North Korea's Sharp Power and the Divide Over Korean Identities

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This chapter examines the nature and motivations of North Korea's sharp power toward South Korea. Unlike China or Russia, to secure long-term survival, North Korea ultimately needs cooperation from the rival democracy it seeks to undermine. I argue that this produces a particular North Korean brand of "Trojan horse" sharp power: the hijacking of South Korea's value diplomacy apparatus to disseminate a dual narrative. Externally, North Korea aims to project soft power hand in hand with South Korea to the international community, while internally, it exploits South Korea's nationalist divisions to its desired ends. I illustrate this strategy through in-depth case studies of North Korea's most significant sharp efforts in 2018. The analysis contests a simplistic understanding of sharp power and shines a different light on the regime's recent diplomatic efforts.

In the last decade or so, authoritarian states, notably Russia and China, have increasingly resorted to tactics of information manipulation and distortion toward rival democracies. The ongoing investigation on Russia's probable interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, through the use of fake social media accounts and campaign narratives, is a prominent example. Such tactics have earned the moniker of "sharp" power; unlike soft power, which aims to win hearts and minds through attraction, and unlike hard power, which aims to coerce through threat or force, these informational strategies aim "to cut, razor-like, into the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions."[1]

Sharp power as a political strategy is not new. What is new is the alarming speed and scale by which such tactics can be implemented with the globalization of communications technology. Yet while the specific strategies of sharp power are better known—information hacking, embedding reporters, disseminating fake media stories—less is known about the deeper political factors that drive it. Why do authoritarian states use sharp power? How do their motivations or constraints shape the particular form and timing of "sharpness"? This chapter examines such questions through an in-depth case study of North Korea's sharp power toward South Korea.

I argue that authoritarian states resort to sharp power for political ends that cannot otherwise be achieved through soft or hard power alone. Both soft and hard power are about applying external carrots or sticks to push the target state to behave in a desired way. What distinguishes sharp power, I argue, is not so much its divisive or informational characteristic, but its *internal* nature: it exploits pressures that are internal to the target state to force its hand. Sometimes, those exploits are about exacerbating internal divisions, but other times—as I will show through the case of North Korea's strategy—they are about stoking internal unity in the target state to bind the leader. This reconceptualization of sharp power not only offers a more useful analytical lens, but in the case of North Korea, I argue that it uncovers an important political logic to the regime's seemingly abrupt and irrational turns in diplomacy.

Based on the framework of sharp power as an internal power strategy, I characterize North Korea's sharp power toward South Korea as a "Trojan horse" tactic. That is, North Korea hijacks South Korea's value diplomacy efforts to promote a dual narrative. Externally, it projects a softer image to the international community by working hand in hand with South Korea, while internally, it leverages performance politics to exploit South Korean public opinion to its benefit. This form of sharp power, I argue, is the result of North Korea's

peculiar political constraint. To survive against pressures from the United States and the international community at large, it ultimately needs cooperation from the rival democracy that it seeks to undermine in the long run.

Insights from the North Korean case contest what is assumed to be a clear and obvious distinction between sharp versus soft power. On the surface, North Korea's recent interactions with South Korea appear to be soft value diplomacy efforts. In fact, I illustrate through the most prominent Trojan horse efforts from 2018 that they are more likely to be sharp tactics in sheep's clothing, casting quite a different light on North Korea's recent turn toward diplomacy.

Reconceptualizing Sharp Power

Sharp power, as the term is coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig in a *National Endowment for Democracy* report, refers to influence efforts by authoritarian regimes that center on manipulation, division, or distraction. The authors argue that recent efforts by Russia or China to seed journalists, cultural centers, and think tanks in various democracies—what seem like "public diplomacy" efforts—are, in fact, tools for information censorship and control that seek to undermine the legitimacy of democracies. Unlike soft power, which aims to move a target state through attraction and shared values, these efforts "are 'sharp' in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries."[2]

For the authors, the key distinction between soft versus sharp power appears to be one of motive: whether the efforts are "benign" and aim to attract versus "malignant" and aim to manipulate. The main problem with this distinction, however, is that it assumes a false dichotomy in the nature of power. Even soft power, in the way that Joseph Nye first conceptualized it with regards to the United States, is far from "benign":

> "This second aspect of power—which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants—might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants."[3]

In fact, the co-optive nature of soft power can be characterized as the ultimate form of manipulation—the ability to shape the very preferences of target states, or what Steven Lukes calls the "third dimension" of power.[4]

The other problem is that Walker and Ludwig often conflate power motive with regime type, characterizing democracies as benign, and authoritarian regimes as malignant. Such linkage, however, is empirically false. Democracies have certainly engaged in what can be described as "sharp" tactics, such as the United States' efforts to covertly fund anti-communist parties in Italy's 1948 election during the Cold War.[5] And certainly not all of China's estimated $10 billion a year investment into soft power projects has latent or hidden "sharp" motives.[6] The fact that such efforts have been unsuccessful in improving public opinion towards China in democracies is cited as suggestive of ulterior motives, but such investments could be to improve China's standing among authoritarian regimes instead. Thus, while the motive behind a diplomatic strategy may loosely correlate with regime type, equating the two seriously limits the analytical usefulness of sharp power.

