

North Korean Media Penetration and Influence in Chinese and Russian Media: Strategic Narratives During the 2017–2018 Nuclear Confrontation

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Research on North Korea’s internationally oriented media remains sparse, with most studies conducting comparative framing analyses of its nuclear program with other nations’ national media. While these studies find national press agencies differentially framing the issue along their national interests, questions remain regarding whether such coverage influences others to shift their perspectives and, if so, why. To address these questions, we evaluate North Korean narrative penetration in Russian and Chinese news through the framework of strategic narratives. We conducted a quantitative and qualitative narrative analysis of 1,045 news articles from eight Russian and Chinese news sources for references made to North Korean sources from May 2017 to August 2018. The findings indicate that increasing voice was granted to North Korean narratives as North Korean actions aligned with Russian and Chinese interests; the results of this coverage included legitimizing the Kim regime, bolstering Russian and Chinese international influence, and reducing U.S. influence and support for denuclearization.

Keywords: North Korea, strategic narratives, nuclear weapons, global media

On January 6, 2016, North Korea detonated its first hydrogen bomb followed one month later with a long-range ballistic missile test in direct defiance of United Nations sanctions. These actions sparked five additional UN Security Council resolutions from March to December 2017. Undeterred, North Korea conducted 21 more missile tests and two nuclear tests. China and Russia condemned the tests, calling for their immediate cessation, and advocated for all parties to engage in dialogue to reduce tensions. Pressure mounted in August and September as North Korean state media released photos of Kim Jong-un in possession of a thermonuclear weapon capable of reaching the continental United States. In response, President Trump told reporters that North Korean provocations would be met with “fire and fury like the world has never seen,” later tweeting that “military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded.” Kim, meanwhile, called Trump “mentally deranged,” asserting that “a frightened dog barks louder.” To prevent military conflict on the Korean peninsula, South Korea agreed in December to field a unified North-

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South Winter Olympic team and participate in an inter-Korean summit in April, leading to the United States and North Korea agreeing to host their own summit. Again, rhetorical drama ensued as Kim threatened to cancel the U.S.–North Korean meeting due to U.S.–South Korean joint military exercises. One month later, Trump wrote a letter to Kim canceling the summit before going back on his statement. The two leaders met in Singapore on June 12, 2018 (Davenport, 2019).

As these statements demonstrate, news media are on the front line of international conflict, with media messages playing a key role in diplomatic negotiations—especially in contentious ones, which easily capture media attention (Lee & Wang, 2016). While Rich (2014) argues that analysis of North Korean media can provide insight into the country's thinking and foreign interests, Jang (2013) notes that little scholarly attention has focused on how North Korean media covers international news. The few studies examining North Korean media do so through the lens of news framing (Jang, 2013; Jang, Hong, & Frederick, 2015; Lee & Wang, 2016; Rich, 2014; Zhan, 2016) and find that North Korean, South Korean, U.S., and Chinese media frame the nuclear dispute differentially. These findings support a hegemonic-propaganda model of news framing in which foreign news reflects the national interests and ideology of the source nation (Jang, 2013; Jang et al., 2015).

Although these studies lay the foundation for understanding how national media disseminate their host nation's policy positions on North Korea's nuclear program, conceptualizing this action primarily as state-influenced propaganda underplays an important purpose of such media coverage: to influence other nations to adopt one's perspective, at least in part, on the issue in question. To alleviate this, our study evaluates the efficacy of North Korea's strategic media messaging on its nuclear program by analyzing its penetration and resonance in Russian and Chinese news media from the framework of strategic narratives. As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) argue, strategic narrative analysis brings back into question the role of persuasion in international communication and media studies on foreign policy by focusing on the means and methods political actors use to persuade and influence others. Thus, while the United States and North Korea were arguably the primary disputants in the 2017–2018 nuclear negotiations, China and Russia remained influential stakeholders, with their buy-in viewed as necessary for any meaningful resolution to occur. Furthermore, China and Russia have been more amenable to North Korean security concerns in the past, making them strong cases to examine North Korean narrative resonance.

Theoretically, our study advances understandings of the persuasive impact of North Korean international media messaging while extending research on strategic narratives in foreign media by conceptualizing the process as that of perspective transference—that is, the process by which foreign media cite and share other nations' telling of events, which function in legitimizing that nation's policy preferences, leading to an alignment of perspectives. We go beyond identification of divergent framing of the issue to include when these frames coalesce into coherent narrative perspectives and explain why those narratives come to resonate among target audiences. Such an approach builds toward understanding how global media interconnectivity reflects, alters, and creates political realities across global communities.

North Korean Media and Propaganda-Driven News Framing

North Korea is one of the world's most tightly controlled media systems, and it consistently ranks at the bottom of press freedom indexes (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). North Korean media follows

communist theories of journalism; its role is primarily to educate, mobilize, and explain government policies to the masses (Institute for Unification Education, 2014). Nonetheless, it has developed its own *juche* idea of the press, stipulating complete loyalty to the party and leader with "Kimilsungism" being the guideline for support of the Kim dynasty (Kim, 1998). All newspapers are official organs of the party, and they are monitored and supervised by the Propaganda and Agitation Department (Zhan, 2016).

This propaganda approach to North Korean media not only informs us of its domestic-oriented purposes but also shapes researchers' understanding of its internationally oriented messages. Jang (2013) and Jang et al. (2015) argue that propaganda plays a significant role in shaping international media coverage of North Korea's nuclear program. According to Jang et al.'s (2015) model, North Korean media framing from 2003 to 2007 reflected its dominant ideology, leaders' ideology, and national interests leading to divergent frames between China's *Xinhua* news agency and North Korea's Korean *Central News Agency (KCNA)*. The study found both nations' media positively depicting images of themselves, while *Xinhua* included a mix of cooperative, threatening, and conflict frames toward North Korea and cooperative and conflict frames toward the United States. The researchers concluded that these frames reflected China's desire to resolve the issue peacefully through international negotiations, while North Korea desired to resolve the nuclear issue in exchange for security and assistance from the United States.

