

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AT THE PYEONGCHANG WINTER OLYMPICS: A GROUNDWORK STUDY

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Abstract

This article draws on content and sentiment analysis of a sample of international English-language media reports to identify the core elements of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) strategic communications campaign conducted at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, and to establish groundwork for an assessment of its effectiveness. Using the Olympics as a stage for strategic communications is as old as the games themselves. The article examines the structure and elements of a DPRK Strategic Communications campaign by locating it in historical and theoretical context, and shows how it bears the hallmarks of a carefully crafted and timed agenda-setting campaign. Subsequent to the games, the supreme leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-un, met with President Moon Jae-in of South Korea, to discuss a full peace treaty and, in June 2018, met with President Trump of the United States. Irrespective of the ultimate outcome of these engagements, a month before the games such a meeting would have been inconceivable. We contend that the 2018 Winter Olympics held in the Republic of Korea (ROK) provides a case study for assessing how influencing discourses in the media space may impact the conditions of possibility for international political action.

Keywords *PyeongChang Winter Olympics, Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in, Donald Trump, North Korea, South Korea, China, strategic communications*

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Introduction

In February 2018, as the 23rd Winter Olympic Games approached, there had been a notable increase in tension on the Korean peninsula. In 2016, the UN Security Council had adopted Resolution 2270, leading to measures against Pyongyang taken by the Council of Europe. The preceding 12 months had seen the leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Kim Jong-un, grandson of founder Kim Il-sung, launch 23 missiles during 16 tests, apparently refining its technology with each launch. In July 2017, North Korea conducted its first test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which it claimed could reach 'anywhere in the world'. A further launch, taking place during the early hours of 29 November 2017, flew higher and farther than any previous test launch. That missile, which landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone, came after a break in testing of almost two months.

Where the Obama administration's posture of 'strategic patience' represented hopes that North Korea might voluntarily de-nuclearise or spontaneously implode, the regime's rapidly growing nuclear confidence led to a change in posture by Donald Trump's White House. Then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced the end of the policy of 'strategic patience' in March 2017, and declared that 'all options are on the table'. During the latter half of 2017, international concern mounted over what this meant for the complex security

balance in North East Asia. Communicating that the era of ‘strategic patience’ was over did not explicate what outcome, short of a preemptive war, would suit the Trump administration, and what posture South Korea would assume. This febrile security environment coincided with a change in administration in South Korea; the sitting president was impeached and Moon Jae-in, a former human rights lawyer and son of North Korean refugees, was elected in May 2017.

Relations between the DPRK and the ROK have been cyclical in nature. Periods of high tension and escalation marked by overtly hostile communications and missile or nuclear testing have alternated with periods of rapprochement. The North has previously been effective in leveraging these cycles to extract monetary aid and development assistance.¹ The DPRK’s first leader, Kim Il-sung, extracted almost \$US20 billion in economic and military aid from the USSR and China, and used the war with the South to prop up his hold on power in the face of early challenges.² Recent history reflects an established pattern of nuclear testing and missile launches as a prelude to negotiations and engagement, followed by further tests.³

Widespread cynicism regarding the DPRK’s unexpected offer to participate in the PyeongChang Games⁴ in January 2018 reflected a belief that the DPRK simply aimed to extract financial assistance from the newly emollient South, potentially through an easing of sanctions. Whilst heading off risk of a US-led intervention, it was also seeking to reinforce potentially fraying domestic regime stability. On the other hand, the PyeongChang Olympics appeared to some to present a real opportunity for reconciliation between the North and the South, as well as reducing the possibility of disastrous, full-blown conflict with the US. It is certainly possible that the DPRK now envisages a peacefully united peninsula.

Hopeful responses to the DPRK’s participation in the PyeongChang Games reflect a widespread assumption that major sporting events can function as tools

1 Andrei Lankov, ‘Changing North Korea: An information campaign can beat the regime’, *Foreign Affairs* 88:6 (2009): 95–105.

2 Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

3 Victor Cha, James Lewis, Jenny Jun, Scott LaFoy and Ethan Sohn, ‘North Korea’s Cyber Operations, Strategy and Responses’, *Report for CSIS Korea Chair* (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2015).

4 PyeongChang was spelled with a capital C in the Olympic marketing materials to differentiate it from Pyongyang for foreign audiences.

of reconciliation, and that sport 'brings people together'.⁵ The Olympics have been thought to exemplify the pacifying potential of sport. There is a long history of projects of national reconciliation using the Olympics as a platform for communications aimed at fostering unity, for example, between West and East Germany, or in Yemen after its previous civil conflicts.⁶ On the other hand, the Olympics are clearly not free of international tensions; there have been recurrent calls for boycotts, including Spain's boycott of the 1936 Berlin Games due to differences with Germany, and the African nations' boycott of the 1976 Montreal Games due to the failure of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ban New Zealand for participating in a rugby tournament in South Africa still under Apartheid.

Whilst the historical record is mixed regarding the relationship between sporting events and peace-making, the Olympics constitute a unique venue for international strategic communications. International strategic communications are defined here as planned interventions into the information environment, with observable effects on that environment, which serve international political ends. The Olympic Games are a platform that is conducive to specific kinds of communication by states, and thereby constitute a unique avenue to measurable influence. There is evidence to support the hypothesis that the DPRK viewed the PyeongChang Olympics as a political opportunity to shape its representation by the international media. We argue below that DPRK strategic communications using the Olympics have been effective to some degree, inasmuch as they influenced the tone and content of international coverage within our sample of English-language media.

Any perception by the DPRK that it succeeded in creating behavioural change in other countries through its Olympic communications may shape its subsequent actions, but measuring the influence of strategic communications on other international actors' decision-making is challenging. In the aftermath of the Olympics, a US-North Korea summit was proposed and accepted, resulting in a face-to-face meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un in Singapore. Over the course of a single month, the mood and tone of engagements among the DPRK, the ROK, China, and the US turned to diplomacy and talks. The presence of multiple variables, including changing attitudes amongst a Chinese

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⁵ Liam Stockdale, 'More than just games: the global politics of the Olympic movement', in Spaaij, Ramón, and Cindy Burleson (eds) *The Olympic movement and the sport of peacemaking* (Routledge, 2016): p. 83.

⁶ Ibid.

leadership keen to quieten the security situation on its borders, sanctions, and the unpredictability of Trump himself, must foster caution regarding linear explanations for this change on the basis of our media sample. Though, it is noteworthy that claims that the DPRK may have been forced to the table by sanctions are tempered by the lack of material concessions offered by the DPRK in subsequent talks with the US. It seems clear that the DPRK responded to the environment in which it found itself in late 2017 by launching a strategic communications campaign at the Olympics. In this article, we identify the elements of that campaign and make a preliminary assessment of how it may have influenced subsequent events.

To conduct this research, we undertook a qualitative analysis of a sample of international and domestic (South Korean) English-language media reporting of DPRK activities at the games. Our analysis identifies how DPRK strategic communicative actions at the PyeongChang Olympics were received, and provides a preliminary assessment of their influence on the tone of reports in the international media. We examined 110 English-language articles, including reports from the leading international news wire services; all major US television channels; the major print media in New York, Washington DC, and around the US; magazines (from *Time* and *Esquire* to *Cosmopolitan* and *People*); global media including the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera; the UK media from the *Sun* to the *Telegraph*; as well as coverage from Canada to the Antipodes. We sorted these articles for their focus, then subjected them to sentiment analysis to identify ways in which the DPRK may have contributed to setting the agenda and tone of international media discourse.

We were interested in the degree to which North Korean messaging at the Olympics appears to have influenced the content and tone of English-language media coverage as the English-language media were overwhelmingly negative in their representation of the DPRK prior to the Olympics.⁷ Focusing on English-language media facilitated coding across the sample, but it is also justified inasmuch as they are an influential source of secondary news content globally. Local ROK-based English-language media representations of the North—generally translations of articles from local media—are constrained by the National Security Law, which prohibits positive representations of the North. However, they provided a sample that could be effectively compared with international

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⁷ Hyun-jin Seo, 'International media coverage of North Korea: study of journalists and news reports on the six-party nuclear talks', *Asian Journal of Communication*, 19:1 (2009): 1–17.

content. This is a groundwork study, laying the foundation for robust preliminary hypotheses that we plan to test in further research, expanding the analysis to include other likely target audiences for DPRK Olympic communications. Such research will test preliminary findings by comparing English-language media sentiment with content and sentiment in Chinese- and Korean-language media before and after the PyeongChang Games.

