

## **An Unlikely Seducer: Kim Jong-un’s Charm Offensive From the PyeongChang Winter Olympics Until the Trump–Kim Summit**

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This article analyzes North Korea’s image transformation in 2018 through the concept of charm offensive. A charm offensive is a diplomatic strategy in which countries aim to shift a problematic international image by harnessing their national leader’s personal magnetism to the task. We examine North Korean leader Kim Jong-un’s charm offensive in the American and South Korean press from his 2018 New Year Day’s Address until his meeting with the U.S. President on June 12, 2018. During these six months, Kim used various methods to charm his audience, from enlisting family members to crossing the demilitarized zone to even participating in a selfie. In return, in President Trump’s communication he was miraculously transformed from a “little rocket man” to an “honorable” leader. Through thematic analysis of the press coverage, we demonstrate that both American and South Korean journalists were transfixed by Kim’s conciliatory gestures, but “charm offensive” was a term and mindset favored only by American journalists.

*Keywords: charm offensive, North Korea, Kim Jong-un, foreign affairs, image makeover*

Within a short six months in 2018, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un radically changed his diplomatic strategy with South Korea and the United States. Kim’s New Year’s Day address proposed increased collaboration with the South to create a peaceful environment on the Korean peninsula. In a quick procession of events, in February 2018, North Korea participated in the Winter Olympics; on April 27, the inter-Korea summit was held for the first time in 11 years; and June 12 marked the first meeting of a U.S. president and a North Korean leader in history. During these six months, in President Trump’s communication Kim was miraculously transformed from a “little rocket man” to an “honorable” leader.

How could such a metamorphosis happen? This article analyzes Kim Jong-un’s and North Korea’s image transformation through the concept of charm offensive. A charm offensive is a “diplomatic technique in which countries aim to shift their international image through strategic public relations campaigns utilizing personal magnetism” (Sonnevend, 2019, pp. 695–696). Kim used a combination of methods to charm his

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audience, from enlisting sympathetic family members, to presenting spectacular performances by cheerleaders, to shaking hands at the demilitarized zone, to even participating in a selfie. His campaign was strategic and concerted, showing the North Korean leader in a radically different light on the world stage.

We examine Kim Jong-un's charm offensive as represented in the American and South Korean press from his New Year's Day address on January 1, 2018, until his meeting with the U.S. president on June 12, 2018. Through thematic analysis of the press coverage, we track the North Korean leader's steps toward shifting his own and his country's image, and analyze how American and South Korean journalists chose to depict these steps. In the contemporary media environment, where visual and textual representations of leaders instantaneously shape their countries' images on the global stage, charm offensives are key strategies of public diplomacy. With the help of a charm offensive, country leaders directly set some of the parameters of their media coverage, potentially shifting long-held public assumptions about their nations. Kim Jong-un's charm offensive is a rich case study to analyze this process.

### **"Charm Offensive" as a New Framework for Analyzing Mediatized International Relations**

Traditionally, scholars of international relations have differentiated between hard power and soft power. Hard power refers to the coercive force of a country, especially through military intervention, and soft power, a concept introduced by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (1990, 2004), stands for persuasion by peaceful influence. Soft power techniques focus on shared values and lasting alliances in foreign affairs; in Nye's understanding, countries create alliances with the help of soft power when they agree on the significance of certain social, political, and cultural values and try to contribute to these values' lasting success internationally. The charm offensive's seductive power brings it closer to soft power than to hard power, but the two terms are not identical. Charm offensives aim for quick metamorphosis in the perception of a country internationally. They typically focus on a fleeting moment of capturing hearts that rearranges the international political scene for a short time, without aiming to build or reaffirm enduring values.

Most often, a charm offensive shifts the image of a country's leader to alter the image of the country as a whole. In some cases, charm offensives use various leaders, and occasionally their families and a close group of advisors, to "seduce" the international audience. Political scientists have described the past 30 years as a peak time in political personalization, when the media have paid increasing attention to individual politicians and their close associates at the expense of nations, institutions, parties, organizations, and other entities (Balmas & Sheafer, 2013, 2014; Downey & Stanyer, 2010; Van Aelst, Sheafer, & Stanyer, 2012). The current popularity of mediatized political personalization also means that when people perceive the leader of a country negatively, this will influence their judgment of the country as a whole (Yang, Shin, Lee, & Wrigley, 2008). As political communication scholar Meital Balmas (2019) has recently demonstrated, the perception of a foreign country's leader shapes people's decisions about whether or not to support sending military aid, to buy products from the particular country, or even to visit it as tourists. Countries' leaders and their close associates thus serve as cognitive shortcuts or source cues to navigate complex and confusing information landscapes.

Charm offensives are strategic public relations campaigns of contemporary public diplomacy. They are concerted and planned, even if they occasionally display improvisatory features. Although politicians may or may not have personal magnetism in their everyday interactions, charm offensives as campaigns construct relatable, "charming" features for the leader and communicate these features to distinct local and international audiences.

