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‘WE DON’T KNOW WHAT KIM JONG-UN HAS FOR BREAKFAST’: NARRATIVE
CONSTRUCTION IN MEDIA ABOUT NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR TESTS IN 2017

Master’s Thesis

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Tartu 2026

I have written this Master Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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Abstract

„Me ei tea, mida Kim Jong-un hommikusöögiks sööb”: narratiivide konstrueerimine meedias Põhja-Korea tuumakatsetuste kajastamisel 2017. aastal

Kasutades erinevaid poststrukturealistlikke diskursusanalüüsi lähenemisi uurib autor USA, Hiina ja Venemaa meedia kajastusi Põhja-Korea tuumakatsetustest ajavahemikus september–detsember 2017. Autor kasutab Laclau ja Mouffe'i välja pakutud informatsiooni organiseerimise teooriat sõlmpunktide kaudu, et koostada diskursiivne kaart, mille eesmärk on näidata erinevusi suurriikide lähenemistes Korea poolsaarel toimunud sündmuste kirjeldamisel ning seda, kuidas need sõlmpunktid toimivad vahendina mõjuvõimu teostamisel niinimetatud paariariikide üle. Rakendades Derrida keele kui kirjutuse teooriat, dekonstrueeritakse piirkonna peamiste jõudude narratiive, näidates, kuidas nii Põhja-Korea liitlaste kui ka vastaste käsitletused põhinevad nende hegemoonilistel projektidel ja soovil mängida kesket rolli konflikti deeskaleerimisel.

Uurimus näitab samuti, et kõik kolm Ida-Aasia piirkonna suurriiki ei ole tegelikult pikaajalises perspektiivis huvitatud pingete lahendamisest Korea poolsaarel, vaid järgivad pigem lühiajalisi eesmärgi säilitada status quo'd ning hoida Põhja-Koread külma sõja, 1990. aastate ja 11. septembri järgsete binaarsete vastanduste – kapitalistlik/sotsialistlik, autoritaarne/demokraatlik, avatud/isoleeritud ning tsiviliseeritud/paariariik – raamides, taastootes samal ajal omaenda nägemust piirkondlikust võimujaoosusest.

Lisaks analüüsitakse nimetatud ajavahemiku Põhja-Korea diskursust, et näidata, kuidas Põhja-Korea ingliskeelne meedia püüdis õigustada oma riigi tegevuskava ning luua suurriikide kehtestatud narratiivile vastunarratiivi. Selleks kasutatakse Baudrillard'i „hüperreaalse spektaakli” käsitlust, et mitte ainult dekonstrueerida Põhja-Korea narratiivi, vaid ka näidata, kuidas nende sõnumid „imperialismile vastupanust” ja „suveräänsuse kaitsmisest” osutuvad vähem veenvaks kui suurriikide loodud diskursused.

Autor jõuab järeldusele, et kuigi Ameerika, Hiina ja Venemaa meedia tegutsesid erinevates meediaökoloogiates ja geopoliitilistes kontekstides, pakuvad nad kõik Põhja-Korea tuumaküsimusele mõneti sarnaseid lahendusi, mis ei suuda probleemi konstruktiivselt lahendada.

Käesolev töö võib edaspidi panustada hegemooniliste projektide ja rahvusvahelise poliitika narratiivse konstrueerimise uurimisse, jälgides diskursiivsete mustrite kujunemist erinevatel ajaloolistel perioodidel ning viise, kuidas väiksemad riigid saavad neid vaidlustada. Samuti võib seda kasutada esmase uurimusena info vastuvõtu ning massimeedia mõju kohta inimeste arusaamadele ümbritsevast maailmast ja konkreetsetest riikidest.