Jang (2013) argues that this propaganda approach occurs in democratic nations' foreign media reporting as well, where it functions as a form of hegemonic news framing. Jang's comparison of the United States' *Associated Press*, South Korea's *Yonhap News Agency*, and North Korea's *KCNA* found each country's news agency again providing differential framing of the nuclear dispute based on the country's national interest. *KCNA* emphasized confrontational frames and attribution of responsibility frames to Japan and military consequences frames to the United States and South Korea; U.S. framing followed an anticommunism or terrorism frame; and South Korean media focused on domestic implications.

Lee and Wang (2016) found similar results when applying indexing theory to a comparison of Chinese, U.S., and South Korean news sourcing and media frames of North Korea's nuclear program. Their study found *Xinhua* including more diverse multinational sources and issue frames, *Associated Press* being biased toward the United States and its allies, and *Yonhap News Agency* sourcing emphasizing domestic and economic policy.

As all these studies show, the propaganda-frame approach to international news coverage confirms that when discussing conflicting foreign policy issues media will do so from the perspective of their own nation. With this type of approach, media functions primarily as a mouthpiece for each disputant, ignoring how the specific messages persuade foreign audiences. If, however, media coverage of international issues reflects a battleground, or contestation of competing perspectives (Nye, 2004; Roselle et al., 2014), one would expect political actors' messaging strategies to include not only the construction and projection of their own messages in confirmation of their own views but also attempts to craft messages designed to influence the resonance of such messages on specific target audiences as well. To understand how these foreign media messages may do so, we turn to the literature on strategic narratives.

Strategic Narratives

According to Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), strategic narratives are "a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elite—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (p. 5). In their most basic sense, strategic narratives are compelling storylines describing events in convincing ways (Freedman, 2006), and they contain actors, agents, scenes, instruments, and intentions (Burke, 1969). Research on strategic narratives has found these narratives constraining actors' behavior in the international system (Krebs, 2015; Mattern, 2005), with target audiences' reception of strategic narratives linked to the narrative's ability to resonate with target nations' own narrative and mythological projects (Schmitt, 2018) as well as their ability to provide "compelling narratives" (Dimitriu & de Graaf, 2016). Media play an important role in disseminating and validating these narratives; strategic narrative analysis of news media reveals political actors' interests and identity constructions about themselves and other nations on various important international issues (Kluver, Cooley, & Hinck, 2018).

Strategic narrative analysis advances our understanding of international news coverage of North Korea's nuclear program in a few key ways. First, strategic narrative analysis is distinct from news framing in its focus on temporality and long-term sense making of events. According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), frames "lack the temporal and causal features narratives necessarily possess" (p. 7). Furthermore, while news frames are included in media narratives, Coticchia (2016) argues that frames remain more tactical in nature, providing snapshots of events that serve the short-term purposes of elites. Thus, it is through narrative that our understandings of the world are shaped in more enduring ways, not merely reflecting it but tying in constructions of identity, latent social values, and cultural myths.

Second, strategic narrative analysis helps determine when and how media messages influence their target audiences. According to Schumacher (2015), elites' advancement of foreign policy narratives relies on public acceptance of their policies, requiring them to be grounded in enduring structures of national identity discourse. As such, political actors do not have a blank slate on which to construct their narratives because they operate "in a discursive terrain where the agencies of elites and masses are mutually constitutive" (Liao, 2017, p. 111). Strategic narratives, then, are not simply one-way vehicles of mass manipulation of a population; rather, they rely on the complexities of shared meaning within an entire society in order to build a collective story that relays the truth of an event to the population. In both domestic and international news contexts, the projection of these narratives cannot effectively function in complete isolation from outside input and can even fall short of effective influence if the narratives fail to resonate with competing narratives to which their target audiences are exposed (Liao, 2017).

Two perspectives on strategic narratives provide further support in predicting when such narratives are likely to resonate. First, Schmitt (2018) argues that a strategic narrative's effectiveness is determined by the extent to which they resonate with local political myths. Second, Dimitriu and de Graaf (2016) developed a concept of strong versus weak narratives based on five criteria: (a) articulation of a clear, realistic, and compelling mission purpose; (b) legitimacy through both judicial/procedural and subjective/political values; (c) promise of success; (d) consistent and persistent reinforcement by political elites paired with real live events and media reporting; and (e) fit within a strategic plan. Thus, we can

expect the degree to which North Korean narratives of its nuclear program resonate in Chinese and Russian media as dependent on their support of Chinese and Russian interests, values, and culture.

Furthermore, sourcing plays a key role and can contribute to the strength of such narratives by granting them legitimacy through voicing their perspectives and aligning the narratives with the target audiences' strategic plan and values. As Lee and Wang (2016) argue, source structures help determine how policy makers and news media interact with each other; they also implicate how Chinese, South Korean, and U.S. media differentially framed North Korea's nuclear dispute. This process is important when considering nations' strategic narratives, because, as Arsenault, Hong, and Price (2017) argue, mainstream media plays an important role as the site where strategic narratives gain legitimacy through specific actors' sponsorship of certain narrative perspectives over others.

With these perspectives in mind, we can determine the influence of North Korean strategic narrative messaging about its nuclear program in Chinese and Russian media by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: How do North Korean news reports and sources influence Chinese and Russian strategic narrative messaging?

RQ2: What North Korean strategic narratives are reported in Chinese and Russian media?

RQ3: What factors contribute to Chinese and Russian strategic narrative construction of North Korean interests and actions in relation to its nuclear program using North Korean sources?

Method

We conducted a quantitative content analysis and qualitative narrative analysis of 1,045 native-language news articles from eight regime-leaning, high-viewership Chinese and Russian news sites. Chinese media outlets selected were *Xinhua*, the official state-run press agency of the People's Republic of China; *Cankao Xiaoxi*, a daily newspaper with one of the largest circulations in China; *Renmin Ribao*, China's largest newspaper group and the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in China; and *Global Times*, a daily Chinese newspaper focusing on international issues from a Chinese-government perspective. Russian media outlets selected included *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, a government-owned daily newspaper with one of the largest Russian-language readerships; *Izvestia*, a prominent Russian national newspaper; *NEWSru*, one of Russia's largest and most viewed online news portals; and *Kommersant*, a leading business broadsheet. This selection of outlets enabled observation of public shifts in official Chinese and Russian foreign policy narratives.