In the first section, we outline the historical and geopolitical context for DPRK strategic communications. In the second section, we examine the background for strategic communications on the Olympic stage and what is distinctive about this forum. These sections provide the theoretical grounds for positing that it is advantageous to view DPRK participation in the Olympics in the context of strategic communications. In the third section, we analyse the dominant narratives in our sample of English-language media reports about the Games. We identify three areas of activity that appear to constitute the pillars of a DPRK strategic communications campaign conducted at the Games, evident in the three most widely-reported communicative actions undertaken by the North:

- 1) the joint-Korean team presence at the opening and closing ceremonies;
- 2) the Cheerleading squad that accompanied the DPRK team;
- 3) the stage-managed presentation of Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong at the Games.

We conclude that North Korea appears to have waged a relatively effective agenda-setting campaign. Effectiveness is a measure of the degree to which planned DPRK communicative actions influenced English-language media coverage of the PyeongChang Olympics. Whilst our findings are provisional, they provide grounds for further comparative research to test this hypothesis against a larger multilingual media sample. Irrespective of the ultimate intentions of the DPRK, their apparent ability to influence the agenda of international news reporting using the Olympic Games as a political stage is suggestive of how strategic communicative action can create opportunity spaces in world politics. Whilst we do not posit linear causation regarding subsequent changes to US foreign policy behaviour, DPRK communications at the Olympics influenced discourses within the information environment, which form part of the context for behavioural change.

DPRK international strategic communications in context

The North's international strategic communications should be understood in light of its domestic propaganda. The regime adopted many of the elements of Stalin's USSR, combining a cult of personality centered around the Kims with the idea of a sacred mandate that legitimates their rule. As noted by McFate, North Korean internal propaganda involves a combination of 'top down culture, intentionally imposed by the regime to instil certain behaviours and norms, and bottom up culture, organically developed over the course of centuries of Korean history'.⁸ As such, stable, endogenous, inter-Korean values, including self-sufficiency, family loyalty, 'small group communalism', and conceptions of the sacred, are also critical to the regime. This is particularly clear in the concept of the Kims' 'Mandate of Heaven', which justifies hereditary rule,⁹ and in the national ideology of *Juche*. Invented by Kim Il-sung, and tightly bound up with the sacred coding of the regime, *Juche* legitimises cultural, economic, and political isolationism by stressing the error of imitating foreign countries or of becoming excessively international.¹⁰

Considerable effort has been expended to project an image of the supreme leader Kim Jong-un to both domestic elite and North Korean youth audiences as energetic and likeable, generously forgiving 'defectors' who return to the North after travelling abroad.¹¹ Kim's position is not yet certain within the state apparatus, as prominent defector Thae Yong-ho recently testified: 'while on the surface the Kim Jong-un regime seems to have consolidated its power through [a] reign of terror [...] there are great and unexpected changes taking place within North Korea'.¹² The stability of young Kim's rule relies on maintaining a narrative of technological advancement and modernity.¹³ Domestic propaganda, projected through tightly-controlled state media, centres on the concept of a 'modern socialist paradise'. The central content of this claim is 'that North Korea is the most technologically and spiritually advanced country on earth', with

8 Montgomery McFate, 'Manipulating the architecture of cultural control: A conceptual model for Strategic Influence Operations in North Korea', *Journal of Information Warfare*, Volume 4:1 (2005): 22.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 34

11 Enrico D'Ambrogio, 'European Parliamentary Research Service, North Korea's propaganda strategy', *European Parliament Briefing* (October 2016).

12 Thae Yong-ho, 'Testimony of Minister Thae Yong-ho', *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs* (Washington, DC, 1 November 2017).

13 D'Ambrogio, 'European Parliamentary Research Service'.

South Korea a poor relative.¹⁴ Whilst this was perhaps an accurate description of the comparative situations immediately after the War, the South has developed at a significantly greater rate than the North.¹⁵ This ideologically significant claim is thus vulnerable, which likely explains why so little of the PyeongChang Olympics was broadcast inside the DPRK.¹⁶ This also suggests that any DPRK strategic communications at the Olympics were targeted primarily at external audiences.

The North has a developed capability for international information activities, including the spread of anti-ROK and anti-US propaganda, a function that is apparently led by Kim Jong-un's sister who headed the North Korean delegation to the Winter Olympics.¹⁷ During the period leading up to the Games a campaign of disruptive cyber-attacks targeting institutions in the South and banks worldwide was widely attributed to the North.¹⁸ Whilst there is debate about the strategic communications function of these attacks, for example the degree to which they were intended to function as a deterrent, their economic focus is also thought to provide evidence that economic sanctions were biting.¹⁹ The DPRK's open pursuit of nuclear and missile weapons programmes throughout 2017, alongside demonstrations of informational and cyber capabilities, have been described by H. Pak Jung as signaling to the DPRK's key international target audiences—the ROK, China, and the United States—the regime's commitment to ensuring the country's 'independence and sovereignty under the leadership of the Kim family and to maintain[ing] strategic relevance and [the] ability to drive events on the Korean Peninsula'.²⁰

Whilst DPRK domestic propaganda dismisses the South as a corrupt and venal dictatorship, their cross-border strategic communications are better fitted to those target audiences. In the immediate run-up to the Olympics, its messages were clearly intended to be positive and welcoming. North Korean propaganda material is often found scattered around public places in Seoul. In early 2018, a series of new DPRK propaganda fliers and leaflets that appeared there, pre-

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14 Lankov, 'Changing North Korea', p. 98.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., pp. 95–105.

17 D'Ambrogio, 'European Parliamentary Research Service'.

18 Paul Mozur and Sang-hun Choe, 'North Korea's Rising Ambition Seen in Bid to Breach Global Banks', *New York Times*, 25 March 2017.

19 Min-kyung Jung, 'Cash-strapped North Korea turning more to cryptocurrency', *The Korea Herald*, 19 December 2017.

20 H. Pak Jung, 'Regime Insecurity or Regime Resilience? North Korea's Grand Strategy in the Context of Nuclear and Missile Development', *Brookings Institute* (February 2018)

sumed to have been dropped from balloons, showed the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics logo and its two cartoon mascots standing beneath the Olympic rings. One side showed the Winter Olympics mascots welcoming guests from Pyongyang who were arriving for the Games. The reverse side showed them striding side-by-side, saying ‘Let’s go to Kaesong! Let’s go to Mount Kumgang!’—a reference to the now closed inter-Korean industrial zone and failed inter-Korean tourist project that sit just inside North Korea. The South Korean government closed Kaesong in 2016 in protest over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes. The inter-Korean Mount Kumgang resort lies in the coastal province of Kangwon, which is divided by the border between the two Koreas. It was closed after a South Korean tourist was shot by a North Korean guard in 2008. These propaganda leaflets thus suggested to audiences in the South that the Olympics could provide an opening for a return to friendly inter-Korean co-operation. North Korea simultaneously announced a new ‘world-level’ tourist project in Kangwon province that appeared to be aimed at capitalising on the international attention surrounding the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, which lies in the South Korean half of the province.²¹

This suggested that the North was launching a new strategic communications campaign as the PyeongChang Games approached, the tone of which was in striking contrast to the belligerent messaging that had marked the prior six months and had contributed to intensifying sanctions. The threatening rhetoric between the US and the DPRK, which had accelerated throughout 2017, had been accompanied by a tightening of international sanctions under pressure from the US. By the end of 2017, the DPRK had completed a series of missile tests, which, it claimed, established North Korea’s nuclear deterrent capability, rendering the possibility of conflict on the peninsula more dangerous for everyone. The DPRK claim of having completed its efforts towards developing an operational nuclear missile deterrent capacity suggested that the North now saw an interest in de-escalating tensions with the United States. This would be in keeping with the cyclical de-escalatory bargaining patterns observed in DPRK behaviour over time.²² Since any evidence of productive engagement with the international community would undercut arguments for further pressure to be exerted, either militarily or through sanctions, it is reasonable to infer that the DPRK’s participation in the Olympics constitutes part of a wider effort to soft-

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²¹ James Pearson, ‘[North Korea sends winter Olympics fliers to Seoul: website](#)’, *Reuters*, 5 February 2018.
²² Lankov, ‘Changing North Korea’.

en its international representations, particularly those within English-language media widely consumed by key US audiences and policy-makers. The international English-language news wires dominate media discourse around the world, shaping the information environment in which the international community deliberates.