I offer a different theoretical framework for sharp power. Instead of fixating on the motive behind a strategy, I argue that the locus of power should be the primary axis. Hard versus soft power are often juxtaposed as opposites, but they actually share a key aspect: both are strategies to exert power on a target state from the outside. One does this through coercion and the other through attraction, but the source of power that pushes the target state to behave a certain way is external. The primary way that sharp power differs from hard or soft power is that the leverage point for pressure is internal. Sharp power exploits narrative forces *within* the target state itself to constrain it. Sometimes, as in the case of Russia's tactics, this means exacerbating existing sociopolitical divisions in the target state to alter a political outcome. Other times, I argue, it can mean constructing unity of opinion across key stakeholders in the target state in order to bind its leader. This reconceptualization of sharp power as an internal targeting strategy, therefore, encompasses a broader array of efforts than simply information hacking or social media manipulation. As I illustrate through the case of North Korea, it also helps to provide a more nuanced account of the true extent of sharp power by authoritarian regimes.

So why do authoritarian states use sharp power? The most obvious answer is that they are not very good at soft power, especially toward democracies, and hard power increasingly comes with high political costs. Sharp power, on the other hand, has become exponentially cheaper with communications technology and comes with less threat of retribution. Authoritarian states enjoy a comparative advantage in the sharp realm; whereas the information environment is porous and decentralized in many democracies, authoritarian states tend to have tight and centralized control over their information ecosystems. So far, this comparative advantage—conceptualized as the gap between the capability of the authoritarian state and the vulnerability of the target state—is the main explanation for the recent rise in authoritarian sharp power. For instance, a study of Russia's information wars in Georgia versus Ukraine identifies the readiness of the target state to respond as a key determinant in the timing and longevity of a sharp attack.[7]

Comparative advantage certainly matters for strategic calculations, but it alone does not explain why authoritarian states decide to act upon it. I argue that authoritarian states resort to sharp power when they have specific political needs that cannot otherwise be achieved through soft or hard power. It is the nature of those needs—what they are, the barriers they face, and how they change—that dictates the form and timing of sharp power use. Thus, unlike soft power, for which there is no downside to consistent investment aside from poor returns, sharp power moves will tend to be highly contextual depending on the circumstances of the agent state. This agent-driven approach to sharp power, in contrast to structural or resource-based explanations, can better account for why Russian and Chinese sharp power look so different, despite both being high-resource authoritarian states. Conceptually, then, it is more sensible to understand sharp power in the context of specific states and political conflicts, rather than as a monolithic or unilateral strategy, as soft power is often portrayed. The main contention of this article is that sharp power will look different for different states at different times, depending on what their political needs are and how they change.

In the following sections, I substantiate these arguments through the case of North Korea's recent sharp power toward South Korea. I apply the agent-driven approach to sharp power by first analyzing what North Korea's political needs are and how South Korea poses both

benefits and barriers to those goals. In particular, I highlight how internal forces within South Korea—specifically, the growing identity divide toward North Korea among key constituencies—serve as points of leverage for North Korea. Then, based on the framework of sharp power as an internal strategy, I illustrate North Korea's most prominent sharp efforts from 2018: the Pyeongchang Olympics and the third inter-Korean summit. On the surface, these events are not what one expects to see in a study of North Korean sharp power; indeed, they appear to be "benign" soft power efforts compared to North Korea's more infamous provocations. But a closer analysis reveals how North Korea deliberately leveraged these events to target South Korea's internal cleavages—sometimes by dividing, other times by uniting—to push South Korea toward its desired ends.

Identity Barriers to North Korea's Political Needs

North Korea's primary goal is regime survival. But like most states, it not only wants to survive, but do so in a respected manner. It seeks to be recognized and integrated into the international community of nations—to have normalized relations with superpowers and, most critically, to find alleviation from aggressive economic sanctions. As Victor Cha notes, "the key country that can provide these benefits is the United States."[8] But as long as North Korea is unwilling to give what the U.S. wants in exchange—complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization—it needs powerful alliances to keep U.S. pressure at bay.

China has been that ally for nearly six decades. Yet, as Kim Jong-un observed through his father and grandfather, it is a fair-weather friend. What began as a communist, ideological kinship developed into a vested economic partnership, but Kim knows that as long as the North Korean economy continues to be crippled by sanctions, his country is a diminishing asset. There are many reasons why North Korea conducted an unprecedented barrage of ballistic missile tests in 2017. One of them was likely to test the upper boundary of the Sino-North Korea alliance. As the missile tests drew international condemnation, China ultimately capitulated. The Foreign Ministry publicly stated "grave concerns and opposition" after the launch of Hwasong-15—said to be capable to reaching U.S. territory—in a rare public denouncement of North Korea.[9]

With that informative signal, what North Korea needs is a more durable alliance against U.S. pressure. It needs an alliance based on something more intrinsic than aligned ideology or shared interests. Ironically, the one state that offers such potential is its rival democracy of South Korea. North and South Korea have radically different governments, but both states espouse the principle of singular nationhood as one Korean *minjok.* This belief was able to endure territorial and political division largely because of the way that Korean identity was "racialized" in the wake of Japanese colonialism. Under Japanese rule, Korean nationalist leaders sought for a way to keep the national community intact, even through the loss of political autonomy. They did so by reimagining Korea as a singular bloodline that could remain pure and continuous despite the imposition of foreign rule, language, or even customs.[10] Thus, even as the Korean War and armistice split the peninsula into *de facto* two states, both Koreas continue to claim legitimacy over the entire peninsula based on this ethno-national principle.

