

# North Korea's Public Relations Strategy, 2018

Eun A Jo

Tension on the Korean Peninsula had reached a boiling point by the time Kim Jong-un delivered his New Year's address—a tradition set by his grandfather that he had revived in 2013. Beyond the talk of a “nuclear button,” which triggered another round of fiery exchanges with Donald Trump, Kim devoted a considerable segment of his speech to calling for improved inter-Korean relations. Though signaling an ambiguous friendly overture to the South has become an annual exercise for Kim, this year's speech was uncharacteristically specific in that he offered to send a delegation to South Korea's highly anticipated Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. But sports diplomacy is hardly new to Kim; an avid sports fan himself, Kim is acutely aware of its propaganda value and utility as a channel for diplomacy. For Kim, the Pyeongchang Olympics presented a timely opportunity to remake the regime's flailing image at home and abroad.

In this chapter, the Pyeongchang Olympics are used as a case study to understand Kim's public relations strategy. Before exploring the strategic intentions behind Kim's diplomatic campaign, both the old and new features of his image-making efforts are examined, focusing in particular on his use of sports diplomacy. How Kim's charm offensive in Pyeongchang is communicated internally and received externally is then analyzed, yielding important insights about the prospects of reconciliation between the two Koreas post-Olympics.

## The Making of Kim's Image

Kim's public relations efforts are largely resonant with those of his predecessors—albeit with a flair of his own. They encompass the following dimensions: 1) inculcating the *juche* ideology; 2) reinforcing the *suryong* system and building a cult of personality; and 3) stirring nationalism.

At the center of the Kim family's public messaging strategy is the promotion of *juche* ideology. Formulated by Kim Il-sung, the state ideology of *juche* is typically translated as “self-reliance” and consists of: 1) political independence, 2) economic self-sustenance, and 3) self-reliance in defense. From the outset, the ideology has been used by the Kims in their own image-making initiatives. For instance, in a 1982 treatise titled *On the Juche Idea*, Kim Jong-il systematized the concept of *juche* and elevated the importance of security above political and economic independence. Publishing the treatise allowed Kim Jong-il—then Kim Il-sung's propaganda chief—to craft his image as an intellectual, or as one scholar put it, “the one and only bona fide interpreter of the ‘immortal Juche idea’ of Kim Il-sung.”<sup>1</sup> This reinterpretation later enabled him to justify his military-first politics (*songun*), placing the army above all aspects of society and pursuing his nuclear ambitions at the expense of the people's welfare.

*Juche* is likewise central to Kim Jong-un's public messaging. In his 2018 New Year's address, Kim stressed the concept of *juche* visibly more than in his previous speeches. He openly acknowledged the “difficult living conditions” that the North Korean people have endured due to international sanctions. However, he declared that those challenges would soon be overcome with the fulfilment of his *byungjin* policy—the simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development. Unlike his predecessors, who “emphasized the people's strength in the face of adversity and willingness to suffer for the sake of their country,” the young Kim avowed that North Korean people would no longer be hungry.<sup>2</sup>

He pointed out that the completion of the North's nuclear forces had "opened up bright prospects for the building of a prosperous country," signaling a shift from his father's army-first policy by highlighting his promise of economic recovery. While the theme of self-reliance is broadly consistent in both Kims' image-making efforts, they carry slightly varying interpretations of *juche* to justify their respective policy directions—*songun* under Kim Jong-il and *byungjin* under Kim Jong-un.

Kim's public relations efforts also serve to reinforce the *suryong* (or the supreme leader) system, which establishes the Kim family as the nucleus of political leadership and elevates the ruling Kim's personal authority beyond the influence of the party and the military. The *suryong* system legitimizes the Kim family's dynastic rule by identifying Kim Il-sung as the sole founder and protector of the Korean nation, whose leadership can only be sustained by his prodigious lineage, the so-called "Mount Paektu bloodline." This idea is further cemented in the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System*—the country's supreme law that supersedes the national constitution as well as laws of the Worker's Party—which declares that Kim Il-sung's revolutionary achievements "must be succeeded and perfected by hereditary succession until the end."<sup>3</sup> Under such a system, Paik Haksoon argues, "the *suryong* and his heir enjoy the same absolute authority and play the same decisive roles... [T]he incumbent *suryong* and his successor are one and the same."<sup>4</sup>

The *suryong* system is maintained by promoting cults of personality around members of the Kim family. According to the mythologies disseminated by regime propaganda, Kim Il-sung single-handedly liberated Korea from the Japanese occupation, commanding his guerillas from a secret camp on Mount Paektu—the country's national symbol.<sup>5</sup> These narratives depict Kim as the patriarch of the family of the Korean nation; he protects his pure, innocent children—the Korean people—from the impure, hostile world.<sup>6</sup> Apocryphal stories also surround the birth and life of his son Kim Jong-il, who was supposedly born on Mount Paektu and inherited from his father superhuman capabilities as well as a revolutionary destiny. Today, tens of thousands of statues of the two late Kims dominate public spaces across the country, and their pictures hang in every household and building. Their birthdays are commemorated as the Day of the Sun (April 15) and the Day of the Shining Star (February 16)—the two most lavishly celebrated public holidays. Even after their deaths, they are worshipped as the "eternal leaders" of Korea.

