

Memes of Mass Destruction: What Do Memes Indicate About Nuclear Power Relations?

Jennifer Clark¹, Fordham University, New York City, United States of America

Abstract

What is the relationship between diplomatic discourse and political memes? What do these themes show us about contemporary power relations? In concentrating on the United States' nuclear relationship with North Korea, I seek to provide a critical examination of the way in which diplomatic discourse is compressed into visual digital arguments also known as Internet memes. In this paper, I gain insight into this topic by analyzing memes on Kim Jong-Un in conjunction with President Obama's discourse regarding North Korea circulating between 2011-2016. This analysis shows that memes about Kim Jong-Un reflect and reinforce the recurrent motifs of President Obama's diplomatic rhetoric: oriental masculinity, isolation, and nuclear terrorism. Based on this research I argue that memes represent a new form of visual political rhetoric that reflect the current international political environment and condense theories of diplomatic relations to a single picture. This article also demonstrates how future scholars can conduct similar analyses of this emerging form of communication.

Keyword: Communications, Memes, Discourse Analysis, North Korea, United States, Nuclear Power Relations, International Relations, Social Media

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Introduction

“Humor can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes.” - Limor Shifman (Shifman, 2007, p. 187)

On November 28th 2017 North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the mainland of the United States, the most recent in a long line of antagonistic nuclear action by North Korea (North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts, 2017). The relationship between the United States and North Korea has a complicated history that has only escalated in a growing understanding gap and controversy in recent years. Over the years North Korea has become deeply entrenched in America’s contemporary, domestic politics. This is due in part to the fact that nuclear weaponry is arguably the most delicate and divisive issue that the international community faces. The 21st century has brought a wave of states, like North Korea seeking involvement in the nuclear community, which further complicates international power structures. With this has also come an escalation in the many forms of discussion surrounding the conflicted relationship, from diplomatic communication to digital discourse. The relationship between these mediums and the way in which the international system’s power hierarchy diffuses throughout larger society and is reflected in the digital media provides a unique window into the study of international relations and power hierarchies. Methods of communication have evolved with the digital age and memes are an important component of this evolution, especially in the communication of power structures.

The central question of this research project is: what is the relationship between diplomatic rhetoric and political memes? What does this relationship indicate about power relations in the contemporary international community? I seek an answer to these inquiries through an exploration into the history behind the United States and North Korea’s discordant

relationship, as well as an in-depth discourse analysis of presidential speeches and political memes. By examining these memes, I argue that memes act as an expression of power through the reiteration of discursive that reinforces US-North Korea antagonisms by propagating a growing knowledge gap.

A Complicated Relationship from the Start

The United States has had a fraught relationship with North Korea since even before its founding in 1948, with historical trends that can be found in key themes of President Obama's diplomatic rhetoric, as well as in memes about Kim Jong-Un. This relationship has been marked by defiance, intimidation, and nuclear threat from its conception. It is important to note that not only was the United States the first of the two to create the initial looming nuclear threat, but also that North Korea has operated under nuclear intimidation longer than any other existing international state (Kim, 2010). Due to an imminent fear of nuclear attack from the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea began developing its nuclear program in the early 1980s with help from the Soviet Union (Boghani, 2017). Security for the purpose of progress, especially economic, was a primary motivating factor in North Korea's original pursuit of nuclear power and weaponry (Chung, 2016). North Korea's initial nuclear program was branded as a peaceful endeavor, and the state even joined other nuclear world leaders in the NPT in 1985 (Chung, 2016). Nonetheless, conflict embroiled North Korea's international and nuclear relations almost from the start.

Obama is not the first to group North Korea as part of the global issue of terrorism, as the state became an officially listed terrorist state according to the United States Department of State in 1987 when two North Korean agents bombed Korean Airlines flight 858 (Wertz, 2017). Although the state was removed from the list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2008, rhetoric

grouping North Korea with terrorism and international menace has continued. Further deteriorating its international image, North Korea has continued to violate its agreement to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) continuously since 1992 (Wertz, 2017). The state's reputation as a distrustful rising nuclear power amongst the international community only grew as the years passed. Following a 1994 conflict wherein North Korea threatened that it would begin to extract weapons grade plutonium from its nuclear reactors, as well as the collapse of the Agreed Framework under the Bush administration, global distrust increased (Boghani, 2017). President Bush went on to infamously label North Korea as a member of the 'Axis of Evil' along with Iran and Iraq in his 2002 State of the Union Address, proclaiming these states to be seeking weapons of mass destruction (Bush, 2002). This embedded a negative international perception of North Korea even deeper into the public's conscience.

