Negotiating with the Leaders of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Inferences from Thematic Content Analysis

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Executive Summary

The UBC research group assessed psychological processes of six DPRK leaders, including Kim Jong-un, using thematic content analysis for integrative complexity and motive imagery, and Profiler Plus® computer-scored measures of Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE), Distrust, and Self-Confidence. Despite some individual differences, in general the leaders were low in complexity, higher in power motivation than other motives, and high in BACE and distrust. This pattern indicates closed-mindedness, rigid thinking and planning, lack of perceptiveness in considering or trusting outsiders' viewpoints and goals, a need for rapid and definite closure, and low probability of negotiating mutual concessions or flexibility in interaction. When under increased tension, the DPRK leaders' profiles showed even higher distrust and need for power, somewhat increased affiliation need, and reduced motivation for achievement. These patterns indicate a low likelihood of significant changes of basic beliefs, motives, and strategies, despite possible overt assertions of such changes.

Background

Historical Summary

The relationship between the DPRK and the United States took an unusual turn during the year 2018. After a major war in the early 1950's, followed by decades of alternating shunning, isolation, and mutual threats and denigration, 2018 saw the beginning of accommodation. As the culmination of several preparatory lower-level meetings and conciliatory steps and public comments, President Trump and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un met face-to-face in June of that year. Each side was motivated to obtain changes in the policies of the other. The United States government had consistently opposed North Korea's program of developing a nuclear arsenal and missiles capable of carrying those weapons to attack America's Asian allies, if not the U.S. itself. It also desired to ameliorate the DPRK's position of hostile threat and gray zone attacks against those allies, especially the Republic of Korea. Ending the program and destroying its

existing products were the major U.S. demands. The DPRK leader, in turn, urged Pres. Trump to call off planned joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises, approve a treaty to formally end the Korean War, and end economic sanctions that had long been in place.

Public reports of the summit meeting were optimistic. Kim Jong-un agreed to denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, which American officials interpreted as a promise to end the DPRK's development, testing, manufacture, and storage of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles. He also continued a recent series of meetings with the president of South Korea and allowing family visits for families long divided by the heavily militarized demarcation line that separates the two countries near the 38th parallel – the truce line at the end of the Korean War. Pres. Trump did cancel the planned joint maneuvers, but the issue of whether North Korea would honour the agreement – especially the cessation of its nuclear program – was a matter of serious concern and uncertainty. Reports have indicated that in fact neither the North Korean nuclear program installations nor missile bases have been dismantled or gone out of operation, despite the summit agreement (Bermudez, Cha, & Collins, 2019). An agreement has been made for a second summit meeting, in 2019.

Starting in 2018, the UBC research group undertook a study of the cognitive and motivational processes of the DPRK leadership.

Method

Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). To study the cognitive and motivational processes of Kim Jong-un (KJU) and his ingroup, the first part of this study used Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), a set of systems for quantitative scoring of levels of selected psychological variables from running text (Smith et al., 1992). Texts scored for TCA studies can be written, recorded, or transcribed from oral materials; they can be scored either in the original language or in translation, contingent upon the translator being competent in the connotations, idioms, etc., of both languages. Similarly, historical texts can also be used. In general, the texts analyzed for research are produced in the course of the source's professional or personal life, not for research purposes. This avoids the problem of artifacts such as wanting to impress or please (or frustrate) the researcher, or projecting an image knowing that the material will be closely analyzed for psychological markers.

TCA scoring proceeds as follows. Scorers are first trained in a face-to-face or online workshop to follow a detailed manual in scoring a large array of test passages. These are selected from actual texts that had been scored by experts in earlier research. When the trainee is ready, a test is administered that requires the scoring of a body of materials. To qualify as an independent scorer, the person being tested must achieve a reliability level of r=.80 (for some measures, 80% agreement) or higher with the expert scoring of the same materials. Only trainees who qualify at the required level participate in scoring texts for actual research projects.

At this time, scoring manuals and training are available for half a dozen psychological variables. In this study, we used two frequently-used measures in the study of leaders. One is the measure of integrative complexity (IC), and the other of motive imagery (MI).

Integrative Complexity (IC). IC is a characteristic of cognition: information search and processing, decision-making, planning, analysis and synthesis of ideas, and the like. The scoring assesses the evidence regarding two components, differentiation and integration. Differentiation is the degree to which the source recognizes more than one relevant dimension of the topic and/or more than one legitimate viewpoint about it; integration is evidence of the recognition of relationships among those dimensions or viewpoints. Relationships can be trade-offs, combinations, similarities, consequences or antecedents, or inclusion in one overarching system of thought.

