

Assessing Agenda Setting for the South Korean Peace Initiative of Moon Jae-in

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Former South Korean President Moon Jae-in implemented a project called the Peace Initiative, which prioritized a “peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula” as the core national agenda and involved using a peace-based frame instead of a unification approach to address inter-Korean relations from a different perspective. This initiative was evaluated in this study using a revised version of the pyramid model to assess the input–output–result process underlying the project and determine whether it generated results that differed from those achieved by the previous administration. To these ends, this research compared Moon’s key presidential speeches with those of his predecessor, Park Geun-hye, as input, news commentaries and responses from major players as output, and the trend of perceptual and attitudinal changes in public opinion as results. Although Moon failed to accomplish significant policy effects on inter-Korean relations because of geopolitical challenges and the transfer of power to the conservative party, the analysis revealed that the input, output, and partial results of inter-Korean dialogue reflect some progress.

Keywords: Moon Jae-in’s Peace Initiative, framing, public diplomacy, norm diplomacy, a revised pyramid model of PD research

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Introduction

The world is seeing a paradigm shift in which international relations not only depend on traditional perspectives regarding power politics being confined to statesmen but also heavily rely on public diplomacy (PD)¹ involving public opinion and the media. At the same time, the emerging power rivalry between the US and China has brought forth a new set of challenges to the world. At the center of this conflict lies value diplomacy, which entails projecting the core values that a country espouses (Rozman, 2019). Both these great countries exert their power to spread their values and influence in favor of their respective power dynamics. As these blocs of values clash, disseminating the Republic of Korea's (hereafter South Korea) exclusive values can be challenging. Even under such pressure, however, it is possible to pursue the non-ideological values that underlie universal norms and collective interests amid few objections from other powers (Kim, 2012). Nevertheless, these rapidly changing power dynamics are a struggle for South Korea to balance, highlighting the necessity of examining its PD efforts and directions from a different angle for effective and coherent communication with domestic public and foreign audiences. Such an approach would provide a platform in which to develop mutually beneficial long-term goals in this challenging society.

In consideration of the abovementioned issues, we conducted a process evaluation of former President Moon Jae-in's Peace Initiative, which established the development of a "peaceful and prosperous Korean Peninsula" as the country's core national interest and agenda (Ministry of Unification [MOU], n.d.). We examined the former president's national agenda-setting and framing tactics, through which his predecessor President Park Geun-hye's direction of unification was transitioned into an orientation of peace in addressing intense inter-Korean relations. Unification was defined in this research as a value exclusive to Korea as opposed to peace, which is a universal norm.

Unification was a national goal traditionally pursued by conservative governments, but Moon's top priority agenda with respect to the internal and external communication of South Korea's PD strategy revolved around improving inter-Korean relations and the national identity closely linked to North Korea-related issues (Ryu & Cho, 2023). These issues, mainly the North Korean nuclear threat and the military tension stemming from the fact that the Korean War never ended, contributed almost 30% to negative impressions of South Korea's national image in 2019 (Korean Culture and Information Service [KOCIS], 2020). The annual national image assessments conducted since that year also indicated that resolving the tension between the North and the South is essential to enhancing the latter's brand image. These matters constituted another significant background for this study, as improving inter-Korean relations and alleviating North Korean-related concerns would contribute to the positive image of South Korea and, ultimately, its national interests.

This study also explored the motivation behind the design and introduction of the peace-based

¹ Public diplomacy is defined as the "communication of an international actor's policies to citizens of foreign countries" (Pamment, 2013, p. 1).

frame. We analyzed how the then recently instituted progressive government invested in agenda-setting efforts differently than the conservative administrations preceding it and how these efforts were delivered to audiences. We employed a revised version of the input–output–outcome pyramid model of public relations (PR) research to assess foreign policy implementation in the chosen context and in connection to the issues in question.

This research is expected to contribute to the field in two ways. First, assessing policy implementation is significant because it may reveal lessons learned from past initiatives. The traditional approach focuses only on the effects of diplomacy, often ending in all-or-nothing outcomes. Second, while there is a vibrant discussion of agenda setting and framing in domestic politics, more research on such efforts in PD domains has recently arisen (Kang, 2021; Xu, 2020) with the growing importance of PD. The current evaluation of the Peace Initiative demonstrates a distinctive exemplary application of PR and communication theories to international politics.

Understanding the Roles of Agenda Setting and Framing

Constructivists argue that national interest is shaped through foreign policy goals and strategies established on the basis of a self-defining identity (Wendt, 1999) and that social factors, such as ideas, knowledge, norms, and rules, affect the identities and preferences of states as well as the dynamics of world politics (Jung, 2019). Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) contended that acknowledging how social views change and how this can make a difference in world politics is essential. These theorists focused on how these nonmaterial determinants influence behaviors in international relations. Thus, the manner by which a mindset constructed by symbols, ideas, imperatives, and beliefs nurtures people’s understanding of society is crucial for social perception (Barnett, 2020). The beliefs held by individuals and causal beliefs, known as cognitive ideas, convert normative principles into strategies for achieving policy goals (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993). The ideas and norms established through a set of lenses originating from the agenda-setting and framing processes are vital for assessing the Moon government’s pursuit of the Peace Initiative.

Agenda setting theory was introduced to explain how the media attempt to influence and emphasize certain issues (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). The media can sway public opinion by selectively choosing what goes into headlines, driving what the public attends to and shaping viewers’ thoughts and perspectives (Dearing & Rogers, 1988). The theory originally involves the media’s role and function in influencing public perspectives, but it was directed in this work toward illuminating the South Korean government’s adoption of an agenda-setting approach via framing techniques in its PD efforts. This relates to how framing is considered the second level of agenda setting—a horizon extended by framing theory through the incorporation of attribute salience into the first level of agenda setting, which concentrates on issue salience (McCombs et al., 1997). Framing strategies can be imported onto the media coverage of a social event because the manner by which the media packages an issue can dictate what people see and, consequently, what they think (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). If the first level of agenda setting motivates what audiences think

about, then the second level, achieved through framing, drives how they think about an issue (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010).