Through participating more actively in sanctions in 2017, China had signaled that there were limits to its patience with regards to DPRK actions, which undoubtedly featured in DPRK calculations. The North's *Juche* or 'national self-reliance' ideology, put in place by Kim Il-sung and maintained by Kim Jong-un, has, in practice, meant an increasing dependence on its powerful neighbour. Mao and successive Chinese leaders viewed North Korea as 'close as lips and teeth', and an important buffer against the threat of a united peninsula under US influence. China is the only continental state that shares a border with North Korea. The Chinese leadership and population thus constitute a key target audience for North Korea's strategic communications.²³ China is the DPRK's predominant trading partner, both explicit and covert, and its principle source of fossil fuels. Whilst the English-language media are the target for strategic communications aimed at the US and the international community, influencing representations within the Chinese-language media is likely to be another key regime objective.

The timing of the DPRK's projection of more emollient messaging also made considerable sense in light of the ROK's desire for the Olympics to be a 'good news' story for the peninsula. The friendly disposition of the new Moon government in the South assured a positive reception of DPRK overtures across the border in January 2018. South Korea's role as Olympic host must be understood in the context of the state's own strategic communications objectives. The ROK has embraced global trade as its mantra since the Korean War, and has adopted a free-market system with distinctive characteristics that led to GDP growth from less than \$US 100 per capita in 1961 to more than \$US 25,458 in 2016. South Korea has been hailed as a regional 'cultural powerhouse', successfully exporting cultural products as far afield as New Zealand and the United States, as well as closer to home—to China, Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

South Korea seems to 'think in terms of relational power, rather than simply

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²³ Yu-Hua Chen, 'China and North Korea: Still "Lips and Teeth"', *The Diplomat*, 21 July 2018.

thinking in terms of the distribution of content around the world'.²⁴ The term *hallyu* or 'Korean Wave' was first coined by the Chinese press in the late 1990s to describe the growing popularity of Korean pop culture in the country.²⁵ What started as a South Korean marketing campaign for selling products to East Asia, then went global with the sale of K-dramas and K-pop, has now grown to the worldwide marketing of a broad range of South Korean products such as fashion, food, and makeup. The Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (KO-FICE) announced on 10 April 2016 that the *hallyu* content exports from South Korea totaled 3.2 trillion *won* (US\$2.8 billion) in 2015, to show year-on-year growth of 13.4%. The estimated effect of the export of cultural content on other products was 15.6 trillion *won*.²⁶ This global marketing of K-culture has been further enhanced as part of a policy of boosting national image by investing in broadband infrastructure, technology, and entertainment industries. This has not only resulted in economic growth but has also boosted bilateral relations and the expansion of the country's 'soft power'.²⁷ The Olympics were clearly intended to sit within and resonate with these soft power efforts. The tagline of the 2018 Winter Games was 'Passion Connected', symbolic not only of Korea's place in the global economy but also of its investment in its Internet and telecommunications infrastructure. South Korea, the world's 12th largest economy and 6th largest exporter, is now the most connected country on earth.²⁸

Moon Jae-in's election as President of South Korea in May 2017 provided a vindication of constitutional process in ROK. The current popularity of the Democrat Party comes from its promise of a clean and transparent government restoring faith in political institutions by addressing the influence wielded by the influential '*chaebol*' (business conglomerates) such as Samsung, and by pursuing a softer policy towards the North. Moon's instincts and his party's traditions favour an accommodation with Kim Jong-un. The left wing of Moon's party con-

24 Terry Flew, 'Entertainment media, cultural power, and post-globalization: The case of China's international media expansion and the discourse of soft power', *Global Media and China*, 1:4 (2016): 278–94, p. 278.

25 B.H. Chua and K. Iwabuchi, *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong University Press: 2008), J. Parc and H.C. Moon, 'Korean dramas and films: key factors for their international competitiveness', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 41:2 (2013): 126–149; Jonathan R Woodier and Sung-woo Park, 'Republic of Korea: K-culture and The Next Wave of Economic Growth', *International Journal of Cultural and Creative Industries*, 5:1 (2017): 70–81.

26 Jung Min-hee, 'South Korea's Hallyu Content Exports Reached US\$2.82 Billion Last Year', *Business Korea*, 11 April 2016.

27 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (Public Affairs, 2004).

28 According to the United Nations International Telecommunication Union's seventh annual *Measuring the Information Society Report*, which ranks countries based on their infocomm development.

siders the South's dependence on the United States oppressively colonial. Moon has stated that he is keen to revive the Sunshine Policy of greater friendship with North Korea begun in 2000 by the first Democrat President Kim Dae-jung and continued by Moon's mentor President Roh Moo-hyun. At his inauguration, Moon announced his intention 'to solve the crisis in national security', saying that he would 'go anywhere for the peace of the Korean peninsula'. Moon has clearly stated that he wants his legacy to be that of the man 'who built a peaceful relationship between the North and South'.²⁹ So it is unsurprising that Moon immediately accepted Kim Jong-un's offer to send a delegation to the Winter Olympics in January 2018, and quickly agreed to the two Korean teams marching together at the opening and closing ceremonies. Moon described this as a first step towards a new phase of bilateral engagement.³⁰

Moon's attraction to representing the Olympics as promising a new chapter for Korea aligns with the broader ROK nation-branding objectives around the Games. Alongside the South's evident desire for the PyeongChang Olympics to carry positive messages about the peninsula to an international audience, Moon's openness to relaunching positive engagement with the North adds to the likelihood that the DPRK viewed PyeongChang as a viable platform for projecting its own strategic communications.

Strategic Communications on the Olympian Stage

Choosing the Olympics as a venue for DPRK strategic communications suggests an adroit reading of the manner in which the Olympic stage amplifies positive messaging around reconciliation. These messages are carried by a range of global media platforms accessed by key international target audiences, but are largely inaccessible to the population of the North. Since the first modern-day Olympics in 1896, politics have been a part of the international sporting competition. To make sense of any DPRK strategic communications in Pyeongchang, it is necessary to outline what is distinctive about this as a context for national strategic communications, and with it, for the projection of national power.³¹ As Victor Cha notes, Olympic sport has long been intertwined with national projects fostering national prestige or rebirth, and has also often been mobilised

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29 Paula Hancock and James Griffiths, 'South Korea's sunshine man: can Moon Jae-in fix the North Korea crisis?', *CNN.com*, 20 January 2018.

30 Steve George and Tae-hoon Lee, 'South Korean leader welcomes North Korean Olympic participation', *CNN.com*, 2 January 2018.

31 Victor Cha, 'Role of Sport in International Relations: National Rebirth and Renewal', *Asian Economic Policy Review* 11:1 (2016): 139–55.

for the reconstruction and projection of new aspirational roles and identities through strategic narratives.³² The Olympics constitute a uniquely pre-structured forum for strategic communications in any national interest, which facilitates certain types and forms of messaging and inhibits others.

Olympic ‘mega events’ are widely seen as ideal platforms for the diffusion of international norms.³³ The concept of an ‘Olympic truce’ dating back to the ancient world, concretised in Pierre de Coubertin’s philosophy of Olympism, views the Olympic games as intrinsically a celebration of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding for the purpose of global peace-building.³⁴ In 1993, the Olympic truce was endorsed by the United Nations and, as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan put it on the eve of the 2008 games, the Olympic Truce ‘can demonstrate to the world that peace is possible even in the most seemingly intractable situations if we work towards it’.³⁵ This normative universalism constitutes a key interpretative frame by which communicative actions on the Olympic stage are read globally.