IC is scored paragraph by paragraph on a 1 to 7 scale. A score of 1 indicates no differentiation: that is, only one dimension is mentioned, or only one legitimate viewpoint is accepted. Evaluative thinking at this level is dichotomous: all or nothing, good or bad, yes or no, included or excluded. Scores of 2 and 3 denote marginal and clear differentiation, respectively; 4 and 5 are assigned to passages showing clear differentiation plus either marginal or clear integration. Scores of 6 and 7 are assigned when integration occurs on more than one level as the integrated concepts themselves are further integrated within a more general cognitive schema. Differentiation is a required prerequisite for integration; integration is a prerequisite

for multiple-level integration. Some material is unscorable: purely factual descriptions, quotes from another source, sarcasm, jokes, proverbs and clichés are marked X and not scored. The score for a speech, article, interview, etc., is the mean of all scored paragraphs.

It is important to note some aspects of IC theory and research that set it off from other approaches to cognitive complexity. First, it views and treats complexity as a state variable rather than a trait variable. That is, IC can change in response to external or internal variables. For example, an individual may think more complexly about emergent issues and important topics than about well-learned procedures or trivial decisions. IC is also affected by environmental stressors such as time pressure or danger, and personal stressors such as illness or fatigue. Trait complexity also exists: that is, individuals have a stable level of complexity that is either a preference or an upper limit on their complex thinking, which is usually referred to as conceptual or cognitive complexity (Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967; Schroder & Suedfeld, 1971). In this way, IC is analogous to intelligence. People have a range of intelligence within which they function – a person with an IQ of, say, 100 is unlikely to understand quantum mechanics – but within that range, they can think and behave at varying levels of intelligence, depending on the particular circumstance.

Second, IC is a measure of the structure, not the content, of thought. Any opinion or belief can be held, any decision can be made, at any level of complexity. To cite a favorite example, believing that rules are made to be broken and believing that all rules should be obeyed regardless of circumstances would both be scored as 1 – undifferentiated black-white thinking – although they are opposite in content (Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Streufert, 1992). By the same token, the overt content of speech or writing does not necessarily reflect the underlying structure. Simple strategies may be chosen on the basis of complex cogitation, and changes in content may or may not be evidence of any real change in structure.

Low IC is associated with a pattern of limited information search, rejection of dissonant facts or ideas, rigidity of planning and attitude development, unwillingness to consider the views of others as legitimate, and discomfort with dissonance, uncertainty, and lack of closure. When an individual operates at this level, decisions tend to be made rapidly, on the basis of relatively little information. Attitudes and decisions are resistant to change, except if the need to change

them is pressing; but once they do change, they tend to change drastically. Incoming information is warded off or ignored, unless it confirms the person's established conclusions and plans; monitoring of how successful a plan is turning out to be is sketchy and biased. At high levels of IC, cognition follows the opposite pattern: among other things, conflicting information can be reconciled in thinking, there is tolerance for uncertainty and delayed solutions, and both plans and attitudes can change in nuanced ways as feedback is received.

For most people, moderate levels of either external or internal stress attract attention and higher levels of complexity than baseline, but if the stress is too severe, too prolonged, or occurs in conjunction with other demands, IC tends to drop. When that happens, the person is likely either to try to find some simplifying response such as an obvious solution to the problem, or will try to escape the situation (physically or psychologically). A body of research on political and military decision-making has shown that IC drops reliably as stress mounts and national leaders decide to go to war – a simplifying solution that moves the problem into a new area of decision-making, and often into new hands (e.g., military rather than political). Consequently, substantial reductions in IC during international crises have been found in many historical and some contemporary confrontations to forecast the outbreak of hostilities. Negotiated solutions to International competition are preceded by IC at an unchanged or raised level (Suedfeld, 2010; Suedfeld & Bluck, 1988). One characteristic of unusually successful leaders is that their IC is more resistant to stress: many retain, and others even increase, their level of IC when facing critical situations such as a major battle or political campaign (Suedfeld, 2014).

Motive Imagery (MI). The second TCA measure used in our study of KJU has been that of motive imagery (MI). The scoring of MI focuses on three basic motives, the needs for Achievement (nAch), Power (nPow), and Affiliation (nAff). Achievement refers to the need for unique accomplishment, personal best, victory in competition; Power, the need to have impact, to control, influence, persuade, or force others to one's will; and Affiliation, the need for close, friendly, emotionally warm interpersonal relationships. A system for scoring these variables in running text was devised by Winter (1991). Scoring is done, as in the case of IC, by trained

personnel who have passed a reliability test, and the score reflects the number of times each of the three motive themes appear in 1,000 words of text.