Humans are inherently cognitive misers (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) who perform as less thinking as possible, and agenda-setting and framing guide people toward a certain pathway to processing data. Entman explained this framing process as involving “selection and salience” (1993, p. 52). Framing shapes the thought processes of individuals because they depend on existing mental structures to interpret incoming messages. It is also, therefore, critical to the delivery of target messages. In the context of the news industry, the media influence a receiver’s opinions by selectively capturing particular aspects of an issue (Entman, 2004). For this purpose, these outlets deploy strategic frames, some representative examples of which are the slogans “war on terror,” “axis of evil,” and “love is love” (Ryu & Cho, 2023).

The agenda-setting and framing theories and concepts discussed above were applied to the assessment of the Peace Initiative as South Korea’s tool for norm diplomacy to shed light on the following questions: Why did the Moon administration prioritize peace in its foreign policy agenda? What are the policy’s achievements and limitations determined using a pyramid model?

South Korea’s Norm Diplomacy¹ Framed as a Collective Goal

The geopolitics of the Cold War largely contributed to shaping the polarized domestic geopolitics unique to South Korea (Kim, 2019). Two polarized approaches to North Korean policies have been adopted by South Korean leaders since 2000. Progressive presidents, such as Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, focused on reconciliation and peaceful coexistence between North and South Korea (Lim, 2010). Conversely, conservative leaders, such as Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, pursued a hard-line stance toward the North, with a clear unification goal at the center of foreign policy (Lim, 2010; Foster-Carter, 2014).

Inheriting the beliefs of the liberal administrations of Kim and Roh, former President Moon wielded peace as the spine of his administration’s diplomacy. The essence of the Peace Initiative lay in the opposition of all military options (whether preemptive or preventive) to preserve peace, the call for peaceful coexistence with North Korea, and the relinquishment of a regime change in the North—measures that were understood as means of avoiding undermining mutual trust and exacerbating North Korean hostility (Moon, 2019). This initiative solidified Moon’s policy to establish South Korea-driven peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and the surrounding region of Northeast Asia. This drive was motivated by the desire to expand the agenda’s scope to

¹ In diplomacy, norms and values are often used as equivalent concepts. In this study, however, we considered norms as universal standards, while values represent different national interests and identities. Peace was regarded as a normative goal with universal value. In contrast, unification can be seen as a value that serves only the interests of South Korea (and North Korea under different terms and conditions). As the peace agenda is a universal norm with a specific policy aim in the national interest of South Korea, the terms used in the paper are interchanged.

Northeast Asia and the global community (Ryu & Cho, 2023).

Against this background, we can understand why the shift in framework from unification to peace was meaningful. It was aimed primarily at recognizing the North Korean regime and respecting its system. It intended to deliver a message that South Korea had no intention to compel unification by force. Whereas the conventional idea of unification meant a complete integration of the two Koreas, the peace-based approach recognized these systems' coexistence, thereby guaranteeing the receptiveness of North Korea to dialogues on international platforms. The initiative was also designed to broaden the South's geopolitical space beyond the Korean Peninsula. Correspondingly, the framing of peace on the Korean Peninsula suggested a norm and value that regional actors are positively involved in collective actions. Cooperation with these regional players is essential to realizing the aforementioned peace, which could be encouraged and promoted when the prospect of peace is at stake. Unification is likely to be considered a frame only between North and South Korea; it is irrelevant to other nations and would thus less possibly gain support from other actors.

For example, China and Japan have national and international interests at stake in opposing Korean unification. China's official position on the Korean Peninsula supports unification (Glaser & Sun, 2015), and its East Asia Strategy suggested the Korean Peninsula Peace Regime, which is also based on the premise that both Koreas should coexist (Zheng & Gao, 2015). Nevertheless, the country upholds a status-quo, two-Korea policy in the region that protects Chinese national interests (Glaser & Sun, 2015). The status quo is similarly preferred by Japan, as changes in the Korean Peninsula, whether involving the establishment of two semi-united Koreas or a fully unified Korea, would create a new regional setting for Japan to adjust to (Driver, 2019). New power dynamics would change and likely weaken Japan's influence and status in this region, thus driving its preference for two coexisting but weak Koreas over one stronger Korea (Ryu & Cho, 2023). In pursuit of assistance from neighboring countries, the peace frame was logical for Moon—lukewarm support or indifference was preferred over a vital objection.

Analytical Framework and Data

The traditional assessment of diplomacy concentrates on the impact of actions and disregards the process of diplomatic efforts or engagement. It is incompatible with inter-Korean relations, which require a long-term negotiation process. With respect to Moon's Peace Initiative, its evaluation necessitates the use of a process model, which can uncover valuable lessons for effective future planning and action. Accordingly, this study employed the pyramid model of program assessment, that is, the input–output–outcome model introduced by the Public Diplomacy Center (PDC) (2016). This model was also outlined by the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy in its 2018 special report. It was initially developed by Macnamara (1999) to measure the effectiveness of PR programs, and it was adapted by the PDC (2016) for application to PD activities.

The pyramid model was initially designed to assess the input, output, and outcomes of PR

programs, but our study revolved around a macro phenomenon—the process of PD policy implementation—rather than programs executed at the micro level. Another challenge was that we needed a public opinion poll to have been carried out before 2017 to confirm the outcomes of Moon’s Peace Initiative. Therefore, we revised the model into a representation of input, output, and results to examine the trend of changes instead of outcomes, which are concerned with the causes and effects of a given program. Figure 1 depicts the analytical framework used in this study.