Kim Jong-un seeks similar veneration by forging his own cult of personality. Notably, the young Kim undertakes a series of public relations efforts that evoke memories of his predecessors, in particular Kim Il-sung. Unlike his more reclusive father, his grandfather was a Fidel Castro-type, reveling in public engagements and photo-ops that bolstered his popularity as a "man of the people."<sup>7</sup> Kim Jong-un has revived many of those lost traditions, including giving lengthy public speeches and paying visits to the army or the state-run factories. It helped that he was "such a splitting image of his grandfather"—a result very much intended as Kim tailored his physique to conjure up his grandfather's image in preparation for his leadership debut.<sup>8</sup> According to one account, "when he first appeared on TV, many North Koreans broke into tears, hailing him as the second coming of Kim Il-sung."<sup>9</sup> Although relatively nascent, Kim Jong-un's cult of personality is progressively taking form, in large part through imitation of his popular grandfather.

Finally, nationalism is a key feature of the Kim family's public relations strategy. For generations, the Kims fanned fears of external threats to justify their high spending on the military and rally the public behind their strong-hand rule. Moreover, they dodged responsibility for the country's internal hardships by blaming foreign enemies—Japan and the United States—as well as their puppet, South Korea. Xenophobia is, therefore, prevalent in the regime's nationalist propaganda: Americans and Japanese are denigrated as “bastards,” “jackals,” and “swine,” attempting to subjugate Korea under their capitalist-imperialist rule, and South Koreans are portrayed as “servile flunkies,” whose purity is tainted by submission to the United States.<sup>10</sup> This narrative paints North Koreans as the only true agents of Korean nationalism and places the Kims at the center of Korean liberation.<sup>11</sup> As Kim Kwang-cheol writes, “Today's North Korean ruling ideology takes the form of a Korean-ethnicity based ‘Kimilsungism’ or ‘Kim Il-sung Nationalism.’”<sup>12</sup> Under this logic, the North Korean nation cannot be understood apart from the Kims.<sup>13</sup>

Kim Jong-un's public messaging harnesses much of the same ethno-nationalistic sentiments as his predecessors', in particular by highlighting the regime's progress in building its nuclear arsenal. On the 100th anniversary of his grandfather's birth, Kim declared, “the days are gone forever when our enemies could blackmail us with nuclear bombs.”<sup>14</sup> This year's annual address is even bolder; it claims that the regime has achieved a “historic cause of perfecting the national nuclear forces” and promises to “mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles [...] to give a spur to the efforts for deploying them for action.”<sup>15</sup> While the speech still largely characterizes the North's nuclear weapons as a defensive deterrent, Stephan Haggard notes an “interesting personalization” of the conflict: Kim asserts, “In no way would the United States dare to ignite a war against *me* and our country.”<sup>16</sup> This appears to promote a sort of “kimjongunism”—akin to “kimilsungism”—in which Kim Jong-un is, effectively, North Korea.

## A “Modern” Kim for a Modern North Korea

Although Kim Jong-un adheres to the broader public relations rubrics set forth by his predecessors, his brand is demonstrably more “modern.” Indeed, if the image of youth had once threatened his legitimacy in the early days of his succession, it is now a defining feature of his leadership. Today, he actively promotes an image of youth and modernity: 1) he is more concerned with how he and the country is perceived externally and encourages the public to be more globally aware; 2) he highlights a previously overlooked aspect of *juche*—economic self-sustenance—and endorses an emerging consumerist culture; and 3) he involves women in image-making operations to present a softer, more inclusive picture of the regime. While these efforts do not necessarily translate to major political changes, they introduce a new imagery: a “modern” Kim for a modern North Korea.

Kim's public messaging frequently refers to “global trends,” fostering an unfamiliar image of openness. Barely a year into office, he called on the party officials to “accept global development trends and advanced technologies in land management and environment protection,” demonstrating his desire to shape an image of globalism.<sup>17</sup> He even encouraged the people to use the Internet, saying they “can see many materials on global trends,” and urged the party to “send delegates to other countries to learn what they need to know.”<sup>18</sup> These messages triggered widespread speculation that the country was on the verge of a proper opening. Though such earlier expectations of reform remain unrealized—at least

officially—Kim's continued references to "global trends" indicate that he wishes to be seen as open—even if without actually opening up.

Under this façade of globalism, Kim promulgates an image of strength and prosperity by promoting his *byungjin* policy. With the country's nuclear program now declared as complete, Kim is able to shift his focus toward economic development without contradicting his father's *songun* legacy. So far, his economic agenda involves building luxury establishments—like amusement parks, ski resorts, and a dolphinarium—which are more ostentatious than practical. Kim's vision of economic development reflects his preoccupation with how the regime is perceived internally and externally; in the words of Jung Pak, Kim likely "considers these [luxury establishments] as markers of a 'modern state.'"<sup>19</sup> It is also possible, though not probable, that Kim genuinely wants the North Korean people to experience the things that he always enjoyed. He once reportedly ruminated to Fujimoto Kenji, his close confidant and sushi chef, "We are here, playing basketball, riding horses, riding Jet Skis, having fun together. But what of the lives of the average people?"<sup>20</sup> Whatever his true intent, Kim's economic agenda serves a critical function in terms of public relations; it paints North Korea as a prosperous, "modern" state and Kim, its young and animated leader.