Since 2006 North Korea has continued to test the limits of its nuclear program at a rate that has only accelerated since Kim Jong-Un came to power following Kim Jong-Il's death in 2011. The United States and the United Nations Security Council have condemned each of its nuclear endeavors. Kim Jong-Un has agreed once to a moratorium on long-range missiles and nuclear activity in exchange for humanitarian aid. However, Kim Jong-Un has also conducted about seven antagonistic military exercises, six of which involved weapons of mass destruction. Due to this escalation, we find ourselves in an environment of contentious discourse surrounding North Korea's international image. This study is especially pertinent to the present because today's level and volume of hostile and binary discourse did not exist in previous administrations.

North Korea's long pursuit of nuclear weapons has sparked international outrage and fear, resulting in ever tightening embargoes and sanctions that isolated and crippled North Korea, suffocating its ability to develop from the start. Without nuclear programs, North Korea believed it would have an extremely difficult time progressing free from the threat of interference by other states. However, as long as it maintained a nuclear program, North Korea would continue to be seen and to suffer as a pariah of the international community. Given this situation, North Korea finds itself in a catch-22 in which the state feels damned without nuclear weapons, and damned with them. There is a responsibility gap between the United States' intimidation tactics in the Korean Peninsula and the general portrayal of North Korea as an irrational actor in the United States' international discourse. This trend is not expected to end anytime soon as powerful states and American allies geographically surround North Korea: China, South Korea, Russia, and Japan (Wessells, 1995).

Therefore, the way in which this topic is represented through diplomatic and digital discourse is vital to the understanding of pervasive themes of international nuclear power relations. These tense, political relations are now reflected in digital media, especially in the format of memes. If memes can be understood as amalgamations of participatory political action, then the key themes found within them can give both an explanation and visual history of political trends. This study shows that theories of international relations can be found in places as serious as Presidential speeches as well as the humorous corners of the Internet. Furthermore, discourse affirms and reinforces power relationships. The way that world leaders are portrayed visually and through spoken word has a role in this reinforcement. Therefore, the relationship between political discourse and political memes solidifies itself as an important one. Understanding the circulation of these ideas and the extent to which they reflect a state has the

potential to teach us an incredible amount, as well as provide us with a new and ever evolving medium with which to study international relations.

In the following section I outline invaluable aspects of previous scholars that have been conducted on this topic thus far. The work of Limor Shifman, David Shim and Dirk Nabers, and Runa Das were especially helpful. These researchers respectively explored: memes as political action, the imaging of North Korea in photojournalism, and oriental masculinity in nuclear power relations.

Distorted Mirrors, Orientalist Masculinity, and the Imaging of North Korea: A Framework for Literature Review and Hypotheses

In this section I discuss literature focused on North Korea's image on the international stage. My goal is to connect scholarly theories on power relations and their portrayal of the way in which these theories are presently illustrated by the new wave of communication: Internet memes. Based upon my preliminary analysis of six years of President Obama's diplomatic speeches and in-depth research on the historical relations between the United States and North Korea, I expect to see North Korea represented as a weaker, criminal, and irrational state. This literature review helps to provide some insights into how, why, and to what extent these representations may be found in Internet memes.

First, it is necessary to explore the process of deteriorating relations and misrepresentations between states to understand the nationalistic narratives of presidential discourse and memes that function as cogs in the wheels of international power hierarchies. Kenneth Boulding and Urie Bronfenbrenner argue that relationships between nuclear states are so fraught because of the long ingrained national image of states and their distorted perceptions of one another. Kenneth Boulding argues that nation states are a complex aggregate of the

public's images of the state. These national images are the combination of a state's "...mythological past and forward into an imagined future." (Boulding, 1959, p. 122) Individuals are born into the fantasy of their state's national image and have it continuously reinforced by their community's belief system (Boulding). In this way national images trickle down into almost all aspects of our lives until they become popularly accepted and almost instinctive. This relates to the living psychological study Bronfenbrenner conducted on Russian people during the height of the Cold War. He found that states often look at one another through what he called a "distorted mirror" (Brofenbrenner, 2010). Through this lens, each state in the nuclear conflict views the other as more hostile, exploitative, untrustworthy, and irrational (Brofenbrenner, 2010, p. 429-34). These misconceptions are the result of a cognitive dissonance common among humans as well as a gap in knowledge and understanding. According to this theory, there is a human tendency to incorporate new and unfamiliar concepts into our existing and often inconsistent frameworks of thought (Brofenbrenner). Once a perception exists and is firmly incorporated into the national image, it is exceedingly difficult to alter this way of thinking.