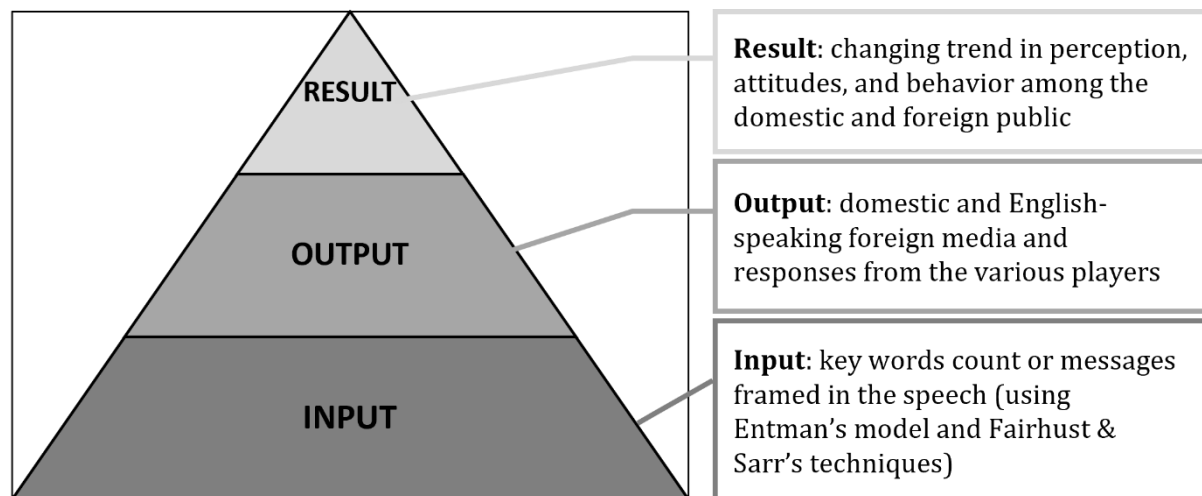


Figure 1. Revised pyramid model of PD assessment (adapted from the PDC, 2016)

In our model, input refers to the critical messages formulated for a host’s planning goals and objectives, output pertains to the review of performance results through media reports and immediate responses from parties involved, and result reflects the trend of changes in perceptions and attitudes among the public and major players concerned. Impact analysis assesses the ultimate goals that are traditionally accorded focus, but an impact is often a delayed effect, and it should lend itself to measurement immediately after communication. On these bases, the current framework seemed more appropriate for understanding the policy initiative process and examining the strengths and weaknesses of PD policy.

South Korean presidents traditionally introduce their North Korean policy in Germany early after inauguration. Representative speeches from presidents were subjected to input analysis as primary data. Moon’s speeches, including the one delivered at the Körber Foundation in Berlin (“The New Berlin Initiative”) in July 2017, and Park’s speech at the University of Dresden in March 2014 (“The Dresden Initiative”) were compared in terms of messages and intentions delivered.

Relevant media reports and commentaries on the speeches and events were examined as output. The reports issued after President Park’s and Moon’s addresses in Berlin were quantitatively compared, whereas the commentaries of domestic media on South and North Korea and those of foreign (mainly English-speaking Europe and the US) media were qualitatively explored to identify the positive or negative tones underlying the reports and their significant content. News reports and commentaries were searched through PressReader, a media database of over 7,000

digital versions of newspapers and magazines published in over 60 languages, accessed through the online library of Ewha Womans University. Given the small number of articles, a further search was conducted using Google. The keywords used were “Moon Jae-in,” “Park Geun-hye,” “Dresden,” “Berlin,” “PyeongChang,” “peace,” “unification,” “South Korea,” “North Korea,” “US,” “China,” and “Japan.” To look into immediate outputs, the search was initiated by covering the three months after each speech was delivered, and then coverage was expanded to two years, mainly for Moon given that events resulting from his peace approach followed. The data set, collected throughout 2014 and 2017 to 2019, comprised English-language newspapers and magazines published in Europe and the US. The search yielded 36 media reports, and the exclusion of factual news left us with 15 media articles or commentaries with a specific tone of voice for comparison. Out of the 15 pieces, five commented on President Park’s speech, whereas 10 remarked on President Moon’s speech and the actions that ensued. Two researchers in our team separately coded the tone of voice perceived from the 15 media articles and found convergence after assessing such attribute on 13 stories. Divergence occurred only on two articles, generating a consistency of .87, which indicated a high reliability of the assessment of the media commentaries.

To identify the results of the initiative, we referred to the trend of changes in perceptions and attitudes among the public by tracing such changes over time after the policy initiative was presented. Relevant results of public opinion polls on inter-Korean relations and perceptions toward North Korea were assessed along with South Korea’s national brand image assessment reports that captured global perceptual changes with respect to Korea-related issues.

Google Trends was used to ascertain the changes in online public interest in inter-Korean relations, Moon Jae-in, and Park Geun-hye. This open platform is designed to capture the topics that people follow and illustrate general interest in an issue. Results are based on Google’s Knowledge Graph technology, which gathers information from Google Search, Google News, or YouTube to detect trending stories based on relative spikes in volume and the absolute volume of searches (Google Trends, n.d.). It provides data visualizations for interest over time and by subregion. Additionally, a Google news search with the keywords “Moon Jae-in,” “Kim Jung Un,” “Trump,” and “Summit” was conducted from 2017 to 2023 to disentangle the effects of the summit and COVID-19 on South Korea’s national image.

Results

Input Analysis for the Peace Initiative

Moon (2017) saw that different actors had dissimilar interests and interpretations around the halted dialogues between the North and South and exhibited his will to resume the peace talks. We compared Moon’s speeches with those of his predecessor, Park, who addressed Dresden in March 2014, for input analysis to determine how differently he approached the peace talks. Park’s speech, the “Initiative for a Peaceful Unification on the Korean Peninsula,” introduced her administration’s policy directions with respect to North Korea and referred to unification 34 times in contrast to a

mere 16 mentions of peace. Park focused on ending the division that has continued after the liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945 and unifying the countries into one Korea. She iterated how Dresden, formerly an East German city, achieved success once a unified Germany climbed the ranks to take the leadership position in Europe. Park applied this success story to the Korean Peninsula, calling for a new era wherein one Korea exists under a single system. She also invested significant time in discussing North Korea's devastating human rights conditions, such as starving children and poor economies—a well-known “ego-touching” issue (BBC, 2022).

When Moon delivered his “Berlin Initiative” speech in July 2017 after he went into office following Park's impeachment, the word “peace” was used 49 times, whereas unification was mentioned only 17 times. Even when Moon voiced the idea of unification, it was not a message directed to North Korea. He carefully positioned Germany and the two Koreas on the same spectrum with regard to future-oriented, peaceful, and collaborative steps. He reiterated stable peace and mutual prosperity on the Korean Peninsula. Moon held a firm position on the nuclear issue, but only in the interest of peace and not as a means of demolishing the North Korean regime. The speech was carefully tailored, calling for mutually beneficial coexistence and trust-building between North and South Korea. Although living conditions in North Korea were not overlooked, the focus was on how natural disasters, such as floods, diseases, and fire, affect both Koreas, thereby projecting them as occupying the same horizon. Moon wrapped up the speech by noting how the world has to deal with new challenges to securing peace. He asserted that Germany and the two Koreas, in “marching toward peace,” have similar agendas for peace and coexistence in their respective regions.