In the American press, the term "charm offensive" was first used in connection with the Soviet Union in the 1950s, when the Soviets tried to shift its international image through sponsoring organized trips for opinion makers to the Soviet Union ("Russian Attack," 1955; "War Danger," 1956). The country's charm offensive came to a swift end with the Soviet invasion of Hungary on November 4, 1956—an act of military aggression that was universally condemned in the West. The term "charm offensive" has had varying success in the U.S. press ever since, with alternating periods of prevalence and disappearance (Sonnevend, 2019).

Although charm offensives certainly existed before digital media, they operate especially well in the current media environment that is characterized by the continuous transnational flow of visual and textual material and the ability for a global audience to respond instantaneously. To adhere to this media ecology, contemporary charm offensives tend to focus on visual appearance, and sometimes on sensory deception (Sonnevend, 2019). The charm offensive's initiators have to provide events and sites that make good visuals for the international media to cover. This way, they can set some of the parameters through which their country would be covered.

Charm offensives are powerful tools to shift public opinion on the global stage, and they are also inevitably deceptive because of their focus on appearance and seduction. These qualities may trigger mistrust and skepticism among journalists and their audiences. Still, even if they discuss charm offensives in a somewhat skeptical tone, journalists find themselves covering these strategic campaigns, giving a platform to controversial leaders and their public relations messages.

### **Brief History of North Korea's International Diplomacy**

To examine North Korea's recent charm offensive, we first review its past foreign policies. Since Kim Il-sung founded the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) in 1948, the Kim family has ruled North Korea—Kim Il-sung until his death in 1994, then his son, Kim Jong-il, until his death in 2011, and now grandson, Kim Jong-un. Just 28 years old and without political experience, Kim Jong-un had to first consolidate his power internally. The early years of Kim's reign were characterized by ruthless executions of potential political dissidents along with the advancement of a nuclear weapons program. In 2017, after his military had conducted its sixth nuclear test, Kim Jong-un declared that North Korea "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force" (Kim & Stewart, 2017, para. 5), capable of striking the continental U.S. This aggressive image was particularly geared toward his national audience, especially in the early years of his leadership (Hong, 2015; Y.-J. Kim, 2017). Ultimately, Kim Jong-un was able to stabilize his domestic power and subdue societal anxiety stemming from poverty and famine. His methods seemed to be to create moments of "crisis" and then to provoke conflicts with his country's "enemies," primarily the United States.

Since the beginning of 2018, Kim Jong-un has dramatically shifted his diplomatic strategies with South Korea and the United States by using softened rhetoric and displaying conciliatory gestures. From January to June 2018, North Korea participated in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in South Korea, conducted two inter-Korean summits, spoke about denuclearization and peace on the Korean peninsula, and held a U.S.–North Korea summit for the first time in history.

Throughout its history, North Korea has been known to oscillate between offensive military threats and appeasing calls for dialogue, especially in relation to South Korea (Chung, 2012; Jeong & Shin, 2015). Some scholars theorized this as Hwa–Chun double-sided strategy (화전양면전술). The Hwa strategy is a defensive tactic characterized by the initiation of dialogues and peaceful negotiations (Chung, 2012). In contrast, the Chun strategy is an offensive tactic that stages military actions and provocations, including the development and testing of nuclear weapons and missiles (Chung, 2012). Also translated as the carrot-and-stick strategy (Jeong & Shin, 2015) or offensive-appeasement strategy (Chung, 2014), scholars claim that such repetitive and periodic transitions of Hwa and Chun strategies have allowed North Korea to establish diplomatic relations with powerful actors in global politics, without giving up its autonomy and identity (Chung, 2014).

According to Jeong and Shin (2015), examples of the Hwa strategy during the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il regimes were, for instance, North–South family reunion events, participating in six-party talks, opening Mountain Kumkang to tourists, taking part in the Pusan Asian Games, and South and North Korean athletes marching together at the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games. At the same time, there were limited opportunities for actual dialogue between North and South Korea during the Kim Il-sung era because North Korea mostly performed coercive diplomacy through armed provocation (Jeong & Shin, 2015). Propagating self-reliance ideology (주체사상) as a central feature of his regime, Kim Il-sung maintained a hostile relationship with the United States and actively excluded North Korea from global capitalism (Suh & Yoo, 1997). Although his son, Kim Jong-il, seemed to seek change in foreign policy as a way to overcome North Korea’s economic hardship (Suh & Yoo, 1997), the Kim Jong-il regime also mainly sought military solutions when dealing with diplomatic issues (Jeong & Shin, 2015). Constructing their respective images as authoritative military leaders, both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il rarely made international appearances and were referred to as “reclusive dictators” (Chun, 2009; Jeong & Shin, 2015).

Kim Jong-un broke with the reclusive style of the past by making numerous public speeches, openly meeting with leaders in various countries, and actively being involved in diplomatic theatrics (“Kim Jong Un,” 2019). Although Rowe (2019) emphasizes the role of sports—the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics—as the “catalyst” that changed the diplomatic relationship between the Koreas and other interested parties, we believe that sports were only part of Kim Jong-un’s deliberate, larger attempt to alter North Korea’s international image. We argue that there is something radically new about Kim Jong-un’s recent international communication that requires new conceptualization.