Darren Van Tassel and Dean Terry note that sporting cooperation has been tightly bound up with the project of peace and unification in the specific Korean context.³⁶ The two Koreas marched together in the 2000, 2004, and 2006 Winter Olympics, and in the Asian Games of 2006. Both North and South Korea are expressly committed to the project of unification. Sport has thus ‘provided a venue for joint cooperation and a demonstration of the ability of the North and South Koreans to work together’.³⁷ The expressed value of sporting cooperation for the development of a common national consciousness may have led to overly hopeful paeans, but the forum of Olympic sport clearly provides a space for safe interaction, the development of interpersonal ties, and related negotiations that may foster more peaceable relations in the future.³⁸

Negotiations were undertaken ‘before the Beijing Games in Guangzhou in September 2005, where an agreement was reached in principle to field a united

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32 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication power and the new world order*, Vol. 3 (Routledge, 2014).

33 Graeme Hayes and John Karamichas, (eds) *Olympic Games, Mega-events and Civil Societies. Globalisation, Environment, Resistance* (Palgrave, 2012), p. 12.

34 Ramon Spaaij, ‘Olympic rings of peace? The Olympic movement, peace-making and intercultural understanding’ in Spaaij, Ramón, and Burleson, Cindy (eds) *The Olympic movement and the sport of peacemaking* (Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

36 Van Tassel and Terry, ‘An overlooked path’, p. 56.

37 Ramon Spaaij, ‘Olympic rings of peace?’, p. 57.

38 *Ibid.*

team', with a single unification flag and uniforms and a single national anthem. This effort was disrupted by nuclear tests and then by wrangling over how to divide the participants, and 'in the end, the two countries only agreed to field a unified delegation of supporters for the Beijing games'.³⁹ Cooperation at the 2018 Winter Olympics built expressly on this history. The pre-existing framework of Olympic dialogue and the history of fragile cooperation between the Koreans in this arena suggest that the international surprise that met North Korean overtures was unwarranted. The DPRK's headline-capturing expression of intent to participate in the February 2018 Winter Olympics, submitted in January 2018, was likely planned well in advance of this date—this casts the hostile communications of the preceding six months in a more strategic light.

Whilst the rhetoric of Olympism is often 'inflated',⁴⁰ it is not meaningless or unimportant to participant nations' strategic communications in and around these events. The 'meaning of all strategic communications' in international relations, by states or other actors, presupposes the existence of practices that carry with them ethical precepts and conditions. These ethical terms are central to 'the justifications, rationales, narratives and explanations' that make up all strategic communicative actions: 'For those terms to make sense to interlocutors, whether states or publics', the interlocutors must pay attention to these settled norms and ethical conditions, even, or indeed especially, when an actor has poor international standing, as the DPRK does, and wishes to be improve that standing.⁴¹ It is part of the coding of national Olympic communications that participants play by implicit communicative 'rules of the game', involving an expression of a commitment to dialogue and negotiation, and categorical opposition to conflict. The fundamental principles of Olympism, based on the values articulated by the founder of the International Olympic Committee and father of the modern Olympics, Pierre De Coubertin, is the 'harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity'.⁴²

This implicit content frames any national strategic communications at the Olympics. To violate the spirit of the Olympic truce, which is to be perceived

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39 Cha, 'Role of Sport'.

Hayes and Karamichas, *Olympic Games, Mega-events and Civil Societies*, p. 143.

40 Stockdale, 'More than just games', p. 82.

41 Nicholas Michelsen and Mervyn Frost, 'Strategic Communications in International Relations: Practical Traps and Ethical Puzzles', *NATO Defence Strategic Communications 2* (2017): 9–33.

42 [The Olympic Charter](#) (15 September 2017), p. 11.

as explicitly politicising the games, will invariably result in loss in standing and influence, and is, thus, likely to backfire from an international audience perspective. Negative messaging often has limited purchase on the Olympic stage. The discourse of Olympism limits cases for exclusion, and calls for boycotts are often unsuccessful.⁴³ A widespread boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games, led by the US and followed by 62 other countries, ostensibly in protest against the Afghanistan War, was simply followed by a tit-for-tat boycott of the subsequent Los Angeles Games in 1984.⁴⁴ The IOC is only very occasionally forced into action, as in Mexico 1968, and with the sanctions that were put in place in 2017, the penalty for Russia's apparently long-running nationwide doping operation.

The Olympics have been viewed as an efficient forum for de-securitisation through positive international messaging.⁴⁵ Authors have argued that the pursuit of soft power generally characterises state communications at the Olympics.⁴⁶ Soft power refers to the ways in which states seek to get their way by attracting others to them, rather than by coercing them.⁴⁷ As Jonathan Grix notes, 'the Olympics—is clearly considered by states to provide a major contribution in the process of improving their nation's image, profiling and showcasing themselves globally and "attracting" others through inbound tourism, increased trade and a growing sense of national pride through the often experienced, but under-researched "feel-good" factor that accompanies major sports events'.⁴⁸ Cha argues that the potential for reconstruction of national identity is central to the value of the Olympic Games, as with other sporting mega-events, for host nations in particular. He argues that whilst 'sport can be a generator of soft power' internationally, it is often at least as important as a forum for nation-building, through the assertion of coherent identities oriented by national pride: In this sense 'sport acts as a prism through which national identity gets refracted domestically and internationally'.⁴⁹

43 Charles Little, 'The Sports Boycott against Rhodesia reconsidered', in Paul Gilchrist and Russell Holden (eds), *The Politics of Sport: Community, Mobility, Identity* (Routledge, 2012).

44 Ibid.

45 Jonathan Grix, 'Sport politics and the Olympics', *Political Studies Review* 11.1 (2013): 15–25.

46 Ibid.

47 Joseph Nye and Youna Kim, 'Soft power and the Korean Wave' in Youna Kim (ed.) *The Korean wave: Korean media go global* (Routledge, 2013), p. 31.

48 Grix, 'Sport politics and the Olympics'. Surveys on the 2012 London Olympics show that positive public is correlated with hosting such events. See *BBC News*, 'Post-Olympic spirits high but may fizzle—Survey', 14 August 2012. However, there are questions about how lasting such effects are. Cases such as Montreal 1976 suggest that there is also no guarantee that even a temporary feel-good factor will materialise. See Jack Todd, 'The 40-year hangover: how the 1976 Olympics nearly broke Montreal', *Guardian*, 6 July 2016.

49 Cha, 'Role of Sport in International Relations', p. 141.

When South Korea hosted the Seoul Games of 1988, it was led by the authoritarian administration of Chun Doo-hwan. The regime made very effective use of the games to ‘call world attention to South Korea’s economic miracle while simultaneously obfuscating and downplaying the repressive political practices that enabled such economic success’.⁵⁰ The Seoul Games were an important element in South Korea’s ‘modernization project’, and marked the beginning of South Korea’s export of cultural products, known as the ‘Korean wave’, or *hallyu*.⁵¹ The success of Seoul ‘88 led to the ROK hosting other major global events, including the Asian Games in 2002 and 2014, the FIFA World Cup in 2002, and the World Expo in Daejeon in 1993. International Public Relations giant Burson Marsteller formulated the country’s PR campaign for both the 1988 Olympics and the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Then regional head of Burson, Bill Rylance, explained: ‘it’s a mix of cohesive national pride blended with a deeply rooted need to show the world that Korea is a sophisticated and successful country’.⁵²

Whilst the concept of soft power captures the manner in which the frame of Olympism inhibits negative messaging and reinforces positive messaging, this does not fully grasp the ways in which global influence may be garnered through communications on the Olympic stage. There is clearly tension between the globalist normative rhetoric enshrined in the Olympic charter and the diverse national interests of hosts and participants. The ‘pursuit of soft power’ may not be entirely adequate in making sense of, for example, Nazi Germany’s triumphant posturing at the 1936 Berlin Games, or efforts by the super powers to reflect their ‘natural’ superiority by topping the medal tables during the Cold War. The Olympics is a stage for political communications operating in service of hard power-political dynamics. There is always a risk to national communicators in overtly politicising the Olympics that such communications may backfire, or be hijacked by other actors as they were in Munich 1972 or Mexico 1968, but it nonetheless provides a powerful arena for the construction and maintenance of national brands amidst competitive international dynamics.⁵³

Differentiation of target audiences is of particular salience here.⁵⁴ Whilst politi-

50 Stockdale, ‘More than just games’, p. 85.

51 Ji-Hyun Cho, and Alan Bairner, ‘The sociocultural legacy of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games’, *Leisure Studies*, 31:3 (2012): 271–89.