When individuals begin to think of another state's citizens as blurred faces part of a larger, hegemonic, and hostile organization, everything that they do also becomes hostile. It is a common phenomenon that individuals mentally fight to maintain their view of others as compatible with these existing frameworks (Brofenbrenner, 2010). Because of this, the images that states hold of each other become self-confirming and therefore self-perpetuating. By doing so, this "strain toward consistency" erases distinctions and categorizes the other into artificially simplistic binaries (Brofenbrenner, p. 433-34). This fosters a harmful dichotomy between good and evil, one that becomes harmful when reinforced constantly on the diplomatic and digital stages. If presidential speeches and political memes reinforce the distorted mirror, they fortify an

ever-growing gap of understanding between the two nuclear states that harms the international community as a whole.

It is also imperative to discuss the toxic role of gendered relations in international power hierarchies, and how they have leaked into general discourse. There is a tendency among Western, developed nations to establish themselves as the obligatory caretakers of the Eastern and developing states of the world. Runa Das labels this phenomenon, “orientalist masculinity” and explains it as rhetoric in the international community that solidifies a hierarchy of international power organized by gendered coding (Das, 2014, p. 88). Das cites that masculine language is often found in instances of nuclear discourse, especially implemented by the United States. It is often used to claim legitimacy over their nuclear policing of the world. In nuclear rhetoric there is a tendency for Western powers to separate themselves geographically and politically from the “unruly other.” (Das, 2014, p. 87) Orientalist masculinity is a perpetuation of a historical dichotomy between developed and developing nations that views developing nations as children that must be taken care of and guided by patriarchal, strong Western wisdom and influence. Orientalist masculinity is a theme that becomes apparent throughout this study.

An additional study on the international imaging of North Korea conducted by David Shim and Dirk Nabers combines the above-mentioned ideas. Shim and Nabers found a paradoxical trend in which North Korea is portrayed as a rational yet irrational, threatening yet weak, state. Somehow, North Korea is seen as both an immediate international threat *and* a global outsider of the international community (Shim & Nabers, 2013). As an outsider North Korea fails to uphold the obligations that come with such membership, and is therefore denied the benefits that come with inclusion. This contradictory depiction is confusing and has conflicting key themes such as: backwardness, danger, isolation, poverty, scarcity, weakness,

calculation, and madness (Shim & Nabers). These inconsistent motifs are often adapted to fit whatever narrative is most convenient and beneficial at a given time, which manifests as trends that can also be found in diplomatic speeches and memes on the subject. While Shim and Nabers's study provides a helpful starting point, it only analyzes photographic portrayals of North Korea created by singular photographers. However, their focus on photography presents a unique opportunity to extend their theories to another visual form of communication: Internet memes.

The themes found within these scholarly works are nearly identical to those found in political discourse and memes on Kim Jong-Un and North Korea. By extending these ideas to this study, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how diplomatic discourse is digitally condensed into arguments about nuclear North Korea.

The Political Currency of Memes

In the 21st century memes have come to be recognized as a means of unlocking cultural and political truths about our own societies (Shifman, 2014). Shifman claims that there are three key political functions of memes: political advocacy, grassroots action, and modes of expression and public discourse. In this study I focus on their function as participatory political action and discourse.

Traditional forms of political discourse rely on highly organized resources, formation, and group identity (Shifman, 2014). Memes operate in a similar fashion; however, they allow people to participate in the public sphere from the comfort of their private sphere. By incorporating secondary content, political memes add new layers of meaning to any given subject. This highlights the importance of intertextuality in Internet memes, making the

contextual meaning even more important. This format of shared cultural references provides frameworks that are easy to replicate and spread.

The dissolution of the border between the public and private spheres is an important aspect in this new system of international communication. As Shifman points out, at the heart of a litany of political scandals (i.e. the Clinton-Lewinski Scandal, Watergate, etc.) is the obliteration of the line between the “front stage” and “backstage.” (Shifman, 2014, p. 140-41) The front stage represents the public sphere in which political figures intensely stage manage the appearance of their character and endeavors, all in the effort to project what they feel to be a desired manner of being to the public (Shifman). Conversely, the backstage is a place of privacy and intimacy in which projections of character do not need to be as aggressively mediated (Shifman, 2014). Memes effectively bring hidden backstage characteristics to the light of the public, often in derision and parody.