Data were collected using the multimedia monitoring system (M3S), which automatically transcribes and translates foreign media. Data were sampled from May 2017 to August 2018, with further sampling identifying mentions of North Korean news agencies and government sources. The project was broken into two phases of reporting: Phase one detailed narratives in coverage related to the Korean

peninsula from May 2017 to May 10, 2018, when President Trump announced the planned U.S.–North Korean summit for June 12, 2018. Phase two occurred from May 11, 2018, to the end of August 2018.

For phase one, we selected six search terms related to the North Korean regime and its possession and development of nuclear weapons following initial qualitative pilots of various terms across Russian and Chinese media sources for accuracy and relevance (DPRK, nuclear weapons, resolution; DPRK, economy, nuclear weapons; DPRK, denuclearization; DPRK, war; DPRK, resolution; DPRK, economy). The process was repeated for phase two as the negotiations evolved, with an additional six terms identified (DPRK, stability; DPRK, nuclear; Korean peninsula; North Korea, nuclear; Korean security; North Korea, United States). Phase one sampled 551 articles (confidence interval = 95%, margin of error = 5%), and phase two sampled 499 articles (confidence interval = 95%, margin of error = 5%). Of the total 1,050 articles sampled, five were eliminated from the analysis due to issues of redundancy and relevance, bringing the final total to 1,045. Both phases used a quantitative coding sheet developed and reliably assessed ($K = .86$).

Two coders conducted the qualitative narrative analysis to further examine the narrative constructions presented in the articles. Narrative was operationalized based on Miskimmon and colleagues' (2013) definition of narratives as possessing actors, action, goals or intention, scene, and instrument. These narratives were then mapped onto Miskimmon and associates' typology of strategic narrative operating on three levels: (a) international system narratives describing how the world is structured; (b) national narratives describing the story of the state, including its values and goals; and (c) issue narratives describing why a certain policy is needed.

Results

To answer the first research question—about how North Korean news reports and sources influence Chinese and Russian strategic narrative messaging—we first compared penetration of North Korean news reports and source quotations in Russian and Chinese news media to other nations prominent in talks related to nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula across the entire time frame. The extent to which Russian and Chinese media cited foreign news reports is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. External News Media Penetration in Russian and Chinese News Media.

| | U.S. media presence | South Korean media presence | European and Allied media presence | Russian/Chinese media presence ^a | North Korean media presence |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Russian media (<i>N</i> = 431) | <i>n</i> = 55 (12.8%) | <i>n</i> = 18* (4.2%) | <i>n</i> = 31* (7.2%) | <i>n</i> = 29* (6.7%) | <i>n</i> = 21* (4.9%) |
| Chinese media (<i>N</i> = 614) | <i>n</i> = 105 (17.1%) | <i>n</i> = 102* (16.6%) | <i>n</i> = 106* (17.3%) | <i>n</i> = 145* (23.6%) | <i>n</i> = 54* (8.8%) |

^a Russian news media is examined for the presence of Chinese media sources, and Chinese news media is examined for the presence of Russian media sources.

* Significant differences at $p < .05$ between Russian and Chinese news media in the respective column via Pearson χ^2 .

As a measure of foreign media penetration, Table 1 provides two important findings. First, North Korean media was among the least referenced in Chinese and Russian media. This suggests that, overall, it was rarely relied on in Russian and Chinese narrative constructions concerning nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula. Second, with the exception of U.S. media presence, foreign media source penetration is significantly higher in Chinese media than in Russian media. This indicates that Russian media narratives were more self-contained, albeit still providing substantial attention to U.S. reporting.

Table 2 compares the extent to which Russian and Chinese media cited foreign leaders or statements from government agencies. As shown in the table, external sourcing from political leaders and government agencies is far more prevalent in both Russian and Chinese news media than references to external news reports; U.S. leaders and government agencies are still the most commonly cited. However, unlike references to North Korean media sources, citations of statements made by North Korean leaders and government agencies are more balanced in relation to other nations, with over 35% of articles in Russian and Chinese media citing a North Korean leader or agency when reporting on resolving nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula. This suggests that official statements from North Korean leaders and government agencies have more sway in Russian and Chinese news than they do in North Korean media. Comparisons of Russian and Chinese leader and government agency citations reveal that Russian media pays more attention than Chinese media to statements by European sources and U.S. allies, while Chinese media grants more weight to South Korean statements.

Table 2. External Leader/Government Agency Source Penetration in Russian and Chinese Media.

| | U.S. source presence | South Korean source presence | European and Allied source presence | Russian/Chinese source presence ^a | North Korean source presence |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Russian media (<i>N</i> = 431) | <i>n</i> = 205 (47.6%) | <i>n</i> = 73* (16.9%) | <i>n</i> = 176* (40.8%) | <i>n</i> = 155 (36.0%) | <i>n</i> = 153 (35.5%) |
| Chinese media (<i>N</i> = 614) | <i>n</i> = 306 (49.8%) | <i>n</i> = 140* (22.8%) | <i>n</i> = 102* (16.6%) | <i>n</i> = 212 (34.5%) | <i>n</i> = 237 (38.6%) |

^a Russian news media is examined for the presence of Chinese media sources, and Chinese news media is examined for the presence of Russian media sources.

* Significant differences at $p < .05$ between Russian and Chinese news media in the respective column via Pearson χ^2 .

Next, we conducted a series of *t* tests to examine whether North Korean statements before and after the summit influenced the penetration of North Korean news sources or statements from North Korean political leaders and government agencies in Russian and Chinese media. Russian and Chinese media were more likely to reference voices in North Korean media after the summit than before. This suggests that news reporting of the summit helped provide greater export to North Korean messaging. See Table 3.

