Improving State Reputation through the UN: The Case of North Korea

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On July 13, 2021, North Korea submitted its Voluntary National Review (VNR) report[1] in which it detailed the nation’s socio-economic situation and documented progress being made on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the submission of the VNR report deserves special attention as a sign of the usually repressive regime’s intent to improve the lives of its people, it is also in line with a broader trend of its increased engagement with the United Nations (UN). North Korea has maintained a relatively positive attitude toward the UN and has cooperated with various rules and processes of the UN, especially under the Kim Jong-un regime.

This is somewhat puzzling, however, as such engagements with the UN are often costly for the regime. Revealing North Korea’s chronic food shortages and lack of medical supplies tends to inhibit the effectiveness of North Korea’s hard-nosed foreign policy. Also, complying with UN rules counters its claims that the sanctions imposed by the UN are based on double standards and unfair. What, then, explains North Korea’s increased engagement with the UN?

A popular explanation is that North Korea cooperates and participates at the UN in order
to receive material assistance. North Korea demonstrates how it is "a good citizen of the international society" by engaging with the UN which, in turn, fosters sympathy for support from the global community. But while these immediate benefits may indeed be relevant, there may also be other motives at play considering that continued participation has not increased international aid to North Korea over the past decade.

We believe that an important supplementary piece of the puzzle is North Korea's need to improve its state reputation. An improved reputation matters for North Korea because it is crucial for achieving its broader foreign policy objectives. A better reputation strengthens North Korea's claims on issues such as nuclear weapons and human rights. This forms the basis of their argument against the "unfairness" of the sanctions mainly led by the US. Relatedly, North Korea may be able to gain political support from like-minded states that sympathize with its position. Cultivating a reputation that achieves these goals is difficult, however, especially considering North Korea's repeated violations of international norms and practices. This requires North Korea to accumulate a track record of participation at the UN, even if it doesn't result in immediate rewards. The legitimacy and authority of the UN lend further credence to the regime's efforts.

In social sciences, reputation is defined as a "belief about a trait or behavioral tendency of an actor based on past actions." In international relations, it is closely related to the credibility of states and their actions. Though it is commonly referred to as a property owned by a certain actor, reputations are an inherently relational concept constructed through the perception of others. In other words, it is formed among others that observe the actions of a particular actor and how they judge such behavior. Some scholars have contended that a state's past actions have little impact on a state's reputation. But it is widely presumed that states, and particularly leaders, "often use the recent behavior of others as important sources of information" when making foreign policy decisions.

The formation of reputations tends to involve a trade-off between short-term costs and long-term benefits. In the realm of deterrence, for example, the short-term costs of risking a war are deemed necessary to credibly deter conflicts in the future. On issues of cooperation, actors are tempted to cheat and defect, particularly due to the international system's lack of enforcement mechanisms. But the need to maintain a positive reputation that contributes to continued future cooperation incentivizes states to fulfill their commitments. Because actors in international relations are uncertain about the intentions of others, the various short-term costs incurred as a result of past actions lend credibility to a state's reputation as a costly signal which others can observe.

North Korea's reputation has been negative, generally considered rogue and abnormal, due to its conflicts with the principles of the UN. Violations of international regimes on non-proliferation and the protection of human rights have made North Korea the subject of numerous UN Resolutions. Since announcing its intent to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has passed 24 resolutions denouncing and punishing North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Meanwhile, North Korea's human rights record has been extensively discussed and documented at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and the United Nations Human Rights

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Council (UNHRC).10

The most efficient way for North Korea to improve its reputation would be to observe global norms by denuclearizing and respecting human rights. But there are severe limits to each of these steps given North Korea’s political system and reality. Continued engagement with the UN offers an alternative path for North Korea to rehabilitate its state reputation while sidestepping these limitations. Here, the actual practice of participating in deliberations and cooperating with others through the UN is more pertinent than the substance of the issue. It is through these processes that North Korea demonstrates how it is a normal country, like other member states, that deserves equal rights and consideration at the UN. Furthermore, it indicates to the rest of the world that North Korea’s diplomacy is not as problematic as its reputation suggests. Such compartmentalization of North Korea’s foreign policy may be crucial since North Korea will likely continue to resort to aggressive and belligerent behavior whenever it deems it necessary for the sake of preserving its national security and interests.

