users' funds and reduce the likelihood of shutdowns after an incident. Introducing regulation that prioritizes advanced blockchain intelligence within the compliance and risk-management frameworks of financial institutions, which allows monitoring and tracing of crypto transactions across multiple blockchains, could also help identify suspicious flows and subsequently flag or sanction them.

Although issuing a ban on cryptocurrency transactions and mining might seem like a certain way to avoid crypto-induced money laundering and cyber theft, traffic can be rerouted through a VPN to another country (Olcott et al. 2021).² Introducing strict cybersecurity measures, including regular training, as well as anti-money laundering regulations would likely have a more positive effect while still allowing users to enjoy the advantages of cryptocurrency's inclusivity.

The second set of recommendations involves improving cybersecurity practices and responses to ransomware. First, it is important to ensure that cryptocurrency-exchange systems are secure and up to date by

² This is what some crypto miners in China are suspected to be doing after crypto mining was banned.

strengthening public-private cooperation. Second, frequent internal checks and commissioning external cybersecurity professionals should be prioritized. Third, educating employees and customers on basic cybersecurity hygiene—particularly on social engineering tactics used by hackers—can reduce the likelihood of successful spear-phishing attacks. Tactics used to counter misinformation, such as “pre-bunking,” which issues early warnings based on patterns and early signs of fraudulent campaigns, can also decrease the success of phishing.

Due to complicated inter-Korean relations and the security situation on the Korean Peninsula, as well as sharing the same language with the attackers, South Korea has been one of the earliest and most frequent targets of North Korean state-affiliated groups, including attacks on its cryptocurrency exchanges. Exposure to a large number of cyber threats requires more rigorous cybersecurity measures across internet infrastructure and exchanges. Ensuring that businesses promptly contact KISA (Korea Internet & Security Agency) in cases of suspected compromise—and that KISA has sufficient resources and authority to help mitigate consequences—requires increases in personnel, given the DPRK’s growing focus on cyber activity. Another policy some governments have considered is prohibiting ransomware payments, which would strip attackers of financial incentives. Legislation restricting transactions with users in countries lacking adequate anti-money laundering policies might also reduce the likelihood of funds being transferred to malicious actors. Finally, policies regarding North Korea’s cyber activity focused on cryptocurrency should address two issues: the effects of economic sanctions, and the means of retaliation against continuous cyberattacks. Efforts to make North Korea adhere to international norms through sanctions have instead pushed the DPRK to evolve methods of funding its nuclear and missile programs rather than suspending them. It is also important to note that the share of for-profit cyberattacks launched by North Korea increased after sanctions went into force, helping the regime keep pace with its strategic objectives. Because cyberattacks originating from North Korea or conducted by North Korean hackers

abroad are clearly state-sponsored, implementing policies targeting illicit activity in cyberspace—and the actors facilitating such activity—would at least partially help contain North Korea within international norms.

Additionally, retaliating against the DPRK with cyber tools would likely not inflict considerable damage due to its very low connectivity and underdeveloped infrastructure. Stripping other states of incentives to aid North Korea in cyberattacks is difficult but likely more effective. However, the states that provide internet connectivity to North Korea and those hosting groups of North Korean hackers may see benefits from the disruption North Korea causes in global cyberspace and from its illicit cryptocurrency operations. Katagiri (2024) notes that, because Russia and China lack reciprocity or extradition agreements with the West, Russian and Chinese hacking groups “can operate without fear of repercussions, except for the possibility of detention and arrests by the authorities for behaviors inconsistent with state interest.” Reaching an intergovernmental agreement on a cyber regime that defines rules of behavior and thresholds for state participation is necessary to begin much-needed regulation, but is hard to achieve.

However, minilateral cooperation among like-minded countries to investigate and prosecute individuals behind attacks is feasible, as shown by the 2021 joint operation by law-enforcement agencies from Ukraine, South Korea, and the United States. That operation resulted in the detention of multiple suspects in Kyiv believed to be linked to the Clop ransomware cartel accused of hacking South Korean retailer E-Land, with South Korean police physically present during the arrests—usually carried out solely by local authorities. Similar operations can be conducted with local law enforcement when dealing with “scam cities,” such as those on the Thailand-Myanmar border. This, however, requires improving diplomatic ties with ASEAN and its member states.