Table 3. T-Test Comparisons Presummit and Postsummit.

| | Presummit North Korean media sources | Postsummit North Korean media sources | Mean difference (significance) | Presummit North Korean leaders and agencies | Postsummit North Korean leaders and agencies | Mean difference (significance) |
|--|--|---|--------------------------------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| Combined Russian and Chinese media (<i>N</i> = 1,045) | <i>M</i> = .06 (<i>SD</i> = .23) | <i>M</i> = .09 (<i>SD</i> = .28) | .03 (<i>p</i> = .85) | <i>M</i> = .24 (<i>SD</i> = .43) | <i>M</i> = .52 (<i>SD</i> = .50) | .28 (<i>p</i> = .00)* |
| Russian news media (<i>N</i> = 431) | <i>M</i> = .02 (<i>SD</i> = .15) | <i>M</i> = .09 (<i>SD</i> = .28) | .07 (<i>p</i> = .00)* | <i>M</i> = .30 (<i>SD</i> = .46) | <i>M</i> = .46 (<i>SD</i> = .50) | .16 (<i>p</i> = .00)* |
| Chinese news media (<i>N</i> = 614) | <i>M</i> = .09 (<i>SD</i> = .29) | <i>M</i> = .09 (<i>SD</i> = .28) | .006 (<i>p</i> = .81) | <i>M</i> = .19 (<i>SD</i> = .39) | <i>M</i> = .55 (<i>SD</i> = .49) | .36 (<i>p</i> = .00)* |

* Significant differences at $p < .05$ via independent sample *t* test.

Finally, we conducted four separate stepwise regression analyses to determine predictors for the presence of North Korean news media and leader and agency sourcing in Russian and Chinese media. Twenty-six coded variables were included as potential predictors for the regression analyses. Sourcing of North Korean political leaders and agencies in Chinese media is predicted by sourcing of U.S. leaders and agencies ($b = .31$), Russian media sources cited ($b = .18$), mention of economic resolutions to denuclearization ($b = .14$), and sourcing of public intellectuals ($b = -.08$). $R^2 = .17$; $F = 32.17$ ($p = .03$). The sourcing of North Korean political leaders and agencies in Russian media is predicted by sourcing of U.S. political leaders and agencies ($b = .31$), sourcing of South Korean political leaders and agencies ($b = .31$), South Korean news media sourced ($b = .11$), mention of economic resolutions to denuclearization ($b = -.12$), and sourcing of European and Allied leaders and agencies ($b = -.08$). $R^2 = .26$; $F = 30.04$ ($p = .04$). The common predictor in both Russian and Chinese media is sourcing of U.S. leaders and agencies. Meaning, if U.S. leaders and agencies were sourced, there was a significant likelihood that North Korean leaders and agencies would also be sourced in the article.

A key distinction is the positive correlation of mentions of economic resolutions in Chinese media as a predictor compared with the negative correlation of mentions of economic resolutions in Russian media. While both are significantly correlated predictors, the correlation is opposite in Russian and Chinese media.

Sourcing of North Korean media in Chinese news is predicted by mentions of conditions for denuclearization ($b = -.14$), mentions of economic resolutions ($b = .12$), and mentions of Chinese national security threats or redlines ($b = -.08$). $R^2 = .30$; $F = 7.37$ ($p = .00$). This finding indicates that as talks of conditions for denuclearization and security threats decreased and conversations on economic resolutions increased the Chinese news media became significantly more likely to reference North Korean media sources.

The sourcing of North Korean media in Russian media is predicted by mentions of conditions for denuclearization ($b = -.19$), mentions of deterrence of armed conflict ($b = .15$), mentions of Russian national security threats or redlines ($b = -.09$), mentions of social and cultural resolutions ($b = .12$), mentions of other resolutions ($b = .12$), mentions of nonproliferation discussions ($b = .11$), and sourcing of

public intellectuals ($b = -.09$). $R^2 = .10$; $F = 6.92$ ($p = .00$). Again, as threat mentions and conditions for denuclearization decrease, and mentions of items related to alternate resolutions to resolving nuclear tensions increase, North Korean news media is more likely to be referenced.

In answer to the first part of RQ2—about which North Korean strategic narratives are discussed in Chinese media—we found that Chinese media citing North Korea’s narratives changed substantially pre- and postsummit, with significant increases in references made to North Korean leaders, media, and government agencies as the dispute went on. The presummit North Korean narratives began with updates on North Korea’s missile development, with Chinese leaders chastising the tests and affirming UN sanctions against North Korea. For instance, *Renmin Ribao* (2017a) reported:

Today, the North Korean side confirmed that it had launched a “North Pole Star-2” medium-range long-range ballistic missile yesterday and announced that it will prepare new missiles for actual combat. . . . China’s position on issues related to the issue is consistent and clear. The Security Council has made certain decisions on the use of ballistic missile technology by North Korea to launch activities. The Chinese side opposed the DPRK’s decision to launch an anti-NEA resolution.

Likewise, *Global Times* (2017a) reported China’s support of the international community’s decision, with China’s UN representative “stat[ing] that the resolution adopted by the Security Council indicates the international community’s unanimous stand against North Korea’s nuclear development plan.”

Once North Korea stopped its testing, Chinese media reports began citing North Korean sources more frequently and, in doing so, (a) began affirming North Korean narratives of its successful development of weapons; (b) began citing North Korean claims of its being a responsible actor; (c) began citing North Korean officials’ explanations about why these weapons were needed, focusing on the threat posed by the United States and its allies; and (d) frequently cited North Korean leaders’ commitment to begin negotiations with South Korea and the United States. For instance, as *Xinhua* (2018c) reported: “He [Kim Jung-un] said that the development of nuclear weapons and transport tools has been scientifically carried out. Under the condition that the weaponization of nuclear weapons has been verified.” The article reported that “North Korea no longer needs any nuclear tests and tests of medium- and long-distance and inter-continental ballistic missiles. . . . The Plenary also stated that the suspension of nuclear tests is an important step for the realization of the world’s nuclear disarmament.” Likewise, an article from *Cankao Xiaoxi* (2018a) citing North Korea’s *KNCA* reported:

According to the *KCNA* . . . Kim Jong-un pointed out that the outstanding results achieved last year was “the historic cause of perfecting national nuclear forces.” The completion of various nuclear means of transport, and the ultra strong thermal nuclear weapons test, thus effectively and successfully achieved North Korea’s overall ambitions and strategic objectives, North Korea has finally had “any force, a powerful and reliable war deterrent that nothing can reverse.” “The United States cannot wage war against me and our country,” Mr. Kim said. The United States should face up to the entire American homeland within the North’s nuclear strike range, the nuclear button is always on my desk. This is not a threat, but a reality.