In many fields, prominent individuals tend to score high on nAch. In addition, leaders tend to have high nPow scores. Thus, for example, astronauts are high in achievement need, but have relatively low power motivation; politicians and business CEOs tend to be high in both. nAff plays little role among these individuals. An interesting distinction is that nAch is more highly associated with success and satisfaction among business leaders than among political leaders. For the latter, high nPow is an important aspect of positive outcomes. Winter (2010) hypothesized that achievement-focused political officeholders with low power motivation view the need to negotiate, confer favors, conciliate opponents, and at least seem to consider opposing views, etc., as irritating obstacles to reaching their goals; top-level business (and military) leaders, on the other hand, deal mostly with subordinates, whom it is not necessary to cajole or persuade. For both groups, power motivation is important, but in at least the democratic political world, it must to a considerable extent be effected as "soft" power, exercised through persuasion and negotiations, rather than by depending on formal position, status, or force.

Unlike IC, the hierarchy or profile of motives is considered to be relatively stable. Thus, differences in MI associated with different kinds of decisions are theorized to reveal differences in the stable personalities of decision-makers. However, studies of leaders have found some variation as a function of situations (e.g., Suedfeld, 2014). Leaders high in nPow are more likely to involve their nation in war. For example, one study paired crises that were peacefully resolved with crises in the same geographical area, involving the same nations, that led to war; documents produced during the latter were higher in nPow and lower in IC and nAch (Winter, 2007).

Procedure and Results

Thematic Content Analyses

Our study used the English translations of published speeches by the North Korean leaders listed in Table 1. The speeches were presented to scorers without identification as to the source, and the scorers were unaware of the hypotheses or purpose of the study.

Table 1. The Subjects (Titles and Positions).

Kim Jong-un	Supreme Leader of the DPRK[a]
Kim Yong-nam	President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly (nominal Head of State since 1998)[b]
Pak Kil-yon	Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs
Pak Pong-ju	Premier
Ri Su-yong	Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2014-2016
Ri Yong-ho	Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2016-

[a] Also: Chairman of the Workers' Party, Marshal and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces

[b] Short version: President of the People's Assembly

The scoring procedures outlined previously were followed. Table 2 shows the scores of the group for IC and MI. KJU's integrative complexity is low, implying rigidity, resistance to dissonant information or attempts at persuasion, and the use of one-dimensional rules in thinking and decision-making. He does not recognize the legitimacy of alternative perspectives or the relevance of more than one dimension within a given perspective. These factors are operative over his time in power and across various major events, which in most national leaders have been found to evoke changes in complexity. Thus, he is insensitive to developments that would have an impact on most leaders. His motive hierarchy shows the dominance of need for power. Achievement is second in the case of KJU, and Affiliation is a low third.

Table 2. IC and MI scores of six high-ranking officials of the DPRK regime.

		# of Paras	IC		nAch		nAff		nPow	
		Sum	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Speaker	Kim Jong-un	597	1.54	.34	6.06	2.52	1.44	1.52	7.34	3.27
	Kim Yong-nam	147	1.55	.27	5.97	2.96	1.31	1.26	4.10	2.98
	Pak Kil-yon	20	1.37	.05	3.11	.61	.59	.83	7.39	2.88
	Pak Pong-ju	95	1.55	.32	6.57	1.96	.88	.74	3.92	1.84
	Ri Su-yong	25	1.45	.31	1.13	1.96	.00	.00	10.74	2.41
	Ri Yong-ho	36	1.56	.21	1.22	.88	.66	.81	9.83	1.06

The IC scores of all six men were very close together, at or near the middle of the range between 1.0 and 2.0. These scores indicate at most emergent or marginal differentiation, a mode of thought that can be described as low-complexity. Negotiating with individuals at this level of IC, one would not expect flexibility, open-mindedness, tolerance of uncertainty or lack of closure, the ability to recognize the legitimacy of an adversary's point of view, or nuanced responsiveness to changing circumstances. Their basic set of beliefs, information processing predispositions, attitudes, and strategies would be rigid and susceptible to change only under extreme incentives or stressors.

