

Authoritarian Media Coverage of International News: The Case of North Korea

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〈Abstract〉

What determines authoritarian media's coverage of international politics? Existing scholarship on media outlets in authoritarian countries has largely focused on their domestic political dynamic. This paper extends this literature by analyzing the patterns of authoritarian media reporting targeting international audiences. Analyzing 85,313 English news articles published by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) from 2008 - 2020, I find different effects of the North Korean regime's security and economic interests on the coverage frequency and favorability of other countries in the reports. Security interests affect both coverage frequency and favorability whereas economic interests, especially the size of imports, affect only coverage frequency to a limited extent. This implies that English broadcasting in North Korea is used as a tool frequently signal to its adversaries frequently and occasionally signal to economic partners.

*Keywords: authoritarian regime, state-controlled media, North Korea

I . Introduction

What drives the attention of the state-owned media in authoritarian countries? Information control by authoritarian regimes, especially that by the Chinese government, has been extensively studied (King et al. 2013, 2014; Roberts 2018). Scholars have identified censorship and propaganda

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by these regimes as a contributor to regime stability and legitimization, at least in the short run (Huang 2018; Stockmann & Gallagher 2011).

Yet this literature has generally focused on the media targeting domestic audiences (Arnon et al. 2023; Boxell & Steinert-Threlkeld 2022; Huang 2018; Miller 2022; Pan & Siegel 2020; Stockmann & Gallagher 2011), largely overlooking those targeting foreign audiences. Many authoritarian regimes operate media outlets that target foreign audiences, English-speaking audiences in particular. Their target audience includes governments and citizens of their international allies and adversaries, sending political messages to win over the audience or to signal to it. However, we know relatively little about what these outlets cover and communicate to the international public.

I explore the coverage of international news reported by the North Korean state-controlled media, analyzing 85,313 English news articles published by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) from 2008 - 2020. I argue that North Korean media coverage of foreign countries is largely driven by North Korean security interests and, to a limited extent, economic interests. Its coverage frequency is affected by the regime's both security and economic interests whereas coverage favorability is driven by only security interests.

My findings extend the small but growing literature on authoritarian media outlets that target foreign audiences (Avgerinos 2009; Bailard 2016; Brady 2015; Carter & Carter 2021; Ji & Liu 2022; Min & Luqiu 2021; Orttung & Nelson 2019; Wang 2023; Wasserman 2016; Zhang et al. 2022) by showing the effect of external, macro-level factors on the coverage of authoritarian media in a country relatively understudied – North Korea. I extend existing research on international news flows (Ahern Jr. 1984; Charles et al. 1979; Dupree 1971; Ish 1996; Pietiläinen 2006; Segev 2014; Wu 2000) by examining whether those in North Korea are also motivated by its economic interests. The paper also examines the implicit assumption in the scholarship on North Korean media rhetoric (Rich 2012a; Sukin 2022; Whang et al. 2017, 2018; Zhang et al. 2023) that it is security-driven.

The results suggest that media coverage in authoritarian countries may differ by their security and economic contexts.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews recent literature on authoritarian media. The next section proposes a theory and hypotheses that explain the variation in country coverage in international news reported by the North Korean media. In the following section, I present the data and results of its analysis. The paper then concludes.

II. Literature

Both political science and communication scholars have long been interested in the media in authoritarian regimes. Recent scholarship on authoritarian media (Hallin & Mancini 2004, 2011) has largely focused on political control by authoritarian governments, such as censorship and propaganda, and how such political control affects domestic institutions and audiences. For example, scholars show that the Chinese government operates a sizable, efficiently-run, and multi-layered online censorship apparatus, “The Great Firewall,” that targets the domestic audience. The Great Firewall can block Chinese citizens from accessing popular websites, such as Wikipedia (Yang & Roberts 2021), or wipe away any traces of given information from the Internet and social media within 24 hours (King et al. 2013, 2014). In particular, the Chinese government is extremely sensitive about, hence eager to censor, any information on social media that involves or is likely to result in social mobilization, such as protests, but relatively lenient about citizens’ generic criticism of the government and its leaders (King et al. 2013; Roberts 2018). Authoritarian governments have also successfully used non-technical means, including physical repression and financial punishment, to enforce online censorship as in the case of Uganda; the imposition of a social media tax by the Ugandan government decreased the number of geo-referenced Twitter users by 13 percent (Boxell & Steinert-Threlkeld 2022).