These statements serve to bolster North Korea's image to Chinese readers as an established nuclear power, ostensibly enhancing its negotiation position. As an article from *Cankao Xiaoxi* (2018a) notes, North Korean narratives reported by the Chinese media emphasized that "Kim Jong-un stated that North Korea is a responsible nuclear power that cherishes peace" and that "so long as aggressive hostile forces do not violate North Korea's sovereignty and interests, they will not use nuclear weapons, and will not threaten any country with nuclear threat." With this achievement, the article quoted Kim Jung-un stating that North Korea was ready to negotiate with South Korea: "Kim Jong-un, wearing a grey suit and tie, said it was imperative to reduce military tensions on the Korean Peninsula, improve relations with South Korea and open the way for dialogue." The article continues by citing a report from *KCNA* stating that, following the Panmunjom Summit, North and South Korea had entered "a new era of reconciliation and unity in North-South relations, as a symbol of peace by the world's attention to the Panmunjom [Summit]."

Following North Korea's willingness to negotiate came increased citations of North Korean sources from Chinese media reporting North Korea's narrative on the issue as placing the onus on the United States to faithfully come to the table and resolve the issue. Chinese media quoting North Korean officials placed blame on the United States for ratcheting tensions, casting the United States as the aggressor in the conflict, and shifting blame from North Korea as the agent destabilizing the region to the United States. As *Xinhua* (2018a) stated, "North Korea has long condemned the ROK-US joint military exercise as a 'war of the invasion of Korea,' and often responds with missile tests." These actions are thus the cause for "tension in the peninsula." As *Cankao Xiaoxi* (2018b) reported:

North Korea will, as always, make active efforts to improve North-South relations, but it will never sit by and watch the bad behavior of pouring cold water on them. . . . The United States has led the sanctions in order to realize the denuclearization of North Korea. In response, the DPRK Central Committee issued a warning on the 14th, saying that North Korea will never sit back and ignore the bad behavior of improving the North-South relations.

Whereas North Korea's reported narrative constructions of the dispute painted the United States as the aggressor, Chinese media increasingly reported North Korea as a good-faith actor. *Cankao Xiaoxi* (2017) noted that the North Korean ambassador was willing to put a moratorium on weapons testing and begin talks with the United States despite continued U.S. aggression:

"We can start talks on a moratorium on weapons testing," said the North Korean ambassador. He pointed out that Pyongyang was willing to hold talks with the United States "at any time, but without preconditions." He said: "The United States continues to threaten North Korea, President Trump said, there are many options, including the military level."

Likewise, *Renmin Ribao* (2018b) stated:

According to the Korean Central News Agency . . . North Korea will suspend nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile launch tests from April 21, 2018. . . . To ensure the transparency of the suspension of nuclear tests, North Korea will scrap the northern nuclear test site. . . . The resolution stated that North Korea will never use nuclear weapons without nuclear provocations. North Korea will not transfer nuclear weapons and nuclear technology under any circumstances.

Finally, and most distinctly from the Russian reporting, Chinese media frequently quoted Kim Jong-un's visits to China to emphasize the common bonds between the two nations as well as North Korea's shift from nuclear development to economic and social development. As *Cankao Xiaoxi* (2018c) reported:

According to the *KCNA* . . . Kim Jong-Un said the meeting [with Xi] and the talks will make a positive contribution to a closer strategic cooperation between the two countries and the establishment of lasting and consolidated peace and stability in the Korean peninsula. . . . China supports North Korea's decision to shift its focus from nuclear-guided development to economic construction. On Pyongyang's strategic route of "concentrating all its efforts on socialist economic construction," Mr. Xi announced the cessation of nuclear testing and intercontinental ballistic missile testing and the abandonment of the North nuclear test site, "praised the body [and will] improve the people's livelihood and the high priority to maintain regional peace and stability of the firm will."

Likewise, Xinhua (2018b) reported:

Kim Jong-un said that General Secretary Xi Jinping has issued important opinions on the friendship between the DPRK and China and the development of the DPRK-China relationship between the two parties and the two countries. This has inspired me [Kim Jong-un] greatly. The DPRK-China friendship created and nurtured personally by the older generation of leaders of both parties cannot be shaken. To inherit and develop DPRK-China friendship under the new situation is a strategic choice for the DPRK and will not change under any circumstances. My visit to China hopes to meet with Chinese comrades, strengthen strategic communication and deepen the traditional friendship.

In answer to the second part of RQ2—about which North Korean strategic narratives are discussed in Russian media—we found that, as with China, Russian media reports citing North Korean leaders, agency, and media prior to the summit were few. However, unlike Chinese support of UN sanctions, Russian media cited North Korean narratives calling into question the efficacy of sanctions, viewing them as U.S.-led and unlikely to change North Korean behavior. As *Kommersant* (2017b) reported:

North Korea stated that it “categorically” rejects the new resolution of the UN Security Council (UN Security Council) and considers it to be “fabricated” by the USA. This is reported by the *Central Telegraph Agency of Korea (CTC)* with reference to the statement of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The department stressed that the resolution is “the product of a brutal provocation aimed at completely strangling our state and people, depriving the just self-defense right of our Republic and applying a comprehensive economic blockade.” Also, the DPRK is confident that the path chosen by the North Korean authorities is absolutely “right,” and the US, through sanctions, is trying to “impede the development of the country.” “We will defend our sovereignty and the right to exist and further increase our power to ensure peace and security.”

Likewise, *Izvestia* (2017c) reported that the “DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs [called] these measures . . . an act of aggression and stated that the republic completely rejects the new resolution of the UN Security Council” and, ultimately, that the “resolution was ‘unfair.’”

When reporting on North Korea’s missile testing, a few Russian articles did cite North Korea’s rationale, focusing on its nuclear program as serving an important deterrence to U.S. aggression. According to *Kommersant* (2017a):

Earlier, Kim Jong-un decided to delay the missile launch in the direction of Guam. At the same time, he ordered the operators of missile systems to “always be ready to rush into battle at any moment by order of the party” and warned the US against the wrong “choice.”