Blood is certainly thicker than water, but South Korea also brings other alliance benefits that North Korea needs. The U.S. has vested interests in South Korea that it is willing to protect. South Korea is a key trading partner in the region, provides geopolitical pressure against China and Japan, and its democracy holds tremendous symbolic value for U.S. involvement in the Korean War—one reason why over 28,000 American soldiers are still stationed there. All of this means that South Korea can be an invaluable shield for North Korea, as it constrains the U.S. from taking any actions against North Korea that would hurt or jeopardize security in the South. But the two Koreas are still in an armistice and technically at war. In the wake of a thinning alliance with China, North Korea, therefore, finds itself in the peculiar predicament of needing cooperation from a rival democracy that it ultimately seeks to defeat.

The principle of co-nationality, however, belies the complexity of securing a South Korean alliance. The domestic identity politics within South Korea are far from simple. To understand why North Korea has recently turned to the kind of sharp power that I discuss below, it is critical to first understand the identity cleavages toward North Korea that exist in the South and how these pose barriers to establishing an inter-Korean alliance.

The post-Korean War identity politics in the two Koreas took very different paths. Whereas the North quickly consolidated into a top-down nationalist regime poised against the U.S. as the primary foreign threat, South Korea's inconsistent turn toward democratization opened up room for nationalist contestation. For the military dictatorships that immediately followed the war, the singular national threat—indeed, what they saw as the very reason for the war—was the spread of communism and its destabilizing potential. Presidents Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan, therefore, all took a hardline stance of containment against North Korea. But for the progressive cause, forged out of opposition to the military dictatorships, a different national narrative was needed.[11] This coalition instead turned to the U.S. as complicit in the brutal oppression practiced by those dictatorships, most tragically distilled in the 1980 Kwangju massacre. Liberation from U.S. influence became its slogan of national autonomy, with some extremists even praising North Korea for its staunch anti-Americanism.[12]

Thus, the progressive-conservative divide in South Korea has less to do with the economic agenda that defines the left-right political spectrum in most Western democracies, and more to do with national narrative, specifically vis-à-vis the North. Neither group defines or claims North Korea as a national "other." The "us" versus "them" divide in South Korea is of a much subtler sort: whether they see co-nationality with North Korea as an asset or threat to democratic stability in the South. The election of Moon Jae-in—and the return of progressive leadership after a decade—opened a window of opportunity for North Korea to strike a much-needed identity alliance. Unlike a military or political alliance, this would be a shared sense of purpose in facing pressures from the outside world. As a competitive democracy, however, South Korea is far from a singular or autonomous actor. North Korea knows that the Moon administration's agenda is still constrained by popular support, as it just watched the grassroots efforts that led to the impeachment of Park Geun-hye. To secure an identity alliance, then, North Korea knows that it must address the barriers that are internal to South Korea, which leads to the need for sharp power.

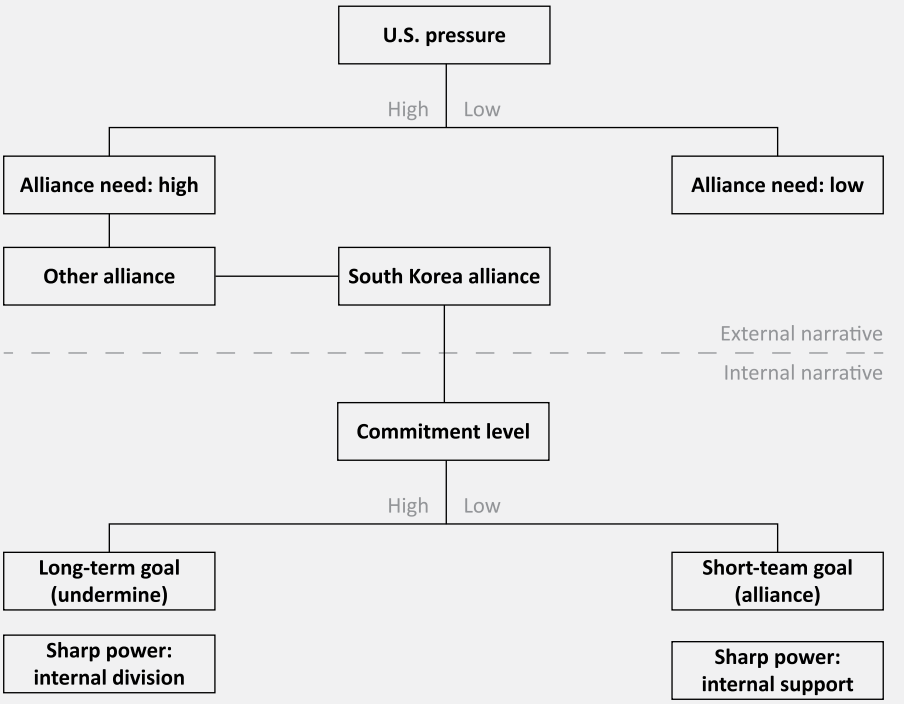
The most obvious opposition to an identity alliance with North Korea will come from conservatives in South Korea. A less obvious source comes from a key constituency group for Moon: the youth. Perceptions of and identification with North Korea are at an all-time low among this group. South Koreans in their 20s and 30s came of age during the conservative era when inter-Korean relations were hostile. Incidents such as the *Cheonan* sinking and *Yeonpyeong* shelling, where North Korea caused South Korean casualties, serve as the formative political moments that define this generation's views of North Korea. Thus, in nationally representative surveys, these age groups consistently report the lowest feelings of closeness toward North Korea. In a 2015 Asan Policy Institute study, for instance, on a scale of 0 (not close at all) to 10 (very close), they averaged only 4.0 and 4.3, respectively.[13]

