

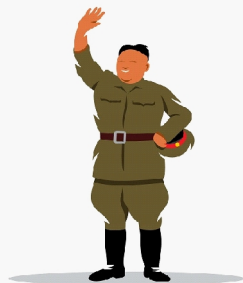
North Korea's propaganda strategy

SUMMARY

The internationally isolated regime of the Democratic Popular Republic of Korea (or North Korea) needs to build consensus around the idea that, under the direction of a young dynamic leader, the nation's living standards have improved amidst vivid economic and technological growth. North Koreans are often forced to contribute their free labour to campaigns, as a way to attest their devotion to the nation and help make it stronger in the face of its external enemies.

Kim Jong Un's coming to power has helped modernise the image of the North Korean leadership. His sister, Kim Yo Jong, has been put in charge of Pyongyang's Propaganda and Agitation Department. The regime is building a nationalistic narrative that increasingly targets young people and elites while keeping information under strict control, in a country whose population is today less inclined to believe in propaganda than in the past.

The USA, South Korea, and occasionally Japan, are the targets of bellicose North Korean rhetoric that has often had a destabilising effect on the region. Anti-US propaganda has been a primary theme in Pyongyang's efforts to boost patriotic feeling, while the duel with Seoul often resembles old-fashioned psychological warfare.



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Strategy and priorities of a totalitarian regime

The internationally isolated regime of the Democratic Popular Republic of Korea (DPRK) needs to build consensus around the idea that, under the direction of a young dynamic leader, the nation's living standards have improved through vivid economic and technological growth. North Koreans are often forced to contribute their free labour to '[public innovation campaigns](#)', such as the '[70-day campaign](#)' which preceded the May 2016 congress of the leading Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the first in 36 years. Through such campaigns, they can attest their devotion to the nation and help make it stronger in the face of its traditional enemies: the USA and South Korea.

Creating a charismatic image of a young leader

Following the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, his middle son, **Kim Jong Un**, succeeded him and became the DPRK's '[supreme leader](#)'. Since then, prestige projects have been realised in the capital, Pyongyang, aimed at changing how the country is perceived from outside and at convincing North Koreans that their living standards are improving. Major efforts have been put into portraying Kim Jong Un as a young, energetic leader, a people person and a family man, someone who likes meeting with people and is often seen wearing a smile, surrounded by smiling or applauding high-ranking military officers. His images are often carefully retouched and while it is not difficult to detect the work of amateurs on them, the domestic audience may not always be aware of the manipulation involved.

Since becoming his country's leader, Kim has never travelled abroad, but has had visitors from abroad, such as former NBA players [Dennis Rodman](#) and [Charles Smith](#). Kim's wife, [Lee Seolju](#), has been appearing in public by his side since mid-2012 – something unusual for North Korea – adding glamour to the image of the regime projected to the rest of the world, but also drawing domestic [criticism](#) for her Western style. Fashion norms have been reshaped, with outside trends gaining greater influence. At the same time, an all-female band, [Moranbong](#), has emerged on the local artistic scene, helping to build a nationalistic narrative targeting young people and elites and providing an alternative to South Korean values asserted through films and dramas smuggled into the country at [significant personal risk](#). Kim has also declared his intention to turn his country into a sporting [powerhouse](#); however, despite some results in [weightlifting](#), the outcome of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro has been [disappointing](#).

State media

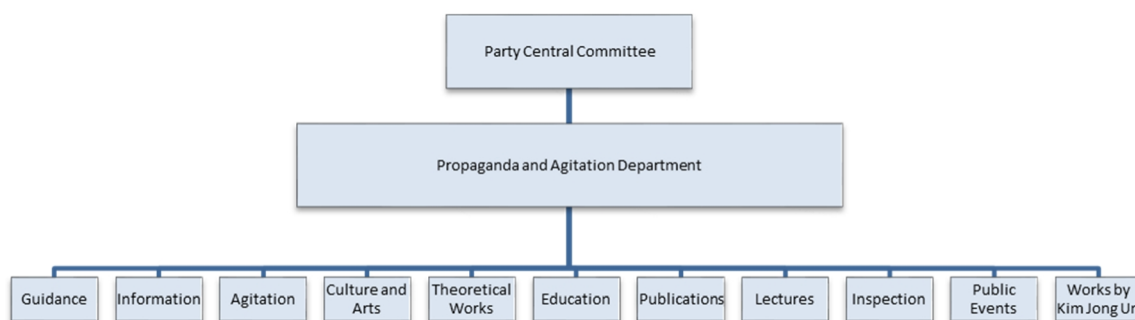
In a country where freedom of the press is virtually non-existent (the DPRK ranks [179th](#) out of 180 countries in the 2016 World Press Freedom Index), news is exclusively reported through the state media, namely the Korean Central News Agency ([KCNA](#)). The latter disseminates the state's messages to a population not allowed to open websites outside the national intranet (this reclusiveness has earned the country the label 'Hermit Kingdom', which locals find [insulting](#)) or to use their mobile phones for accessing social networking services.¹ As modern North Koreans are [less susceptible to propaganda](#), information control has become a key issue for the regime. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that in January 2016, Agence France-Presse (AFP) was [allowed](#) to open a bureau in Pyongyang – where the US Associated Press, the Japanese Kyodo and Chinese Xinhua agencies were already operational – in a move that, according to [some](#), signals the regime's increased confidence in its ability to keep the foreign press under control.