In addition to online censorship, autocratic regimes are also known to disseminate propaganda, including deceptive writings, in an attempt to influence and control the domestic public. For example, the Chinese government is known to hire as many as 2 million people—the so-called “50c party”—to generate fake social media posts in order to distract the public (King et al. 2017). It is also known to use “strategic labeling” of protesters and “public statements by regime sources” in reports by state-controlled media to respond to protests, which can increase domestic support for repression (Arnon et al. 2023)

In particular, authoritarian governments have been observed to engage in media campaigns to shape domestic public opinion on foreign policy issues. For example, the Chinese government has used state-controlled media to pacify the public during territorial disputes with other countries (Chubb & Wang 2023; Wang 2021). In Syria, the government used media portrayals of Israel to divert public attention (Alrababa'h & Blaydes 2021).

Political control of the media can reinforce autocratic rule, particularly in the short run. For example, Chinese state-controlled media can “contribute to regime legitimacy and effective rule” via censorship and propaganda (Stockmann & Gallagher 2011, 436). “Hard” propaganda by the Chinese government has been shown to “deter dissent and help maintain regime stability in the short term” by “signaling the state’s power and reducing citizens’ willingness to protest” (Huang 2018, 1034).

At the same time, censorship and propaganda can backfire. In Saudi Arabia, physical repression, such as imprisonment, to censor online dissent did not suppress overall dissent but instead drew attention to arrested dissenters (Pan & Siegel 2020). In the case of Uganda’s social media tax, while it resulted in a decrease in the number of Twitter users in Uganda, it also resulted in a backlash among the users (Boxell & Steinert-Threlkeld 2022). Scholars have also documented a backlash in response to Turkey’s March 2014 Twitter ban, finding widespread circumvention of the ban and strong online criticism of then-Prime Minister Erdogan (Miller 2022). In China, hard propaganda by the government is shown to decrease regime legitimacy in the long run by worsening citizens’ evaluations of domestic

rule (Huang 2018).

Moreover, such limitations on the state-controlled media can motivate citizens to seek outside information. In particular, foreign media and social media can fill the vacuum created by the censorship of state-controlled media. In China, sudden online censorship has been shown to motivate citizens to jump the Great Firewall and seek outside information from foreign media in particular (Hobbs & Roberts 2018). At the same time, selective exposure to outside information can either, counterintuitively, stabilize (Huang & Yeh 2019; Kern 2011; Kern & Hainmueller 2017) or undermine (Steinert-Threlkeld 2017) autocratic rule by persuading or mobilizing the domestic public.

Given this academic landscape, this paper's contributions are trifold. First, I focus on the relatively understudied topic of the behavior of authoritarian media outlets that target foreign audiences. Compared to authoritarian media outlets that target domestic audiences, less has been studied about those that target foreign audiences in general.

It's puzzling why authoritarian regimes have these "outward-facing propaganda apparatuses," which are costly to maintain (Carter & Carter 2021, 50). Yet many authoritarian—and democratic—regimes have operated media outlets that target foreign audiences since the 20th century. To win over the foreign public for foreign policy goals, governments heavily invested in war propaganda operations during the two World Wars and in public diplomacy efforts since the 1960s (Zhang et al. 2022). Autocratic regimes nowadays operate both traditional and new media outlets as part of their outward-facing propaganda apparatuses (Carter & Carter 2021, 49). For example, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) operates the English newspaper *China Daily* and the CGTN news network. The Russian government maintains Sputnik and RT (formerly named *Russia Today*) which in 2015 - 17 alone uploaded 70,220 videos on YouTube (Orttung & Nelson 2019). The Turkish government operates the English news channel TRT World.

Recent scholarship on international propaganda sponsored by authoritarian regimes has studied its effect on persuading or generating

good will among foreign audiences, especially in the case of Russian (Carter & Carter 2021; Orttung & Nelson 2019) and Chinese propaganda via traditional and new media (Bailard 2016; Min & Luqiu 2021; Wasserman 2016). Yet less has been studied about how authoritarian regimes' underlying incentives influence the content of international propaganda. The relative dearth of research on the authoritarian media's coverage of international news contrasts with the ample research on media coverage of international news in multiple—mostly democratic—countries (Ahern Jr. 1984; Charles et al. 1979; Dupree 1971; Ish 1996; Pietiläinen 2006; Segev 2014; Wu 2000). This paper studies coverage of state-controlled media in authoritarian countries, utilizing existing literature on democratic countries' international news flows. It investigates how external, macro-level factors, such as the security and economic interests of autocratic regimes, affect coverage of state-controlled media in authoritarian countries.