Additionally, memes lend evidence of public opinion about global political developments because one meme represents an aggregation of cultural relics, “...remixed by countless participants employing popular culture for public commentary.” (Shifman, 2014, p. 140-41) By examining iterations of memes, it is possible to get a closer and more comprehensive look at the theories and power relations behind mediated commentary on public events (Shifman).

Previous forays into the study of memes in relation to politics and communication have laid out valuable groundwork and working definitions. However, these studies have predominantly focused on domestic political movements within a singular country. Few, if any, have utilized in depth analysis of memes to draw conclusions regarding diplomatic and political relations between separate states. Additionally, existing studies predominantly focus on memes as participation in political movements or protests. I have found none that examine memes

depicting a state's leader as a way to uncover the dynamics of said state's global power position, or as condensed products of historical trends.

Method and Data

Having already set out the defining terms being used, the general frameworks of nuclear relations, and outlining the United States and North Korea's history, I now seek to identify how these frameworks relate to the case studies of the United States' discourse, presidential and digital, on North Korea. First, I will analyze the rhetoric, context, and themes found in speeches made by President Obama on these subjects between 2011 to 2016. I have chosen to focus on presidential speeches because state leaders are a country's most visible diplomats, and their words are likely to receive a high degree of publicization. Therefore, the strategic undertone of Obama's speeches is most likely to have a far-reaching effect. Second, I will analyze the visual political rhetoric of viral Internet memes about Kim Jong-Un of North Korea that circulated within the same time period of 2011-2016. In quantitative terms, this can be understood as speeches as the independent variable and memes as the dependent variable. A confounding variable in this research is the fact that not every person has access to, views, or shares political memes; minimizing their potential influence and importance as a piece of rhetoric. In the final section I will evaluate the connections, if any, which can be found between Internet memes and international political discourse.

The speeches I will study were selected for containing the phrase, "North Korea." The Internet memes I will analyze were selected because they feature images of Kim Jong-Un as the focal point. Speeches and memes selected are coded for: (1) language framing North Korea as isolated, (2) language referencing North Korea as a threat, and (3) rhetoric exemplifying the United States as a paternalistic figure. Accordingly, conclusions I draw on this digital dimension

of international relations may open the door for modernized political discussion. Below are tables illustrating the presidential speeches studied, as well as the key themes and their respective indicating phrases used for analysis. What follows are the findings of this exploration broken up into three subsections.

Figure 5.1: Themes Coded For²

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Key Indicating Phrases</i>
International Pariah	Isolation, violation of international norms/obligations/law/responsibility,
Global Threat	Threat global/domestic, security, proliferation
Paternalistic United States	Behavior (good or bad), reward, punishment, provocation, send message, protect

² These themes and indicating words were chosen due to the overwhelming frequency with which they were incorporated into President Obama's diplomatic rhetoric. Coding for mentions of North Korea's "violations" of international norms/obligations/responsibilities is included under the "Isolation" section because failure to uphold these standards leads to a negligible position within the international community. The chosen phrases coded for North Korea as a threat were chosen to obtain a more detailed look into the different ways that the state is framed as a nuclear threat. Finally, the language chosen to indicate the key theme of oriental masculinity as indicated by phrasing used in Runa Das's work and other words (such as good versus bad behavior, or punishment) associated with paternalist behavior.

Figure 5.2: Speeches Analyzed

Press Conference with President Hu of the People's Republic of China	January 19, 2011
State of the Union	January 25, 2011
Message to the Senate on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty	February 2, 2011
Remarks by the President to Parliament in London, United Kingdom	May 25, 2011
News Conference With President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea	October 13, 2011
Remarks to United State Military Personnel at Camp Bonifas, South Korea	March 25, 2012
News Conference with President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea	March 25, 2012
News Conference with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of Japan	April 30, 2012

Remarks Prior to a Working Session With Group of Eight Leaders at Camp David, Maryland	May 19, 2012
Message to the Congress on Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to North Korea	June 18, 2012
State of the Union Address	February 12, 2013
News Conference With President Park Geun-hye of South Korea	May 7, 2013
Joint Press Conference With President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan	April 24, 2014
News Conference with President Park Geun-hye of South Korea	April 25, 2014
Remarks by President in Year-End Press Conference	December 19, 2014
Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan in Joint Press	April 28, 2014