It is important to note that Moon reiterated his message in the events that followed. The peace metaphor was repeated when North Korea joined the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February 2018 in response to the suggestion offered by Moon in Berlin. Peace was mentioned 14 times in his congratulatory remarks to the 132nd IOC General Meeting Opening, welcoming a new future and North Korea to the “peace Olympics.” At the pre-opening reception, the word was uttered 11 times. In these remarks, unification was never mentioned to the global audience at the international sporting event.

Output Analysis for the Peace Initiative

Immediate reports following the “New Berlin Initiative” gave rise to many questions in Korean media. The idea of terminating the war and pursuing a peace treaty encouraged the domestic media to call Moon “a dreamer” of unreachable goals. The right-wing press focused on and criticized how the government recognized the North Korean regime. Even though Moon's gesture of embracement was apparent in his cautiously chosen words and call for mutually beneficial coexistence, skeptical media reporting continued throughout 2017, as no advancement was achieved in the succeeding months.

Whereas domestic media maintained a consistently somber tone, a more positive commentary was

published in 38 North. Frank (2017) noted that the interests of external forces could affect the future of Korea and that “while Korea . . . dream about active support from Washington and Beijing, a more modest goal would be to at least avoid their opposition. This . . . was one of the key goals of the speech.” This was a representative read-out of Moon’s intention, which was well picked up (Ryu & Cho, 2023).

The significance of Moon’s speech can be more clearly discerned when it is compared with Park’s subsequent media coverage. Park’s retention of the conventional unification idea while conveying pity for starving North Korean children chafed North Korean pride. Korean domestic media reporting followed the opposition party’s criticism of Park’s lack of specific solutions to the unification problem, with commentators claiming that nothing had changed. Contrary to how he wrote about Moon’s speech, Frank (2014) expressed disapproval of Park. She recognized the success of West Germany but dismissed East Germany, driving the author to regard Park’s dismissal of East Germany’s value as a metaphor for disregarding North Korea.

A German English-language outlet, Bild, delivered the message of German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel that “Kim [Jong Un] is not crazy,” calling Kim a dictator with a prudently developed strategy and noting how North Korea could be a “normal state.” After the two leaders of South and North Korea met at Panmunjom in April 2018 and in Pyongyang in September 2019, Bild continued to mark succeeding historical events in its reporting. Through an interview with the former head of planning of the Chancellery and Korea expert Wolfgang Nowak, Bild called the Panmunjom summit a “historical” event designed to herald a “new era of peace.” Nowak asserted the following: “What we saw at the inner-Korean border was a significant event, symbolically and about its content.” The story recognized that “Moon and Kim have taken the first and big step closer towards peace.” Nowak also commented that even though reunification is not an easy issue that can only be “conceivable at the end of a very long process . . . , the border can be more permeable,” so “there can be meetings between the people from the North and South again.” This was a continuation of the positive interpretation of the developments between North and South Korea. In another story featuring the Pyongyang summit, a German commentator, Bernhard Bartsch, said, “South Korea’s president is obviously pursuing a policy of change through cooperation,” recognizing a different effort coming from Moon that resulted in “more concrete and realistic agreements with South Korea,” as opposed to what transpired during President Trump’s visit to Singapore.

Other outlets, such as The Washington Post and VOA, optimistically interpreted the Panmunjom summit because of months of negotiations in which Moon played a significant role in persuading North Korea to engage in talks, thus “giving diplomacy a chance.” The Washington Post especially acknowledged how the images at Panmunjom would “accompany history book sections” as an unprecedented result of the historic event marking the initial encounter between the leaders of North and South Korea since the Korean War as Politico put it. Reuters, a wire service focusing on the delivery of facts, noted that Moon “tried to communicate between North Korea and the U.S.,” recognizing the former president’s critical role in pursuing dialogue and peace. The optimistic tone in the media reporting on Moon was distinctive and ensued from his efforts to reframe inter-Korean relations under the banner of peace.

An interesting occurrence during the research was that it took considerable work to find English reporting on Park's speech in Dresden or her message to North Korea. The lack of media reporting suggests how she failed to draw attention, as newsworthiness is based on the values that news offers to audiences (Bell, 1991). A number of media reports partially related to Park's North Korea policy were published by Deutsche Welle's (DW) Tokyo correspondent. In an article in January 2014, two months before Park's speech delivery in Dresden, Julian Ryall highlighted the visit by Dennis Rodman to North Korea as follows: "None of [Rodman, Kim, and Park] seems destined to achieve that aim [of achieving a breakthrough in diplomatic relations]." Ryall also exhibited skepticism toward Park's reunification, describing it as "cripplingly expensive and disruptive to the national economy." These concerns over cost were repeated by the author in another commentary later that month on Park calling a unified Korea a "jackpot." Even with the scarcity of such media reporting, it showed only negative interpretations of Park's "One Korea."

North Korea reacted to Moon and Park with subtle and nuanced differences. With such unchanged ideas and thoughts receiving criticism in and out of South Korea, North Korea also provided Park quick feedback. It took only three days after the speech in Dresden for the North Korean state media outlet, the *Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)* (2014), to publish scathing and blusteringly raw criticism, calling her actions a "vulgar diplomacy" (Shin, 2017). *The Rodong Sinmun*, the state newspaper, slammed Park's suggestions as "[harming] North Korea's philosophy and system" (Shin, 2017). She also fell victim to their sexist name-calling, with the former president called a "babbling peasant woman" (Ryu & Cho, 2023; Rauhala, 2014).

In contrast, North Korea responded to Moon after nine days, which the South Korean authority saw as "not a bad sign" (Kim, 2017). Even though *The Rodong Sinmun* rehashed criticism from 2014, calling Moon's ideas "twaddle" (Shin, 2017), there was also an aspect that can be interpreted as positive feedback. Specifically, North Korea recognized the New Berlin Doctrine and pledged respect for the 6.15 and 10.4 declarations—a positive gesture distinct from those in response to Park. Notably, this op-ed was published under an individual's name, not a high-level official or authority figure, reflecting North Korea's delicately tailored messaging to balance the intensity of expression, leaving room for possible further discussion later. A titleless individual's opinion could have been remedied later by higher government officials, implying a lighter weight than those accompanying comments by the North Korean leader. At the 2018 Panmunjom summit, the BBC reported that the *KCNA* "hailed the talks and the leaders' commitment to seek complete denuclearization"—a significant change in North Korean narratives.