Second, this paper studies the behavior of an international media outlet based in a relatively small authoritarian country—North Korea. Studies of authoritarian media, including those targeting foreign audiences, have generally focused on a handful of countries, geopolitical heavyweights in particular. Specifically, recent scholarship on “externally oriented communication” (Xie & Boyd-Barrett 2015) by authoritarian countries has focused on China (Bailard 2016; Brady 2015; Ji & Liu 2022; Min & Luqiu 2021; Wang 2023; Wasserman 2016; Zhang et al. 2022) and Russia (Avgerinos 2009; Carter & Carter 2021; Orttung & Nelson 2019; Zhang et al. 2022). While it is reasonable to focus on the two countries that are “among the largest powerful countries in the world, yet in need to counter the West's vast soft power resources” (Zhang et al. 2022, 2), we know relatively less about international propaganda operated by other authoritarian countries. This paper fills this research gap by analyzing the case of North Korea.

Third, I extend the recent scholarship on the North Korean state media by testing its implicit but key assumption. To scholars of the North Korean state media, the media rhetoric has been interpreted as a signal for

the opaque regime's threat perception (Sukin 2022), leadership frames (Rich 2012b), impending military provocations (Whang et al. 2018), and nuclear ambitions (Rich 2012a), policies (Whang et al. 2017), or intentions (Zhang et al. 2023). This scholarship generally focuses on the relationship between the North Korean media narrative and the regime's military intentions or actions. One implicit assumption shared by this scholarship is that the North Korean media rhetoric is security-driven. I test this assumption, exploring whether media coverage in North Korea is driven by the regime's security or economic incentives.

III. Media Coverage and State Economic and Security Interests

What drives international news coverage in authoritarian regimes? One possibility is that it is the regimes' economic incentives that determine what and how their state-controlled media cover in their international news. Economic performance is often important to the political stability of authoritarian regimes (Reuter & Gandhi 2011), which would be reflected in their media coverage (Ji & Liu 2022).

Existing literature on international news flows has proposed various explanations for what gets covered in international news in general. In particular, scholars have examined which countries are covered in international news reported by multiple—usually more than 30—media outlets in various countries and languages. They have debated whether the variation can be attributed to the attributes of host or guest countries (e.g. GDP, population, geographic proximity, trade volume), shared cultures and languages between host and guest countries, or logistical factors in news reporting (Ahern Jr. 1984; Dupree 1971; Ish 1996; Pietiläinen 2006; Segev 2014; Wu 2000).

According to this literature, one of the strongest predictors of how frequently a guest country gets covered by news outlets in a host country

is the volume of imports and exports between the host and the guest (Ahern Jr. 1984; Charles et al. 1979; Dupree 1971; Kariel & Rosenvall 1984; Pietiläinen 2006; Rosengren 1977; Wu 2000). For example, Ahern Jr. (1984) found that trade, the target country's Gross National Product (GNP), and political relations with the U.S., can account for almost 60% of the variance in predicting the number of articles about the target country published in three major U.S. newspapers. In an analysis of the coverage of 18 African nations in *The New York Times*, Charles, Shore and Todd (1979) showed that the amount of news coverage for each country can be explained by trade and population size. Studying international news coverage in 38 countries, Wu (2000) found that the volume of trade between host and guest countries and the presence of international news agencies are the primary predictors of news coverage of the guest countries. Pietiläinen (2006) also documented a strong correlation between trade and news coverage in an analysis of international news flows of 33 countries.

This leads us to the following hypotheses about the relationships between trade flows and the coverage frequency of a country in a given year:

$H_{\text{freq_import}}$: Media outlets are more likely to cover countries from which the country imports a lot in a given year, relative to smaller importers.

$H_{\text{freq_export}}$: Media outlets are more likely to cover countries to which the country exports a lot in a given year, relative to smaller exporters.

Additionally, existing literature on authoritarian media shows that coverage favorability—how positively countries are depicted in international news—can be driven by autocratic regimes' economic interests. Analyzing China Central Television (CCTV)'s news about international affairs between 2003 and 2018, Ji and Liu (2022) found that countries with strong economic ties receive more coverage with positive sentiments—more favorable coverage—than countries that are not as economically engaged with China. Specifically, countries with large volumes of bilateral trade

with, exports to, and imports from China, exporters of fossil fuel to China, and countries where China has investment projects are more likely to receive favorable media coverage. Thus, I hypothesize the following relationships between trade flows and coverage favorability of a country in a given year:

$H_{\text{favor_import}}$: Countries from which an authoritarian country imports a lot in a given year are likely to be portrayed positively by authoritarian media, relative to smaller importers.