This image of modernity is bolstered by the "feminine touch" in Kim's public messaging. Two women play particularly important roles: his wife Ri Sol-ju and his sister Kim Yo-jung. For the ordinary people as well as for the privileged elites, Ri is an idol. As Pak reports, "[t]he carefully curated public appearances of Kim's wife [...] provide the regime with a 'softer' side, a thin veneer of style and good humor."<sup>21</sup> Together, Kim and his wife represent a "modern, young, virile couple on the go."<sup>22</sup> Then there is his sister Kim Yo-jung, who—besides accompanying her brother in various public engagements—is said to be the country's de facto propaganda chief.<sup>23</sup> Many credit her for the discernible change in the regime's public relations strategy, including its recent embrace of transparency.<sup>24</sup> Under her direction, the state media today disseminates information about the country's internal affairs with an unprecedented degree of honesty and detail. For instance, in April 2012, the state media reported the crash of the Unha-3 shortly after its launch, marking it the first time the regime has admitted to such failure.<sup>25</sup> The involvement of his wife and sister in public relations helps mollify Kim's image as well as transform the regime's image-making methods to reflect Kim's supposed modernity and openness.

## Kim's Sports Propaganda and Diplomacy

For a "modern" leader like Kim, sport is a refreshing, powerful tool for propaganda and diplomacy. The symbolism of sports—youth, excellence, and honor—is closely aligned with the imagery Kim seeks to promote in association with himself. In fact, regime propaganda reports that Kim is a sport prodigy—having mastered sailing, golfing, and shooting, among others—but that he retired from sporting once he was "satisfied with his performance."<sup>26</sup> Further, Kim has demonstrated his enthusiasm for sports on various occasions. Even as sanctions hit the regime's cash supply, he boosted its spending on sports, signaling his ambition to turn the North into a "sports power."<sup>27</sup> As part of this effort, he also invited and hosted Denis Rodman, a former NBA champion, cultivating what many deemed an unusual friendship.<sup>28</sup> Kim's love of sports explains, in part, why he uses sport as a propaganda and diplomatic tool more actively than his grandfather and father.

Indeed, the North's practice of politicizing sports predates Kim Jong-un. In a 1986 speech, Kim Jong-il stressed the importance of sports for realizing the ultimate objective of *juche*: "Unless a man is healthy and strong, he cannot become a powerful being with the capacity to conduct creative activities... [a] strong physique is a basic quality of a fully developed communist."<sup>29</sup> In the same speech, he also identified the benefits of sports in improving the country's international reputation and relations: "if our sportsmen achieve good results at many international events and they fly the flag of our Republic, the honor of the country will be increased and our nation's resourcefulness will be demonstrated to the world."<sup>30</sup> He added, "Developing sporting skills and organizing sporting exchange on a wide scale will also contribute to promoting friendly relations with many countries."<sup>31</sup> Espousing his father's views on sports, Kim today harnesses its potential to reinforce national identity at home and build the country's soft power abroad.

Sports propaganda helps heighten a sense of nationalistic pride on which image-dependent Kim greatly relies.<sup>32</sup> Winning is particularly helpful, as victorious athletes would "pour adulation on their Dear Leader," with bandwagon effects across the country.<sup>33</sup> During the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, where the North won four gold medals, the medalists credited Kim for their success and received "a hero's welcome" upon their return.<sup>34</sup> Their triumphs were shown repeatedly on state television, inspiring national pride and loyalty. To prevent losses from tarnishing the regime's image, the state media also broadcasts sporting events with a delay—if the result is unfavorable, it can be easily censored. Stakes were particularly high at the 2014 Asian Games in Incheon, when the North Korean men's football team faced the South Koreans in the finals. The North eventually lost, and the result was—unsurprisingly—never aired.<sup>35</sup>

Besides propaganda, sporting engagements also serve as a platform for diplomacy. The tradition of using sports to improve political relations dates at least as far back as 776 BC in Ancient Greece, when the monarchs of Elis, Pisa, and Sparta signed the Olympic Truce, allowing safe passage of the athletes to participate in the Games.<sup>36</sup> Recalling the spirit of the Truce, the United Nations introduced a resolution titled "Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal" in 1994, which has since been adopted every year prior to the Games. Given this robust tradition, sports have come to represent a face-saving tool for Kim to facilitate diplomatic exchanges with the South, even when tensions are manifest. The idea is not foreign to Seoul either; the two Koreas marched under one flag in 2000 and 2004 during the Summer Games—an initiative that was then hailed as a "diplomatic breakthrough" but which culminated in limited political progress.<sup>37</sup> For Kim, the imagery linking sports and peace is a highly expedient gesture of goodwill on the international stage without jeopardizing the domestic narrative of "North Korea against the world."