The preeminent players witnessed more promising outputs in 2018 through changed attitudes and behaviors. A positive image of the possible peace on the Korean Peninsula was conveyed by Kim Yo Jong, Kim Jong Un's sister, who attended the opening ceremony of the PyeongChang Winter Olympics and the national teams of the two Koreas entering together under the peninsula flag. This development communicated a strong impression of a peaceful resolution of acute issues on the Korean Peninsula. The worldwide sports event displayed peace as the representative normative value (Kim, 2020). Such PD efforts are significant in the age of social media, where images and messages are constantly circulated (Otmazgin, 2021).

Other positive outputs transpired from Moon's call for a peaceful resolution of problems linked to inter-Korean relations and a recognition of North Korea as a normal state. Moon and Kim hosted two inter-Korean summits at Panmunjom in April and May 2018 and one in Pyongyang in September 2018. President Trump and Chairman Kim also participated in three summits: those in Singapore in June 2018, Hanoi in February 2019, and Panmunjom in June 2019. Moon and Kim declared the following in April 2018: "There will no longer be a war on the Korean Peninsula, and a new age of peace has opened" (MOFA, n.d.; Wróbel 2018). They both crossed the armistice line back and forth, becoming the first North and South Korean leaders to ever do so since the Korean War. Peace seemed near, and expectations of ending the protracted Korean War arose. Wada (2018, pp. 223–224) observed that the Singapore summit "stopped the fear of war between the U.S. and DPRK and opened a new page of dialogue and negotiation in Northeast Asia." It was described by Moon (2021) as a development that "appeared to be the triumph for the Korean Peace Initiative."

Result Analysis for the Peace Initiative

The leaders were not the only entities displaying softened attitudes during this period. The media's framing was positively influenced by the Moon administration's framing narrative, and modified responses from various players led to changes in public perception. KOCIS' Brand Image Assessment Reports¹ depicted favorable changes. The 2019 (2020) and 2020 (2021) reports showed a continuous increase in complimentary perceptions of South Korea. We found a 0.2% rise from 2018 to 2019 and another increase to 2.7% in 2020. Although Hallyu was inevitably the main catalyst for this increase, Moon was also ranked as the top figure in Korea, surpassing even BTS, denoting his more considerable contribution to Korea's image than that of its cultural assets. This also reflects the foreign public's recognition of Moon's significant contribution to the international community, as evidenced by the KOCIS brand image assessment results (2021), with 66.6% of foreigners confirming a positive change in South Korea's national image. The more apparent shift was documented in the 2020 report (2021) and the 2021 results (2022) relative to the 2019 record (2020). The negative brand image of South Korea no longer stemmed primarily from North Korea-related matters but from its (domestic) political situation, public characters, and international status. The North Korean factor was steadily decreasing in pertinence among the other elements. To sum up, the KOCIS reports indicated a trend of change in global perceptions toward North Korea-related matters.

¹ National image management by states began approximately 20 years ago, and efforts have recently been made to improve national images through activities such as diagnosing problems in each country's image and strengthening competitiveness. A KOCIS Brand Image Assessment survey was conducted in major countries around the world to understand global perceptions of Korea, observe perception changes, and use these as ground data for establishing PD strategies for improving South Korea's national image.

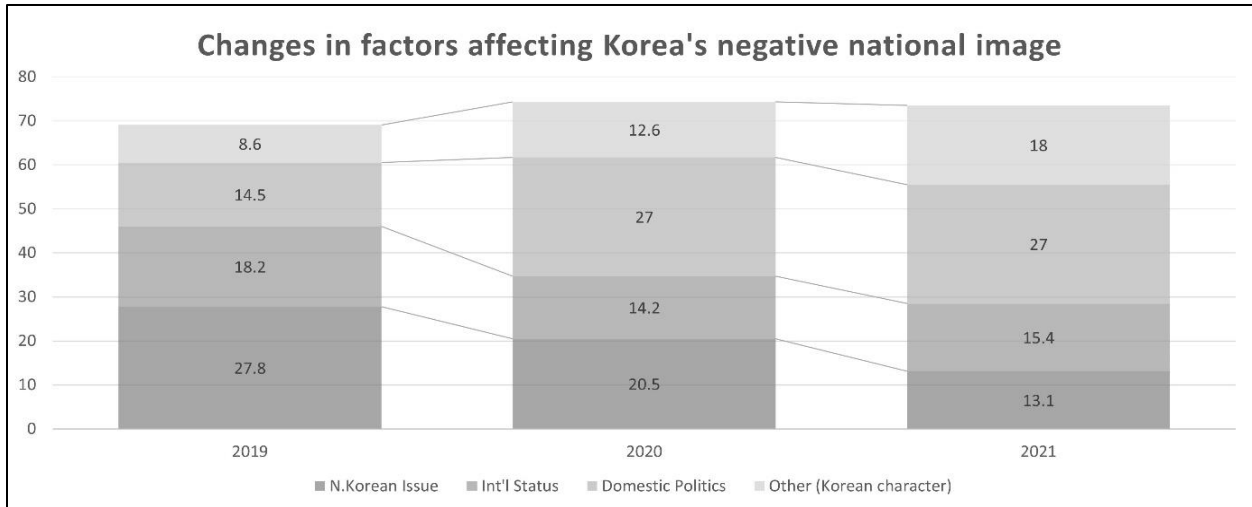
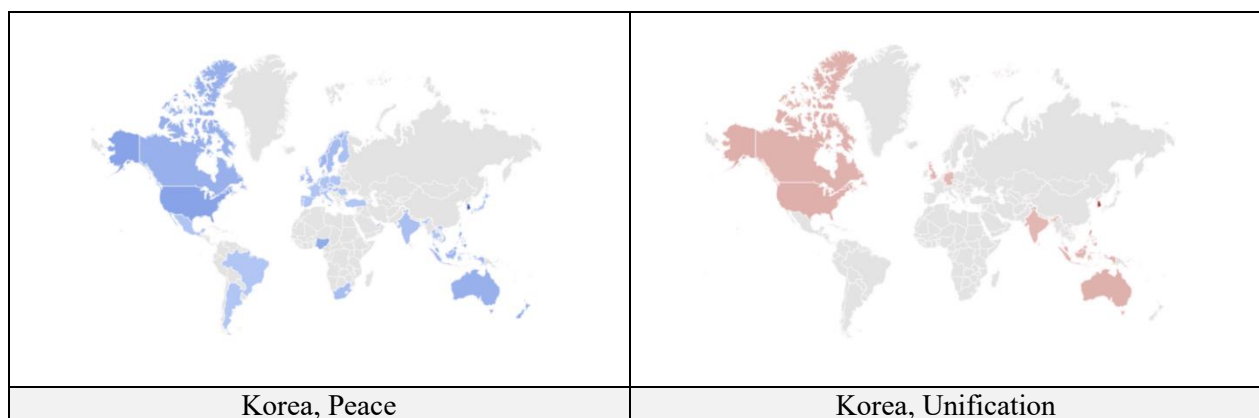