$H_{\text{favor_export}}$: Countries to which an authoritarian country exports a lot in a given year are likely to be portrayed positively by authoritarian media.

However, existing scholarship on the North Korean media rhetoric implies a geopolitical dynamic unique to North Korea and different from China. In North Korea, coverage in international news may be used more as a security tool, particularly as a device through which the regime sends signals to other countries, adversaries in particular. Previous research on the North Korean media rhetoric shows that it can reflect the regime's policy of prioritizing security interests.

For example, Rich (2012b)'s analysis of English news articles published by the Korean Central News Agency, the state mouthpiece, showed that general references to the military were much more likely after Kim Il-sung's death and succession by Kim Jong-il. This is because it was Kim Jong-il who adopted the Military First policy (Songun Jeongchi) and to whom the military was important for regime survival after the succession (Rich 2012b, 659). Furthermore, his analysis showed that security rhetoric trumped economic rhetoric in the KCNA reports as follows (Rich 2012b, 665):

[T]he most common themes [in the KCNA reports] were references to the military...Direct military references slightly outnumber references to reunification, suggesting again the importance of the military for regime survival. In contrast, references to economics are less than a third of that of military. References to economics also fall far behind common themes

of anti-imperialism, Juche, reunification, revolutionary, and socialism. Furthermore, roughly three quarters of the daily news reports reference the economy, compared to over ninety percent that reference reunification or the military.

Moreover, this view of the North Korean media rhetoric is consistent with the views of the scholars who have detected in the rhetoric the regime's threat perception (Sukin 2022), impending military provocations (Whang et al. 2018), and nuclear ambitions (Rich 2012a), policies (Whang et al. 2017), or intentions (Zhang et al. 2023).

This leads us to the following hypotheses about the relationships between security interests and the coverage frequency and favorability of a country in a given year:

$H_{\text{freq_nk_crisis}}$: Authoritarian media outlets are more likely to cover countries with which the regime is in a conflictual relationship in a given year, relative to countries with cooperative relations.

$H_{\text{favor_nk_crisis}}$: Authoritarian media outlets are less likely to cover countries with which the regime is in a conflictual relationship positively in a given year, relative to countries with cooperative relations.

IV. Data

I use the collection of 85,313 English-language articles from North Korea's Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) provided by the FOCUSdata Project (Fisher et al. 2022). The articles were posted online from October 1, 2008 to December 31, 2020 and automatically extracted online ("scraped") in February 2021. The collection represents all English articles that the scraper was able to find in February 2021.

The KCNA is the "sole news agency of North Korea" and publishes news articles on its website daily (Whang et al. 2018, 196). The KCNA's reports target international audiences in contrast to *Rodong Sinmun*

(another resource popular among scholars interested in the regime) and *Minju Chosun*—newspapers that target domestic audiences (Whang et al. 2018, 196-197). Accordingly, the KCNA reports are published in four different languages—English, Spanish, Russian, and Korean (Whang et al. 2018, 196-197).

KCNA reports range from the North Korean government’s official statements and articles published in *Rodong Sinmun* and *Minju Chosun* to original pieces about “activities of the ruling North Korean elite”, the North Korean society, and news about other countries (Whang et al. 2018, 196-197). Consequentially, reports published by the KCNA have been an important data source for scholars interested in deciphering the opaque regime’s geopolitical intentions (McEachern 2010; Rich 2012b; Sukin 2022; Whang et al. 2017, 2018; Zhang et al. 2023).

V. Variables and Estimation

The key measures of interest are coverage favorability and frequency of each country-year reflected in the KCNA reporting. First, I analyze how frequently a country is covered by the KCNA in a given year relative to other countries. Coverage frequency of each country-year is the proportion of the number of KCNA articles mentioning the country published in the year by the total number of articles published in the same year as the following. Note that 1 is added to the denominator lest it is 0.

$$\text{Coverage (Relative) Frequency}_{c,y} = \frac{\text{Number of News Articles Mentioning Country } c \text{ in Year } y}{\text{Total Number of News Articles Published in Year } y+1} \quad (1)$$

Reflecting the “intensity of news coverage” (Ji & Liu 2022, 132), the measure follows other measures of media coverage by country (Segev 2014; Wu 2000) which associate each country-year with the number of news items mentioning the country published in the year and assess its

relative frequency.