Perhaps a more troubling trend is that the importance of ethnicity as the basis for Korean identity is fading. This shift describes the South Korean public generally, but is most acute among youth. Back in 2007, a slim majority of South Koreans in their 20s and 30s—by 51 percent and 58 percent, respectively—cited shared ethnicity with North Koreans as a reason for reunification. By 2014, those numbers had dropped to 36 and 40 percent, respectively. The reason why this trend is particularly problematic for North Korea is that South Koreans in their 20s to 40s comprise Moon's main electoral base. In the 2017 presidential election, these age groups had by far the highest vote shares for Moon.[14] Thus, Moon is heavily constrained by the preferences of the young electorate—one that is overwhelmingly apathetic or negative toward North Korea.

Maneuvering such oppositional forces within South Korea to secure an inter-Korean identity alliance cannot be achieved by soft or hard power alone. Unilateral soft power toward South Korea would undermine Kim's own legitimacy in the North. Trying to coerce South Korea into an identity alliance would risk further alienating the North from the international community, which defeats the purpose for such an alliance in the first place. Instead, North Korea needs to walk a careful dual narrative. Figure 1 maps out the dual levels of North Korea's political needs and the various allied contingencies that ultimately shape its sharp strategy toward South Korea. Externally, it needs to project a "soft" identity alliance with South Korea to an international—and specifically U.S.—audience to secure a diplomatic shield. Internally, it needs to gain narrative leverage over South Korea's domestic forces to balance between two contradictory goals. In the short-term, North Korea needs to secure an identity alliance with South Korea; in the long-term, it needs to ultimately undermine South Korea's legitimacy.[15]

The way that North Korea balances between these short-term versus long-term internal goals depends, I argue, on South Korea's demonstrated commitment to the external narrative of an inter-Korean identity alliance. When perceived commitment from South Korea is strong, North Korea does not need to take further action to bind South Korea's hand. Therefore, it uses its sharp capacity to pursue its long-term goal of undermining South Korea's legitimacy by stoking internal divisions, even while pursuing an alliance on the surface. When perceived commitment from South Korea is weak or constrained, however, North Korea reverts its sharp energy toward the short-term goal, using it to build up internal support within South Korea for an inter-Korean identity alliance. The next section illustrates how North Korea's recent turn toward sharp power does this.

Figure 1. Dual levels of North Korea's political goals and constraints



North Korea's "Trojan Horse" Sharp Power

I describe North Korea's particular form of sharp power as a Trojan horse tactic. This strategy is the result of North Korea's peculiar predicament: the need to project a strong South Korean alliance internationally, while continuing to weaken South Korea's legitimacy internally. I argue that North Korea does this by hijacking South Korea's most prominent soft power efforts. North Korea proactively supports or participates in them, projecting the warm glow up north and outwards to the international—and specifically U.S.—audience. In the process of participation, however, North Korea exploits direct access to the South Korean public to inject performances or narrative nuggets that grant it leverage over South Korea's identity cleavages. It then wields that leverage—sometimes by dividing and other times by uniting the South Korean public—to put internal pressure on the Moon administration to cooperate with the North's goals. Such a strategy is akin to the final military tactic used by the Greeks in the Trojan War, where soldiers hid inside a giant wooden horse, seemingly gifted to the Trojans as a gesture of defeat, in order to penetrate Troy's indomitable walls and eventually claim victory over the unsuspecting Trojans.

