



📞 202.464.1982 📍 1800 K Street NW

## THE PENINSULA

### **Kim Jong-un's Use and Abuse of Apologies in Context: "Sorry, Not Sorry"**

Published February 24, 2021

**Author:** [Markus Garlauskas](#)

**Category:** [North Korea](#)



In recent months, western [media reporting](#) has emphasized Kim Jong Un's emotion-laden comments admitting both North Korea's [failure](#) to meet economic goals and the severe [hardships](#) being experienced by its people. These statements have been characterized by some western observers as apologies, [contrition](#) and personal admissions of "[his](#)" failure. Such characterizations should not lead to unwarranted optimistic assumptions that Kim is reconsidering his approach, or even that he is growing desperate. Though the strong emotions behind these statements may be quite real, they are not real apologies in the

sense that they are not an admission on Kim's part that he has done anything wrong. They are also very much in line with the continuing evolution of Kim Jong Un's more "down to earth" style of communication rather than indicating any change in policy. These statements are expressions, at best, of mounting frustration rather than contrition or desperation.

The most dramatic and explicit example took place in October last year, when state media published Kim Jong Un's speech opening the military parade marking the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Party, including:

*"Our people have placed trust, as high as sky and as deep as sea, on me, but I have failed to always live up to it satisfactorily. **I am really sorry** [author: emphasis mine] for that. Although I am entrusted with the important responsibility to lead this country upholding the cause of the great Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il thanks to the trust of all the people, my efforts and sincerity have not been sufficient enough to rid our people of the difficulties in their life."*

Official video of the event even showed an emotional Kim Jong Un wiping moisture from his glasses, while tears openly streamed down the cheeks of uniformed North Koreans in his audience.

The full context of these statements must be considered when assessing their significance.

The broadest cultural context includes a body of research examining the different social and legal traditions and values surrounding apologies, including contrasts between Korean and American views of apologies. Such studies have found that apologies are more common and expected in South Korea than the United States. One recent study using US examples even found that apologies by public figures make them less likeable. Perhaps summarizing the traditional American attitude toward apologies by those in authority, the crusty cavalry captain portrayed by John Wayne in 1949's "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" admonished a young lieutenant: "Never apologize, mister! It's a sign of weakness." Therefore, it should not be surprising that presidential apologies are particularly uncommon and indirect in the United States—helping to explain why Kim's direct "I am really sorry" last October would attract such attention in America.

As apologies have become more expected among Americans, while the underlying reluctance to make explicit apologies has remained, new terminology has emerged to mock insincere “fauxpologies” made for tactical purposes. These could easily be applied to Kim Jong Un’s comments. The phrase “sorry not sorry” has emerged for use in situations when the speaker acknowledges that the speaker’s behavior could upset someone, but that the speaker openly stands by this behavior—just as Kim Jong Un has. (Two different platinum-record songs, hundreds of internet memes, a Twitter hashtag, and even an LA cocktail bar are now named for this evocative phrase.)

To these considerations must also be added the specific context of North Korea’s own culture and history. North Koreans, particularly Party officials, are required to participate in saenghwal chonghwa, regular formal group sessions in which they are required to criticize their own (and their colleagues’) shortcomings in meeting the Party’s standards, and then pledge to do better. Kim Jong Un’s expressions of his own shortcomings would not have been out of place in one of these sessions as a pro-forma, but not particularly meaningful, self-criticism.

There is a long history of optimistically interpreting statements of sympathy or regret from North Korean leaders as apologies, even when they dodge responsibility. In 1972, Kim Il Sung assured South Korean officials that he had not approved of the “regretful” attempted attack on the South Korean presidential palace in 1968. Similarly, though some claim that Kim Il Sung apologized for the 1976 DMZ axe murders, his vague message only stated regret.

More recently, the North Korean statement of regret that was part of the deal which ended the military confrontation of August 2015 was characterized by optimistic observers as an apology, yet never acknowledged guilt for planting the landmines that maimed two South Korean soldiers. North Korean state media soon vehemently denied its statement was an apology.

Similarly, Kim Jong Un’s personal statement of regret over the killing of a South Korean official in September 2020 was a more explicit expression of “sorry” but still did not meet the criteria for a true apology. As Olivia Schieber pointed out on the American Enterprise Institute blog, this was a case of “sorry not sorry,” in that it showed no intent to change behavior. UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur Tomás Ojea Quintana also assessed this was not a real apology—because there was no admission of wrongdoing.

On the domestic front, Kim Jong Un has also been willing to admit failures as part of his approach of portraying himself and the Party in a more realistic manner in state media. His more recent comments are only the latest and most vivid of many examples in this vein, such as in his 2017 New Year's speech: "My desires were burning all the time, but I spent the past year feeling anxious and remorseful for the lack of my ability."

When taken in full context, even Kim Jong Un's "I'm sorry" on October 10 was neither a real statement of apology, nor even a sign that he regrets the course he has chosen for North Korea. His next few sentences were particularly telling: "Our people, however, have always believed and absolutely trusted me, and supported my choice and determination, whatever it is. **Even if it may mean suffering more**, [author: emphasis mine] our people's trust in me and our Party is always absolute and steadfast." The rest of the speech went on to explain that the Party would "continue to strengthen" North Korea's military capabilities and warned of "trials" ahead, even as it held out hope that the Party would lead North Koreans to a "better tomorrow."

Since then, Kim's lambasting of North Korean officials in February show even more clearly that he is not accepting blame or admitting any mistakes on his part. Kim Jong Un's acknowledgements of economic failures, suffering and hardships, and even his expressions of sympathy with the North Korean people, are not admissions that he has taken North Korea on the wrong path.

To put it into terms an American President might use, Kim has been telling North Koreans: "I feel your pain. We're all in this together. Hang in there."

To put it into more blunt terms, Kim has been saying: "Sorry, not sorry."

*Markus V. Garlauskas led the U.S. intelligence community's strategic analysis on North Korea as the national intelligence officer for North Korea from July 2014 to June 2020. The views expressed are the author's and do not imply endorsement by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Intelligence Community, or any other U.S. Government agency.*

*Photo from The Kremlin's photostream on flickr Creative Commons.*

## Return to the Peninsula