Second, I also measure how favorably each country-year is covered in the KCNA reporting, following Ji and Liu (2022)'s measure of coverage favorability. Their measure of coverage favorability toward an entity is measured as the following (Ji & Liu 2022, 132):

$$\text{Coverage Favorability}_{cy} = \frac{\text{Sentiment Index}_{cy*}}{\text{Coverage (Absolute) Frequency}_{cy}} \quad (2)$$

This measure reflects “both *what* is reported about a country and *how often* it is covered” (Ji & Liu 2022, 132). Like Ji and Liu (2022), (absolute) frequency for each country-year is assessed by the number of KCNA articles mentioning the country published in the year. Unlike Ji and Liu (2022), sentiment for each country-year is the mean sentiment score of all articles mentioning each country *c* published in year *y*.

However, I differ from Ji and Liu (2022) in constructing the measure of coverage favorability. First, I use an off-the-shelf tool for measuring the sentiments of all KCNA articles in the dataset, instead of manually labeling a training set of articles and using the trained supervised machine learning algorithm to measure the sentiments of the remaining articles (Ji & Liu 2022, 130). The polarity-based sentiment scores I use are estimated by the R package “*quanteda.sentiment*” based on the 2015 Lexicoder Sentiment Dictionary (Young & Soroka 2012). While Ji and Liu (2022)'s method may fit the data better, it requires a lot of temporal and financial resources. Off-the-shelf tools—many of which are of good quality nowadays—are more economical and efficient for a resource-constrained researcher.

Second, I do not assume that news articles that mention multiple countries express a neutral sentiment toward all countries. When manually labeling the training set, Ji and Liu (2022, 130) assume that “news reports involving multiple countries, where the underlying sentiment for each is inconsistent, are...neutral.” Instead of following the assumption, I instead calculate each article's sentiment score and tie it to all countries

mentioned. I then aggregate the data by country-year, calculating the mean sentiment scores of all articles mentioning each country-year.

Both coverage frequency and favorability serve as dependent variables in the following linear regression model, respectively:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{cy} = & a + \sum_s \beta_{Security_s} X_{Security_cys} + \sum_e \beta_{Economic_e} X_{Economic_cye} \\
 & + \beta_{Preference_Distance} X_{Preference_Distance_cy} + \beta_{GDP} X_{GDP_cy} \\
 & + \beta_{Population} X_{Population_cy} + \sum_g \beta_{WGI_g} X_{WGI_g} + \gamma_c + \eta_{by} + \varepsilon_{cy}
 \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

Y_{cy} is either coverage frequency or favorability of a country-year.

$X_{Security_cys}$ represents the security-related independent variables, namely whether a country (c) is involved in an international crisis that also involves North Korea and the number of international crises the country is a party to in a given year (y) according to the actor-level International Crisis Behavior (ICB) dataset (Brecher & Wilkenfeld 1997; Brecher et al. 2023).

$X_{Economic_cye}$ represents the independent variables for bilateral economic relations with North Korea, trade flows in particular. Following Ji and Liu (2022), I include in the models variables on the logged value of total imports from each country-year to North Korea and exports to each country-year from North Korea in US dollars. The data on North Korean trade flows is provided by the Observatory of Economic Complexity (Simoes & Hidalgo 2011), which is compiled from CEPII's data (Gaulier & Zignago 2010).

To capture the time-variant geopolitical dynamic between each country and North Korea, I use the distance in their ideal points measured by their votes cast in the United Nations (Bailey et al. 2017). $X_{Preference_Distance_cy}$ is the mean ideal point distance between each country and North Korea each year.

Among the control variables are the variables about country attributes, including political and social conditions from the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), following Ji and Liu (2022). WGIs are aggregated indicators for the quality of governance for cross-country, temporal comparisons (Kaufmann et al. 2010). X_{WGI_cy} includes the indicators for

each country-year's perceived levels of political freedom, political instability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (Kaufmann & Kraay 2022). Following existing literature on country coverage (Ahern Jr. 1984; Dupree 1971; Ish 1996; Segev 2014), I also include as control variables countries' GDP and population. $X_{GDP_{cy}}$ is country c 's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in constant 2015 US dollars in year y according to the World Bank. $X_{Population_{cy}}$ is country c 's size of the population in year y , according to the World Bank. γ_c represents the country fixed-effects, η_y the year fixed-effects, ε_{cy} error in the model. The country fixed-effects reflect the time-invariant factors such as alliance status, territorial size, and geographical proximity. The year fixed-effects take account of year-specific changes, such as Kim Jong-il's death in 2011.