In order to examine how North Korea’s engagement with the UN achieves such goals, it is first necessary to outline the regime’s overall attitude and strategy towards the UN. When describing actions and decisions made by the UN, North Korea often uses the word “theft.” That is, North Korea seeks to frame decisions made by the UN as unjust and wrong, the result of the principles of the UN being wrongfully hijacked by the US and its partners. This strategy effectively relieves the UN from responsibility and enables North Korea to continue engagement. This is important because, as stated above, the legitimacy and authority of the UN provide a unique forum for North Korea to improve its reputation through continued and consistent cooperation.

At the GA meeting in October 2016, for example, the North Korean Ambassador to the UN emphasized how “all issues raised in international relations must be resolved in accordance with the purposes and principles regulated by the UN Charter.”11 The ambassador further stressed that the UN needed to “end the unsavory history of threats to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula precipitated by the theft of the UN,” clearly in reference to America’s role and influence on the issue.12 Similarly, North Korea has declared the UNGA resolution on human rights against North Korea as one “made by the United States by snatching up idiots” which the UN adopted “under the control of the United States.”13

A quick comparison of North Korea’s speeches, letters, and notes verbales addressing the UN during the last ten years of the Kim Jong-il era and the first decade of the Kim Jong-un regime, as seen in Figure 1 below, shows that North Korea has become more vocal and active within the UN. Noteworthy is the increase in statements by North Korea from 2014 to 2018 when the regime was criticized intensely; the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK was released in 2014, while North Korea conducted three nuclear tests in quick succession from 2016 to 2017. This suggests that instead of remaining silent, North Korea has decided to stand up for itself but in a manner that conforms with normal diplomatic

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 The authors counted the number of NK’s Speeches, Letters, and Notes Verbales from 1991 to 2021 by using the search engine of the United Nations Digital Library System.
behavior through the mechanisms granted by the UN.

Meanwhile, North Korea’s participation at the UN has come in various forms. Here, we highlight two mechanisms that are particularly costly to the Kim Jong-un regime. First, North Korea has maintained a considerable track record of complying with the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. North Korea has cooperated on three separate occasions, in 2009, 2014, and 2019, respectively. It has also been surprisingly open to recommendations. After the third iteration in 2019, North Korea expressed its intent to fully accept 132 out of the 262 recommendations suggested in the review. North Korea received praise for its review process from 49 out of 88 countries at the proceedings, according to UN Watch, many of which commended Pyongyang specifically for its persistent participation and cooperation.

North Korea’s commitment to achieve SDGs has received similarly positive attention. North Korea’s progress made on several SDGs had been recognized well before the VNR report was submitted last year. At the 69th Session of the World Health Organization (WHO) Southeast Asia Regional Assembly in 2016, for example, North Korea was categorized as a leading country in the region on the matter of health, and the North Korean Ministry of Health was thus awarded the Regional Office Health Excellence Award. North Korea has also shown great interest in the environment. This is significant as it displays North Korea’s desire to contribute to transnational solutions for the threat of climate change, a gesture that is expected from every responsible state around the world. North Korea has made a deliberate attempt to meet global standards in the areas of environmental management systems and preservation projects.

The repeated and consistent nature of both these examples of cooperation with the UN, outlined above, is especially imperative for North Korea. Much like the process of persuasion, changing an actor’s reputation takes time and effort even under the best of circumstances. North Korea will need an extensive record of participation at the UN to mend its reputation considering how much it has worsened during the Kim Jong-il era. The process will also likely be gradual and in some regards self-reinforcing as the accumulation of cooperative behavior by the Kim Jong-un regime may lead to new opportunities for engagement with the UN.

Whether North Korea’s efforts to improve its reputation have succeeded remain up for debate. There are, however, some indications that it has had some success. North Korea’s cooperation with the UPR and VNR process received praise from numerous other member states. Moreover, continued engagement with this and other UN mechanisms have made it easier for more members of the international community, such as Russia and China, that are inclined to be more sympathetic to North Korea’s position, to publicly endorse North Korea’s stance on key issues.