Conference	
News Conference with President Park Geun-hye of South Korea	October 16, 2015
Press Conference by President Obama	April 1, 2016
Remarks by President Obama at the Closing Session of the Nuclear Security Summit	April 1, 2016
News Conference with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany in Hannover, Germany	April 24, 2016
Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abe after Bilateral Meeting	May 25, 2016
Post G7 Press Conference in Japan	May 26, 2016
Remarks by President in Commencement Address to the United States Air Force Academy	June 02, 2016
Message to Congress on Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to North Korea	June 21, 2016
Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Lee of Singapore in Joint Press Conference	August 02, 2016
Remarks of President Obama to the People of	September 06, 2016

Laos	
President's News Conference in Vientiane, Laos	September 8, 2016
Address by President Obama to the 71st Session of the United Nations General Assembly	September 20, 2016

Discursive Themes

Key themes identified through the discourse analysis conducted on President Obama's speeches are inter-contextual and mixes of them are found in almost every speech on the topic of North Korea. Although all the rhetorical themes are interrelated, I have separated them into three major categories of imaging: North Korea as an international pariah, North Korea as a global threat, and the United States as a paternalistic figure. What follows is a more detailed synopsis of major themes echoed throughout Obama's many presidential speeches.

An Isolated Pariah

One of the most pervasive themes found within President Obama's rhetoric is North Korea's position as an isolated state within the international community. As indicated in the literature review, a major motivating factor for developing states to acquire nuclear weapons is to save themselves from the margins of the international community. In the 28 speeches analyzed, 75% (21 of the 28 speeches on North Korea) contained language that othered North Korea from the international community.

I found that the term "isolation" was used as both a descriptor and a threat. The term, "isolation" confirms that a developing state has already fallen into the neglected folds of the

global society. During a news conference in 2012, Obama compared North and South Korea stating, “You were there at the DMZ [demilitarized zone], and it's like you're looking across 50 years into a country that has missed 40 or 50 years of progress.” (Obama, 2012). Phrasing such as this implies that North Korea is not only on the sidelines of international norms, but also that its progress and modernization have stagnated drastically in comparison to its regional neighbors and the world. Interestingly, isolation was also used as a threat from the United States in response to North Korea's repeated nuclear actions. In all the analyzed speeches that mentioned “isolation,” about 46.15% presented isolation as a threat of disciplinary action. Obama's speeches made it clear that while North Korea continues developing its nuclear arms, the United States would enhance isolation with tighter sanctions enforcement supported with the backing of the international community as it has done numerous times in the past.

Another indication of North Korea's exclusion from the norms of the international community is the frequent reference of the state's “violations of international obligations.” The terminology surrounding violation suggests that North Korea is an international lawbreaker that should be held accountable for its crimes against the global society. Almost 10% of speeches analyzed contained language such as “irresponsible” and “reckless,” indicating the deliberate frequency of this trend.

The most striking trend in analysis of speech regarding the leadership of North Korea's isolation is the United States' overall delegitimization of any and all perceptions of power or cohesion in strategy. This tactic serves to create a gaping legitimacy deficiency between North Korea and the international community. The antiquated regime is both the cause of and consequence of its isolated position. North Korea's categorization as an international pariah has led to extensive economic, political, and social restrictions outside its borders. Additionally,

North Korea is held back from shaking off the label of “isolation” and normalizing diplomatic relations because it is cut off from basic international and regional commerce, as well as cultural and technological exchanges.

Global Threat

In the 28 speeches studied, around 85.71% framed North Korea’s nuclear program as a threat. Throughout discussion of its arms program, North Korea is simultaneously presented as a global threat, a domestic threat to the United States, and a terrorist threat.

Even North Korea’s label as a global threat is marginalized and isolated in statements such as, “North Korea is in a whole different category and poses the most immediate set of concerns for all of us, one that we are working internationally to focus on.” (Obama, 2016). This further exhibits the frequency with which North Korea is othered in international diplomatic rhetoric. It is useful to pose nuclear North Korea as a global and domestic threat to justify the United States’ continued military presence in the region as merely self-defense of itself and its allies.

Another effective justification for intervention and military presence in the Korean Peninsula region is to rhetorically link North Korea to terrorism. The use of phrases related to terrorism insinuates that North Korea is a piece in the larger puzzle of global terrorism and the fight against it. The United States has time and again used defending freedom and democracy in the face of terrorism as rationale for becoming embroiled in foreign conflict. However, North Korea is a regime, not a non-governmental organization. Therefore, it is odd for the conflict between these two states to be framed as an issue of terrorism. While Obama does not distinctly label North Korea as a terrorist in his speeches, by associating North Korea with the word, it

indirectly can influence others to accept and perpetuate this judgment of criminalization and illegitimacy.