Before delving into the North Korean case, it is helpful to put it in comparative context with other forms of sharp power, particularly those of Russia and China. Even between the latter two cases, there is significant divergence in how sharp power is manifested. The Russian strategy, examining its meddling in the U.S. (2016), Ukraine (2014), and Georgia (2008), tends to be more specific and aggressive. The Kremlin aims to alter specific political

outcomes—an election, a military conflict, a mass uprising—by going on the information offensive. The Chinese strategy, on the other hand, is subtler and more diffuse. China aims to construct narratives from the ground-up, through carefully censored journalist "training" programs, people-to-people exchanges, and establishment of Confucius Institutes.[15]

The comparative value of the North Korean case is to clarify the political logic that underlies such diversification in sharp power, not only between countries, but also within the same country. As its past activities show, North Korea knows how to do the Russian style; the Sony hack, the WannaCry virus to raid the Bangladeshi bank, and other cyberattacks, were more of that flavor.[16] North Korea's Trojan horse strategy toward South Korea is quite different from these past endeavors. My claim is that this is not an impulsive change, but a calculated response to the rather perverse political need of North Korea at this historical juncture: identity alliance with a democracy that it ultimately seeks to undermine. Thus, an in-depth look at North Korea's contemporary tactics makes a case against any monolithic notion of "sharp power" as simply cyber or information warfare. Instead, sharp power is better understood as an umbrella of strategies for constructing or disrupting narratives to create internal pressure on a target state. Information hacking and embedding fake content are certainly part of that tool set, but so are other means of narrative control, such as performance politics.

I trace North Korea's Trojan horse strategy through case studies of what I view as its most notable sharp power efforts from 2018: its participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics and the third inter-Korean summit held in April. It is no coincidence that both events are listed as South Korea's most successful soft power efforts from 2018 by Soft Power 30.[17] Indeed, that is precisely why North Korea targeted them.

Case 1: Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

For a North Korea coming off the heels of a tense, "fire and fury" 2017 and seeking a South Korean alliance, the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics offered the prime setup. The Olympics are the epitome of sports diplomacy: Kim knew that the world's eyes would be on Pyeongchang, and he also knew that the progressive Moon administration would be receptive toward North Korea. Seemingly out of nowhere, Kim expressed interest in participating in the Olympics in his New Year's speech, and as expected, the Moon administration quickly followed up with an invitation.

North Korea effectively leveraged South Korea's soft power to project a narrative of inter-Korean identity alliance to the international community. Not only did it partake in the Olympics, but it also walked in joint procession with the South under a "one Korea" banner and sent a 400-person cultural troupe, including the famed cheerleaders, along with athletes. This was not the first time the two Koreas made a joint entrance, but to do so on South Korea's turf held novel symbolic value and elevated North Korea's status to essentially a co-host. The move won North Korea a favorable diplomatic aura at a critical time, and externally, signaled a strong, perhaps even unprecedented, level of inter-Korean identity alliance, which is precisely what it needed to show the United States.

Internally, however, North Korea also needed to maintain a more nuanced, delicate balance between its contradictory short-term versus long-term goals toward South Korea. While needing support from South Korea now, in the long run, North Korea ultimately wants to

maintain within-nation superiority. With the Olympics, South Korea's strong commitment to an identity alliance—signaled by the Moon administration's immediate invitation—freed up North Korea to simultaneously use sharp power for its long-term goal of weakening South Korean democracy. Thus, in the participation process, North Korea deliberately provoked divisive cleavages within South Korea that would be most apt to destabilize Moon's legitimacy, even as Moon worked to ensure the Olympics was a joint, inter-Korean success. I highlight two divisive kinks that North Korea embedded in the participation process to accomplish this objective.

The first kink was to demand a joint North-South hockey team. While the visual of a "one Korea" team generated diplomatic benefits for the North, in practice, the decision meant that certain South Korean players would lose their spots on the team to make room for North Korean players. The unilateral announcement of the decision from South Korea's Ministry of Unification, which justified it under the banner of pursuing "Pyonghwa *(peace)*" Olympics, drew nearly 450 complaints on the Blue House's online petition forum, with some posts drawing more than 58,000 co-signers.[18] Table 1 shows a content analysis of the petitions, in which I coded the main schema raised in each entry. Opposition to the joint team was based mainly on two reasons: the politicization of the Olympics for a progressive agenda, and outrage over accommodating the North at the expense of the South.[19] In other words, the joint team decision triggered, with precision, the historical concerns that define the South Korean right.

Table 1. Content analysis of South Korean petitions against the joint Korean hockey team

Justification schema	**N**
Use of Olympics for political agenda	172
Accommodation of North at the expense of South	135
Fairness concerns (unmeritocratic or opacity of decision)	49
Anti-North Korea	40
Other	32
Total	**428**

The second kink was a cheerleading prop. The North Korean cheerleaders—the object of seemingly endless international media coverage during the Games—typically waved the "one Korea" flag. But during the hockey match in which the joint Korean team competed, they swapped the flag for a prop of a young man's face. To many observers, the face bore undeniable resemblance to a young Kim Il-sung, as shown in Figure 2. The face ignited outrage from the South Korean right, with representative Ha Tae-kyung from the conservative Bareun party—an offshoot from former president Park Geun-hye's Saenuri party—tweeting that "they [North Korea] think this is the Pyongyang Olympics."[20] More curious was the fact that the face resembled Kim Il-sung, rather than the current leader Kim Jong-un—clearly a deliberate, forethought decision. This meant that the face was most readily recognizable by South Korea's elder generation; those who have first-hand memories of the Korean War, remember Kim Il-sung's younger profile, and are overwhelmingly conservative. The prop, therefore, targeted the South Korean right, the group with the most destabilizing potential under progressive leadership.