## Why the Pyeongchang Olympics?

As the Pyeongchang Olympics approached, North Korea was in dire need of a public relations make-over. Externally, the regime's image had deteriorated significantly. The defection in 2016 of its high-ranking official, Thae Yong-ho, provided a rare look into the internal vulnerabilities of the regime and the extent of its brutality.<sup>38</sup> Thae's claims were further bolstered by the alleged assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother in 2017, which demonstrated both the violent nature of Kim's domestic purges and the perverse means by

which he executed them—in this case, using an internationally-banned chemical weapon.<sup>39</sup> Further, the mistreatment and subsequent death of Otto Warmbier, the U.S. student who had been detained in Pyongyang on charges of “hostile acts against the state,” spurred international ire.<sup>40</sup> Each of these events helped the Trump administration galvanize support for its “maximum pressure” approach, strengthening sanctions against Pyongyang—with crippling economic ramifications—and branding it a “rogue regime.”<sup>41</sup>

Internally, as sanctions began to bite and rumors about foreign affluence—especially that of the South—infiltrated the North’s increasingly porous information blockade, the public grew more and more disgruntled, at times to the point of defection.<sup>42</sup> The regime tolerated thriving black markets to offset the effects of international isolation, but this had one deleterious side effect: as more people depended on markets to survive, an increasing number of them began to view the regime not as a provider of but an obstacle to their welfare.<sup>43</sup> In addition, among the popular items smuggled from China were foreign contents—in particular DVDs and USBs containing South Korean dramas—which revealed in plain sight the falsehood of the regime’s propaganda.<sup>44</sup> Though public mistrust remained largely checked, Kim became increasingly wary about a weakening of his domestic legitimacy, which he had so painstakingly manufactured over the course of his leadership.

Against this backdrop, Kim’s shift in rhetoric and attitude toward the South is perhaps neither surprising nor illogical. Kim needed to reshape his image as his reputation plummeted, hardening the international community’s resolve to punish the regime. He also needed to buy time and diffuse tension as Trump’s threats of a “bloody nose strike” appeared bafflingly genuine. The Pyeongchang Olympics proved a fitting occasion to extend an olive branch without appearing too eager for appeasement, particularly given Moon’s efforts to resume contact with the North through what he dubbed the “Peace Olympics.” Kim’s decision to partake in the Olympics could be easily justified to his people as a response to Moon’s continuous overtures and would be welcomed by the international community as a long-anticipated beacon of peace on the Korean Peninsula. For Kim, the Pyeongchang Olympics could be transformed into another opportunity for a much-needed public relations campaign.

## Kim’s Charm Offensive in Pyeongchang

Besides Kim’s affinity for sports and the timeliness of his Olympics maneuver, the so-called “charm offensive” in Pyeongchang makes for an interesting case study, because it features both the old and new aspects of Kim’s public relations strategy. Among the most notable elements of the campaign include: 1) hosting a military parade before the Olympics to juxtapose his peaceful intentions with formidable capabilities; 2) showcasing the Wonsan tourist area to establish an alternative source of income and promote an image of prosperity; and 3) sending his female envoys to give the reticent regime a human face—one of glamor and grace. While consistent with promoting *juche*, his *suryong* status, and nationalism, the image-making operations Kim undertook before and during the Olympics endorse a unique combination of images: strength, prosperity, and modernity.

It is no coincidence that on the eve of the Pyeongchang Olympics, the regime held a massive military parade to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of its army. Kim deliberately changed the festive day from April 25 to February 8, so that the parade

could take place before the Olympics.<sup>45</sup> Though its scale was smaller than usual, its timing indicates Kim's desire to nuance his Olympics message: North Korea is willing to cooperate with the international community as long as it is respected as a nuclear state.<sup>46</sup> This image of a powerful yet peace-seeking North Korea is deeply embedded in the minds of its people. In an impassioned speech, Kim declared that the military parade will boast the North's "world-class military power."<sup>47</sup> He also maintained his narrative about the imperialist threat posed by the United States, in a familiar attempt to stir nationalism and justify the stature of the army.<sup>48</sup> The parade represents Kim's way of rationalizing his Olympics overture to the North Korean people—he is demanding from the international community what is rightfully theirs: prestige.

Externally, Kim treated the parade as an exclusively domestic affair. Contrary to past precedent, the regime banned foreign journalists from covering the spectacle, presumably to limit outside coverage of its display of force.<sup>49</sup> According to Bong Yong-shik, Kim hoped to make his domestic audience believe that North Korea had truly become a "nuclear power," but tempered his activities to strengthen the credibility of his peace gesture to South Korea.<sup>50</sup> Despite Kim's effort to keep a low profile abroad, South Korean conservatives mounted heavy criticisms of the parade, asserting that it violated the peaceful spirit of the Olympics and failed to reciprocate the South's decision to postpone its military exercises with the United States. In retaliation, Kim canceled a joint cultural event in Mount Kumgang, explicitly characterizing the Army Day parade as an internal affair: "In the midst of continuing insults from the South Korean press [...] towards our own *domestic celebratory event*, we have no choice but to cancel the agreed-upon event."<sup>51</sup> The parade reveals Kim's wish to defend an image of peace before the international community even as he projects a perception of strength among his domestic audience.