Figure 2. Factors affecting Korea’s negative national image (source: KOCIS reports 2019–2021)

According to Google Trends, which is used to analyze the popularity of top results in Google Search across the globe, there was a broader interest in “Korea, peace” and “Moon Jae-in” than in “Korea, unification” and “Park Geun-hye.” Figure 3 displays how much each search option received global interest on the Google platform. The term “peace” elicited more interest in the broader international community than the word “unification.” There was a distinctive elevation of interest coming from all permanently inhabited continents. For example, interest in peace was observed in Japan, New Zealand, Thailand, and Vietnam but none in unification. In Europe, the UK and Germany were the only two countries signifying interest in unification, but France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Czechia, and Türkiye were added to the list of those interested in peace. A similar pattern characterized the search words “Moon Jae-in” and “Park Geun-hye,” denoting how far the issue reached different parts of the globe, stimulating the public to actively search for information on this matter. This result is meaningful as it demonstrates that the approach to peace and the driving leader, Moon, successfully attracted more public interest than the unification frame on the globally dominating, English language-based internet environment.



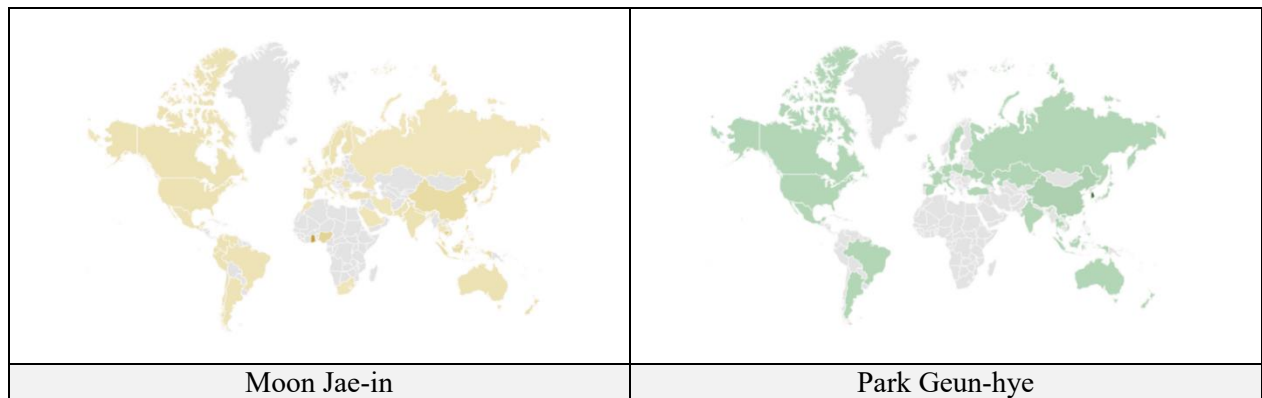


Figure 3. Google Trends analysis of interest by region (2014–present)

The general tendency of global interest delineated by year also reflected a distinctive emphasis on peace discussions. Figure 4 illustrates the intense international interest that Moon received during the peace talks. Compared with the unification idea, the peace-based approach drew more attention from the world, especially around April 2018, when the Panmunjom summit took place. By contrast, Park received the most attention around her impeachment, specifically for the candlelight rally in November 2016 and the impeachment ruling in March 2017.

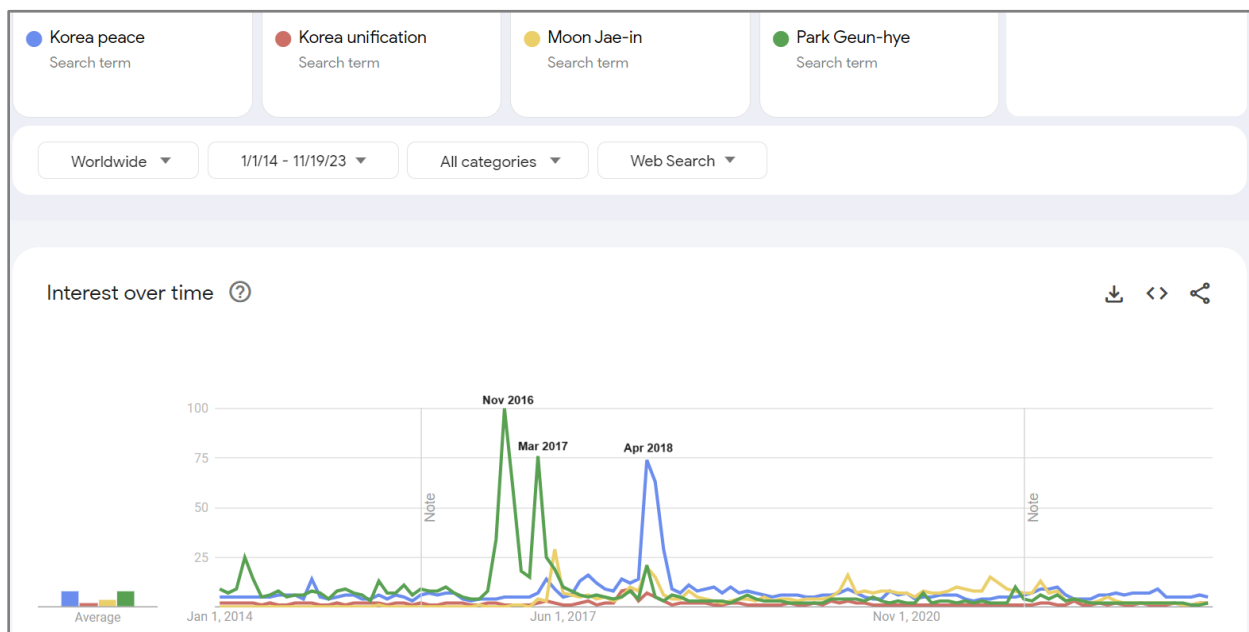


Figure 4. Google Trends analysis of Korea's peace and unification (2014–Present)