Figure 2. North Korea's cheerleading prop as sharp power

Source: Kookmin Ilbo

North Korea denies such accusations, communicating through South Korea's Ministry of Unification that using the founder's face as a cheerleading prop would be unimaginable.[22] At the same time, North Korea's concern over the South Korean right is laid bare in the *Rodong Sinmun,* the official mouthpiece of the Workers' Party. In one of several op-eds and articles about the Olympics, a staff writer attacks South Korea's conservative media for interfering with a budding inter-Korean alliance:

> "No matter how desperately [the conservative media] may try to mislead public opinion, nobody will lend an ear to their trumpeting. The South Korean conservatives would be well advised to stop at once such foolish smear campaign making their end more miserable and prepare themselves to stand their trial for the thrice-cursed crimes they committed against the nation."[23]

The narrative bait and switch is obvious here. While deliberately stoking conservative backlash within South Korea, and, therefore, undermining democratic legitimacy, North Korea takes the official stance of supporting inter-Korean unity to an international audience,[24] maneuvering away from any culpability.

North Korea's engagement with the Pyeongchang Olympics was "sharp," in that it manipulated narrative forces internal to South Korea to balance two seemingly contradictory goals: in the long-term, to undermine the rival democracy, while in the short-term, to reap the "soft" benefits of effectively co-hosting the Olympics. How successful were North Korea's efforts? Hosting an international sporting event like the Olympics typically yields a boost in public support for the incumbent president. In contrast, Moon's approval rating fell below 60 percent for the first time immediately following the Olympics,[25] in what some Korean media have dubbed the "Pyeongchang paradox." Of course, exacerbating internal discord within South Korea was a viable strategy because North Korea knew that the Moon

administration was fully committed to making the Olympics a success, regardless. To show how North Korea shifts strategy when South Korea's commitment to an identity alliance is less clear, I turn to its engagement in the third inter-Korean summit.

Case 2: Third Inter-Korean Summit

A key argument in this article is that political context—a given state's political goals and the barriers against it—undergirds sharp power strategy. As the third inter-Korean summit began to materialize in the spring of 2018, North Korea's political context had shifted. The Olympics signaled thawing relations on the Korean Peninsula, which prompted a change of tone from the U.S.: Trump accepted Kim's invitation to meet, Mike Pompeo made the highest-level visit to North Korea since Madeleine Albright in 2000, and Trump publicly endorsed a Korean peace treaty leading up to the inter-Korean summit. This was a very different context than the one in which North Korea had found itself right before the Olympics, where the U.S. had recently added it back to the list of "state sponsors of terrorism" and backed U Resolution 2397, which imposed additional sanctions to cut North Korean imports of petroleum by almost 90 percent.

This shift complicates the strategic landscape for North Korea. What it had envisioned as an inter-Korea identity alliance standing off against the U.S. has now become a three-way negotiation, with the U.S. engaging directly and separately with both Koreas. The U.S. wields significant pressure over South Korea's option set: not only has South Korea maintained a close relationship with the U.S. since the armistice, but also, in the event of hostility from North Korea, an alliance with the U.S. is its most powerful defense. In this scenario, the primary threat to North Korea's goal of keeping U.S. pressure at bay is a South Korea that prioritizes a U.S. alliance over an inter-Korean identity alliance. North Korea knows that, while the Moon administration may be ideologically committed to favor the latter, the U.S. also exerts real security pressure on South Korea from the outside. Its sharp power strategy, then, is to counter that by building internal pressure within South Korea to prioritize an inter-Korean alliance. As I illustrate below, North Korea effectively used performance politics during the inter-Korean summit to target the key constituency within South Korea that could exert this pressure on Moon: the youth.

The dominant narrative about North Korea and Kim Jong-un among South Korean youth is negative. The majority see North Korea as a liability. For instance, a 2017 study by the *Korea National Institute for Unification* finds that South Koreans in their 20s and 30s are most likely to see North Korea as an object of hostility rather than cooperation, and that a majority of them believes reunification to be unnecessary.[26] Similarly, another recent study that analyzed the valence of all North Korea-related searches between September 2017 and April 2018 in South Korea found that the highest percentage of "negative" searches came from those in their teens to 40s.[27] The irony, of course, is that this age group was also Moon's deepest support base in the 2017 election. The youth constituency is, therefore, a pivotal internal constraint to South Korean leadership.

I argue that North Korea's approach to the summit—from the logistics and visuals to Kim's expertly tailored repertoire—was aimed at revising the North Korean narrative among South Korean youth, as a way to exert internal pressure on Moon. The strategy began with framing the summit as a "historic" turning point of revival and rebirth for the peninsula.

The summit itself was not historic; it would have been the third time that leaders from both sides met in person. What gave it historical significance was that Kim requested the summit to take place in South Korea, making him the first North Korean leader to set foot on South Korean territory since the armistice.