A Paternalistic United States

The United States' maintenance of a strong military presence in the demilitarized zone of South Korea is concerning and demonstrates its self-perception as the region's protector. Out of the 28 speeches analyzed, about 42.86% contained paternalistic language on behalf of the United States. This theme stems back to the concept of oriental masculinity. According to this line of thought, Obama effectively establishes the United States as a necessary caretaker of the region, justifying the need to protect South Korea and the world at large from the dangers of North Korean nuclear armament.

The position of protectorate is useful in the defense of the United States' own powerful nuclear presence in the international community. In the 2011 State of the Union Obama said, "Because we rallied the world, nuclear materials are being locked down on every continent so they never fall into hands of terrorists." (Obama, 2011). This affirms the United States' position as a nuclear world leader while again equating outlier states such as North Korea with terrorism. The theme of paternalism is reinforced by Obama's discussion of punishment and reward in relation to toleration of North Korea's actions. Obama typically labeled North Korea's actions as "bad behavior" or "provocations." These are words one would use in describing a disobedient child, making Obama's discussion of punishment and reward even more poignant. This select wording insinuates that the United States has the authority and permission to penalize and discipline other members of the international community. The United States' positioning as a parent-figure in Asia (specifically the Korean Peninsula) acted as both a justification of its

continued military presence and as a reason to exercise its authority in an attempt to train North Korea towards better “behavior.”

In the following section I will study a few of the many popular political meme iterations on Kim Jong-Un and explore the extent to which they reflect the above-mentioned frameworks of thought popularized by Obama.

Mememes Analyzed

In this section I will apply the same method of discourse analysis to select memes featuring Kim Jong-Un. The man did not gain international recognition in digital culture until Kim Jong-Il named him his future successor. Much like Obama’s speeches, these contain strong themes of paternalism, isolated pariah, and global threat.

Paternalism

Infantilizing imaging found in these memes is comparable to Obama’s paternalistic language. It implies that Kim Jong-Un is similar to a bratty child driven to reactionary tantrums when denied his wishes. It is strikingly like Obama’s News Conference with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda of Japan in 2012 when he stated, “And what I’ve tried to do since I came into office is to make sure that the North Koreans understand that the old pattern of provocation that then gets attention and somehow insists on the world purchasing good behavior from them, that that pattern is broken.” (Obama, 2012)

Both the rhetoric of this speech and the argument presented by similar political memes implies that North Korea’s leader is an immature world leader. This perpetuates the historically popular tendency, as Das argues, among developed democratic nations to infantilize developing, non-democratic countries (Das, 2014). Words such as “irrational,” and “irresponsible” add potency to the rhetoric of oriental masculinity. Because children have not matured enough to

possess the quality of good rationality, they may make irresponsible choices such as eating ice cream for dinner, not wearing a coat in the cold, or detonating weapons of mass destruction.



[Image 7.1, Red Button]

For example, in [Image 7.1] Kim Jong-un cries with the phrase, “But the red button looked so fun.” superimposed over his image. The meme conveys that Kim Jong-Un is not permitted by the global community to utilize nuclear weapons due to the fact that he simply does not understand the magnitude of his actions nor the number of people they could negatively affect. This communicates in a different way the kind of international condemnation Obama stated in instances such as his 2015 news conference in South Korea, “Today President Park and I are reaffirming that our nations will never accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.” (Obama, 2015) The implication here is that Kim Jong-Un is not a legitimate political leader with legitimate defense strategies, but instead he is a juvenile who cannot be trusted, left to his own devices, nor approved by the global community. The positioning of people who are fellow mourners behind Kim Jong-Un gives the impression that these are his handlers, reinforcing the

idea that the leader must be babysat. The wording of the meme further reinforces this sentiment. The protesting language of “but” insinuates that Kim Jong-Un objects to something that he was not permitted to do. In this case, the action that was not permitted was the hypothetical deployment of nuclear warheads. The language used here draws parallels between a child not being permitted to play with his “fun” and entertaining toys, and a state leader not being permitted to make major political decisions for his own country.