If North Korea is indeed concerned about improving its reputation, this may offer relevant parties in the region, as well as the international community more broadly, additional sources of leverage to compel change. As state reputations rely on past behavior, North Korea will need to continue to consistently participate at the UN. Making such cooperation more costly by proposing stricter recommendations through the UPR process or by demanding greater access to raw data in subsequent VNR reports, for example, will not only make North Korea’s path to redemption more sincere but achieve actual progress on the ground in the process. North Korea may have managed to persuade some members of the international community that it is changing, but it has a long way to go to convince the rest of the world. Both global peace and stability, as well as the lives of the people of North Korea, will benefit by making this journey to redemption as substantive and arduous as possible.
Hospital Logistics and Supply Chain Management Preparation for Emerging Infectious Disease

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In modern warfare, logistics is understood to be equivalent to operations. Logistics is not the concept of support when an operation plan is prepared. On the contrary, no matter how good the operational plan is, if the logistics is not supported, it means that the operation plan should be revised. On January 28, 2022, Reuters reported, “Russia’s military buildup near Ukraine has expanded to include supplies of blood along with other medical materials.” This might be seen as Russia’s willingness to attack if the final negotiations are not successful since it has actually prepared for the outbreak of war. As such, logistics, like the tip of an iceberg, is an essential element in war and battle. The importance of logistics, which is similarly invisible in wars or battles against emerging infectious disease (EID), is increasing.

There are certain units such as platoon, company, battalion, division and corps to perform the functions of war. Likewise, there are medical systems that respond to emerging infectious disease including health centers, regional hospitals and university hospitals. Additionally, just as there are Armed Forces Medical Command and Medical Research Institutions in the military system, so there are the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Agency and the Research Institute for Public Health and Environment in the private sector combating against Viruses. However, while the military has a military command that supports logistics, the hospital logistics combating against EID are heavily reliant on special contracts with private companies to receive supplies from the private sector. Since all inventory management costs money, it has a logistics form that maintains only minimal operation-level inventory. Although private hospitals (medical research institutions) may vary depending on the size, they are nonetheless operated as a system that receives and operates separately by billing from the general affairs department, purchasing department, medical equipment department, pharmacy department, and facility department.

Private hospital sectors seldom use RO (Requisition Objectives) considering the operating inventory level (OL), safety level (SL), and ordering and shipping time (OST) due to limitations of the budget. Most of the private hospitals Requisition Objectives are in the form of receiving and using only the operating inventory level from time to time. In particular, it is important to have an excellent supply chain that considers characteristics (chemical, biological, radioactivity, temperature sensitivity, etc.) according to the types of major materials used in the hospitals. In addition, these excellent supply chains can have a significant impact on the patient’s life and hospital operation if hospital leadership is not paying attention.

Logistics originated from the military position of "Quartermaster," a function of managing people, weapons, equipment, food in military activities and supplying and transporting them where necessary. In general, logistics is “the detailed organization and implementation of a complex operation and the management of the flow of things between the point...

2) Moonsoo Yoon (translated in Korean by Siyeon Oh), LOGISTICS 4.0, 2019, p.15.
of origin and the point of consumption to meet the requirements of customers or corporations.  

The history of logistics innovation can be divided into mechanization of transportation, automation of loading and unloading, systemization of management and processing, and the industrialization of modern logistics equipment that began in the 20th century as shown in the table below. Logistics is also believed to have evolved from logistics to a process called Supply Chain Management (SCM) since the 21st century.

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<tr>
<td>Mechanization of transportation</td>
<td>Automation of loading and unloading</td>
<td>Systematization of management and processing</td>
<td>Industrialization of logistics equipment</td>
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<td>- High speed and large capacity of land transportation by trains and railroads</td>
<td>- Supply of foodstuffs and commercialization of automatic warehouses</td>
<td>- Introduction and use of logistics management systems such as Warehouse Management System and Transportation Management System</td>
<td>- Distribution of supply chain robots, self-driving trucks and drones and small number of labor</td>
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<td>- Steam and machine ships are distributed to expand maritime transportation</td>
<td>- realization of consistent maritime transportation through commercialization of maritime transportation</td>
<td>- Achievements of standardization in logistics connecting all supply chains</td>
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Recently, goods are delivered from the contracted logistics suppliers that supply goods used in hospitals to the department of use. Ordering and inventory management work is also in the trend of operating an integrated logistics system entrusted and managed by a company specializing in external supply chain management. Hospitals are introducing logistics systems and automatic ordering (supply) systems that reduce inventory for efficient supply chains.