With the media now fixated on the unprecedented moment, Kim proceeded to turn the dominant narrative of who he is, and what North Korea is, on its head. In stark contrast to his reputation as "rocket man" and a ruthless autocrat who murdered both his uncle and half-brother, Kim projected himself as warm, honest, and even humorous. Upon crossing the DMZ, Kim also invited Moon to step over to the other side, saying "shall we go now, together?" When Moon noted how Kim must have gotten up early that day to travel south, Kim apologized in jest for making Moon a habitual early riser, referencing the early morning National Security Council meetings Moon had convened each time North Korea tested a ballistic missile. At the dinner, as Kim introduced the Pyongyang cold noodles he had brought from North Korea, he noted how the food had traveled "very far," but quickly quipped: "Oh, I guess I shouldn't say that it is far." The phrase became an unofficial slogan of sorts, both for the summit, and as a sign of a new start in inter-Korean relations generally, and was cycled countless times through South Korean news shows, ads, and social media.

Post-summit surveys suggest that Kim's performance was unusually successful at shifting South Korean public opinion toward North Korea. A Gallup survey of 1,002 South Koreans on May 2-3, 2018, a week after the summit, showed that 65 percent of citizens said that their opinion of Kim had become "more favorable," with only 28 percent saying that their views were "unchanged."[28] Even among those in their 20s and 30s—typically the most apathetic or pessimistic toward North Korea and prospects for reunification—a majority chose "more favorable." This gain in favorability was related to a significant increase in perceptions of trustworthiness toward North Korea. When asked whether they believe North Korea would follow through on the agreements from the summit, 58 percent of respondents said that they believed it would—a notable increase from the 17 percent level of faith that followed the last inter-Korean meeting between senior officials in August 2015.

Perhaps Kim is just a jovial personality. Perhaps his summit demeanor was just a good faith response to Moon's invitation. Or, perhaps, Kim is a third-generation dictator of a regime that is exceptional at performance politics, and in particular, knows how to appeal to youth, something that he has done within North Korea to build his own legitimacy as a young successor.[29] My claim is that Kim's repertoire at the inter-Korean summit is a prime example of North Korea's Trojan horse sharp power: hijack what appears to an international audience to a high-profile "soft" event to seed narrative nuggets that put internal pressure on South Korea's option set. With the U.S. now exerting its own pressure on Moon's commitment, North Korea's strategy was to gain leverage from within: to rally pro-North support in Moon's key constituency—which formerly ranged from apathetic to negative toward engagement—to force the president's prioritization of an inter-Korean alliance. In this view, the historicity of the third summit, the symbolic visuals it produced of the two leaders hand in hand, and the witty rhetoric used by Kim in otherwise predictable summit exchanges—these were all part of the toolkit of Kim's performance politics to change the dominant narrative toward North Korea among South Korean youth.

North Korea's political strategy toward the summit becomes more apparent in what it actually says about it. In nearly every article and op-ed in the *Rodong Sinmun* about the summit, language about unanimous public support abounds across the nation for inter-Korean identity alliance. This particular result of the summit is used as leverage whenever South Korean commitment is seen as wavering or succumbing to U.S. pressure. Immediately after the summit, *Rodong* stated that the Panmunjom Declaration will serve as a turning point of peace for the peninsula, "as the entire minjok has unanimously hoped and demanded."[30] When Moon expressed support for the U.S. hardline demand of denuclearization after the U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore, an op-ed argued that "South Korea should come to its senses and pursue *by popular mandate* the path of autonomous unification within one people instead of worshipping foreign powers" (emphasis mine).[31] Interestingly, any anti-North Korea protests or opposition efforts by conservatives are characterized as "not being able to read the *minjung's will*" and "anti-nationalist,"[32] effectively framing any hesitance on the part of Moon as not responding to the public's preference—the key constraint in a democracy.

Conclusion

The recent wave of democratic backsliding, in places like Venezuela, Turkey, and even to a certain extent in the United States, has a distinctively subtle and internal form. These episodes of backsliding do not begin as violent or even dramatic shakeups due to a crisis or external pressure, but rather, are gradual erosions from within, driven by competing political narratives and steady attacking of domestic institutions.[33] In light of this trend, sharp power and its capacity to misinform and seed alternative narratives is particularly menacing.

This article makes the case, however, that to accurately portray the full extent of the threat posed by sharp power, a more theoretically precise framework is needed. I argue that the focus on information warfare, hacking, or media propaganda results in too thin of a definition; those are specific tools of sharp power, but do not capture the underlying strategy that distinguishes it from genuine value diplomacy efforts. A more analytically useful distinction is the targeting of pressures *internal* to a rival state to force its hand, where the intent of the agent state is discerned not by regime type, but by paying close attention to its political needs and constraints. That specific political context, and not necessarily the communications capacity or vulnerability of the target state, is what shapes the timing and form of sharp power.

North Korean sharp power is particularly helpful in illustrating this point, as the regime operates within political constraints that are quite different from those of Russia or China. I showed that using the internal and agent-driven approach to sharp power offers quite a different assessment of North Korea's recent diplomacy. What appear on the surface and to an international audience as value diplomacy efforts toward South Korea also embed sharp power tactics that target South Korea's domestic audience. Depending on the alliance context at the time, North Korea has strategically used a variety of performance politics to exacerbate existing identity divisions or to unify them in order to internally pressure South Korea in ways that it needs.