As part of his efforts to capitalize on international publicity and boost tourism in North Korea, Kim also promoted the Wonsan tourist zone, in particular the Masikryong ski resort, where he negotiated with the South to hold joint ski training ahead of the Olympics.<sup>52</sup> Since its opening in 2013, Masikryong has been a symbol of North Korean prosperity and an important propaganda tool: "Masikryong speed"—referring to the hustle with which the resort was built—serves as a political slogan to encourage a *juche* mentality among the toiling masses.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the state media credits "the vigor, fearlessness, and high morale of the workers" for making Wonsan "the envy of the world."<sup>54</sup> Further, it adds that, "[i]n the near future, people coming here from around the world will open a new civilization in Chosun," signaling positive prospects for the country's economic revival—and thus, its attainment of *juche*.<sup>55</sup> That South Korean athletes now trained at Masikryong helps portray Kim's multimillion dollar project as a product of his far-sighted *byungjin* policy (rather than an imprudent decision made at a time of crushing poverty) and strengthen his legitimacy as *suryong*.<sup>56</sup>

Kim's promotion of the ski resort is as much targeted at his international audience as at his domestic one. Besides reinforcing the North's message of reconciliation, the joint North-South training session at Masikryong allows Kim to show off the country's latest feat. Built amid intensifying sanctions and isolation, the resort symbolizes the North's resilience, indicating that "North Korea is preparing for a future despite its isolation—or perhaps for an end to the isolation altogether."<sup>57</sup> In touting the resort, Kim also highlights what makes him different from his grandfather and father: as Benjamin Silberstein puts it, "Kim Jong-un wants to make it clear that he cares not just about the country surviving and fighting the



Americans, but also about people having fun.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, a plaque at the resort openly labels it “[t]he work of Dear Leader Kim Jong-un who devoted hard work and heart and soul to make our people the happiest and most civilized.”<sup>59</sup> This imagery of North Korean prosperity is precisely what NBC anchor Lester Holt witnessed when he visited Masikryong and probably what Kim intended for him to see: a “modern resort” with “a lot of families out enjoying themselves.”<sup>60</sup>

Among the features of Kim's Olympics campaign, one that enjoyed the most extensive coverage is his use of female envoys, trained to reshape the North's image. It began with Hyon Song-wol—a North Korean singer and Kim's alleged ex-lover—who arrived in the South two weeks prior to the Olympics to inspect the facilities where the North's Samjiyon Orchestra was scheduled to perform.<sup>61</sup> Hyon leads the country's first modern pop group called the Moranbong Band, which represents North Korea's emerging globalism and modernity: Handpicked by Kim, the band first appeared in 2012 in short skirts and high heels, performing a rendition of the “Rocky” theme song.<sup>62</sup> Embodying the North's embrace of “global trends,” Hyon attracted intense curiosity in the South and around the world. Her glamour contradicted an image of deprivation that is typically associated with North Korea, and her captivating effect was compounded by the fact that she was rumored to have been executed for making pornographic videos, which is clearly fake news. Hyon's trip exemplifies the fact that external narratives about the regime can be wrong, and that, contrary to common perception, North Korea is a “modern” country, with beautiful, empowered women like herself.

Perhaps the most prominent among the women Kim sent is his own sister, Kim Yo-jong, who led the North's Olympics entourage to signal the regime's sincerity behind its renewed engagement with the South. As one of Kim's direct family members—and the first to ever visit the South since the war—Kim Yo-jong carries with her an air of authenticity and legitimacy that even his most trusted advisors lack. This is true for North Koreans as well, as people increasingly speculate that she holds more power than Kim Jong-un's wife and that he places “a special kind of trust in her.”<sup>63</sup> To the outside world, Kim Yo-jong's soft-smiling face came to replace the image of an authoritarian regime that is politically and culturally male-dominated.<sup>64</sup> In contrast to her brother's brash mannerisms, Kim Yo-jong's attitude appeared “more refined and polite,” challenging a widespread notion that the regime is irrational and therefore, unreliable.<sup>65</sup> Conjuring up an image of goodwill, she gave further credence to the North's latest peace initiative.

To amplify her effect, Kim Yo-jong was accompanied by the North's infamous “army of beauties,” a squad of two-hundred-odd cheerleaders selected for their attractive looks and ideological devotion.<sup>66</sup> While trained to promote *juče* and honor Kim Jong-un, the group was dispatched with a more immediate objective in Pyeongchang: to generate positive publicity for North Korea, particularly in the South, ahead of Kim's post-Olympics diplomatic maneuvers.<sup>67</sup> To that aim, the cheerleaders made a surprise appearance at the South Korean men's hockey game, marking it the first time they attended an Olympic event where the North Korean athletes did not compete.<sup>68</sup> The squad cheered for the South and waved flags of a united Korea, chanting “Unify the Motherland” and “Win, win, our athletes win.”<sup>69</sup> Rekindling a connection between the two Koreas that is often lost among the younger generations in the South, the cheerleaders served to inspire new hopes of reunification and peace, however unrealistic they may be.