[Image 7.2, It's Not a Phase, Mom]

In the next meme, [Image 7.2] of Kim Jong-Un displays him as a feminine adolescent dressed in Goth style and protesting their mother. The intended message of the meme appears to be that Kim Jong-Un is an adolescent who is not capable of making serious decisions. Although this may be a step up from portraying the leader as an infant, it still does not bode well for his legitimacy on the world stage. This meme implies that as North Korea is experiencing a period of transition of leadership, Kim Jong-Un is experiencing a transition himself. This comparison likens Kim Jong-Un to a leader experiencing a crisis of identity and confidence, further delegitimizing his leadership position. Another implication of this framework is that his decision

to build up North Korea's nuclear missile systems is an irrational and unplanned strategy with no predicted outcome. This could not be more different than the reality of North Korea's nuclear deterrence program that was born of threats from America and a desire for autonomy free from great power interference. It also fails to consider the rational reasons countries have for amassing nuclear weapons as highlighted earlier.

Another point reinforced by the dichotomy between infantilizing and discipline is the commonly held belief of American exceptionalism. These memes make the argument that Kim Jong-Un is not a rational enough actor to be trusted with the military and political power of nuclear weapons. However, to present day the United States is the only country in the global community to use weapons of mass destruction against another state. This highlights the American exceptionalism and paternalism previously demonstrated in Obama's speeches.

Isolated Pariah

Memes depicting Kim Jong-Un often remix his appearance or context to place the leader in marginal positions. Whether he is made to appear oblivious, or as a teenager belonging to a fringe group [Image 7.2], Kim Jong-Un's image is often that of an outcast. The choice to present Kim Jong-Un in gothic clothing further emphasizes North Korea's isolated global position [Image 7.2]. Goths are known generally as a marginal subset of teenage cliques that are often isolated and looked at as strange and to be avoided. This description is strikingly similar to the way that North Korea's power position is established through Obama's diplomatic discourse. Similar to this, another meme [Image 7.1] portrays Kim Jong-Un as a child. The greater significance of this imaging is that North Korea is considered an immature, less powerful actor in the international community.



[Image 7.3, With This Technology]

Another meme [Image 7.3] presents an image of Kim John-Un sitting in on what appears to be an official governmental congregation holding a floppy disk. The textual message states, “With this technology, we will bring the United States to its knees.” The message conveyed by this meme is that North Korea believes that the floppy disk will be sufficient means of technology with which to operate an attack against the United States. The “outdated” floppy disk is important. It signifies that not only is North Korea technologically unadvanced, but also the Kim Jong-Un is not intelligent enough to understand the modern complexities of nuclear warfare. This correlates to the constant theme of North Korea’s isolation found in Obama’s international discourse and reinforces North Korea’s position as a marginal global actor. Finally, it is humorous to note that the United States’ own nuclear codes remain safeguarded on 1970’s level technology (including floppy disks) to this day (Kennedy, 2016)

Global Threat

North Korea is often presented as the rogue, irresponsible, and irrational other in comparison to the United States. This imaging implies that North Korea deserves less respect on the diplomatic stage.

The language of [Image 7.3] is telling. The phrasing, “...bring the United States to its knees” presents North Korea as an aggressor. This is despite the popular international theory that a key reason developing states develop nuclear power is because they seek deterrence of foreign interference. Instead, North Korea is presented as the military intimidator bent on invading a foreign country, a sentiment starkly contrasting the state’s actual international strategy yet enforcing the rhetorical theme of the state’s willful violation of international obligations.

[Image 7.1] continues the emphasis of North Korea as a global threat can be found. Here the use of the phrase “The red button” is important. In the true nature of memes, this piece expects the reader to understand the “red button” reference and its many violent connotations without explanation. It is a play on a classic cinema trope found in many a Hollywood movies and television (TV Tropes). Hollywood is a major part of the American ethos, and cinema helps to frame our image of the world as much as any other form of popular propaganda. Movies have trained us to inherently recognize tropes like this and their connotations. This represents the true nature of memes and their tendency to appeal to the popular culture of its audience (Milner, 2013). In audience’s imagination, the presence or mention of the red button is designed to bring thoughts of imminent danger or global threat to the mind of the audience. The person with potential to press the red button is typically an actor playing a wildly unhinged and evil individual. The creator of this meme inserted Kim Jong-Un into the position of even having access to the red button to portray him yet again as an irrational, imminently dangerous actor.