Leading up to the summit, Russian media began focusing more on North Korean accusations of the United States as an aggressive, bad-faith actor. As *Izvestia* (2017c) noted, while “Kim Jong-un threatens to start war day after day,” this threat was the result of U.S. bellicosity, citing Kim Jung-un as “stating that the Americans, with their sanctions and statements, allegedly do not leave the DPRK any other choice.” Despite this aggression, North Korea was still willing to negotiate:

This week, the North Korean leader expressed a desire to personally meet with South Korean President. . . . Comrade Kim agreed to a dialogue with the Americans, in addition shocked the public with a statement that he “understands” the military maneuvers of South Korea and the United States. (*Izvestia*, 2018)

Similar to Chinese media, although not as frequently cited, was Russian media citing North Korean sources announcing its cessation of missile testing and focus on economic development. As *Kommersant* (2018c) reported:

Today, the leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-un, announced that his country is stopping rocket and nuclear tests, and also closing a nuclear test site. He called the suspension of nuclear tests an important process of global nuclear disarmament and expressed the intention to focus on “creating a strong socialist economy and mobilizing the country’s human and material resources in order to dramatically improve the people’s standard of living.”

With this reorientation, citation of North Korean sources turned to the possibility of negotiations with the United States, with discussion of the heated back-and-forth rhetoric and threats of canceling the summit. While Russian media included statements mentioning Kim Jung-un's saber rattling, it did so by equating North Korea and the United States as equally destabilizing. As *Izvestia* (2017a) explained:

The Foreign Minister of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Lee Yong-ho, in his turn, calls the Trump administration "a noisy bazaar" and threatens that the North Korean missiles "will inevitably visit the entire territory of the United States." As a result of the UN General Assembly, the situation was commented on by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who compared the behavior of the United States and the DPRK with the fight of children in kindergarten.

As the summit approached, Russian media continued to cover North Korean sources' description of the regime's willingness to negotiate with the United States, placing the United States as acting against the wishes of the international community. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (2018b) reported:

DPRK authorities expressed their intention to hold talks with the US. The DPRK authorities say they are still interested in negotiations with the US, despite the cancellation of the bilateral summit by the White House. . . . The DPRK representative noted that the decision of the US president contradicts the wishes of the international community.

After the summit, Russian media picked up on North Korean narratives equivocating the United States and North Korea in ways that elevated Kim Jung-un in the international order. As *Kommersant* (2018e) reported:

North Korea was level with America. . . . "We decided to leave the past behind," Kim Jong-Un solemnly proclaimed. "The world will see significant changes." . . . As a result of the last half-year, Kim Jong-Un really managed to break free of diplomatic isolation, restore spoiled relations with China, hold two meetings with South Korean President, host Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and now also get from the head of the United States characteristics of a "very, very talented young man" and "a great patriot." While in Singapore . . . Kim skated through the city at night, greeting its inhabitants and taking selfies. Thus, he tore away at not only diplomatic isolation, but also with the image of the ruling Kim dynasty in Pyongyang as pathological sociopaths and hermits.

Turning to the third research question—about the factors that contribute to Chinese and Russian strategic narrative construction of North Korean interests and actions in relation to its nuclear program—our results suggest that Chinese and Russian narratives amplified North Korea's narrative shift as a good-faith actor in the lead-up to the summit and after the summit. These narratives can be seen as attempts to bolster Chinese and Russian prestige as North Korea's actions began aligning with their interests by (a) affirming their projected normative visions of global conflict management through a dialogue-based process, and (b) casting doubt on U.S. actions.

Prior to the summit, Chinese and Russian media repeatedly advocated for a dual-track suspension of North Korean nuclear development in return for dialogue and easing of economic sanctions. As *Global Times* (2017c) reported:

The situation on the peninsula is in a vicious cycle of escalation, rooted in the hostility between the DPRK and the United States as a direct party and the absence of a sense of trust and security. An effective way to solve this problem can only be to resolve the legitimate concerns of all parties through dialogue and consultation. The common initiatives put forward by China and Russia on the basis of the "dual track parallelism" initiative, the "double suspension" initiative, and the step-by-step approach are full consideration and efforts to balance the reasonable solutions that take into account the concerns of all parties and help to get rid of the current difficulties and to find a breakthrough for the resumption of talks, all parties concerned should seriously consider and respond positively.

During this time, both Chinese and Russian narratives expressed a desire for stability in the region, while North Korean missile testing acted in contrast to these concerns, coinciding with fewer citations of North Korean sources. However, with North Korea's cessation of missile tests and overtures toward negotiating with South Korea and the United States, the Chinese-Russian proposal was confirmed, bolstering their international clout. As *Kommersant* (2018a) reported, "Russia, which has not taken an active part in solving the North Korean problem for a long time, suddenly became a bridge between the US and the DPRK." As another article from *Kommersant* (2018b) reported:

The Russian minister expressed his satisfaction with the fact that "the real development of events around North Korea is following the Russian-Chinese road map," which involves the simultaneous freezing of the DPRK's nuclear missile tests and the cessation of US-South Korean military exercises with the subsequent transition to negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang.

Likewise, in an article from *Renmin Ribao* (2018a), Xi Jinping was quoted as saying:

Since the beginning of this year, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has undergone positive changes. The DPRK has made important efforts to this end. We appreciate this. On the issue of the peninsula, we insist on achieving the goal of denuclearization on the peninsula, maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula, and solving problems through dialogue and negotiation. . . . China is willing to continue to play a constructive role in the issue of the peninsula and work together with all parties including the DPRK to jointly promote the relaxation of the situation on the peninsula. . . . We took the initiative to take measures to ease the tension and put forward proposals for peace dialogue. . . . We are determined to transform North-South relations into a relationship of reconciliation and cooperation. We will hold a North-South summit meeting and are willing to hold dialogues with the United States and hold summits between North Korea and the United States. . . . We hope to strengthen strategic communication with China to jointly maintain the momentum of consultation and dialogue and peace and stability on the peninsula.

We can see how Chinese and Russian news media amplified North Korea’s narratives as a means to bolster their prestige quantitatively in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows the substantial increase in Russian and Chinese media citations of North Korea sources immediately prior to and following the summit, which occurred on June 12, 2018.