One-way analysis of variance was applied to compare IC, nAch, nAff, and nPow across the different leaders, with a Bonferroni correction of the family-wise error rate. Regarding nAch, the group divided neatly into two, with three subjects scoring around 6%, and the other three from slightly above 1 to slightly above 3%. KJU was in the high-nAch group. He was highest of all of the subjects in nAff; interestingly, four of the six men scored quite low on this variable, including Ri Su-yong, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, whose nAff score was actually zero. On the other hand, Ri's nPow score was the highest in the group, a combination that may be unusual for someone in a position overseeing diplomatic relations. KJU was significantly higher in nAch than both Ri Su-yong ($p = .021$) and the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ri Yong-ho ($p = .006$). KJU's nPow score, although it topped his motivational hierarchy, was about midway in the group, significantly higher than those of the President of the Presidium, Kim Yong-nam ($p = .004$) and Premier Pak Pong-ju, ($p = .015$).

KJU's IC score was recalculated to compare two recently proposed aspects of IC in argumentative, adversarial, or confrontational texts (Conway et al., 2008). Dialectical complexity refers to the complexity with which the source deals with two or more competing perspectives – e.g., , between those of his or her own views versus those of the adversary; Elaborative complexity refers to how complexly a single perspective – e.g., that of the speaker's own group – is cognized. KJU's Dialectical Complexity was 1.06 (SD=0.10); his Elaborative Complexity was 1.48 (SD=0.32). It was thus the case that even within his low level of overall IC, his cognitive processing of competing viewpoints was considerably less complex than how he

discussed his own. This pattern reinforces the conclusion that he is unable or unwilling to consider seriously other people's positions that disagree with his.

Together, these measures show KJU to be resistant to changing his mind, averse to considering the viewpoints of others as legitimate, and unlikely to make flexible, coordinated plans. Low-complexity thinkers are resistant to information intended to persuade them, but if they are somehow persuaded, they are likely to change in a drastic rather than a nuanced way, moving from one simple, rigid set of opinions to the opposite. There is some evidence that change in complexity from one negotiating party may evoke parallel changes from the other, so the use of messages that gradually increase modeling and persuasion toward flexibility and insight may result in a reciprocal response after a while. Last, it must be remembered that cognitive structure is independent of content; thus, in the case of KJU, apparent change of his position does not necessarily mean that the underlying cognitive complexity or motivational hierarchy has actually changed.

Other Psychopolitical Variables

In this stage of the research, we added new measures to the toolbox. We continued with the list of subjects that included KJU and five high-ranking associates and added computerized analyses of their texts. Profiler Plus® is a set of computer-based software. The procedure begins with a dictionary that compiles words and phrases relevant to the scoring of a specified psychological variable. These items are then entered into the software, and the resultant computerized dictionary is the basis for scoring that variable in the text by counting the number of times the specified words or phrases appear.

We used Profiler Plus® version 7.3.11 (64 bit), coded via LTA Classic. Six sets of coding schemes are available, two of which are derived from the scoring systems for IC and MI respectively. Comparisons of human and Profiler Plus® scoring show that the results are not equivalent. In general, human scoring is considered higher in validity, although at the expense of being much more time- and labor-intensive (Suedfeld & Tetlock, 2014; Suedfeld et al., 2015). The variables for which we used Profiler Plus® are three components of Leadership Trait Analysis (Hermann, 2005): Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE), Self-Confidence, and Distrust.

BACE is the degree to which an individual's communication conveys a sense of control or influence over events. The score for BACE is derived from the proportion of references in which the source or the source's group is identified as having planned or initiated some action, or taken responsibility for it. Self-Confidence is the person's belief that he or she can cope satisfactorily with challenges and problems. This variable is assessed by the relative frequency with which first person singular pronouns are used to communicate that the speaker instigates an activity, is an authority figure, or is the recipient of a positive response from another person. Distrust refers to a generalized level of suspiciousness, wariness, and misgivings about the motives and intentions of other people. Words and phrases mentioning such feelings are markers for the variable (Hermann, 2002).

The Profiler Plus® scores of the DPRK leadership group are shown in Table 3.

		Speeches	Distrust		Belief in Ability to Control Events		Self-Confidence	
		Count	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Speaker	Kim Jong-un	44	.19	.11	.39	.14	.21	.26
	Kim Yong-nam	17	.11	.11	.33	.24	.09	.30
	Pak Kil Yon	2	.20	.07	.40	.37	.25	.35
	Pak Pong-ju	11	.12	.07	.38	.24	.00	.00
	Ri Su-yong	3	.12	.03	.24	.11	.61	.35
	Ri Yong-ho	4	.28	.08	.34	.16	.24	.18

The Impact of DPRK-US Tension

For this part of the study, we were interested in the effects of increased tension on the four TCA and three computer-scored psychological factors. We compared speeches by the North Korean leaders during a period of relatively high tension between the DPRK and the US with relatively less confrontational periods. We defined the tense period as the time between President Trump's "Fire and Fury" speech (Aug. 8, 2017) and his acceptance of an invitation to meet with KJU (March 7, 2018), and compared speeches from those seven months with speeches given during times of less fraught confrontation between the two countries. Table 4 shows the results. The only significant difference among the computer-scored variables was in Distrust, which was much higher than when tension was lower (M = 0.26 vs. 0.16, p= .009).