Economic hypotheses H_{freq_import} , H_{freq_export} , H_{favor_import} , H_{favor_export} expect the coefficient $\beta_{Economic_e}$ to be positive. Hypothesis $H_{freq_nk_crisis}$ predicts positive $\beta_{Security_s}$ and Hypothesis $H_{favor_nk_crisis}$ negative $\beta_{Security_s}$.

VI. Results

1. Coverage Frequency

<Figure 1> prepared by the author below shows coverage frequency by country in the KCNA's English articles published in 2012. Coverage frequency ranges from 0 to 1. Most countries were mentioned very infrequently in KCNA articles, with a mean frequency of 0.005. The U.S. received the most attention, with over 21% of all KCNA news articles published in 2012 mentioning it at least once. The U.S. was followed by South Korea, which was mentioned by 15% of all news articles in that year.

<Figure 1> Coverage Frequency (2012)



<Table 1> prepared by the author below shows 10 countries most frequently mentioned in the KCNA reports published in 2012. In addition to the U.S. and South Korea, countries such as Japan, China, Russia, Iran, Germany, and France were also mentioned frequently. Countries that were never mentioned in any articles published in 2012 included Albania, Liberia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Serbia.

This predominance of the U.S. among country mentions in 2012 contrasts with the pattern of country mentions in KCNA reports from an earlier period of 1997-2011. Rich (2012b, 666) finds that direct references to the U.S. (9,390 times), trailing those of South Korea (51,532 times) and Japan (57,111 times) in his analysis of KCNA reports published in 1997-2011. At the same time, China (20,505 times) and Russia (13,299 times) were also the fourth and fifth most frequently mentioned countries in his analysis, similar to my findings.

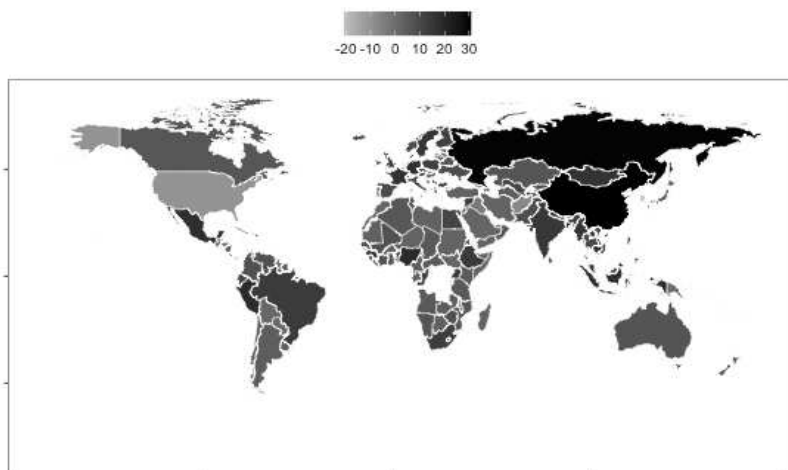
〈Table 1〉 Coverage Frequency (2012)

	Country Name	Coverage Frequency
1	United States	0.21
2	South Korea	0.15
3	Japan	0.09
4	China	0.07
5	Russia	0.05
6	Iran	0.03
7	Germany	0.02
8	France	0.01
9	Indonesia	0.01
10	Laos	0.01

2. Coverage Favorability

However, more limelight does not always mean favorability in media coverage. <Figure 2> prepared by the author below shows the coverage favorability of foreign countries in KCNA reports published in 2012. In that year, the coverage favorability for the U.S. was -10.315, a lot lower than the mean favorability of 5.469. South Korea scored the lowest, -20.797, and China scored the highest, 30.774.

〈Figure 2〉 Coverage Favorability (2012)



<Table 2> prepared by the author lists ten countries with the highest coverage favorability in 2012. After China, countries such as Russia, Bangladesh, and Nigeria received favorable coverage from the KCNA.

<Table 2> Top 10 Countries with Highest Coverage Favorability (2012)

	Country Name	Coverage Frequency
1	China	30.77
2	Russia	29.98
3	Bangladesh	19.57
4	Nigeria	18.99
5	Peru	18.56
6	Indonesia	18.17
7	Cambodia	17.81
8	Mexico	17.68
9	Laos	17.54
10	Germany	17.26

In addition to South Korea and the U.S., countries such as Montenegro, Iraq, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Israel, and Afghanistan were depicted unfavorably by the KCNA. <Table 3> prepared by the author displays the 10 countries with the lowest favorability scores.