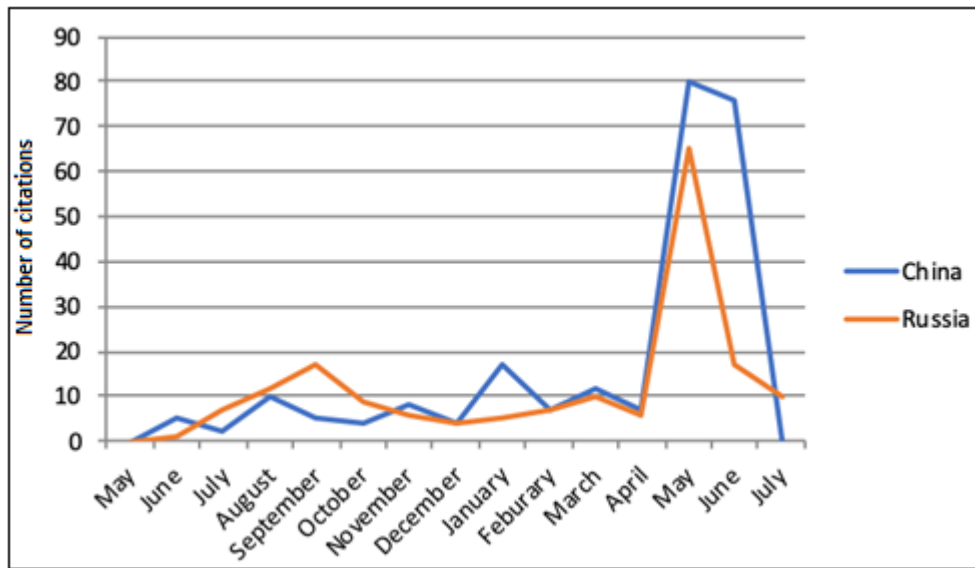


Figure 1. North Korean source citations in Chinese and Russian media.

Figure 2 shows the increase in Russian and Chinese media reporting before and after the summit, describing their international influence in relation to the nuclear dispute.

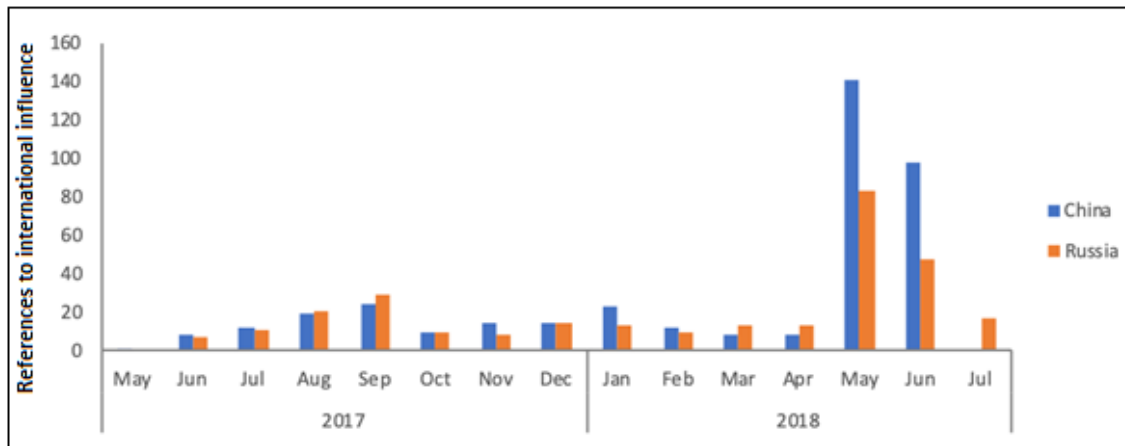


Figure 2. Chinese and Russian media self-mentions of international influence.

Together, Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the rise of North Korean sources coinciding with increased references to Chinese and Russian media mentions of their respective international influence. The combination of these quantitative data with the earlier qualitative examples suggests that North Korean narratives resulted in greater narrative penetration into Russian and Chinese media as the nation's actions and statements aligned with Chinese and Russian narratives calling for a dialogue-based resolution between the United States and North Korea.

Finally, on a more tactical level, Russian and Chinese media reference North Korean sources as serving their own strategic purposes throughout the process. As noted in the previous examples, China was reported as acting in support of UN sanctions, representing its desire to act as a fair global leader within the current international system. The United States, on the other hand, was viewed as self-interested and aggressive, threatening North Korean sovereignty and acting to further destabilize the region. As *Global Times* (2017b) stated:

Regardless of whether it is the United States or North Korea, no country's leaders will be allowed to threaten to launch a nuclear warfare in the language. It is an urgent task for the international community to protect the Korean nuclear issue and return to the proper path of foreign exchange and political solution as soon as possible. It is important for China to maintain the stability of North Korea's nuclear islands. Northeast Asia needs concerted efforts, mutual division of labor, and multi-pronged approaches. Together, it strives to reopen the door to the DPRK's contacts and dialogues while maintaining the necessary sanctions and pressure.

Likewise, *Renmin Ribao* (2017b) reported:

The U.S. deployment of the "THAAD" system in South Korea seriously damages China's strategic security interests and undermines regional strategic balance. It does not contribute to achieving peace and stability in the denuclearization of the peninsula and the region. It runs counter to the parties' efforts to solve problems through dialogue and negotiation. The Chinese side resolutely opposes.

For Russian media, the tensions on the Korean peninsula offered an opportunity to criticize and belittle the role of the United States in international affairs, fitting its larger patterns of providing counter perspectives to the U.S.-led global order. For instance, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (2018a) reported how the prospects of the summit began to unravel:

Russia regrets the exchange of the US-DPRK summit in Singapore. Especially since the President of North Korea did everything he promised to his American colleague earlier. . . . Russia takes this news with regret, . . . Putin added that Kim Jong-un for his part fulfilled all the promises promised to Donald Trump, including [dismantling] a nuclear test site. However, immediately after this meeting of the two leaders, [the summit] was canceled.

Others articles demonstrated U.S. aggression, with *Izvestia* (2017b) noting that North Korea was “protecting the fate and sovereignty of the country from the protracted nuclear threats of the US imperialists” while making sure to note that U.S. policy had little effect on North Korea’s economy: “The head of the DPRK said that the country’s economy is on the rise, despite the sanctions of other countries.”