Contemporary charm offensives differ from the above described reward and punishment focus of Hwa strategy in three important ways: (1) They focus on visual spectacle and public performance, (2) they place a political leader’s image at the center of attention in contrast to other elements of the country’s image, and (3) they operate in digital media environments that enable the quick dissemination of visual and textual

information and also trigger immediate responses from diplomatic partners through social media in front of a global audience. These characteristics were all present during Kim Jong-un's recent seduction of the West.

### Methods

To investigate how North Korea's diplomatic maneuvers were mediated, we focused on the journalistic coverage of North Korea and Kim Jong-un in the American and the South Korean press from January 1 to June 30, 2018. January 1, 2018, was selected as the starting date because Kim Jong-un's New Year's Day address was the point when the international media began to pay attention to North Korea's changing diplomatic strategies. We examined articles that were published until June 30 to include the coverage of the Trump–Kim summit. Articles were collected from five media outlets: for the U.S., *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post* (WP), and *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), and for South Korea, *Chosun* and *Hankyoreh*. These newspapers were chosen to represent diverse political opinions; three of them tend to be favored by liberals (NYT, WP, and *Hankyoreh*), whereas the other two cater more to conservatives (WSJ and *Chosun*). Articles were located using the search terms "North Korea" (북한) and "charm" (매력), "appease" (유화), "peace offensive" (평화 공세), and "image" (이미지) in the internal search engines of the news websites. Because the goal of this article is to examine how Kim is presenting himself and his country to the international media and the media's reception of his strategies, we narrowed our search to these specific terms. This search resulted in 84 articles in the American and 136 articles in the South Korean press.

We examined news articles to compare and contrast the different vocabulary, tones, and meanings that are implied by American and South Korean journalists. After a close reading of the articles, we conducted a thematic analysis—"a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57)—and identified repetitive themes in the media coverage of North Korea's charm offensive. As the concept of charm offensive rests on mediatized actions, news articles serve as suitable texts to observe how a charm offensive operates.

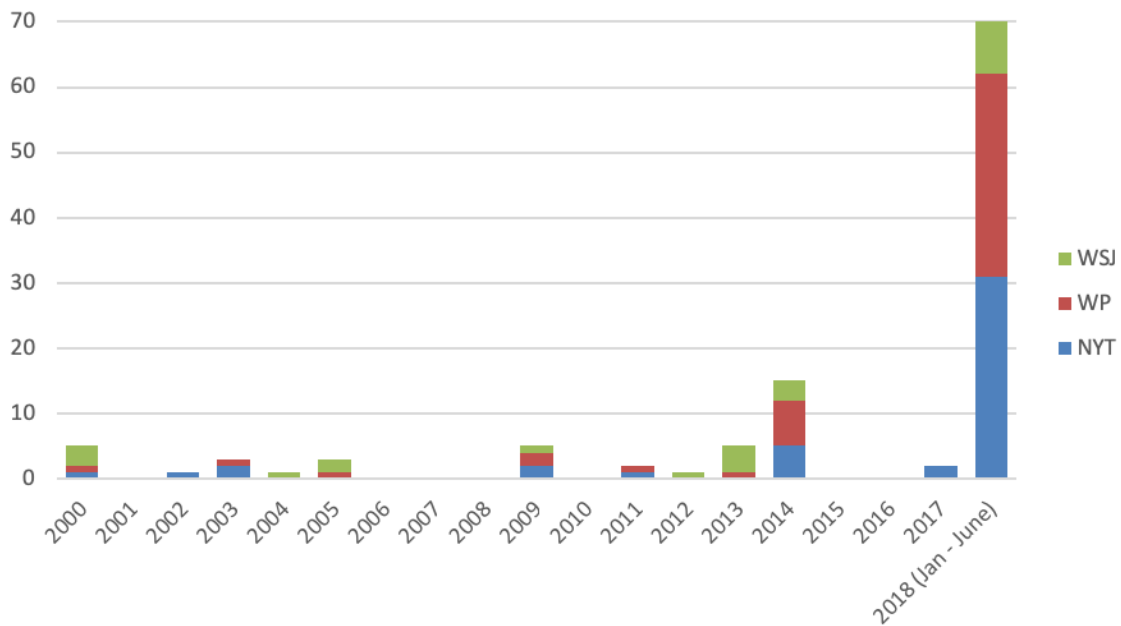
We offer a three-part analysis of the data. First, the section "Frequency of Usage" provides descriptive information about how many times the term "charm offensive" was mentioned in the American and South Korean newspapers and whether journalists used alternative concepts/vocabularies to describe the same phenomenon. Such a difference in frequency was then interpreted in relation to each country's sociocultural context and historical relationship with North Korea. Also, to examine the chronological progression of the term in association with North Korea, we counted the number of times "charm offensive" was mentioned in the American news coverage of North Korea from 2000 to 2018.

The next section examines the main strategies that Kim Jong-un used to run his charm offensive to successfully prompt a reformulation of foreign audiences' perception of North Korea. We analyze these strategies based on how the international media recalibrated its image of North Korea from "unpredictable threat" to "legitimate partner" in international diplomacy. By looking at both the American and South Korean press, we attempted to find similar representations of the charm offensive that traveled transnationally.