52 Andrew Salmon, ‘A sporting host: how South Korea has continued to build on the legacy of the Seoul Olympics’, *SCMP.com*, 5 July 2015.

53 Roy Panagiotopoulou, ‘Nation branding and the Olympic games: New media images for Greece and China’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29.16 (2012): 2337–48.

54 Akihiko Tanaka, ‘Comment on “role of sport in international relations: national rebirth and renewal”’, *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 11.1 (2016): 156–57.

cal communications at the Olympics are framed by the discourse of Olympism, that frame clearly does not preclude communication in service of perceived national interests.⁵⁵ Strategic Communications, as a key term of reference here, seeks to capture the ways in which communications may be designed to achieve various strategic ends, and so must be tailored to discrete audiences, whether the intention is to (re)construct national identity, build international soft power, or intervene in the international discursive climate so as to nudge the decision making of another state or other states.⁵⁶ In the Korean context, Olympic cooperation in the past has ‘stood in’ for the pursuit of political resolutions to the crisis on the peninsula, which has allowed the North to prepare more effectively for the next cycle of tension.⁵⁷ Periods during which the highest degree of sporting cooperation took place between the two Koreas were also the periods during which development aid moved most smoothly from the South to the North, a process commonly seen as having allowed the North to reach its present nuclear and missile capability.

Olympic coverage reaches global audiences, and is reported widely in international media. Early estimates predicted that some three billion people would watch some coverage of the 2018 Winter Games and the event was broadcast on television in more than 80 countries. The IOC’s director of television and marketing, Timo Lumme, notes that preliminary data showed overall output from the Games in South Korea was bigger than at any previous winter Olympics, with an average of 130 hours of programming per rights-holding broadcaster.⁵⁸ As noted above, the Olympic stage is predisposed to reinforce positive messaging around reconciliation and international cooperation. The scale and global extent of the Olympic audience provides potential opportunities for communications to bypass media narratives that have become entrenched over time, as long as the new projected message coheres with the discourse of Olympism.

As Manuel Castells argues, seeking to shift the tone of media coverage, thus nudging discourses within the information environment surrounding an actor, event, process, or issue, is a well-documented method by which to influence the behaviour of target audiences.⁵⁹ A study of the media coverage of the six-party

55 Brennan K. Berg et al., ‘A realist perspective of sport and international relations: US governmental perceptions of Olympic boycott movements, 1936–2008’, *The ‘Olympic and Paralympic Effect’ on Public Policy* (2016): 7.

56 Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

57 Van Tassel and Terry, ‘An overlooked path’, p. 56.

58 Karolos Grohmann, ‘“Global broadcasters” output up by 14 percent from Sochi: IOC’, *Reuters*, 20 February 2018.

59 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

talks held between 2003 and 2007 on the Korean question revealed the vulnerability of international journalists to deliberate influence from the US and South Korean government officials, both of which took a negative view on North Korea and emphasised the importance of the North's 'rogue state' dimension.⁶⁰ This became the dominant narrative in global media. The DPRK rarely enjoys a sympathetic hearing from international media, particularly the English-language media, which dominate global news coverage. This supposed 'media bias' is a subject of complaint from the North.⁶¹

News coverage of scandals, such as President Park's impeachment and removal, show that media in the South are able to cover politics effectively and to criticise the country's institutions. The debate about relations with North Korea remains, however, tightly censored. Any discussion on the DPRK in South Korea is hampered by a national security law under which any article or broadcast favorable to the North is punishable by imprisonment.⁶² This is one of the main grounds for online censorship.⁶³ These legal constraints make it less likely that the domestic South Korean media, and by extension the population, would be a principal target audience for DPRK communications at the Olympics.

The Olympic forum is a rational choice for hosting a communications campaign aimed at softening international perceptions of an autocratic regime by seeking to influence international media coverage.⁶⁴ Of particular interest to a country like the DPRK is the fact that narratives and images communicated at the Games are less subject to the filter of English language international news media, which rarely portray the DPRK in a positive light. Olympic broadcast rights holder NBC says the overall audience in the US for prime-time Olympics across platforms reached 26 million, slightly down from the viewing figures for previous Winter Olympics, but standing up well in the face of generally falling television audience numbers.⁶⁵ As noted above, the United States' geopolitical significance for the Korean peninsula, and its active role in the international criticism of

60 Seo, 'International media coverage of North Korea'.

61 *Macau Daily Times*, '[North Korea Expels Three BBC Journalists Over Complaints of Coverage](#)', 10 May 2016.

62 The issue is outlined by Reporters Without Borders in '[South Korea: Distinct improvement after a bad decade](#)'.

63 This censorship has been shown to be of limited value to inhibiting the distribution of rumours online. See K. Hazel Kwon and H. Raghav Roa, 'Cyber-rumour sharing under a homeland security threat in the context of government Internet surveillance: The case of South-North Korea conflict', *Government Information Quarterly*, 34: 2 (2015): 307–16.

64 Similar observations might be made with respect to Russia hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

65 Josef Adalian, '[Why NBC Shouldn't Worry About the Winter Olympics TV Ratings](#)', *Vulture.com*, 13 February 2018.

the DPRK that characterised the preceding six months, would suggest that US audiences are probably the key targets for a communications campaign making use of the Olympic forum to soften media representations of the DPRK. As a consequence, our initial analysis looks at a sample of English-language media.

The PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games likely also appealed to the North as a promising venue for international strategic communications aimed at Chinese audiences. The PyeongChang Games are the first of three consecutive Olympics in Asia, with Tokyo hosting the 2020 Summer Games and Beijing staging the 2022 Winter Olympics. While China sent only about 100 athletes to Pyeongchang, less than half the number of Team USA, with the country set to host the next Winter Games in 2022 it is likely that the DPRK judged that the games presented a unique opportunity for direct communication with the Chinese domestic public and Communist Party target audiences. In China, Internet giants Tencent and Alisports (the online sports arm of Alibaba) stream the Olympics alongside the main rights holder, CCTV, China's state broadcaster.⁶⁶ Tencent by itself has about 500 million monthly subscribers to its video channel, which shows the scale of the potentially accessible audience.⁶⁷ Whilst this groundwork study does not assess Chinese-language media, a fuller multi-lingual comparative analysis will form the next stage in our research.

DPRK Strategic Communications at the Games

In early January 2017, Lee Hee-beom, head of the organising committee for Pyeongchang 2018, announced to great fanfare that North Korean athletes would compete in four sports and that the two groups of athletes would march together under the Korea Unification Flag at the opening ceremony in February. North Korea would send athletes in pair figure skating, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, and women's ice hockey. It would be the first time that the two countries would compete as one nation at the Olympics.⁶⁸

Our media sample was limited in size and restricted to English-language media. As such, it provides only preliminary grounds for hypotheses that need to be more fully substantiated in larger-scale analysis. However, the content analysis identified three clear areas of activity that featured in almost all the Olympic coverage touching on the DPRK: i) the stage-managed presentation of Kim

66 Emma Lee, 'China is watching the Olympics with Internet companies instead of state TV', *Technode.com*, 9 August 2018.

67 Bien Perez, 'Tencent Video, iQiyi, in race to lead China's online video market', *SCMP.com*, 2 October 2017.

68 *Yonhap News*, 'N. Korea to participate in four sports at PyeongChang 2018: top organizer', 18 January 2018.

Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong during the games, ii) a squad of DPRK cheerleaders, and iii) the opening and closing ceremonies.

Whilst these DPRK activities did appear in domestic ROK media reports on the games, a range of issues dominated local media reportage which were less prevalent in international media reports. Significant efforts had been made to provide English-language ticketing and booking facilities; the local train company Korail and Korea's Google, Naver, translated their apps into English for the first time. Tickets for the venues appeared to be sold out, as were the trains from Seoul to the Olympic sites, yet seats in both remained empty. Perhaps due to concerns about rising tensions on the Peninsula during the lead up to the Games, many international visitors stayed away. Low domestic turnout for the games had the organisers scrambling to fill the seats in the stands. This is not a wholly unusual scenario for the Olympics, but the Pyeongchang sites were particularly remote. Limited expectations of South Korean athletes winning medals, except perhaps in ice skating and speed skating, the expense of tickets and local lodging, and the relative distance of the Olympic sites from the major population centers, all featured in media reports of a muted domestic reception.⁶⁹ A team from Intel had put together the largest coordinated drone exhibition for the opening ceremony, only to have their performance cancelled at the last moment. Local media coverage of the cancellation was limited, and the television audience was treated to a recording of an earlier rehearsal. Reasons of public safety were given to enquiries from the media, and the local team was told the ROK military had cancelled everything at the last moment.⁷⁰

There was also a dispute with Japan over the flag the two Koreas had agreed to use in the opening ceremony; its depiction of a unified Korea included disputed territory—a dot representing islands claimed by Japan, leading Tokyo to lodge a diplomatic protest.⁷¹ ROK media themes indicated a mixed local reaction to the North Korean presence. In Seoul, anti-North Korean demonstrations continued throughout the Olympics. There was concern expressed in national media over the fact that North Korean athletes were to replace South Korean hockey players who had trained for four years for the event and qualified. These con-

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69 Tariq Panja, 'Olympic Organizers Say Tickets Are Sold, but Where Are the People?', *New York Times*, 15 February 2018.

70 Michael Luciano, 'Olympic opening ceremony drone show cancelled last minute', *ECNMag.com*, 12 February 2018.

71 AFP, 'South Korea to stop using Olympic flag with disputed isles after Japan protest', *SCMP.com*, 5 February 2018.

cerns were amplified when it became clear that South Korea was paying for the North Korean delegation's presence.

Influencing public opinion in the South appears not to have been the key objective of the DPRK, as evidenced by the decision of the North to send one of its most contentious generals to the closing ceremony, which was a subject of widespread media discussion in the ROK. In what was presented as a last-minute decision, South Korea's Ministry of Unification announced that General Kim Yong-chol, vice-chairman of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee, would attend the closing ceremony and stay in the South for three days. Kim also heads the United Front Department, the North Korean office responsible for handling inter-Korean affairs. More controversially, he was previously chief of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, a top North Korean military intelligence agency, which South Korea blamed for the deadly 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan*, a South Korean navy corvette.⁷² This decision, which appears to have had significantly more negative resonance locally than internationally, suggested some degree of DPRK willingness to test South Korean audiences so as to create propaganda for its own population. Public opinion in the South seems not to have been the priority for the DPRK, this may potentially have been because the Moon government was already committed to facilitating de-escalation.

Domestic reception of the DPRK's presence at the Games was relatively muted. Our English-language media sample suggests that internationally the opposite was the case. North Korea's belligerence in late 2017 ensured the world was paying attention when Pyongyang accepted the invitation to take part in the Games. It is possible that this decision was taken at the last minute, in light of the impact of sanctions and escalating rhetoric emerging from the United States before the end of that year. It seems more likely, as the preceding sections outline, that the North had pre-determined at least the potential for this route to de-escalation.

The three DPRK activities at the Olympics most prominent in English-language media reports broadly cohered in seeking to represent North Korea as a legitimate state, ready to cooperate with the South in pursuit of a unified Korea, and appear to have been targeted principally at an international audience. The US is likely to have been a key target audience for these messages. Given the tone of US communications about the DPRK in the months prior, it is unsurprising that

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⁷² Christine Kim and Hyon-hee Shin, [North Korean closing delegation includes man blamed for deadly sinking](#), *Reuters*, 22 February 2018.

initial signals towards de-escalation at the Games were rebuffed by the US Vice president Mike Pence.⁷³ As Washington vigorously warned against a North Korean charm offensive, athletes from the two Koreas entered the arena together under a unification flag, which was widely reported in the international media as offering hope of a breakthrough in the geopolitical standoff.⁷⁴ The pictures of the athletes marching into the stadium side-by-side dominated most media coverage around the world. This was clear in our sample, where almost all of the articles and news reports mentioned the joint presence of the two Koreas at the opening ceremony, even describing it as ‘peace in motion’.⁷⁵ The preceding period of high tensions, and the sudden surprise move to participate, invited interpretation of the new spirit of collaboration within the framework of Olympism.

The obviously cool reaction by Vice President Pence to being seated close to Kim Jong-un’s sister in the South Korea President’s box was clearly meant for his US domestic audience, but also risked communicating failure to get into the spirit of the Games. Pence was criticised for not standing up with the South Korea President and the rest of the crowd when the unified team entered the stadium. This communicative bind could only play out to the benefit of the DPRK, and contributed to widespread media representations of the United States as haughty. North Korean state media reinforced this in warning that the conservatives in the US, Japan, and the ROK should not spoil the atmosphere of détente. Kim and the DPRK have always sought to present themselves as the peacemakers, with their military stance one of self-defence against an aggressive militarism from the South and its allies. In remaining relentlessly positive at the games, they maximised their ability to get this message across. CNN reported widely what Kim Yo-jong wrote in the South Korean President’s guestbook: ‘I hope Pyongyang and Seoul get closer in our people’s hearts and move forward the future of prosperous unification.’⁷⁶

The North’s communications at the Games centered on Kim Yo-jong, who became the first member of Pyongyang’s ruling dynasty to set foot in South Korea since the Korean War. Again, this was clear in our sample of English-language

73 Makiko Takita and Rui Abiru, ‘Moon Jae-In’s Smile Vanishes as Shinzo Abe, Mike Pence Flaunt Bond’, *Sankei Shinbun*, 23 February 2018.

74 Rich Motoko, ‘Olympics Open With Koreas Marching Together, Offering Hope for Peace’, *New York Times*, 9 February 2018.

75 Morgan Winsor, ‘Olympics 2018: Opening ceremony “Peace in Motion” kicks off Pyeongchang Winter Games’, *ABC News*, 9 February 2018.

76 Will Ripley and James Griffiths, ‘North and South Korea to meet to discuss taking part in Paralympics’, *CNN.com*, 23 February 2018.

media reportage, with Kim Yo-jong dominating news reports, appearing in most stories that discussed the PyeongChang Olympics and the North and South détente. Her presence appears to have played a key role in framing international media discourses away from the narrative of the rogue state, and the more problematic presence of General Kim Yong-chol. A significant sample of reports fixed on Kim Yo-jong as a peacemaker carrying her brother's wishes for peace. Kim Yo-jong is known to be a leading figure in the domestic propaganda and state communication institutional architecture. The success of Kim Yo-jong in generating positive international media coverage of the North Korean delegation was significant, with 90 per cent of such accounts mentioning her positively. Her words and actions were in constant resonance with the Olympic frame, sustaining message continuity, and framing the reportage of her as the 'Pyongyang Princess', the human face of a secretive regime. A story on CNN.com was typical of the coverage, carrying the headline: 'Kim Jong-un's sister is stealing the show at the Winter Olympics'. Positioning Kim Yo-jong as Kim Jong-un's Ivanka, the report suggested she was a 'foil to the perception of North Korea as antiquated and militaristic'. The DPRK's domestic purpose in raising the profile of Kim Jong-un's wider family is difficult to ascertain, though Kim Yo-jong's role here offers some support for presumptions about her significance to the regime's stability.⁷⁷ This role continued at the subsequent Singapore summit between Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump.