<Table 3> Bottom 10 Countries with Lowest Coverage Favorability (2012)

	Country Name	Coverage Frequency
1	Haiti	-0.93
2	Greece	-1.41
3	Montenegro	-2.46
4	Iraq	-3.32
5	Georgia	-3.32
6	Bosnia & Herzegovina	-3.60
7	Israel	-6.83
8	Afghanistan	-7.37
9	United States	-10.32
10	South Korea	-20.80

That South Korea, not Japan, scored the lowest in coverage favorability in 2012 contrasts with the analysis of KCNA reports from 1997-2011 (Rich 2012b). He finds that “references to Japan are predominantly negative in nature, while references to South Korea appear more balanced between condemnation of the government and support for their citizens” (Rich 2012b, 666). In contrast, South Korea was portrayed extremely negatively and Japan less so in the KCNA reports published in 2012. At the same time, both KCNA reports published in 1997 - 2011 and in 2012 confirm the “conventional wisdom of a largely negative tone towards the U.S. and largely positive tone in referencing China and Russia (Rich 2012b, 666).”

3. Security or Economic Interests?

North Korean media coverage of international news is largely driven by North Korean security and, to a limited extent, economic interests. My analysis finds that its coverage frequency is affected by the regime’s security and economic interests whereas coverage favorability is driven only by security interests.

<Table 4> prepared by the author below shows the results of linear regressions of media coverage. Model (1) is a linear regression of coverage frequency and Model (2) that of coverage favorability.

The results indicate that media coverage is largely driven by North Korea’s security interests. Countries that are targets of aggression by North Korea, such as the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, are much more likely to receive attention from the North Korean state media than other countries. Model (1) shows that these countries are more likely to be mentioned by KCNA articles by 3.4% on average in the year they experience tension with North Korea (such as 2009, 2016, 2017, and 2018), relative to when they are not butting heads with North Korea or to other countries that are not targets. The effect is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

<Table 4> Linear Regressions of Media Coverage

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Coverage Frequency	Coverage Favorability
	(1)	(2)
Whether Involved in Crises With North Korea	0.034*** (0.003)	-1.939** (0.804)
Whether Involved in International Crises	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.433 (0.301)
Imports by North Korea (Log)	0.0001* (0.00004)	-0.007 (0.013)
Exports by North Korea (Log)	-0.00004 (0.00005)	0.020 (0.014)
GDP (Log)	-0.003 (0.002)	-1.136* (0.586)
Population (Log)	0.004 (0.004)	0.702 (1.097)
Preference Distance	-0.0001 (0.0005)	-0.122 (0.154)
Political Freedom	0.0003 (0.001)	0.594 (0.364)
Rule of Law	0.001 (0.001)	0.330 (0.426)
Regulatory Quality	0.001 (0.001)	0.558 (0.385)
Political Instability	-0.0003 (0.001)	0.012 (0.202)
Gov't Effectiveness	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.221 (0.356)
Control of Corruption	0.001 (0.001)	-0.063 (0.371)
Fixed Effects?	✓	✓
Observations	2,351	2,351
R ²	0.893	0.784
Adjusted R ²	0.883	0.763
Residual Std. Error (df = 2142)	0.007	2.306
F Statistic (df = 208; 2142)	86.197***	37.437***

* Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

These countries are also much more likely to be portrayed unfavorably by the KCNA in the crisis years. Model (2) indicates that the usual adversaries of North Korea, such as the U.S., South Korea, and Japan, are also more likely to be portrayed negatively by the KCNA during crises with North Korea, compared to when they are not involved in such crises or other countries that are not involved in such crises. Being a party to such crises is likely to lower the media favorability score by 1.939 on average. The effect is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Interestingly, countries when involved in international crises in general are less likely to receive attention from the KCNA. These cases are *less* likely to be mentioned by KCNA articles by 0.4%, and the effect is statistically significant at the 0.01 level, according to Model (1). These country-years include Syria in 2016 - 19, Turkey in 2015 - 17, Sudan and South Sudan in 2011 - 12, and Ukraine in 2014 - 15. These international conflicts are either those that grew out of civil wars or those in which Russia, a North Korean ally, is an aggressor. This suggests that the North Korean state media actively manipulates coverage by turning away from international news that may hurt the regime's security interests.