Finally, the last section illustrates how Kim’s charm offensive was received by the American and the South Korean press by examining the journalistic attitudes expressed in the articles. We initially aimed to code the articles’ general tone and sentiment, but this task has proven to be impossible because most of the articles incorporated varied views toward North Korea’s charm offensive. Such finding supports this study’s methodological approach because complex layers of meanings and attitudes can only be captured through careful, close readings of every article.

**Frequency of Usage**

The American press frequently used the term “charm offensive” to describe North Korea’s diplomatic strategy. We found that this term was picked up by journalists explosively in 2018, compared with the past coverage of North Korea. Figure 1 depicts the number of times “charm offensive” was mentioned in the news coverage of North Korea from 2000 to 2018 (January–June). The figure shows that although news articles rarely associated charm offensive with North Korea’s foreign diplomacy, this changed during the first half of 2018. This finding supports our argument that North Korea’s recent foreign diplomacy should be understood and conceptualized differently from its past tactics.



**Figure 1. The number of times charm offensive was mentioned in news coverage of North Korea (2000–18). Note. WSJ = Wall Street Journal; WP = The Washington Post; NYT = The New York Times.**

Interestingly, the examined American newspapers frequently used the term “charm offensive” when describing North Korea’s shifting public diplomacy, but Korean newspapers rarely used this term. In the American press, 70 of 84 articles mentioned charm offensive. In contrast, in both *Chosun* and *Hankyoreh*, only 15 of 136 articles mentioned charm offensive directly, and in 10 of them, charm offensive was quoted from

American media outlets or foreign individuals. Korean journalists were more inclined to use terms such as “appeasement offensive” (유화 공세), “peace offensive” (평화 공세), “image change” (이미지 변화) and “regime propaganda” (체제 선전).

There could be multiple explanations for this difference. The focus of South Korean media was on the relationship between North and South Korea rather than on individual charm or the charm of a nation. Moreover, the South Korean press generally applied gentler terms than the American press did in their description of North Korea’s shifting diplomacy. The American press often used dramatic words such as “charmed the world” and “seized the spotlight,” whereas the Korean press spoke of “softened gestures” and “wanting a conversation.” Such contrast in word choice may come from the different historical relationships that the United States and South Korea have built with North Korea. As the concept of the Hwa-Chun double-sided strategy implies, South Korea has experienced similar appeasing moments with North Korea in the past, which then often shifted back to a more hostile relationship. These past memories have remained in the South Korean collective consciousness and likely trigger caution in the interpretation of conciliatory North Korean gestures.

### **The Characteristics of Kim Jong-un’s Charm Offensive**

Based on the analyzed media coverage, we discovered five main strategies of North Korea’s charm offensive: (1) Kim Jong-un’s increasing openness to news photography, (2) meticulously planned image campaigns with occasional improvisation, (3) enhancing the leader’s relatability, (4) enlisting female “ambassadors,” and (5) forging sudden and momentary friendships between political leaders.

#### ***Kim Jong-un’s Increasing Openness to News Photography***

Casting away North Korea’s image as a “hermit kingdom,” Kim Jong-un increasingly opened up to the media as a strategy to show his leadership to the wider world. Unlike his predecessors who mostly kept their diplomatic practices behind the scenes, Kim actively invited the media’s attention and appeared on the global stage whenever possible. Newspaper articles frequently highlighted the unprecedented aspects of the North Korean leader’s openness to cameras. For instance, *Hankyoreh* pointed out that unlike the past inter-Korean summits that were held in Pyongyang, the April 2018 summit was broadcast live across the world (Jae-Hoon Lee, 2018). Even confidential negotiations between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in, the president of South Korea, were visually disclosed as the two leaders engaged in one-on-one conversation during a walk. *Chosun* also mentioned that Kim appeared in front of tourists and citizens the night before the Trump–Kim summit, waving to the cameras (Oh, 2018). As cameras captured Kim’s every move, his human characteristics were unveiled. The whole world was watching.

Kim Jong-un did not merely appear in front of the cameras, he also took the initiative to actively shape North Korea’s media coverage. Sending his sister Kim Yo-jong to the PyeongChang Winter Olympics serves as a prime example (see Figure 2). She is the first person in the Kim family to set foot on South Korean soil since the Korean War. The unprecedented nature of this visit and the public’s curiosity over Kim Jong-un’s relatively unknown sister led international media to follow her closely. The NYT commented that Kim Yo-jong created a “media frenzy” (Choe, 2018b, para. 18), while the WSJ called this phenomenon “media’s dictatorship indulgence” (“The Pyongyang Olympics,” 2018, para. 9). WP mentioned that she was “the object of most South

Korean fascination,” observing that Kim Yo-jong was “surrounded by the kind of paparazzi throng and security detail that are usually the preserve of K-pop Stars” (Fifield, 2018a, para. 13).

Kim Jong-un also introduced his wife, Ri Sol-ju, to international media during his visit to China and the April inter-Korean summit. Ri Sol-ju quickly became a media sensation, as she walked in front of the cameras, holding hands with her husband. An opinion piece on *Hankyoreh* even called journalists’ obsession with Ri Sol-ju “Ri Sol-ju politics” (R.-Y. Lee, 2018, para. 7), as her beauty, attitudes, and fashion were lavishly covered by international media.