## Olympics for Peace?

Kim's public relations campaign is designed to support his strategic agenda at the Olympics: breaking free from the debilitating economic pressure and political isolation by holding hands with South Korea. By promoting an image of North Korean modernity and stealing the symbolism of the Olympics, Kim brands both himself and the country as open and peace-seeking. Externally, this gesture of goodwill helps soften the international community's resolve to stifle the North and thwarts the United States from resorting to force. Internally, whatever rewards Kim earns from his cooperative behavior enables him to deliver on his *byungjin* promise and further strengthen his domestic legitimacy. To that end, Kim has selected South Korea as the first and primary target of his Olympics gambit. Two factors make this a salient choice: 1) under Moon's progressive leadership, Seoul is more likely to reciprocate Kim's peace initiative with immediate rewards, providing the regime with much-needed relief; and 2) the image of inter-Korean reconciliation will bolster Kim's message of peace and prompt the international community to reexamine its pressure tactics. If the credibility of any promise (or threat) is in the eye of the beholder, then learning South Korean responses is a good starting point for assessing the strategic value of Kim's Olympics campaign.

Signifying at least some success on Kim's part, Seoul's response has been reasonably promising. For Moon, having the North participate in the Olympics was the surest way to prevent a provocation, which could have otherwise sabotaged his first major diplomatic event. Besides enabling the event to take place in a friendly atmosphere, Kim's overture paved the way for the two leaders to officially meet in Panmunjom in April and revitalize their cultural and humanitarian exchanges, aspirations long espoused by Moon as part of his "Moonshine policy." Yet, the recent thaw in relations also deepened internal divisions in South Korea about how to perceive and respond to Kim's latest campaign. In particular, Moon's accommodation of sanctioned entities during the Olympics prompted heated debate about Kim's (ulterior) motives. Conservatives asserted that, by demanding concessions under a false promise of reconciliation, Kim was trying to challenge the sanctions regime and the U.S.-South Korean alliance. Beneath the surface of warming relations, suspicions about Kim's true intentions continued to boil.

This divisiveness in Seoul further heightened as Washington signaled its own skepticism toward Kim. On his way to Pyeongchang, Mike Pence stressed that the Trump administration's objective was to prevent North Korea from "hijacking" the Olympics. Indeed, to emphasize the North's brutality, Pence included in his delegation Fred Warmbier—the father of the American student who died following his detainment in a North Korean prison camp. Further, Pence visited the Cheonan memorial and met with North Korean defectors during his stay, reinforcing images of Kim's despotism to undo his image make-over. Despite expressing a willingness to engage with the North (on condition that sanctions continue), Pence skipped Moon's dinner reception, presumably to avoid encountering the North Korean officials. This show of disrespect, in the broader context of his anti-North Korean campaign, demonstrated Washington's disapproval of Kim's gambit and—according to South Korean conservatives—Moon's seeming vindication of it.

Seoul's internal dilemma—exacerbated by Washington's conflicting signals—indicates that the post-Olympics inter-Korean relations still remain uncertain and at risk. In the shorter term, Moon has to work with a narrow scope of rewards he can offer Kim, involving smaller, more symbolic measures such as humanitarian aid and family reunions. Likewise, Kim may earn some recognition and legitimacy, quashing internal criticism of his inexperience and crafting an image of a seasoned leader, but he is unlikely to attain wider sanctions relief in so far as Washington continues to advocate its “maximum pressure” approach. Indeed, any substantive progress on long-term, full-scale inter-Korean reconciliation will depend on the results of the Trump-Kim summit. Until then, what Kim can gain from the thaw in relations with the South is fairly constrained, even if still constructive for his agenda.

## Kim's Charm Offensive Post-Pyeongchang

The South's conflicted stance and the constraints this imposes on Kim suggest that his charm offensive will continue for the foreseeable future, extending to the more consequential (if unlikely) partner—the United States.

Redoubling his charm offensive, Kim participated directly in remaking his image during the inter-Korean summit on April 27 in Panmunjom. The outcomes of the summit—principally the Panmunjom Declaration—consisted of familiar generalities, which were intended to set a tone of goodwill as the two Koreas deepen their engagement. Though the details of their agreement remain yet to be delineated, the summit was rich with symbolism. From savoring the North's signature dish to watering a commemorative pine tree, the brotherly chemistry between the two leaders garnered widespread delight, particularly among the South Korean public. Bolstering these cosmetic effects were Kim's own reconstructed image: defying his oft-caricatured “mad man” persona, Kim presented himself as unassuming and good-humored, joking regretfully about his morning missile launches and admitting the “embarrassing” state of the North's transit system. Shared comfortably and off-script, such remarks painted Kim as a reasonable, honest, and even amiable leader, strengthening the credibility of his peace gesture.

