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Poisoned Candy

The Portrayal of Donor Motives for Foreign Humanitarian Aid and Development Assistance in North Korean State Media

Topic and Research Question

For decades, humanitarian aid and development assistance by various actors (hereafter: foreign support) have been an integral part of addressing food shortages, poverty, and disaster recovery in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Its government portrays these support providers in a complex light, attributing a multitude of motives beyond humanitarianism. This study systematically examines this portrayal based on a 28-year dataset of state media articles by addressing the research question: *"What types of donor motives did North Korean state media attribute to humanitarian aid and development assistance during the 'Arduous March' period, and how have these attributions evolved since then?"*

The study contributes to a better understanding of how North Korean state media frames foreign support to the DPRK and other recipients, including the dynamics of donor-recipient relationships. By examining how an authoritarian regime frames foreign support, valuable insights into the broader dynamics of international aid in politically sensitive environments are attained. How authoritarian governments perceive and portray support has significant implications for stakeholders like donor countries and international organizations engaged in humanitarian efforts.

State of the Art

Foreign support is supposed to alleviate suffering and improve recipients' livelihoods. Or is it? The literature provides a multifaceted understanding of donor motives and how they are framed. Donor motives are underlying reasons for why an entity provides support and can be broadly classified into seven categories: humanitarian-developmental, political-strategic, security-related, cultural, economic, symbolic, and religious. They encapsulate a spectrum ranging from altruistic goals, such as alleviating human suffering and fostering sustainable development, to strategic interests like geopolitical leverage and national security (Aaltola, 1999, pp. 375–376; Blunt et al., 2011, p. 183).

The literature shows the interaction between these motives, as aid initiatives often serve multiple, sometimes conflicting purposes simultaneously (Arababa'h et al., 2020, p. 750). The donors in question are as diverse as their motives, comprising state actors,

multilateral international organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) alongside private foundations, companies, and community-led movements.

The way motives are framed by media plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of donor intent, strategically constructing narratives that either amplify or obscure information (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 64). Foreign support faces criticism for reinforcing power imbalances, paternalism, and donor self-interest. While supposedly intended to alleviate suffering or foster self-reliance, it often reinforces dependency, control, or political agendas (Barnett, 2011, p. 35; Browne, 2006, pp. 4–5). Others argue that aid and assistance can sustain authoritarian regimes or perpetuate inequities through tied assistance and conditions favoring donors (Harrison, 1997, p. 58; Manning, 2018). The "gift" of aid symbolizes hierarchy, with implicit expectations of reciprocity. Despite efforts like OECD's Development Assistance Committee to regulate fairness, assistance delivery often compromises ideals to balance competing interests.

Methodology and Approach

The study employs a single-case quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019; Neuendorf, 2017, pp. 57–58) of North Korean state media based on articles published by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) between December 1996 and August 2024. The data was coded, guided by a pre-defined coding framework combining thematic categorization (deductive coding) with new codes generated directly from the data (inductive coding). This hybrid approach ensures a comprehensive and flexible analysis (D'Angelo, 2017, pp. 7–8; Krippendorff, 2019, pp. 89–90). Motives belonging to one of the seven motive types were identified and categorized via thematic clustering and frequency analyses and cross-tabulation of text-based criteria, including the objective of the foreign support, the language and terminology used to describe it, the normative sentiment, the donor type, and the type of assistance provided. These elements are visible components of communication, such as specific words, phrases, and themes that are directly observable and quantifiable without requiring interpretation of underlying messages or intentions, i.e., reading between the lines. The analysis concludes with a temporal comparison of media articles, showing the changes among ascribed donor motive attributions over time.

Main Facts

The analysis resulted in 14 different motives across six types. Religious motives are absent from the dataset.

Table 1: List of Identified Donor Motives

Motive	Associated Motive Type
Relief of suffering based on humanitarian principles	Humanitarian-developmental
Development via capacity-building, modernization, and rehabilitation	
Imperialist domination	Political-strategic
Leverage in a diplomatic dispute	
Normalization or improvement of diplomatic relations	
Political favoritism	
Disruption of foreign support flows	Security-related
Weakening the systemic stability of the recipient	
Regime change	
Poisoning the recipient population	Cultural
Ethnic compatriotism	
Expression of fraternity	Economic
Economic control and profit	
Self-promotion	Symbolic

The total occurrence of donor motive portrayals declines significantly over time, most notably in the early 2000s after the worst fallout of the famine in the mid-1990s has passed. During the "Arduous March" period (1996–1999), humanitarian-developmental motives were predominantly highlighted, portraying donors as compassionate actors alleviating suffering. The positive framing also included adversarial states like the United States, Japan, and South Korea. However, at the same time, lampoon articles were published, which served the purpose of scrutinizing the evil schemes of hostile forces, sometimes simply referred to as "imperialists," "dominationists," or "neo-colonialists," implying the United States and its allies. In subsequent periods, political-strategic and security-related motives became more pronounced, reflecting growing suspicion toward foreign intentions. Those motive attributions are used to frame donors as pursuing selfish agendas, such as political leverage or undermining North Korea's sovereignty. Cultural and symbolic motives appeared sporadically, often associated with friendly nations like China or states with historical ties. Throughout all

periods, economic motives were framed critically, emphasizing exploitation rather than mutual benefit.

Results

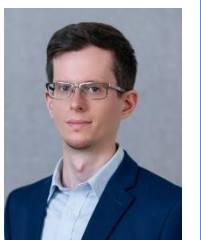
Acknowledging the need for foreign support and accepting its implementation was a daunting task for the DPRK, whose political philosophy and economic policy are strongly characterized by self-reliance. Throughout the study, the portrayal of foreign humanitarian aid and development assistance clearly extends beyond describing one-sided acts of either selflessness or selfishness. Donor actions are regularly presented as part of a broader geopolitical strategy, implying that foreign powers had ulterior motives such as political domination or economic exploitation. By emphasizing ulterior motives, state media delegitimized foreign support while reinforcing the regime's mantra of self-reliance. This underscores the challenges humanitarian actors face in navigating politically charged environments. Positive framing with attributed humanitarian-developmental motives can be observed the most in state media articles during times of great peril. As the country recovers from disaster, donor motive attributions continuously decline in occurrence and emphasize critical political-strategic and security-related motives more than positively framed motives. The study makes clear that the DPRK is primarily interested in aid that does not have any conditions attached.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

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