In this contest for visibility, journalists often positioned representatives of North Korea against prominent politicians of the United States. For instance, Kim Yo-jong was portrayed as a winner of a “charm competition” (Ives & McDermid, 2018, para. 6), as she attracted more media attention than American Vice President Pence during the Winter Olympics. Articles emphasized that she was “taking Pence’s spotlight” and “outflank[ed] Trump’s envoy” (Rich & Choe, 2018, para. 4), and “stole much of the show” (Choe, 2018b, para. 18). South Korean media also spoke in a similar vein, as *Chosun* presented Ivanka Trump’s visit to the Olympics as a “PR game with Kim Yo-jong” (S.-M. Lee, 2018, para. 3), while *Hankyoreh* claimed that Kim Yo-jong can even “win a gold medal for her diplomatic maneuvers” (M.-N. Kim, 2018, para. 1).



**Figure 2. The historic handshake between Kim Yo-jong and President Moon, which went viral on social media.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Due to copyright considerations, we purchased photographs for this article from Getty Images. These images are the same or almost identical to the ones published in the analyzed newspapers.



At the same time, frequently using words such as “pageantry” and “spectacle” when describing North Korea’s recent media performances, both American and South Korean journalists understood North Korea’s diplomatic strategies to be heavily concentrated on visual appearance. Media representations of North Korea’s charm offensive focused on Kim’s stylistic change. For instance, journalists highlighted Kim Jong-un wearing a Western style suit and tie instead of his original Mao-style suit on the New Year’s Day address, and his change in hairstyle on the day before the Trump–Kim summit. North Korean cheerleaders’ Nike baseball caps during the PyeongChang Winter Olympics were also frequently depicted (Friedman, 2018).

### ***Meticulously Planned Image Campaigns With Occasional Improvisation***

Both American and South Korean media depicted Kim Jong-un’s shift in international diplomacy as a deliberate PR strategy (Bae, 2018). For example, the NYT assessed North Korea’s diplomatic overture during the early months of 2018 as something that was “planned methodically” (Landler, 2018, para. 19) and “plotted for months” (“Donald Trump and North Korea,” 2018, para. 7). Similarly, *Hankyoreh* commented that North Korea’s “changes in international diplomacy were under Kim Jong-un’s detailed roadmap” (Jin, 2018, para. 5), explaining that Kim’s recent diplomatic overture is far from spontaneous.

Kim’s performance during international media events, such as the inter-Korean summits and the Trump–Kim summit, was also described as extensively rehearsed showmanship. An opinion piece from *Chosun* that commented on the inter-Korean summit reflects this sentiment: “Every scene of the summit was meticulously planned and played by the script that was written to move the audience and maximize the dramatic effect of Kim’s performance” (S.-M. Chang, 2018, para. 1). American media spoke in a similar vein when reporting the Trump–Kim summit, portraying Kim’s actions as “expertly choreographed, sophisticated stagecraft” (Rich, 2018, paras. 17–18). Journalists were careful not to take North Korea’s softened diplomatic gestures at face value; they rather attempted to scrutinize North Korea’s underlying motives.

Kim Jong-un occasionally also improvised (although we can never be certain whether these acts were also preplanned). A key example was Kim’s crossing the demilitarized zone while holding hands with president Moon (see Figure 3). Covering this unexpected, live broadcast performance, *Chosun* wrote that such “impromptu allowed Kim to show his flexibility and openness, as well as the sincerity of his recent diplomatic transformations” (Cho, 2018, para. 2). The NYT also mentioned that this encounter “transfixed television viewers in South Korea . . . That single gesture went beyond political language as the theatrics conveyed messages of trust that language alone could not” (Choe, 2018d, para. 24). These commentaries illustrate the paradoxical characteristics of North Korea’s charm offensive: Although most elements of the charm offensive were described as extensively rehearsed performances, there were several unexpected scenes that were extensively circulated by the media. These moments of surprise highlighted Kim Jong-un and his team’s personable aspects, eventually supporting North Korea’s goal to transform its international image.



**Figure 3. Chairman Kim and President Moon cross the military demarcation line between North and South Korea during the inter-Korean summit in April 2018.**

### ***Enhancing Relatability***

As part of his charm offensive, Kim Jong-un drastically changed his public attitudes and manners. One of the most crucial components of this effort was smiling, as 73% of the photos in Korean newspapers and 82.4% in American newspapers we analyzed depicted Kim Jong-un and other high-profile North Korean leaders smiling. Journalists also mentioned Kim's smiles in their respective articles. For instance, the NYT's coverage of the meeting between Kim and South Korea's special envoys noted that "the envoys were taken aback by Kim Jong-un's friendliness . . . when it was time for farewells after a night of talk and dining, Mr. Kim walked them out and sent them off with *smiles* [emphasis added] and waves" (Choe, 2018c, paras. 3–12).