The red-parka-clad North Korean cheerleaders also emerged as the domestic, international, and social media stars of the early days of the Olympics because of their carefully choreographed songs and dances. First appearing at the opening ceremony, they garnered the media epithet in South Korea of the 'army of beauties'. The all-female cheering squad and their singing performances piqued the interest of Olympic fans worldwide, even though the North's athletes, inexperienced in international events, won no medals. The North Korean cheerleaders drew mixed responses, but their pictures were distributed around the world, emphasising the viral power of the image.⁷⁸ As messages about peace and unification were tied to images of the cheerleaders, they were effective in pushing more unfavourable mention of the North Korean regime to the bottom of articles.

77 Myong-song Kim, 'Kim Jong-un's Sister Returns to Hero's Welcome in Pyongyang', *The Chosunilbo*, 13 February 2018.

78 Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent propaganda and the new revolutionaries* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

International media reports of the reactions of people from various countries who attended the Games were often gushing in their accounts of the Korean cheerleaders. It was easy for the global media to pick up the story along with the great photo opportunities the cheerleaders provided. The positive media response to the cheerleading squad is perhaps surprising, as significant international cynicism was generated at the 2010 FIFA World Cup when the North sent a tiny group of uniformly dressed fans who cheered wildly at matches; they were filmed close-up, implying the stadium was full of fans, when actually they were only a small group of people in a confined area. The images of the cheerleaders, suggestive of North Korean propaganda but created by the South's television coverage, may have invited satirisation. However, it remains an effective example of agenda-setting in that international media attention was kept on the North Korean presence. Even satirisation combined with critique, evident in a quarter of over fifty media reports which mentioned them, may have contributed to softening representations of the regime in the North. Given that these images were so conducive to distribution on social media, the cheerleaders may have been intended to sustain media attention on the DPRK presence at the Games, regardless of their athletic successes.

In what was described in international media as an unprecedented and unexpected display of unity, President Moon shook hands with Kim Yo-jong and Kim Yong-nam, North Korea's ceremonial Head of State and the highest-level official to have visited the South.⁷⁹ A diplomatic fiasco at a state dinner hosted at the Blue House (the South Korean President's executive office and official residence, similar to the White House in the USA) before the opening ceremonies was widely reported.⁸⁰ US Vice President Pence was to share a table with Kim Yong-nam. He arrived at the dinner, exchanged greetings with President Moon, Japanese Prime Minister Abe, and others, but avoided Kim Yong-nam and left before the meal was served. US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis was forced to deny explicitly any division between the US and South Korea, and Lee Nak-yeon, the ROK's Prime Minister, suggested that any summit would need the 'right conditions' to go ahead.⁸¹ It was clear that an informal summit, a deliberate breaking of the ice, was what Mr Moon had intended.

There was no improvement in the atmosphere in President Moon's box at the

79 Benjamin Haas, '[Pence skips Olympics dinner in snub to North Korean officials](#)', *Guardian*, 9 February 2018.

80 So-young Kim, '[At Games reception, a hopeful dessert and a hasty exit](#)', *Reuters*, 9 February 2018.

81 Bryan Harris and Katrina Manson, '[Seoul seeks to ease US concerns about Korean détente](#)', *FT.com*, 12 February 2018.

stadium for the closing ceremony. This time, the US was represented by President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka, who sat beside Moon's wife, while North Korea's Kim was seated a row behind. Sitting two seats along from him was General Vincent Brooks, the commander of the United States Forces Korea headquarters. During his speech, Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, invited several athletes to join him on stage, including South Korea's gold medalist skeleton rider Yun Sung-bin and North Korean figure skater Ryom Tae-ok. The unease with which the US and Japan greeted this rapprochement between the North and the South was reflected in the local English-language media headlines. A poll conducted at the time suggested six out of ten South Koreans thought the two Koreas should hold another round of bilateral summit talks; among those in their 60s and older the percentage of support was less than half.⁸² In the ROK, the Moon administration's approval ratings were recorded as dropping below 60 per cent for the first time since he took office.⁸³ Domestic opinion in the ROK tends to be divided along the lines of the familiar generational groups. Older, more conservative South Koreans are against improving relations with the North, while those in their 40s and 50s, generally Moon supporters, hope for improved relations. And the young are closer in opinion to older Koreans.⁸⁴

The message from the North Korean state media was consistently celebratory and focused on peaceful reunification. Korean Central Television, which rarely shows live events, did not show the opening ceremony or any Olympics coverage live. Indeed, early coverage from the broadcaster was limited to still images of the Olympic competition published in its news bulletin—they showed Kim Yong-nam and Kim Jo-yong attending an ice hockey match where the two Koreas fielded the combined team, and a Taekwondo performance by athletes from both countries that was not part of the official Olympic competition.⁸⁵

Although North Korea's visit to the Winter Olympics marked a step away from its normally isolationist position and ideological emphasis on self-reliance, the next steps were unclear. After the Games, keen to be seen as a peace-maker, President Moon continued to press for high-level meetings between Seoul and

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82 Yonhap News Agency, '[Over 60 pct of S. Koreans support proposed inter-Korean summit: poll](#)', *N.K. News*, 15 February 2018.

83 Clint Work, '[What Do Younger South Koreans Think of North Korea?](#)', *The Diplomat*, 2 February 2018.

84 Philip Lee and Steven Denney, '[South Korea's Identity Gap: Diverging Views on North Korea](#)', *Sinonk.com*, 23 January 2017.

85 Williams Martyn, '[Olympics notes: No coverage yet on KCTV](#)', *North Korea Tech*, 12 February 2018.

Pyongyang, and for trilateral talks in South Korea between Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington. The domestic South Korean media were more interested in Moon's disagreements with his allies. In the international media this was less pronounced. The South's national image-building efforts, promoting a 'super-connected Korea' developing into a major player in the global creative economy, appear to have been overpowered in the international media by the North's consistently positive messaging tied to the three themes that dominate the media sample analysed for this paper—the presence of both Koreas at the Games, the photogenic North Korean cheerleaders, and Kim Jo-yong, the 'Pyongyang Princess'. These strategic topics likely helped ensure the way the international media framed its reports about the Games, highlighting the potential for peace-building across the 38th parallel. Moon facilitated Pyongyang's efforts, allowing it to substantively set the agenda attached to its own participation.

This required little from Kim Jong-un himself. He had used his annual televised New Year's address to announce North Korea's plan to participate in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics and to wish for their success. On the eve of the Games—just one day before the opening ceremony—Kim Jong-un presided over the annual military parade in Pyongyang to mark the founding of its armed forces. News footage in North Korea showed him together with party officials watching the display of military strength in the capital. The parade was not shown live on state television, but in a speech marking the event Kim said the parade underlined 'the status of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which has developed into a world-class military power'.⁸⁶ Having established a narrative of military security aimed at his domestic audience, Kim remained quiet throughout the Games, leaving DPRK international strategic communications to his sister and her 'army of beauties'. Once the Games had concluded, the tone of Kim's international communications shifted—after exchanging insults with Trump in late 2017, he was now asserting a willingness to de-nuclearise, but only if unspecified conditions were met. Following a summit with Trump (announced, cancelled, then rescheduled and held in Singapore in June 2018), Kim was rewarded with a long-desired strategic objective for his regime—the suspension of joint ROK-US military exercises.

As the Olympics began, there was very little evidence of appetite within the United States government for a rapprochement with the North. This suggests

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⁸⁶ Yonhap News Agency, '[N. Korea displays ICBMs during low-key military parade](#)', *Korea Herald*, 8 February 2018.

that the Olympics took place at an inflection point, after which there was a shift in US strategy. The international impact of the strategic communications campaign that the DPRK conducted at the Olympics contributed to the context for that change. The sentiment in our sample of English-language media, as well as the content of the reportage, appear to have been influenced by DPRK activities at the Olympics. In the conclusion below, we set out the resultant hypothesis for further empirical testing.