Moreover, following his pledge to suspend missile tests and shut down the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, Kim granted “amnesty” to the three jailed Americans and released them during Mike Pompeo's visit to Pyongyang. The images of their return were sensational, and strategically useful for both Trump and Kim: Embracing the prisoners as they thanked him tearfully, Trump declared a swift diplomatic victory. On the other hand, in releasing the prisoners, Kim gave up a crucial bargaining chip against Trump—but by letting him score politically at home, Kim locked Trump into a summit, the particulars of which had only been loosely organized thus far. Indeed, hours after Kim's decision to free the American prisoners, Trump announced that their summit will be held on June 12 in Singapore. He even underscored Kim's intentions of peace: “We're starting off on a new footing [...] I really think [Kim] wants to do something and bring that country into the real world.” In Trump's words—however transient and frivolous they may be—Kim was now a “very honorable leader,” which is a significant improvement from the “rocket man” he was once derided to be. The optics of Kim's benevolence enabled him to clinch the date and location of his summit with Trump, all the while reshaping his image as a leader of considerable diplomatic savvy.

## Conclusion

Like his grandfather and father before him, Kim Jong-un relies on calculated public relations maneuvers to justify his power. At home, his public relations initiatives help propagate an elaborate set of narratives through which he can strengthen the legitimacy of his regime and his own personal credibility as the ruler. Combined with the use of force and restrictive social policies, these image-making efforts help Kim prevent internal challenges against his rule.<sup>70</sup> Abroad, Kim alters his image to shape the diplomatic climate and gain material and political advantages. Creating competitive images and raising the specter of conflict can coerce adversaries into making concessions, which can be exploited to arouse nationalistic sentiments and bolster Kim's authority. On the other hand, promulgating cooperative images and raising the prospect of engagement can compel both allies and adversaries to offer extensive rewards. For Kim, these resources are particularly important as they help provide for public sustenance and—to a much larger degree—the privileges of the elites, whose deference is imperative for regime stability. His external public relations efforts are, therefore, intricately linked to his domestic priority: the survival of his regime.

Kim Jong-un's public relations strategy follows the broader framework on which his grandfather and father have heretofore relied—and yet, Kim promotes an image of youth and modernity that is distinctly his own. Indeed, this is evident in his latest campaign in Pyeongchang, during which Kim sought to paint himself and the country as strong, modern, and prosperous. Though Kim's true intentions behind the Olympics gambit remain difficult to specify, his peace gesture allowed him to humanize the North's image ahead of its real diplomatic tests—namely, what comes after the “Peace Olympics.” For now, that Kim earned a chance to meet with a sitting U.S. president indicates that his public relations efforts have worked favorably toward his overarching strategic objective. For as long as his diplomatic outreach lasts, and until he can gain the necessary rewards he needs to stay in power, Kim's image-making maneuvers will continue.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Christopher Hale, “Multifunctional Juche: A Study of the Changing Dynamic between Juche and the State Constitution in North Korea,” *Korea Journal* 42, no. 3 (2002): 301.
- <sup>2</sup> David Kang, “The Wolf of Pyongyang,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 9, 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> Ten Great Principles of the Establishment of the Unitary Ideology System, <http://www.internationallawbureau.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Ten-Great-Principles-of-the-Establishment-of-the-Unitary-ideology.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> Haksoon Paik, “Power Transition in North Korea and Kim Jong Un's Leadership Style: Prospects for Reform and Opening,” NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 3, 2012, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/power-transition-in-north-korea-and-kim-jong-uns-leadership-style-prospects-for-reform-and-opening/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Christopher Richardson, “North Korea's Kim dynasty: the making of a personality cult,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—And Why It Matters* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Isaac Stone Fish and Adam Cathcart, "The Slick PR Stylings of Kim Jong Un," *Foreign Policy*, July 11, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Choe Sang-hun and Norimitsu Onishi, "North Korea's Tears: A Blend of Cult, Culture and Coercion," *New York Times*, December 20, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, "Pyongyang's Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea," *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 52-53.

<sup>11</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race*, Ch. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Kwang-cheol, *The Political Strategies of 'Kim Il-sung Nationalism': A Critical Analysis* (Seoul: Book Lab, 2014), 237.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Denney, "North Korean Nationalism: Lessons from Pyongyang," *Sino-NK*, June 8, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Jung H. Pak, "The Education of Kim Jong-un," Brookings Institution, February 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/essay/the-education-of-kim-jong-un/>.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Haggard, "Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's Address," Peterson Institute for International Economics, January 2, 2018, <https://piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness-transformation/kim-jong-uns-2018-new-years-address>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Kim Jong-un calls on nation to catch up with 'global trends,'" Yonhap, July 8, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2012/07/08/12/0301000000AEN20120708002400315F.HTML>.

<sup>18</sup> Jeong Jae-sung, "Will He, Won't He: to Open or Close," *Daily NK*, July 5, 2012, <http://english.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catId=nk00400&num=9457>.

<sup>19</sup> Pak, "The Education of Kim Jong-un."