Strengthening cybersecurity architecture and fostering ties with other countries could also be recommended for better bilateral cooperation and faster response. Programs similar to the one the Korean Institute of Criminology developed with the UNODC in 2008 for law-enforcement

and police officers in Vietnam and Thailand—teaching computer-related technologies and providing general information on cybercrime trends and legislation—could be implemented to raise awareness of cryptocurrency crimes. Finally, tackling cryptocurrency crime could be integrated into the cyber component of multi-domain joint military training or joint cyber-law-enforcement exercises, which could improve public-private cooperation and subsequent investigations when a cryptocurrency exchange is compromised.

To summarize, ensuring maximum protection of cryptocurrency reserves through robust cybersecurity measures and coordinated international action against perpetrators would not only help combat money-laundering practices and decrease ransomware attacks, but also potentially improve the effectiveness of restrictions on the North Korean regime by cutting off a major channel for funding its nuclear and missile programs.

Conclusion

North Korea shows no signs of slowing its nuclear and missile programs and continually adapts to new constraints, calling into question both the effectiveness of international sanctions and the rationale for imposing them. Concurrently, the DPRK has found a new revenue stream to support military development in a “low-risk, high-return” fashion characteristic of a pariah state: money theft in cyberspace, a domain enabled by anonymity and its cross-border nature. Difficult attribution and limited options for cyber retaliation complicate efforts to ensure adherence to international norms of conduct online.

Against this backdrop, North Korea has gone further than most state actors by crossing the boundary between the behavior of national governments and criminal entities: among the “Big Four” (Russia, China, Iran, and the DPRK), North Korea is the only country that conducts cyberattacks for financial gain at the state level through an

integrated government hacking system. Since the early 2020s, cryptocurrency-related attacks have become a go-to tactic for state-affiliated hackers, leveraging the core features of virtual currencies—privacy, encryption, peer-to-peer architecture, and blockchain settlement—that are not yet fully subject to national or international regulation. DPRK hackers have exploited these attributes by directly compromising cryptocurrency exchanges via spear-phishing and by demanding crypto transfers in ransomware campaigns.

This combination—a versatile toolkit, sensitivity to social and political developments, and state backing—interacts with uneven corporate cybersecurity and hesitant regulation to make it extremely hard to prosecute suspects in cryptocurrency theft. Moreover, because cryptocurrencies gain from rising volumes and users, imposing tighter rules and limits is unlikely so long as perceived benefits outweigh risks. In parallel, North Korea's cryptocurrency theft adds to an already chaotic cyber landscape characterized by ransomware, infrastructure attacks, disinformation, and election interference. By stretching already thin law-enforcement, intelligence, and often underfunded and understaffed military resources, malicious actors gain greater operational freedom.

Additionally, because the internet is not integrated into the DPRK's critical infrastructure and very few users have regular access to the global network, other states have comparatively little room to maneuver in cyberspace to retaliate in ways that would cause significant damage. Aware that it has little chance of surviving a conventional military conflict, the regime finds asymmetric capabilities in cyberspace relatively cheap, safely provocative, and consistently remunerative, offering a broad target set and virtually unlimited attempts. North Korea also benefits from the fact that cryptocurrency theft typically does not directly target other states but private companies, which, amid loosely enforced regulations and uneven cybersecurity, often have limited ability to recover stolen funds.

To counter North Korea's activity in cyberspace, states should work toward consensus on an intergovernmental cyber regime to overcome

the legal vacuum and discourage other governments from facilitating DPRK criminal activity. In parallel, while basic cybersecurity hygiene is a necessary first step to protect users, businesses, and infrastructure, promptly updating anti-money-laundering and cryptocurrency regulations in response to evolving tactics would help disincentivize attacks and keep pace with North Korea's rapidly adapting cyber operations.

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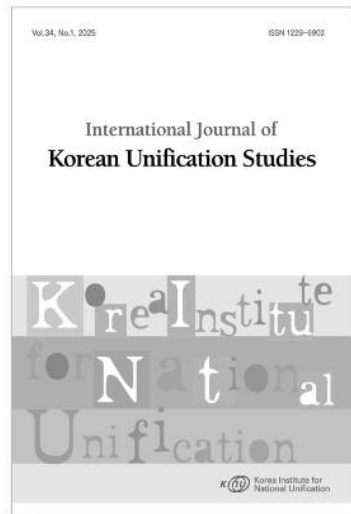
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