TCA Results. We compared IC and MI scores for 2017-18, the immediate pre-summit year, to earlier periods. We found no significant change in IC; however, the DPRK leadership group responded to higher tension vis-à-vis the United States with major increases in nPow and nAff imagery and much reduced nAch. The change in power motivation was particularly noteworthy, with an almost fourfold increase. The other two MI variables also showed major changes under pressure, nAch dropping by a half and nAff doubling. In other words, under higher stress the North Korean leaders exhibited greater motivation to exert their influence on others, lower inclination to prioritize progress or improvement, and less trust in the intentions of the other party. Coupled with the previously scored low cognitive complexity of the group, a characteristic that is related to rigidity and closed-mindedness except under extreme pressure, the findings imply that increased pressure at relatively moderate levels is likely to induce reactance – that is, higher resistance to influence attempts from outside. The rise in nAff is likely to have been a sign of higher ingroup cohesiveness, although further content analyses would be needed to test that hypothesis. Table 4 shows the TCA mean scores and statistical analyses.

Mean scores	IC	nAch	nAff	nPow
Low U.S. pressure	1.56	5.82	1.26	6.16
High U.S. pressure	1.47	2.70	2.72	22.85
$F(1,81)=$	0.58	9.55	3.37	14.32
$p=$	Not signif.	.003	.070	< .001

Profiler Plus® Results. During the tense period, the group showed a significantly higher level of Distrust, $M = 0.26$ vs. 0.16, $F(1,81)=7.20$, $p=.009$. Higher Distrust implies a greater level of suspiciousness, and therefore more resistance to negotiated compromises. The other changes did not reach statistical significance.

Inferences and Conclusions

Combined thematic analyses of KJU's texts show a combination of rigid thinking (low IC) and high need for power. A high level of achievement motivation would indicate some potential responsiveness to a strategy offering such progress. Here, the results are mixed. Despite KJU's

moderate level of achievement motivation, both his and his group's motive profiles consistently rank power higher than achievement. An incentive for compromise might have some effect if he could come to believe that his alteration of North Korean policy would result in a significant achievement.

There are obstacles to this, however. The combination of low IC and high nPow would most likely lead to relative immunity to arguments based on pragmatism or logic. In the absence of very large carrots or very strong sticks, major concessions on his part are unlikely.

KJU is unlikely to compromise in direct response to attempts to pressure him. There is some evidence implying that a weaker negotiating party may move toward higher complexity if the stronger one does. It may be that if US negotiators gradually increase the integrative complexity of their tactics -- e.g., start with a one-sided position, and then gradually communicate greater openness, flexibility, and nuance -- then this *might* induce KJU to do the same. However, given his generally low IC, he is unlikely to exhibit major increases in openness and flexibility. The most likely strategy for initiating this process would be to move in small steps, monitoring his response to each move along the way and continuing only if there is a sign of reciprocity.

Individuals with low IC are generally closed-minded and averse to changes in strategy as a response to new or contradictory information. Kim's low IC, and his extremely low Dialectical Complexity, suggest that he is not very open to contextual information. A reduction in outside pressure is not likely to bring about changes unless it features specific, important advantages that would benefit him and/or offer progress toward his important goals and values.

The results for affiliation motivation are also mixed. Compared to leaders of other states assessed in previous research, KJU's affiliation motivation is high. However, it is also by far the lowest ranked of the three motivations in his profile. Although detailed content analysis of his texts is needed to provide information about the objects of his affiliation motive, it may be concentrated on his own regime and ingroup. At the level we have found, his affiliation need is unlikely to alter or modify his more dominant drives, most strongly for power and to a lesser extent for achievement.

Our conclusion is that even reasonable incentives to change will have little if any impact, if KJU and his regime see these changes as frustrating their need for power. Real change is unlikely, whether or not pressure is reduced, unless KJU sees that change as consistent with his power or glory. Last, it is important to remember that changes in the content of communications do not necessarily reflect any change in their underlying cognitive or motivational structure.

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