Korean domestic opinion also showed a promising change. MBC (2018) conducted a public survey which showed that nearly 80% of Koreans praised Moon's North Korean policies. This echoed the people's positive expectations and hopes, with clear visuals of the North and South Korean leaders

standing hand in hand, disseminating positive images even before the Panmunjom Declaration in April that year. A Gallup (2018) poll in May indicated 88% of the population being in favor of the declaration. These meetings were considered meaningful trust-building steps toward two improved Koreas.

In the US, a survey administered by the Pew Research Center showed differences in public opinion compared with the results of polls carried out from April 2017 to May 2018. In April 2017, three months before Moon's Berlin speech, Americans uniformly held a negative view of North Korea amid nuclear tensions (Poushter, 2017). According to this report, 78% of Americans had an unfavorable idea of North Korea as ruled by Kim. However, a report released by the Pew Research Center (2018) in May 2018 indicated that 71% of Americans approved of the US negotiating directly with North Korea. Considering the unfavorable portrayal of the North in the US media in 2016, which fostered certain attitudes among North Korean watchers (Curran & Gibson, 2020), the aforementioned percentages point to a significant change in public perceptions. This can be interpreted as translating to improved impressions of North Korea in the US, stemming from efforts to frame the North as a normal state to the world through the repeated meetings between the two Koreas and the US moderated by Moon.

Some may argue that South Korea's response to the COVID-19 pandemic could have generated a positive increase in its national brand and image, as during this period, the Peace Initiative was still unfolding. Lee and Kim (2021) stated that South Korea's PD during the pandemic, including its mask policy, substantially improved the country's global image. We do not deny that a compounding effect may have been engendered by the South Korean government's successful management of COVID-19 and the Peace Initiative since the current analysis and the data did not allow for separating effects or controlling for the impact of other variables.

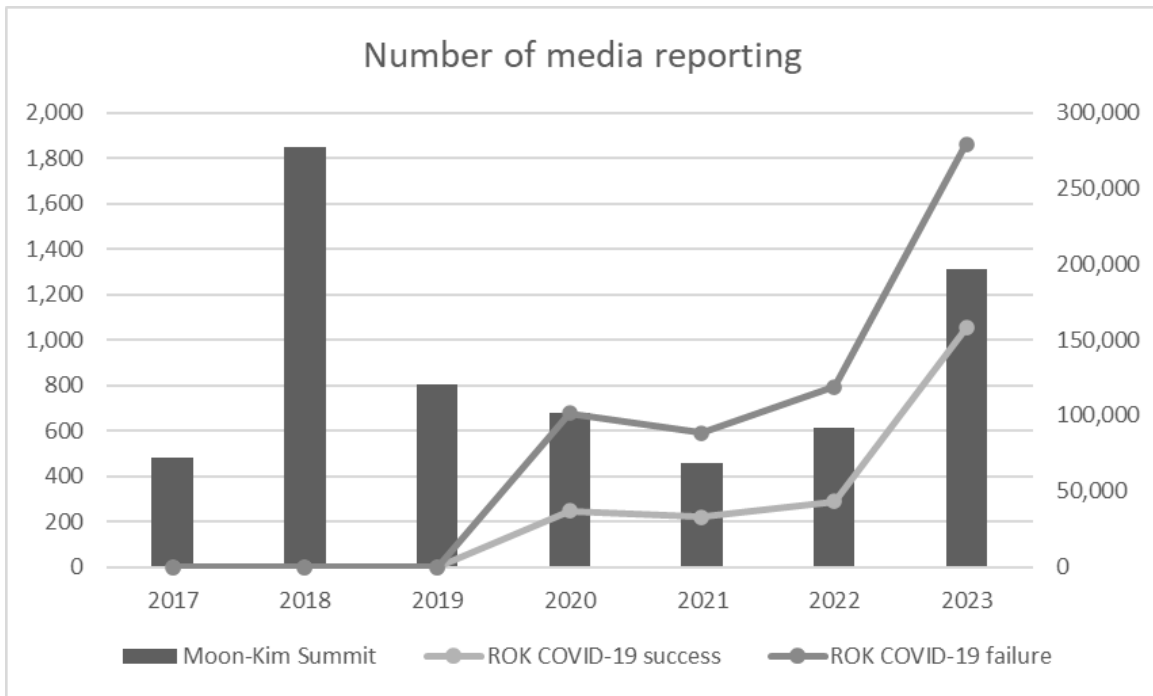


Figure 5. Google News search results on Moon–Kim summit and ROK COVID-19 coverage

Figure 5 displays a Google News search result on the summits and COVID-19 from January 2017 to September 2023. The figures for the summit are incommensurable to those for COVID-19, but the South Korean government was praised by the world as a success case while also criticized for privacy intrusion and other reasons. Again, we acknowledge that South Korea’s image dramatically improved during the Moon administration owing to both the Peace Initiative (early term) and its pandemic policy (later term).

Conclusion

Using agenda setting theory and framing, this study examined why and how the peace frame was packaged and introduced by the Moon administration. It adopted a revised version of the pyramid model to break down the process and cast light on delivery to audiences as part of South Korea’s PD efforts at the international level. We discovered meaningful achievements that contrast with those derived via the traditional approach that centers on the impact of diplomacy.