In an unprecedented act of visual diplomacy, on the day before the Trump–Kim summit, Kim Jong-un was spotted taking a selfie with the Singapore Minister of Foreign Affairs (see Figure 4). He also happily waved at people who were taking photos of him. These images went viral on social media, attempting to change Kim's image from scary and somewhat comical to friendly and relatable. Arguing that this surprise event was meant to demonstrate the softer side of North Korea, the NYT wrote: "Before the meeting, Mr. Kim posed for a selfie with Singapore's foreign minister, as if he were a fraternity brother blowing off his senior thesis for a night on the town" (Rich, 2018, para. 8). Such descriptions contributed to bringing Kim Jong-un "down to earth," constructing his image as a relatable figure. This event also suggests that Kim was actively participating in, and even exploiting, the features of digital media, especially the opportunity to promptly and widely circulate visual representations.



**Vivian Balakrishnan** ✓

@VivianBala



[#Jalanjalan](#) [#guesswhwere?](#)

♥ 14K 8:42 AM - Jun 11, 2018

**Figure 4. A screenshot of Singapore Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vivian Balakrishnan's, Twitter post.**

Korean newspapers also discussed Kim Jong-un's "humble attitudes." *Chosun* emphasized that Kim showed honesty and respect toward President Moon when the two met during the inter-Korean summits (J.-Y. Ahn, 2018). An opinion piece from *Hankyoreh* captured Kim's polite manners, saying that "his use of honorific terms, smoking a cigarette outside the meeting spaces, and letting President Moon and his wife take the elevator first, were far from what we knew of Kim Jong-un as an arrogant, insolent young leader" (Y.-H. Kim, 2018, para. 2). These humanizing descriptions contributed to his image as a relatable leader.

#### ***Enlisting Female "Ambassadors"***

Kim Jong-un also enlisted female family members to emphasize a "softened," "feminine" image of North Korea. He designated these women as "ambassadors" of North Korea and created settings where they could capture the media spotlight. His sister, Kim Yo-jong, was one of those most suitable for this peculiar job. While Kim Yo-jong usually stayed behind the scenes in local politics, as North Korea's authoritarian regime requires all propaganda to be concentrated on her brother, she was definitely "put much closer to the center stage" (Choe, 2018a, para. 26) when she came to the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Articles

described her as a “nuclear bomb with a smile” (Choe, 2018a, para. 19), serving as an emissary that sends a message to the world: “See, we’re not that scary” (Fifield, 2018a, para. 5).

Both the American and the South Korean press heavily reported about Hyon Song-wol, a famous North Korean singer and her all-female cheering squad when they were deployed to the PyeongChang Olympics. News articles often emphasized the explosive media attention given to Hyon, commenting that such interest is almost becoming a “Hyon Song-wol syndrome” (S. Kim, 2018, para. 12). Highlighting the news programs’ constant close-ups of Hyon’s face, articles mentioned that she is one of Kim Jong-un’s people that are trained to be picture-perfect by displaying a “stylish and charismatic image” (S.-Y. Ahn, 2018, para. 3)

Another enlisted member of Kim Jong-un’s family was his wife, Ri Sol-ju. While the First Lady title does not officially exist in North Korea, Kim elevated his wife’s status from “comrade” to “First Lady” in 2018. By inviting Ri Sol-ju to his diplomatic meetings and international travels, including the inter-Korean summit, the visit to China, and the meeting with South Korean special envoys, Kim Jong-un used publicity to legitimize her title internationally. Journalists interpreted these moves as attempts to normalize North Korea as an ordinary state (Noh, 2018; Soo-Hyun Park, 2018).

### ***Forging Sudden and Momentary Friendships***

Lastly, North Korea’s charm offensive involved sudden “friendships” with “enemy nations,” namely the United States and South Korea. As Kim’s 2018 New Year’s address started off by offering Seoul increased diplomatic communication, the North and South quickly built up an amicable relationship, which news sources called “a sense of brotherliness” (Parker & Fifield, 2018, para. 16). The media suspected that North Korea’s appeal to South Korea was a maneuver to drive a wedge between the United States and South Korea, but Kim Jong-un quickly reached out to the United States as well, suggesting a meeting with President Trump. After this diplomatic gesture, the relationship between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un drastically changed course. *Chosun* mentioned that whereas Trump had called Kim a “mad man” only a few months earlier, he later referred to Kim as a “very open and very honorable man” (Lim, 2018, para. 8). The *WSJ* similarly described this turnaround as “from name calling to high hopes” (“From Name Calling,” 2018).

North Korea’s charm offensive also presented North Korea and the United States as equal partners. Kim Jong-un aimed to demonstrate that his nation’s power in some ways equals that of the United States. The *NYT*’s coverage of the Trump–Kim summit illustrates this effort:

All of the pageantry pointed to a meeting between two equals—from the row of American and North Korean flags that stand behind the leaders as they first met, to the joint entrance into the room where they signed a declaration. (Rich, 2018, para. 14)

At the same time, news articles often depicted this sudden friendship as unstable and temporary; they indicated that it rested on mutual benefits rather than on shared values. Kim’s intention for this friendship was read as an attempt to lift or limit the economic sanctions against North Korea, whereas

President Trump's enthusiastic response was interpreted as a maneuver to shift attention away from his administration's failing foreign policy in the Middle East (Ignatius, 2018; Lyons, 2018).

