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North Korea's External Information Sector and Implications for the World

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In his first remarks to the western press ahead of his second meeting with then President Donald Trump, Chairman Kim Jong-un said: “I won’t make predictions. But I instinctively feel that a good outcome will be produced.” He has not interacted with foreign journalists since then, but that long silence may soon come to an end, based on a report published

earlier this year by North Korean state media.

During the 8th Party Conference in January, Chairman Kim called on attendees to focus their efforts in the “field of external work.” According to the report published by the Korean Central News Agency, he said that these efforts should “orient external political activities

with the main emphasis put on prevailing over and subjugating the U.S., the fundamental obstacle to the development of our revolution and our principal enemy.”

The report added that Chairman Kim called for more cooperation and coordination with like-minded parties and governments to further North Korean diplomacy. These efforts would be a jumping off point for “a dynamic joint struggle against imperialism on a worldwide scale so as to make the external environment of our state ever-more favorable,” according to state media.

American experts say that the report suggests a renewed focus by the North Korean government on its messaging to foreign audiences. “Enhancing the role of the information sector is definitely propaganda, for sure,” said Professor Andrea Mihailescu from the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine University. “It’s reaching out to countries that they have long-lasting relationships, where they have their presence of missions and trade representatives.”

Some experts note that North Korea has struggled in finding success in their outbound communications. “I don’t see it as so much as a new strategy on messaging to the outside world, so much as a strategy on controlling information coming from the outside,” said Jean Lee, director of the Hyundai Motor-Korea Foundation Center at the Wilson Center for International Scholars. She added that contemporary North Korea has had difficulty finding a balance between regime control and information from the outside world. “This goes hand in hand with opening up to the outside world,” said Ms. Lee.

But North Korea under Kim Il-sung was able to win friends and influence people. “We’ve seen this very vigorous spurt of trying to be engaged by the world [starting in] 1965, when the strategic environment seemed to be volatile but not entirely unfavorable [to North Korea],” said Dr. Sung-yoon Lee, a professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. “Kim Il-sung was very astute to reach out to people,” he added. “He gave dozens of interviews with the foreign press, in Pyongyang from 1971 to 1973, including several times with Japanese reporters.”

But it wasn't just reporters from other neighboring countries. In the 1970's, Kim Il Sung met with and gave interviews with American reporters, like Harrison Salisbury of *The New York Times*, and Selig Harrison of *The Washington Post*. Dr. Lee says the latter in particular

became a vocal defender of North Korea. "With people who have met with Kim Il-sung, all these things sometimes resonate throughout their entire life. They're so dazzled by Kim Il-sung," he said.

Given the current leader's emulation of his grandfather, it is not unlikely that Chairman Kim may see some benefit in focusing on North Korea's foreign propaganda efforts. "It's an arrow in North Korea's quiver, that Kim Jong-un has not deployed, has not used yet," said Dr. Lee. "If Kim Jong Un were meeting with foreign reporters, from the *Asahi Shimbun*, from *The New York Times*, that would be a mini coup in terms of propaganda victory," he said.

Based on the KCNA report, experts say North Korea will try to revitalize its diplomatic partnerships with other like-minded countries. Among these likely targets are states like Cuba, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela, among others. "Kind of a roster of countries with poor human rights records," says Daniel Wertz, program manager at the National Committee on North Korea.

As with many North Korea issues, the Chinese factor remains preeminent. North Korea remains focused on trying to repair that relationship from its doldrums in 2016, "when China was enforcing sanctions and supporting more robust measures at the UN in terms of adopting UN Security Council resolutions," said Professor Mihailescu. Indeed, just last week leaders from both sides reportedly exchanged messages, underlining the importance of coordination between Pyongyang and Beijing.

Unlike China and Russia, North Korea has struggled to propagate its messages through social media. American sanctions on Pyongyang discourage sites from YouTube to host content and accounts linked to North Korea. YouTube in particular has been quick to delete accounts that upload content created by North Korean actors. "There is in the International Emergency Economic Powers Act...an exemption place for any kind of informational material, which I think that North Korean-origin videos...would fall under," he observed. But Mr. Wertz said that on such a technical legal issue, it may be safer for the company just to delete such content than host it. "It's just essentially a de-risking strategy

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On the other hand, North Korea maintains a robust presence on Chinese social media. A report published by 38 North last year found that one North Korean account had close to half a million followers on Weibo, a microblogging website popular in China. “It’s noteworthy that a lot of that external facing media has been aimed particularly at a Chinese audience,” said Mr. Wertz.

Despite these challenges, experts say Pyongyang knows that the world pays attention to its messaging. “North Koreans are always very conscious that whatever they send externally, whether it’s people or propaganda, that that’s the image that people will have of North Korea,” said Director Lee. “That’s something that they’re just constantly trying to drill into the propagandists,” she added. Thus, while North Korea may face difficulty in propagating its message abroad, it is likely to persevere.

Monitoring the North Korean external information sector must be included in the Biden administration’s yet unknown policy towards Pyongyang. “North Korea comes across as very unsophisticated, backward, medieval, so Americans tend to underestimate them, be dismissive of them,” said Dr. Lee. But he added that North Korea maintains diplomatic relations with around 160 states, demonstrating that “they know how to do diplomacy, not only make missiles and bombs.”

“I think part of [North Korea’s] foreign policy strategy going forward is spending less time trying to change the minds of stubborn states like the U.S., and spend more time cultivating more sympathetic states,” says Jenny Town, Director of 38 North and Senior Fellow at the Stimson Center. At first glance, smaller states like this may not provide the same kind of economic benefit that would come with improved relations with South Korea or the U.S. But Director Town notes that it is because these smaller states are willing to work with North Korea that make them an enticing target. “There’s more immediate, more near term benefit in that relationship, and these are ways that North Korea adapts to living under sanctions,” she said.

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