Conclusion: The Paradoxical Framing of North Korea

Through a detailed and empirical discourse analysis of President Obama speeches and political memes on the subject of North Korea, I have demonstrated overlapping themes in these two modes of rhetoric. Obviously, this collection of memes and speeches is only a small fraction of the plethora of discourse on Kim Jong-un. The number of political memes alone is even more staggering, and cannot be accurately measured due to the rapid rate with which memes are born, spread, and mutate. In spite of this limitation, this collection exhibits key trends that I found as I sifted through masses of visual digital content. These selections, amongst many others, illustrate Highfield's trend theory that the constant in a series of political memes tends to be the political figure's image (Highfield, 2016). They exemplify the way in which a leader's image is distorted and reimagined in new situations as a tactic for exposing what Shifman calls the backstage (2014). Moreover, while Obama uses the phrase "North Korea" to comment on the rule of Kim Jong-Un, memes use the image of Kim Jong-Un to articulate ideas about the country of North Korea. Ultimately, I argue that memes be considered as a serious, scholarly avenue for future explorations of international discourse.

Based upon the research conducted, I suggest that there is a connection between theories of international relations, presidential speeches, and memes. For example, one could follow a linear trail of exploration starting from the concept of oriental masculinity, through the repetitive theme of American paternalism in President Obama's speech rhetoric, all the way to the corners of the internet to [Image 7.1]. The rhetoric found within the presidential speeches analyzed affirms existing theories about nuclear power relations, and memes exhibit the way that these ideas trickle down to become a part of popular public thought.

President Obama's speeches express the wish that North Korea cease their nuclear program in the hope of normalized international relations for the sake of the suffering North Korean citizens. At the same time, the speeches assert resolute condemnation of North Korea's governing actions and promise punishment in response. Punishment in the form of economic sanctions is likely to hurt the people of North Korea rather than Kim Jong-Un. In denouncing North Korea as an international pariah and nuclear terrorist, Obama indirectly invites other world leaders to apply the same frameworks of judgement to North Korea.

Furthermore, memes evoke a pictured argument of what the world looks like to the creator, which in turn mirrors trends found in Obama's speeches. As Shim and Nabers asserted in their study of the imaging of North Korea, visual representation emphasizes and normalizes a specific way of seeing that fortifies boundaries between the ingroup and the other (Shim & Nabers, 2013). In the process of attempting to bring the backstage of Kim Jong-Un's leadership and persona to the mainstage, these memes instead bring reoccurring American biases towards North Korea to the forefront. In this manner, memes effectively create reproductions of power structures. This only serves to further distort the mirror through which the United States and North Korea view one another, creating a more dangerous international nuclear climate.

The relationship between diplomatic and memetic rhetoric that I have highlighted throughout this research demonstrates the value with which visual digital content should be looked at by scholars. Those who wish to study power relations should consider memes a valuable rhetorical source going forward. Scholars who do not view memes as worthy of inclusion in such studies reject an innovative form of rhetoric that is more widely accessible to the public than traditional modes of political participation and commentary. In future studies

political memes can be utilized as an indicator of how the public shapes, interprets, and views their own reality in light of global developments.

Future work would do well to include a study of how North Korea is imaged by popular, traditional media sources such as major cable networks and newspapers. A majority, around 67.86% of the speeches I analyzed were news or press conferences conducted by President Obama. In attendance of such events are journalists from major news networks. The way in which journalists absorb and purport themes presented in Obama's speeches influences the way that developing stories on North Korea are presented in popular media. A more robust and in-depth study on political memes' place in popular discourse and its effects would produce more accurate conclusions. However, even this concentrated examination of memes allows me to argue that these two distinct forms of discourse have heavily overlapping themes of rhetoric that unfortunately broadens the knowledge gap between the two states, and that memes should be included in future studies of power relations and international relations.

It is necessary to clarify the limitations of this study. To begin with, this study only analyzes the relationship between two states: The United States and North Korea. Although the United States has produced a robust digital culture, North Korea's heavy censorship laws prevent a comparative study to be conducted. In addition to these limitations, it must be noted that not every demographic views, shares, or cares about the arguments that memes present, which suggests limitations for the effect of memes more broadly. In spite of these limitations, the strong correlation between themes found in diplomatic discourse and memes demonstrates that this new stage in the evolution of digital communication is an important site of inquiry.

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Jennifer Clark is a senior International Studies student at Fordham University with a passion for current affairs, digital culture, and storytelling. Her interests of study and research include Middle Eastern culture and politics, history, and new forms of political participation. Her article was inspired by the growing influence digital culture has in forming political opinion, as well as the troubling relationship between the United States and North Korea. After graduating Jennifer hopes to continue honing her creative and technical studies.