While Chinese narratives bolstered the nation’s influence and desire for economic growth by emphasizing its close ties with Kim Jung-un, Russian narratives, once North Korea began calling for dialogue, showcased U.S. failures during the negotiations and its attempt to isolate other nations. For example, *Kommersant* (2018d) reported:

Today everyone is wondering what it was and what the US president [hoped to] achieve. One of the obvious consequences to North Korea (as well as to Iran) is now they have sympathy from almost everyone, not only its traditional ally China, but also South Korea, as well as a significant part of the world community. Because Pyongyang showed restraint and readiness for dialogue, and Washington showed inconsistency and unpredictability . . . the DPRK will not accept the US demand for unconditional surrender, greater sanctions against the regime can hardly be restored in such an international context.

Discussion

As media systems are increasingly global and interconnected, the concept of strategic narratives as a tool for perspective transference impacts diplomacy, negotiation, identity, and alliance and coalition formation, among other important constructs in foreign relations. In essence, the fluid, ever-changing nature of information exchange across global media becomes a unique forum for constructing, validating, and mobilizing truth through narrative. This is not to say that one truth on any given topic or event is ever necessarily decided on, but rather that the exchange of viewpoints across global media allows for various pockets of ideas, voices, and perspectives to manifest as truth in relation to localized needs or perspectives concerning that topic or event. These pockets of localized media truths compete and interact with one another in the global media system and shift as new perspectives or events occur. International media, then, does more than just create frames; it weaves frames into compelling, coherent narratives, drawing in larger elements of culture, history, values, and power. Thus, legitimacy, truth, perceptions of power, and intent revolve less around objective reality or soundness of argument and more on crafting media-stated policy positions that show careful alignment between self and other through the media system one wishes to penetrate. As such, influence and persuasion in international media are inherently tied to the ability to locate and contextualize alignments in, and through, narrative.

This study provides important insights into the process described above. Readers are able to see how rhetorical messaging from North Korea succeeds or fails to resonate in Chinese and Russian media and how media sourcing grants voice to what perspectives are shared. As North Korean actions shifted from nuclear weapons and missile testing to calls for dialogue and economic development, Chinese and Russian media granted greater voice and detail to North Korean narratives. In doing so, North Korea’s telling of events aligned with Chinese and Russian narratives emphasizing the need for stability, dialogue, and fair consideration to both sides of the dispute. This contributed to Chinese and Russian domestic narrative

projects of their own interests in world affairs as well as North Korea's. China demonstrated its role as an international leader supporting international institutions, including the United Nations. China's image was promoted as a fair arbiter of regional conflict—in contrast to U.S. leadership, which was seen as aggressive and self-serving—and Chinese influence and bonds with North Korea were affirmed in support of economic development. The Russian narrative belittled U.S. authority, questioned U.S.-led international sanctions and institutions, and bolstered its own image as an influential player on the world stage. These findings affirm Schmitt's (2018) argument that the resonance of strategic narratives is determined by the extent to which they contribute to local political myths.

This is not to say that Chinese and Russian interests unilaterally influenced North Korea. Both nations failed to persuade North Korea to give up nuclear weapons and missile testing; it was only after North Korea successfully developed a nuclear deterrent that Kim Jung-un began making diplomatic overtures that led Chinese and Russian media to provide greater detail to North Korea's narrative in a compelling way. Following Dimitriu and de Graaf's (2016) model of "strong narratives," North Korea's narrative became more coherent in Chinese and Russian media after the nation's cessation of weapons testing by offering:

- (a) a clear and realistic purpose—a nuclear deterrent against U.S. aggression.
- (b) legitimacy regarding judicial/procedural and subjective/political values—protecting its sovereignty, demonstrating a willingness to peacefully resolve the dispute through dialogue, refraining from sharing nuclear technology, and declaring its intention to use nuclear weapons only for defensive purposes.
- (c) the promise of success—its stated achievement of nuclear weapons capability bringing the United States and South Korea to the negotiation table.
- (d) consistent reinforcement with live events and media reporting—Kim Jung-un's summits with South Korea, China, and the United States and consistent messaging by North Korean leaders and media.
- (e) a good fit within the country's overall strategic plan supporting its major national themes, ideas, images, and actions—Kim Jung-un as a national leader capable of standing against U.S. imperialism, equal in stature to the United States, and following a policy allowing the safeguarding of North Korean security and economic development.

Regardless of the truth of this narrative, Chinese and Russian media helped legitimize it. Through their citing of North Korean officials and media after North Korea's cessation of missile testing and their reporting on the summits, Chinese and Russian media affirmed North Korea's nuclear capabilities, supported its diplomatic overtures, and granted Kim Jung-un political legitimacy. When U.S. leaders and agencies were sourced, there was a significant likelihood that North Korean leaders and agencies would be also, providing equal voice and stature to both. Furthermore, increasing North Korean references coincided with declining threat mentions and conditions for denuclearization and increasing mentions of alternative resolutions to nuclear tensions, affirming North Korean, Chinese, and Russian strategic interests. This narrative, considered with the increase in citations of North Korean sources occurring after the summit, further legitimizing Kim Jung-un as a capable leader. Thus, North Korean sources achieved a respectable amount of coverage relative to that of all other actors (including the United States).

Taken together, these results demonstrate the process by which North Korean narratives eventually transferred their perspective to Chinese and Russian audiences rather than simply propagating differing viewpoints. Indeed, perhaps one reason international affairs appear so chaotic is that any scale of metalevel analysis about who is saying what about whom on the global stage requires substantial in-depth, multilingual analysis, such as the examples provided in this study. The analysis here thus confirms the importance of strategic narratives as a form of soft power through which political actors can persuade others through international communication by drawing on common interests, culture, and national identity (Roselle et al., 2014).

In a multipolar global power structure, this type of media-driven victory should be noted—especially in cases such as Russia and China, where both nations have close state-media relations that perhaps provide them with an advantage in ensuring clear, and consistent messaging. This is not to suggest that political actors operating in media environments with greater freedom of the press cannot similarly practice effective narrative construction and projection; ultimately, persuasive narratives require alignment of the sender's and recipient's positions and values. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that any action or statement, once released for public consumption, is no longer under the control of the actor and may be reconstructed by others to advance their own interests. As this study demonstrates, multipolar state politics requires not only dynamic planning but dynamic interpretation after the fact.

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