In sum, all five elements of Kim's charm offensive were concerted efforts to move North Korea's image from "villain" to "hero," or at least to "partner." Gaining prominence on the global media stage, Kim was able to communicate novel messages of his country and momentarily capture the imagination of the international audience. Whether these changes in appearance bring anything in substance still remains to be seen, but in some ways even capturing the Western media's attention with well-crafted political performances was a major feat for the controversial North Korean regime.

### **The Reception of North Korea's Charm Offensive: Journalistic Attitudes in the South Korean and American Press**

South Korean media's reception of North Korea's charm offensive was partisan in tone. Conservative outlets tended to doubt Kim's intentions, and liberal outlets showed more support for North Korea's shifting diplomacy and for the Moon administration's cautiously open attitude toward the North.

As part of the conservative media landscape, *Chosun* frequently quoted conservative political leaders in South Korea, the United States, and Japan, who are generally skeptical of North Korea's diplomatic actions. These quotes mainly stated that Kim Jong-un's softened gestures toward South Korea were designed to drive the U.S. and South Korea further apart (Kang, 2018) or to disguise North Korea's continuing nuclear program (Yoo, 2018). *Chosun's* coverage of Kim Jong-un often showed him as a brutal, merciless, and war-loving despot, calling him "a slaughterer who even executed his own uncle, Jang Sung-taek and assassinated his stepbrother, Kim Jong-nam" (Cho, 2018, para. 2). Such emphasis on Kim Jong-un's negative characteristics was to caution readers from "being seduced by his words and actions" (Lim, 2018, para. 1). Articles also condemned liberal media outlets for portraying Kim Jong-un in a positive light (Han, 2018; Yoon, 2018).

In contrast, news articles from the liberal-leaning *Hankyoreh* reflected a more supportive sentiment. Many articles referred to North Korea's shifting diplomacy as an opportunity to improve the North-South relationship, evaluating the current diplomatic thaw as a hopeful sign of peace. For example, an opinion piece commented that North Korea's participation in the PyeongChang Olympics "is a door to peace. . . . It is an opportunity for South Korea to persuade the North" (Y.-C. Kim, 2018, para. 4). Moreover, articles emphasized that conservatives are overly anxious about the consequences of North Korea's charm offensive, saying that it is highly unlikely that people would suddenly become blind to the North's past through an image makeover.

*Hankyoreh* increasingly depicted Kim Jong-un in a favorable light over the time frame of this study, describing him as "a practical leader" (J.-S. Lee, 2018, para. 1), "open and confident" (Noh, 2018, para. 3), "honest and bold" (Y.-H., Chang, 2018, para. 2), "large-hearted" (Joo-Hyun Lee, 2018, para. 4), and "personable and relatable" (Sun-Ha Park, 2018, para. 6). These articles also emphasized that ordinary South Koreans' perception of North Korea and Kim Jong-un has drastically changed since the North's conciliatory gestures (journalists aimed to prove this assertion by inserting quotes from South Korean citizens.)

*Hankyoreh's* attitude toward North Korea's charm offensives was somewhat conflicted as journalists also claimed there is little possibility that people will be heavily affected by North Korea's diplomatic maneuvers.

While covering Kim's charm offensive, American news articles sometimes expressed caution over his radical image makeover. Especially in the conservative-leaning WSJ, North Korea's acts were mainly understood as deceitful tactics that hid true intentions. Similar to *Chosun*, WSJ often criticized liberal outlets for glamorizing and giving excessive attention to North Korea's recent diplomatic move. For instance, WSJ commented that "gullible Western media . . . went ga-ga for the North Korean cheerleaders" ("The Pyongyang Olympics," 2018, paras. 1–5) and that "the media went into full fanboy mode" (Mead, 2018, para. 1).

Although the NYT and WP were somewhat less critical about North Korea's diplomatic strategies and occasionally described them with words that exoticized North Korea—for example, referring to Kim Yo-jong as a "sphinxlike" (Tharoor, 2018, para. 3) woman who "flashes that mysterious smile" (Choe, 2018a, para. 20)—the articles from the NYT and WP also depicted mixed attitudes toward North Korea. Most of the articles included skeptical voices, even when the headlines were bombastic. For example, an article from the NYT was headlined "Kim Jong-un's sister turns on the charm, taking Pence's spotlight," and the article obsessed over Kim Yo-jong's appearance at the PyeongChang Olympics, but it also included the voice of anti-North Korea protesters in the South who were "horrified by the notion that Ms. Kim could lull South Koreans, or anyone else, into forgetting the North's repression and human rights abuses" (Rich & Choe, 2018, para. 25). As this example suggests, a mixture of conflicting tones made it difficult to pinpoint a uniform sentiment reflected in the articles.

Finally, there was also an important difference between the American and South Korean coverage in terms of the temporal vocabulary they employed. American news outlets were keen on presenting North Korea's image change as an unexpected and radical shift. Even though the charm offensive included carefully planned and prearranged events, the American media coverage centered on temporal acceleration and on surprise. For instance, the NYT enthusiastically reported that "*almost overnight* [emphasis added] with friendly smiles and messages of reconciliation, Ms. Kim managed to help soften her country's image among South Koreans" (Choe, 2018a, para. 5). Articles in the American press frequently mentioned that North Korea "abruptly changed course" (Perlez, 2018, para. 4), experienced an "astonishing turn of events" (Fifield, 2018b, para. 2), and argued that we are seeing an "unexpected burst of diplomacy" (Myers & Choe, 2018, para. 2). Kim Yo-jong's attendance at the Winter Olympics was reported as "something of a *last-minute surprise* [emphasis added], the result of a *rapidly unfolding* [emphasis added] series of events that began Jan 1" (Fifield, 2018a, para. 8), and North Korea's communication about potential high-level meetings with other countries was covered as "a diplomacy blitz" (Lyons, 2018, para. 8), in which Kim Jong-un presented "a remarkable shift in tone" (Choe, 2018c, para. 8).