Going forward, discussions of sharp power and value diplomacy need to be framed by attention to political context. In the case of North Korea, this lens provides a tractable logic by which to understand the regime's seemingly "radical" shifts toward South Korea, and importantly, casts a realist view of its recent diplomacy efforts toward stronger inter-Korean relations and reunification.

While the primary focus of this article is to delineate North Korea's Trojan horse sharp power, an important question remains: to what extent is South Korea Troy? A mix of hubris and take-at-face-value innocence led to Troy's ultimate downfall into the Greek trap. This is a far cry from the South Korean conservative elite, who have consistently been the ones to call out North Korea's tactics even while risking bad publicity under a progressive presidency and media environment. Even progressive elites are well aware of the pitfalls of taking North Korea's words at face value, a mistake that they have learned from over time and through repeated high-level interactions with the regime.

I argue, however, that a specific confluence of two trends in South Korea make it surprisingly and increasingly vulnerable to North Korea's sharp strategy. The first trend is an unassuming innocence toward North Korea that is growing among the younger generation in South Korea. It is not that these younger citizens have favorable opinions toward the North—in fact, far from it—but rather, that their understanding of the authoritarian regime is unidimensional. Their formative political exposures to North Korea, from the *Cheonan* sinking to the missile tests, have been uniformly negative. The singularity of their assumptions about the nature of "the Other" is problematic because it precludes the possibility of complexity and surreptitiousness. It was precisely this kind of flat assumption about the nature of the Greeks, and of war more generally, that made the Trojans vulnerable. Likewise, the simplification of North Korea among South Korean youth makes them increasingly vulnerable to the North's sharp strategies, as they are more likely to take the regime's actions or rhetoric at face value. In the literature on racial politics and implicit bias in the United States, Tali Mendelberg shows that politicians subvert the social norm of racial equality by "playing the race card" implicitly, through subliminal cues about racial superiority or fear. [34] For the older generation in South Korea, North Korea's tactics to "play the nation card" are immediately evident and, therefore, ineffective, because they understand the complexities that are belied by the public principle of national unity. A growing lack of awareness of that complexity renders the younger generation in South Korea that much more susceptible to North Korea's sharp efforts.

The second trend is the progressive faction's growing political dependence on relations with the North. The progressives have always been ideologically pro-engagement toward North Korea, but Moon's administration has developed a nearly singular dependence on the issue. One possibility is that unprecedented engagement with North Korea serves as a "rally around the flag" diversion from the growing domestic problems of youth unemployment and declining birthrate, for which progressive economic policies have proved to be largely ineffective.[35] The issue here is not innocence toward North Korea, but a highly political need to pursue engagement even at unusually high costs, in order to preserve progressive momentum in South Korea. This growing political dependence on North Korea at the progressive elite level, combined with the rise of an unassuming younger generation that mostly takes political cues from the left, make for a South Korean public that increasingly, and dangerously, treads toward Troy.

Endnotes

[1] Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "From *'Soft Power'* to '*Sharp Power': Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World,*" National Endowment for Democracy, (2017), 13.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990), 166.

[4] Steven Lukes, Power: *A Radical View.* 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[5] U.S. secret funding for anticommunist parties in Italy's 1948 election and the KGB's seeding of a false rumor that AIDS was the product of U.S. government biological weapons experiments were both exemplary uses of "sharp power" before the term was coined. See Joseph Nye Jr., "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence," *Foreign Affairs,* January 24, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power.

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[16] David E. Sanger and Katie Benner, "U.S. accuses North Korea of plot to hurt economy as spy is charged in Sony hack," *New York Times,* September 6, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/06/us/politics/north-korea-sony- hack-wannacry-indictment.html.

[17] Soft Power 30 is a joint project by Portland Communications and the USC Center of Public Diplomacy that provides cross-national and over-time rankings of soft power efforts. South Korea's evaluation is at: https://softpower30.com/country/south-korea/.

[18] A key word search of "joint Korean team+oppose" yielded 428 total petitions between January 1 and February 28, 2018. The full petition list is at: https://www1.president.go.kr/petitions.

[19] In the petition that drew over 58,203 co-signers, for example, the poster writes: "I understand the intent behind a joint team, but this is not the right time. Our hockey players, who trained hard up until this point, should come first."

[20] "North Korean cheerleaders use 'Kim Il-sung' Masks, Criticism of 'Pyongyang' Olympics," *Chosun Ilbo,* February 11, 2018, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/02/11/2018021100313.html.

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[24] North Korea scholars generally agree that outlets such as the *Rodong Sinmun* and the *Korean Central News Agency* are meant to communicate and craft the regime's message to an international audience, as much as the domestic one. See Virginie Grzelczyk, "Hard, Soft, Smart? North Korea and Power: It's All Relative," *Asian International Studies Review* 18(2) (2017).

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[32] *Rodong Sinmun,* October 29, 2018, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2018-10-29-0041.

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