However, these logistic strategies usually seem efficient, but EID may occur every five to six years, leading to a national infectious disease disaster (severe stage), which is the WHO's declaration of Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), or pandemic. For example, basic Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including medical masks, ventilators, rapid diagnostic kits, vaccines and therapeutic drugs should be designated as hospital-specific strategic materials. In addition to the operational level, the requisition objective should secure inventory by calculating the safety level (SL) and the order and shipping time (OST). In particular, major items may need to be identified for the company's production capacity, raw materials, and subsidiary materials and stockpile them if necessary. Of course, since these fields correspond to the hospital's contingency plan, cooperation and communication between the government and local governments are essential.

In the winter of 2020, it was called 'twindemic' due to the overlapping influenza (flu) period in the COVID-19 pandemic situation. At this time, some of the vaccines to be used for free vaccination as part of the national influenza program violated the "cold chain" regulation during the vaccine delivery process, and the national vaccination project was suspended. Cold chain is a system that transports and stores vaccines within the appropriate temperature for each vaccine, starting from the time the vaccine is manufactured, and ending when the vaccine is administered through distribution. The Korean government is promoting a "cold chain central control pilot project" to prevent accidents, such as temperature deviation, through entrusted medical institutions using the Internet of Things (IoT) and artificial intelligence (AI).

The WHO has also discarded a large amount of vaccines every year because the vaccine did not maintain a cold chain. As shown in the Figure below, temperature sensitivity varies by type and

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4) Massashi Onozuka Translated in Korean by Seewon Oh. LOGISTICS 4.0, 2019, p.17.
7) Korea Government Press Release(Joint) (8 Feb 2021), Reference Information - Establishment of the COVID-19 Vaccine Cold Chain Central Control Memorandum of Understanding(MOU)
characteristic of the vaccine. In addition, cholera, hepatitis B vaccine, Human Papillomavirus (HPV), Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV), Influenza, Rotavirus, Tetanus, DT (diphtheria-tetanus), and Td (tetanus and diphtheria toxoids with reduced diphtheria content for adults) should not be frozen. Therefore, specific support (contract, monitoring, and supervision) is needed for medicines that require cold chains such as vaccines. For example, according to the recommendations of the WHO Good Storage and Distribution Practice, it is desirable to specify '2 to 8°C' and '-25 to -15°C' rather than the terms 'Store in a refrigerator', 'Store in a freezer.' Regarding COVID-19 vaccines, for example, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines are required to be maintained at -80°C to -60°C and Moderna are vaccines require to be maintained at -25°C to -15°C. AstraZeneca, Sinovac, Novavax and Janssen vaccines should be stored at 2-8°C.

EID is appearing periodically. We are living in an era where we don’t know when the future disease ‘X’ will come. It is hoped that hospital-centered (a key institution to prepare for EID) logistics or supply chain management, will be implemented. It can also be partially developed in the process of preparing international certification programs such as domestic hospital accreditation and Joint Commission International (JCI).

However, in an era where EID are considered “the new normal”, logistics and supply chain management must be checked throughout hospital management. Recently, in Seoul, infection and transmission of COVID-19 patients is occurring frequently and continuously, especially in the market area. Even in hospitals, places where logistics are distributed and stored, such as these markets, may be the most vulnerable blind spot for the occurrence and transmission of infectious diseases. It is necessary to preemptively and wisely implement strategic stockpiling for major items rather than maintain a zero inventory policy for the efficiency of hospital management alone. There is an urgent need to check hospital logistics and supply chain management in both the public and private sectors.

Although COVID-19 vaccines have been rapidly developed, the majority of them requires very formidable logistics around cold-chain requirements, such that vaccines would not be practical in many Low and Middle-Income Countries (global perspective) and in the field (military perspective).

In the future, this undertaking of matching rapid vaccine development against EIDs with the necessary logistics to distribute them across the globe, particularly from the global perspective in assisting developing countries and the military

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10) safety-and-quality-control (accessed on 22 Feb 2022) / WHO, How to
perspective of distribution in areas of conflict, will be a formidable challenge. The US, Korea and some countries have experienced that the combination of military security support and civilian business technology, such as a vaccine transportation task force, has been very useful in this matter. Nonetheless, we should continue innovating our hospital logistics and supply chain management in a creative way.