In contrast, South Korean journalists mostly emphasized continuity. *Chosun* spoke of the "Kim family's traditional rhetoric and strategy" (Kang, 2018, para. 4) and reminded readers of North Korea's past actions. For instance, quoting a Japanese newspaper, it emphasized that "there have been several South-North unified Olympic teams in the past. Every time it produced a 'softened atmosphere,' but North Korea did not stop developing its nuclear weapons. Peace is only a fantasy" (I.-H. Lee, 2018, para. 7).

At the same time, there was an overlap in the temporal attitudes of American and South Korean journalists. American journalists occasionally emphasized continuity in North Korea's actions, for instance, the WSJ cautioned its readers that "these are *standard North Korean shakedown techniques* [emphasis added], honed to perfection by three generations of regime negotiators" (Eberstadt, 2018, paras. 1–2). And the South Korean press occasionally joined the American celebration of "abrupt change" and "surprise," for instance *Chosun* wrote about "North Korea's unexpected action" (Cho, 2018, para. 2), whereas *Hankyoreh* mentioned a "sudden attitude change" on the part of the North (K.-M. Park, 2018, para. 3).

The different temporal attitudes are likely due to a difference in historical knowledge of North Korean politics among American and South Korean audiences. Most South Korean journalists and their readers are well versed in the complicated past of Korean relations and have a harder time seeing North Korean diplomatic maneuvers as "unexpected" and "magical." An additional explanation could be that the more commercially minded American press is historically inclined to emphasize novelty to increase reader interest.

### Conclusion

Our article has aimed to shed light on North Korea's radical image transformation through the concept of charm offensive. Analyzing how the American and the South Korean press covered Kim's charm offensive provides a unique window into the changing image of North Korea internationally. Kim's plan to create at least momentarily amicable relations with the United States and South Korea had to take the contemporary media environment into account. Any move by the controversial North Korean leader was bound to attract media attention. With a concerted and strategic charm offensive, Kim controlled more elements of the Western media coverage than Western journalists probably would like to admit. By opening up to the cameras, introducing previously rarely seen family members, and organizing visually spectacular events, Kim created the framework in which the Western media's coverage operated.

At the same time, he could not control all elements of the reception. The comparative analysis of the American and South Korean press enables us to see that "charm offensive" was a term favored by the Western media, and the South Korean press handled the story with only rare reference to the concept—illustrative, as our analysis suggests, of very different political stances, perspectives, and expectations of the American and South Korean media. Even leading American news publications offer limited coverage of foreign affairs; therefore, American journalists were more likely to inflate the novelty and unexpectedness of Korean events to capture the audience's attention. Their South Korean colleagues could not escape strong skepticism, given their audience's familiarity with previous failed reconciliation efforts with the North. Moreover, Kim's charm offensive triggered both enchantment and anxiety on the side of American journalists. Journalists acknowledged the seductive powers of Kim's image campaign, but also referred to its potential dangers.

Although North Korea was successful in capturing the eyes of the global audience in the beginning of 2018, skepticism toward North Korea's diplomatic tactics has been growing ever since, as the United States and North Korea have not agreed on the steps of denuclearization since the Singapore summit. Many security experts and journalists have raised doubts whether North Korea is truly committed to abandoning its nuclear weapons, and discredited the Singapore summit as a "global spectacle" (Lemire, 2019, para. 2)

that legitimized North Korea's world standing without any actual achievements. Nonetheless, North Korea continues to practice its charm offensives today—inter-Korean and U.S.–North Korea summits were again held in September 2018 and February 2019, respectively, and Kim Jong-un and President Trump had a surprise meeting at the demilitarized zone on June 30, 2019.

Although we focused on one case study in this article, and this is certainly a limitation of our study, it is worth looking at the broader political and cultural contexts in which all charm offensives operate today. As political leaders in the previous decades have increasingly become mediatized symbolic condensations of their nations (Alexander, Bartmanski, & Giesen, 2012; Downey & Stanyer, 2010), we are likely to see more charm offensives in foreign affairs in the near future. Charm offensives offer tool kits for country leaders to shift, or at least attempt to shift, the perception of their respective countries in the international context. The global proliferation of photographs and videos on social media may inspire political leaders to turn to charm offensives as these strategic public relations campaigns offer the chance of rapid and readily disseminated visual seduction. Whether charm offensives ultimately succeed or fail in shifting a country's image, they certainly manage to capture some of the shrinking space dedicated to foreign affairs reporting in contemporary newspapers. Understanding how a charm offensive operates is thus crucial to conceptualizing diplomacy in the 21st century.

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