There is a single TV channel which is owned by the state. But it does not broadcast the whole day, and chronic electricity shortages render it an unreliable tool for spreading propaganda. That said, even children are targeted by propaganda, by being shown violent [cartoons](#) depicting good animals in uniforms similar to those of the national army fighting animals in uniforms resembling those of the South Korean army.

Responsibilities and tools in Pyongyang's propaganda machine

In the DPRK, strategic communication is in the remit of the Publicity and Information Department (better known as the Propaganda and Agitation Department, PAD) within the leading WFP. PAD is led by WFP Vice-Chairman, Kim Ki Nam; since 2014, Kim Yo Jong, the younger sister of Kim Jong Un, has been its deputy-director. Kim Yo Jong's allegedly prominent role in PAD illustrates the importance that her brother attaches to propaganda. In particular, she is in charge of implementing projects aimed at perpetuating the regime's cult of personality.

Figure 1 – Organisational chart of North Korea's Propaganda and Agitation Department



Source: [38 North](#), 14 August 2015.

Meanwhile, [cyberspace](#) is increasingly gaining in importance as an arena for psychological warfare and propaganda. A service called the Enemy Collapse Sabotage Bureau's Unit 204 (allegedly created in 1995) has the mission of using the internet to spread anti-South Korea propaganda. Reportedly, it is relatively small (three brigades with a total of 2 000 personnel), but is nevertheless headed by a high-ranking army official.

Fighting adversaries through old-fashioned rhetoric

North Korea has an extensive [history of bellicose rhetoric](#), with threats addressed to the USA and South Korea, and occasionally to Japan. This has often had a destabilising effect on the region; sustained anti-US propaganda (now including a [video](#) showing a nuclear strike on Washington) has been a primary theme in Pyongyang's efforts to boost patriotic feeling. When in July 2016 the US authorities asked the DPRK to honour its commitment to abandon its nuclear-weapons programme, the country's Foreign Minister, Ri Yong Ho, accused Washington of 'never-ending nuclear blackmails'. This can be explained by the desire of the Pyongyang leadership to look strong in the eyes of its domestic audience while feeding the myth of external threats that need to be countered, but also by its long-term [aim](#) of making the USA reconsider its presence in the Korean Peninsula.

The duel with South Korea, on the other hand, often resembles old-fashioned [psychological warfare](#), as was the case following the DPRK's fourth nuclear test in January 2016. Seoul retaliated by blasting anti-North propaganda broadcasts from border loudspeakers, garnered with [K-pop](#) music (a modern form of South Korean pop music, forbidden in the DPRK). Pyongyang responded by launching its own border broadcasts and flying balloons carrying anti-South leaflets across the border. In July 2016, for the first time [via a river](#) close to the border, the DPRK floated propaganda leaflets, declaring that it was prepared to launch missile attacks, reiterating that it had won the 1950-1953 Korean War and threatening to start a new war. Following North Korea's fifth nuclear test in September 2016, Seoul announced for the first time its [massive punishment and retaliation](#) concept and [revealed](#) its plans to strike on Pyongyang if it showed any signs of

planning a nuclear attack on the South. Moreover, key members of the ruling Saenury Party [proposed](#) that their country develop nuclear weapons of its own².

Around 30 000 North Koreans have fled to the South since the end of the Korean War, generally for political and economic reasons, running the risk of forcible repatriation by the Chinese authorities and of punishment, including of their family members back home. Since 2012, the regime has started using [redefectors](#) – North Koreans having defected to the South and then returned home – for propaganda purposes. The usual scenario involves interviewing such people at press conferences broadcast on state television, where they deplore their life in South Korea as having being tinted by trickery, discrimination and poverty. Such people also assure their audience that Kim Jon Un forgives returning defectors in the awareness that they have been victims of subterfuge. As of early 2016, the South's Ministry of Unification had [acknowledged](#) 14 such cases.

In an unsuccessful bid to shift international attention away from the dramatic state of its [human rights](#), in September 2015, Pyongyang issued a [report](#) denouncing the USA as the world's most brutal violator of human rights, and [pointed to alleged](#) discrimination against women in South Korea. North Korean media have also offended the US and South Korean leaders, [President Park Geun-hye](#) several times. This attitude has been [interpreted](#) as a possible sign of frustration over the DPRK's international isolation following UN Security Council sanctions adopted with [Resolution 2270\(2016\)](#) and endorsed by the Council of the EU through the adoption of restrictive measures against Pyongyang in [March](#) and [May](#) 2016.

Main references

[North Korea's New Propagandist?](#) M. Madden, 38 North, 14 August 2015.

[North Korea's Cyber Operations. Strategy and Responses](#), J. Jun, S. LaFoy, E. Sohn, CSIS, December 2015.

Endnotes

¹ In 2016, President Obama signed the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement [Act](#) of 2016 into law. In September 2016, the US State Department [submitted](#) a report to the US Congress, in connection with a provision in the act requiring the president 'to report a plan for making unrestricted and inexpensive electronic mass communications available to the people of North Korea'.

² However, the [Joint Declaration](#) on the Denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula of 19 February 1992 [prohibits](#) the deployment of nuclear weapons.

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