Discussion and conclusions

Identifying stakeholders, both actual and potential, is at the heart of all effective strategic communications.⁸⁷ It is also important to identify the behavioural change sought and the significance of the communication for political action—in other words, why stakeholders should pay attention. Strategic communications must be proactive if they are to be effective—setting the agenda, rather than merely responding and recruiting allies in what the media could use as participative stories. Effective communications on the global political stage involve providing stories for multiple media platforms while ensuring that all these stories have arguments, anecdotes, illustrations, and actions, communicated step by step, from the headlines throughout the entire article. Each communication must fit a broader narrative, integrating key themes in pursuit of desired behavioural change. Success is a matter of creating the proper setting for desired behaviours to emerge.

Ensuring continuity of attention is also critical for agenda setting. The DPRK ran a successful strategic communications campaign insofar as it ensured its own coverage. In large part this was because the narrative of peace-building and reconciliation was already prefigured by the idea of the Olympic Games, and the regime needed to do little more than keep this idea in the frame. Using simple but visually arresting communications at Pyeongchang, North Korea got the world to talk about their country.

The Olympics were an opportunity to invite the US and China to engage with the DPRK as a ‘normal state’ without its having to offer significant material concessions. The Olympic forum amplified the positive messaging around reconciliation, and increased the public diplomatic costs of appearing belligerent. The ROK desired to communicate a positive message about Moon’s hope of

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⁸⁷ Neale Consultants Limited—Building Executive Presence, communication tools.

relaunching negotiations with the North; the timing of the Olympics was ideal for the DPRK to pursue de-escalation. The North anticipated that Moon would amplify any message of positivity and contribute to shaping international media coverage. It made sense for the DPRK to use the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang to strategically promote a softer image of the Kim regime.

The PyeongChang Winter Olympics provided the means for the DPRK to gain access to, for them, an unprecedented international audience. We have provisionally gauged the effectiveness of DPRK strategic communications by identifying the degree to which they shaped English-language media representation during the Games, although effectiveness in shaping the agenda and the tone of coverage does not prove causal influence on the behaviour of others. Assessing the degree to which the DPRK's effectiveness in agenda-setting at the Olympics translated into influence over the decision-making of international actors would require knowing which media reports were consumed by key decision makers. We have no data on which international media reports about North Korea shaped by DPRK communications had an effect on their target audiences. Whilst psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman have shown that 'mere exposure effects' (priming, framing, and anchoring) shape actors' understandings and orientate their actions,⁸⁸ it is difficult to quantify the relationship between media consumption and behavioural change.⁸⁹ There are 'growing signs of inefficiency and even gridlock in the variety of ways framing, agenda setting, and priming theory are used by researchers'.⁹⁰ The shifting tone of international media reports regarding the Olympics is suggestive, but without further comparative research we can only provide grounds for a reasoned hypothesis.

Since the Olympic Games, international actors' behaviour aligns with what may reasonably be assumed to have been the DPRK's strategic objectives for Pyeongchang—less hostile communications with the US, as well as more friendly and direct communications between Kim and China's President Xi Jinping. Trump actively contributed to detoxifying the Kim regime by celebrating their exchange of 'beautiful' letters. And, as noted above, the cancellation of joint military exercises between the US and the ROK has long been a strategic objective of the

88 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Penguin; Reprint edition, 2012).

89 Michael Scharkow and Marko Bacht, 'How measurement error in content analysis and self-reported media use leads to minimal media effect findings in linkage analyses: A simulation study', *Political Communication* 34.3 (2017): 323–43.

90 Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury, 'Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models', *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007): 9–20, p. 18.

North. At the very least, we can be confident that a DPRK strategic communications campaign was conducted at the PyeongChang Games, and that North Korea probably considers it to have been effective. Whether or not the perception is accurate, the changes in political attitudes among states will certainly influence the behaviour of the DPRK in the future, for example by reinforcing policy-making that seeks international influence through interventions in the information environment.

Few will conclude that the DPRK has altered its fundamental strategic calculation—it completed its last missile launch in November 2017. It is possible to overvalue the ‘art’ of strategic communications.⁹¹ Behaviour is always multi-causal. The Olympic Games provided a springboard from which the DPRK could achieve more positive media coverage from outlets that have previously tended to create overwhelmingly negative publicity. The Olympics interrupted global discourses about the legitimacy of different policy responses to North Korea’s behaviour, and also interrupted the narrative of military pressure the Trump administration had constructed during 2017.

This suggests that DPRK strategic communications at the PyeongChang Olympics helped set the stage for further action, including the meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un in the aftermath of the games. The traditional emphasis in International Relations scholarship on hard power, in association with formal diplomacy, as a route to assessing and influencing the comparative effects of sanctions as potential determinants of behavioural change can miss the role of carefully timed, subtle influence on the tone of international discourse, which nudges, facilitates, or discourages actions in world politics. The DPRK’s communications on the Olympic stage successfully shaped international coverage and influenced the information environment, which, at least to some extent, shaped the conduct of politicians, and so of world politics. This much is true, even if a definitive measurement of their effect requires more extensive sampling and analysis of global media content.

Affecting the tone of international discourse in world politics at a strategic moment, even minutely, can be useful for foreign policy; it can buy time to prepare new policy strategies and make it more difficult for opponents to leverage the ‘rogue state’ label. The DPRK’s campaign-sought to influence the perception of states’ behaviour and attitudes by international actions. The DPRK’s Olym-

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91 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The art of strategic communication*, (Georgetown University Press, 2012).

pic strategic communications helped Kim Jong-un to reframe North Korea's nuclear testing as preparation for engagement with the world, an engagement in which North Korea would be perceived a 'normal' state in global diplomatic processes. It also, at least temporarily, helped undercut calls for military action emerging from hawks in the United States administration, such as John Bolton. Given that various regional actors were now engaging diplomatically with the DPRK regime, and with apparent positive results, it became much more difficult to make a credible argument for escalation.

Sensitive to the opportunities presented by shifting media narratives, Trump immediately claimed personal responsibility for the inter-Korean détente. His assertion of a foreign policy victory has at least as much to do with US domestic politics as with any expectation that the talks will actually lead to de-nuclearisation, but in Pyongyang this would only reinforce the sense that the irenic campaign at the Olympics was a well-timed strategic intervention by the North, reading the US domestic context effectively. Trump enthusiastically seized the opportunity presented by the Olympian moment to mint a commemorative coin celebrating the planned peace summit. The coin was announced in May 2017, with a price of \$US 100. When in June the summit was called off, the price was discounted; the summit was rescheduled and finally occurred in September. In his 2018 speech to the UN, Trump lauded the de-escalation of tension on the Korean peninsula as one of his major foreign policy achievements, irrespective of any evidence that the North was taking steps towards de-nuclearisation.

Cognisant of China's being selected to host the next Winter Olympics, the DPRK also appears to have used the PyeongChang Olympic platform to directly address Chinese audiences, in hopes of demonstrating the DPRK's reasonableness and openness to diplomacy; Beijing allowed Kim to make this presentation to its populace, a significant fact in a country that exercises tight control on what the public is allowed to see. After the Olympics, Kim met with Chinese President Xi twice before meeting with Trump; China was his first overseas destination as Head of State. These trips contributed to developing his international diplomatic standing and support our hypothesis of the importance of China as a target audience. Post-Olympic diplomacy has created a dynamic in which China and the US must now compete for influence, or the impression of influence, on the North Korean regime.⁹² This reflects the established cyclical historical pattern

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⁹² Samuel S. Kim, 'US-China competition over nuclear North Korea', *Insight Turkey* 19.3 (2017): 121–38.

of strategic action by the North.

The North's Olympic communications leveraged public attitudes of the new leader in the South, and facilitated the development of a personal relationship between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. Having staked his premiership on improving inter-Korean relations, Moon will not easily give up on this possibility, and has shown himself open to extending talks regardless of the relationship between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. The Olympics have in no way precluded a breakdown in talks or the resumption of conflict, nor should we assume that a lasting or significant shift in global public opinion has taken place. North Korea's success in agenda-setting at Pyeongchang seems to have, at the very least, bought the regime some time. This may have been a limited aim of the North's Olympic campaign. The DPRK's Olympic communications do not allow us to determine what their strategic endgame might be. But they show how the Olympics may be used as a forum by states for their strategic communications in seeking to influence the conditions under which actions can take place in world politics.

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