In contrast, there is limited evidence that stronger economic ties result in favorable economic coverage for foreign countries. Countries that export a lot to North Korea, such as China and Zimbabwe, are more likely to receive attention from the KCNA. Model (1) tells us that major exporters (from which North Korea imports a lot) are more likely to be mentioned by the KCNA by 0.01%, compared to other country-years. The effect is statistically significant only at the 0.1 level, however. However, the size of imports does not necessarily translate into media favorability. Model (2) fails to find evidence that major importers or exports are portrayed more favorably by the KCNA. Moreover, countries to which North Korea exports frequently, are not subject to media attention or favorable media coverage. I fail to find a relationship between the size of exports and coverage frequency or favorability. The failure to find a significant relationship between economic ties and media coverage in North Korea contrasts with the findings of Ji and Liu that “countries with stronger

economic ties with China - especially in areas of strategic importance to China - tend to receive more favorable news coverage” (Ji & Liu 2022, 139).

Meanwhile, the models largely fail to discover significant relationships between the remaining control variables about country attributes and geopolitical dynamics and media coverage in North Korea. Countries with large populations; those with preferences different from North Korea’s preferences; those with high levels of political freedom, regulatory quality, political instability, government effectiveness, or control of corruption; or those with the rule of law do not necessarily receive more media attention or more positive coverage in North Korea. Wealthier countries in general are more likely to be depicted negatively in North Korean media relative to less wealthy countries, but this effect is significant only at the 0.1 level. These results differ from the analyses of country prominence (Ahern Jr. 1984; Dupree 1971; Ish 1996; Segev 2014).

VII. Conclusion

North Korean media coverage of foreign countries is largely driven by North Korean security interests and, to a limited extent, economic interests. Its coverage frequency is affected by the regime’s both security and economic interests whereas coverage favorability is driven by security interests.

My findings have several implications for past and future research on the media in authoritarian countries. First, this paper extends the small but growing literature on authoritarian media outlets that target foreign audiences (Avgerinos 2009; Bailard 2016; Brady 2015; Carter & Carter 2021; Ji & Liu 2022; Min & Luqiu 2021; Orttung & Nelson 2019; Wang 2023; Wasserman 2016; Zhang et al. 2022). This paper differs from existing scholarship by exploring and showing how external, macro-level factors, including security and economic interests of autocratic regimes,

affect coverage of the state-controlled media.

Second, this paper also extends the literature on outward-facing propaganda apparatus, which has focused on China and Russia, by studying a relatively understudied case—North Korea. In the process, my findings support the implicit assumption among the small but growing scholarship on North Korean media rhetoric (Rich 2012a; Sukin 2022; Whang et al. 2017, 2018; Zhang et al. 2023) that it is security-driven. At the same time, I find that economic interests of the regime, import flows in particular, also can motivate its media coverage.

Third, my findings suggest that media coverage in authoritarian countries may differ by their security and economic contexts. My findings significantly differ from the existing findings about authoritarian media coverage in China (Ji & Liu 2022). While Ji & Liu (2022) find that countries' imports and exports with China are likely to receive favorable coverage by the Chinese state-controlled media, I find that trade has no effect on coverage favorability and limited effect on coverage frequency in North Korea. This may stem from the fact that in authoritarian countries with a larger selectorate, such as China, economic interests trump security interests in their influence on media coverage whereas in personalist regimes, such as North Korea, security interests are prioritized. Moreover, North Korea is an extremely isolated country with its security interactions heavily focused on the U.S. and its economic relations dominated by China. These specific contexts may be what the KCNA coverage in English reflects.

Future research should investigate whether and how these different facets of authoritarian countries may result in different behavior by the media. Additionally, in-depth case studies on countries other than China and Russia, such North Korea, would be fruitful.

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국문요약

국제 뉴스의 권위주의적 미디어 보도: 북한의 사례

Clara H. Suong | 버지니아텍

권위주의 국가 언론의 국제 정치 보도는 무엇이 결정할까요? 권위주의 국가의 언론 매체에 대한 기존 연구는 주로 국내 정치 역학 관계에 초점을 맞췄습니다. 이 논문은 전 세계 독자를 대상으로 한 권위주의 언론의 보도 패턴을 분석하여 이러한 기존 연구를 확장합니다. 2008년부터 2020년까지 조선중앙통신(KCNA)이 발행한 영문 뉴스 기사 85,313건을 분석한 결과, 북한 정권의 안보 및 경제적 이해관계가 다른 국가에 대한 보도 빈도와 호감도에 미치는 다양한 영향을 발견했습니다. 안보적 이해관계는 보도 빈도와 호감도 모두에 영향을 미치는 반면, 경제적 이해관계, 특히 수입 규모는 보도 빈도에만 제한적으로 영향을 미칩니다. 이는 북한에서 영어 방송이 적국에는 자주, 경제 파트너에게는 때때로 신호를 보내는 도구로 사용된다는 것을 의미합니다.

주제어: 권위주의 정권, 국영언론, 북한