The Peace Initiative exuded a glow, however faint it was, but it did not linger. The Hanoi Summit, from which the participants came back empty-handed, was a turn of events that upended the situation because of the failure of Trump and Kim to reach an agreement. North Korea took extremely hostile action, bombing the joint liaison office building in Kaesong after ceasing all communication with South Korea in June 2020. President Biden has sent a diplomatic gesture meant to convey respect for the Panmunjom Declaration and the Singapore Statement that his

predecessor signed to bring North Korea back to the table. However, no remarkable developments have emerged. The Korean Institute of National Unification analyzed North Korea's missile activities in 2022, which were the most active since 1984 (BBC, 2022).

After the explosion of the Kaesong Joint Liaison Office, the deteriorating relations immediately brought a noticeable change in domestic opinion in South Korea. Support for Moon's policy on North Korea diminished by 12% in June, according to a YTN-commissioned Realmeter poll (2020b). Considering that the Korean public still supported the peace process since the summit meetings in 2018 and 2019 (2020a), this reduction was an apparent change. However, until he left office in May 2022, Moon continued repeating the peace rhetoric. The South Korean government carefully addressed the diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics to balance geopolitical power and respect the universal value of peace embedded in the Olympics. This measure may have been a response to China's positive comments about an end-of-war declaration at the heart of the Peace Initiative. Chinese Ambassador to South Korea Xing Haiming said in November 2021 (Shi, 2021) that China keeps an "open attitude" concerning the South Korean president's push for a declaration, voicing Beijing's support. In December 2021, top Chinese diplomat Yang Jiechi expressed support for a declaration to end the war that would "contribute to the promotion of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula" in possible efforts to "woo Seoul" to participate in the Beijing Winter Olympics (Onchi, 2021).

By setting the Peace Initiative as a top national priority, Moon realized achievements in reconstructing North-South issues into matters of peace. Domestic and foreign audiences saw a potential change in the Korean Peninsula, with North Korea viewed as capable of acting as a normal state. Creating the space for dialogue, shaking hands, and disseminating unprecedented visuals to the world were achievements of the framing efforts. Agenda setting for the universal value and norm of peace invited other regional players to be more actively interested in inter-Korean relations, thus making it a strategically logical choice for South Korea in the longer term. After all, who can vocally oppose the creation of peace?

Nevertheless, with the change in government to a conservative administration under President Yoon Suk Yeol, the Peace Initiative was naturally halted, and it is now difficult to definitively rule on whether the framing efforts have changed long-term public perceptions. In the pursuit of inter-Korean relations, an essential task is to recognize what has been done right and reflect on lessons learned rather than starting or repeating the process from the ground up. It is too early to determine the outcome and impact of the initiative because of the short time frame and the change of government. We also uncovered that framing efforts under a PD approach can reach a deadlock when a geopolitical agenda surpasses the pursuit of universal value in importance.

This study has limitations in that only legacy media was considered, with social media excluded and accordingly missing a direct link between output and outcome. While the traditional media coverage examined in this work reflected the effects of South Korea's PD, it could also provoke questions about potential bias in the restriction of sampling to English articles. Finally, the analytic methods used in this work could not separate compounding effects, thus leaving ongoing opportunities to determine the ultimate policy impact of the Peace Initiative. Future research

should quantitatively analyze coverage via social media, through which the public obtains information that informs their perceptions, especially given that the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a push for broader global public access to information through online platforms (KOCIS, 2021–2022). There is also a path for studies that inquire into the issues on the basis of articles published in other languages, considering that other nations may perceive North Korea differently.

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Appendix

Summary of Coding of Media Articles

Media outlet (date)	Type of article	Commentator/rep orter	Tone of voice		Main issue
			Coder 1	Coder 2	
<i>38North</i> (3 Apr 2014)	Commentary on Park	Ruediger Frank	N	N	Insensitive to location Wrong message to KJU
<i>The WSJ</i> (22 Jan 2014)	Commentary on Park	Aidan Foster- Carter	N	N	Talk of “jackpots” seems both out of control and inaccurate
<i>Time</i> (4 Apr 2014)	Report on North Korea’s attack on Park	Markus Schreiber-AP	N	N	North Korea increasing sexist attacks on South Korea’s President Park
<i>DW.com</i> (7 Jan 2014)	Report on basketball exchange by Park and Kim	Julian Ryall	N	N	No one destined to achieve the aim
<i>DW.com</i> (24 Jan 2014)	Commentary on Park’s reunification dream	Julian Ryall	N	N	Brake on reunification
<i>38North</i> (10 Jul 2017)	Commentary on Moon	Ruediger Frank	P	P	Very specific and detailed proposals, sends a different and more positive and cooperative message to North Korea
<i>Bild International</i> (19 Sept 2018)	Report with comments on Moon	Bernhard Bartsch (commentator)	P	P	“It is still a very long way to reunification. But a peace treaty would be a first step.”
<i>Bild International</i> (28 Apr 2018)	Interview with an expert on Moon	Rolf Kleine (MC) Wolfgang Nowak(expert)	P	P	Cautious, but Moon and Kim meeting signals first step
<i>Bild International</i> (18 Sept 2017)	Interview with former FM with comments on KJU	Rolf Kleine (MC) Sigmar Gabriel (FM)	P	P	“KJU is not crazy. He is following a carefully developed strategy.”
<i>Reuters</i> (14 Aug 2017)	Report on Moon’s push for dialogue with the US	Ju-min Park Heekyong Yang	N	Neu	Moon trying to communicate between North Korea and the US
<i>VOA</i> (10 May 2018)	Report on Moon	Brian Padden	P	P	Moon playing a significant role in persuading North

<i>The Atlantic</i> (12 Mar 2018)	Report on Moon	S. Nathan Park	P	P	Korea to engage in talks and give diplomacy a chance
<i>The Washington Post</i> (27 Apr 2018)	Report on Panmunjom meeting	Rick Noack Joyce Lee	P	P	While Trump and KJU took center stage, it was Moon directing the scene.
<i>Politico</i> (27 Apr 2018)	Report on Panmunjom meeting	Aleksandra Wróbel	P	P	Historic moment, the result of months of negotiations, and images expected to accompany history book sections, tangible results- Panmunjom Declaration
<i>BBC</i> (28 Apr 2018)	Report on Panmunjom meeting	BBC	N	P	Historic occasion marking the first time the two leaders have met since the Korean War
					State-run <i>KCNA</i> hailing the talks and the leaders' commitment to seek "complete denuclearization" Skepticism mentioned in the end



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