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Fifield, "These are the millennial women behind North Korea's Kim Jong Un," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> "Kim Yo Jong," North Korea Leadership Watch, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/kim-yo-jong-2/>.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Madden, "North Korea's New Propagandist?" *38 North*, August 14, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>26</sup> Julian Ryall, "Kim Jong-un was child prodigy who could drive at age of three, claims North Korean school curriculum," *The Telegraph*, April 10, 2015.
- <sup>27</sup> James Pearson, Hyonhee Shin, and Karolos Grohmann, "Kim Jong Un's love of sport could be making of Games," Reuters, November 6, 2017.
- <sup>28</sup> Hunter Felt, "How NBA star Dennis Rodman came to stand between the world and nuclear war," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2017.
- <sup>29</sup> "On popularizing physical training and sport and developing sporting skills rapidly," Kim Jong-il's Speech to the Officials in the Field of Physical Training and Sport, May 19, 1986.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Christopher Green, "Sports Diplomacy in the Korean Peninsula," International Crisis Group, February 8, 2018.
- <sup>33</sup> "North Korea got what it wanted from the Winter Olympics," BBC News, February 9, 2018.
- <sup>34</sup> Adam Taylor, "The Olympics are tough for all athletes. For North Koreans, they're worse," *Washington Post*, August 10, 2016.
- <sup>35</sup> "North Korea and the Olympics: Bombs, media blackouts and glory," BBC News, January 3, 2018.
- <sup>36</sup> "The history of the Olympic Truce," Olympics, November 13, 2017, <https://www.olympic.org/news/the-history-of-the-olympic-truce>.
- <sup>37</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, "North Korea and the Spotty Record of Sports Diplomacy," *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2018.
- <sup>38</sup> Carol Morello, "Soaps and dramas may achieve change in North Korea more than military force, defector says," *Washington Post*, November 1, 2017.
- <sup>39</sup> Suki Kim, "The Meaning of Kim Jong Nam's Murder," *The Atlantic*, February 24, 2017.
- <sup>40</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, Russell Goldman, and Adam Goldman, "Otto Warmbier, Detained American, Is Evacuated from North Korea in a Coma," *New York Times*, June 13, 2017.
- <sup>41</sup> Simon Denyer, "Trump alarms China with 'Cold War' rhetoric in State of Union address," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2018.
- <sup>42</sup> Jonathan Corrado, "North Korea's Propaganda Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, March 13, 2016.
- <sup>43</sup> Andrei Lankov, "Changing North Korea," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2009).
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>45</sup> David Josef Volodzko, "'Pyongyang Olympics': how North Korea stole the Winter Games," *South China Morning Post*, January 27, 2018.
- <sup>46</sup> Bruce Klinger, "What Lies Behind North Korea's 'Charm Offensive' at the Olympics," The Heritage Foundation, February 8, 2018.
- <sup>47</sup> Chad O'Carroll and Dagyum Ji, "Hwasong-14 and 15 rockets displayed on the eve of the Winter Olympics," *NK News*, February 8, 2018.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> "Kim Jong Un declares at parade that North Korea is a 'world class military power,'" *Straits Times*, February 8, 2018.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> Ha Yoon-ah, "Why did North Korea cancel the Mt. Kumgang joint performance?" *Daily NK*, February 2, 2018.
- <sup>52</sup> Josh Smith, "North Korea trumpets 'world-level' tourist project ahead of Olympics," Reuters, January 25, 2018.
- <sup>53</sup> "North Korea got what it wanted from the Winter Olympics."
- <sup>54</sup> Jung Kyo-jin, "Kim Jong Un's real Pyeongchang Olympics strategy, as told through official state media," *Daily NK*, January 27, 2018.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Shin Hyonhee, "Ski lift: North Korea may capitalize on joint Olympics training visit," Reuters, January 22, 2018.
- <sup>57</sup> Adam Taylor, "North Korea's push for ski resorts reveals its hopes for a life after isolation," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2018.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> Sebastien Berger, "Skiing North Korea," *Asia Times*, April 25, 2017.
- <sup>60</sup> Taylor, "North Korea's push for ski resorts."
- <sup>61</sup> Anna Fifield, "South Korea went gaga over a North Korean singer. Just wait until the rest arrive," *Washington Post*, January 22, 2018.
- <sup>62</sup> David Chance and Park Ju-min, "Rock chicks, show tunes and Minnie Mouse: Pyongyang swings to Kim's new vibe," Reuters, July 12, 2012.
- <sup>63</sup> Kang Mi-jin, "Olympics inspire hope for increased access to South Korean goods," *Daily NK*, February 14, 2018.
- <sup>64</sup> "Olympic politics: North Korea's media charm offensive," Aljazeera, February 16, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> “How Kim Yo Jong signals a change in North Korea’s strategy,” *Daily NK*, February 12, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Laura Bicker, “Kim Yo-jong and North Korea’s secret weapon,” BBC News, February 13, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Matt Stiles, “North Korea to send ‘army of beauties’ cheering squad to Winter Olympics in South Korea,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2018.

<sup>68</sup> “Kim’s cheer squad ‘charm offensive.’” Reuters, February 23, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 44-74.