Introduction

Nowadays the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (further DPRK or North Korea) remains one of the most closed countries on the Earth. It can obviously be characterized as a weak state in terms of strategic narratives actors' division (Nam 2013) and the one that can easily be left on the back burner and forgotten by the great powers until something extraordinary happens and people in big countries will discover some new point on the map. However, despite its closedness, it still makes the world paying attention to itself through various interactions, like verbal altercations with another US president (Betz 2017), nuclear tests or extravagant statements like no more considering the Republic of Korea (further ROK or South Korea) as a part of the state (Kim 2024). In response, the country and its leader gets the accusations from the United States of America (further USA or the US) representatives for being a 'madman' in international relations (News 2017), unpredictable country ruled by the 'rocket-man' (Liptak and Diamond 2017) who seems not seeing any limits and is always waiting for an opportunity to violate any agreement they have with their counterparts just to gain another dose of attention and trap the world into another vicious circle of negotiations, agreements, violations and attention seeking. Or maybe, North Korea is just a rational player that have learnt the lesson of checks and balances way too good and now just plays on the contradictions of the world hegemonic states who in the end find themselves following the will of a small East Asian rogue state? Or is it a sort of 'reservation country', the last true stronghold of communism and an exaggerated collective image of all the 20th century socialist regimes' virtues or vices that may once lead the world either to the Marxist utopia or to the nuclear gulag with a relentless Moloch constantly eating the rich (depending on one's political views, of course)?

Regardless of what image do people bear in mind when someone says, "North Korea", most of the scholars agree in their thoughts that due to the North Korean isolation from the outside world, we do not have enough options to study it in conventionally (West 2017, Chernykh 2023,

Choi 2010, Seo and Nah 2020, Seo 2023). That is why when it comes to getting information about in that mysterious underdog scaring the world with another sudden nuclear explosion, we can mostly rely on two sources. The first is that relatively small scope of researchers that can travel to North Korea, translate documents about it from Korean, talk to various North Korean defectors and share their knowledges with a couple of students interested in studying the unique path of the 26-million country to the ideals of *Juche*. Another, more accessible and usually more entertaining, is the mass media articles and publications. Media workers have learnt a lot about what information people want to consume and how to push their countries' agenda through that same media while at the same time satisfying their readers' or viewers' information demands. That all creates the unlimited amount of signals these media can send to their consumers to create in their minds the image of an isolated state. That leads to formation of, as Foucault would say, various regimes of truth that combining together flow out into what Baudrillard would have called a "hyperreal spectacle". And this is what scholars also have to research, as media and their narratives have become a truly unalienable part of our lives even if the person does not really follow the news.

Given all that was written above, I want to argue with this work that the language has two main features when it comes to shaping some sort of identity or narrative. First, it is not stable. Each and every person may interpret it in any possible way depending on their cultural context, shaped identities, previously perceived narratives, and other backgrounds. In that case I will refer to Derrida's theory of language as writing¹, which constitutes the writing as the most self-sufficient form of language and thus helps us to find the path from one signifier to another and then to create a new meaning for the narrative in order to check how it can be traced further after it was written and released to the public. The second important feature of the language and writing comes from the previous one and assumes that language does not only reflect the reality, but also in some way *produces* it. In other words, sharing an information with the others may create a completely new world which may not rely on what is really happening, but what backgrounds and "truths" are provided by the narrator. This, in my opinion, is one of the most crucial concepts of mass media that aim to satisfy the people's need to contact the outer world they cannot (or are not willing to) access.

¹ For more information see Derrida 1978, as well as Harland 2003 and Williams 2014.

However, as I have already said in the previous paragraphs, getting people familiar with the outer world is not the sole purpose of contemporary media, as a modern world gives its own perspective to the objective reality we are living in. That is why, in terms of the 21st century world, media also have to entertain people to be easily comprehensible and to appeal to people's emotions or collective memory. That makes them more popular and reflects in the number of copies sold of a newspaper or number of subscribers in the online versions of the publication. That is also how the articles with the titles like "Seoul-style Kuzma's mother"² or "You are completely out of your mind over there" appear and may attract some audience who can relate to them. Another aim of the media, dictated by the modern capitalist contradictions and the fact that the media do not exist in an emotional-neutral-informational-only vacuum, is to familiarize the audience with the narrative shaped by their government and either to agree with it and to strengthen it with additional arguments, which are relevant to the certain audience, or to contest it through providing counter-arguments and alternative narratives that may be more relatable for the core audience of the media and/or for the main sponsors of it. That is how we get to the Foucault's genealogy theory³ which aims to trace the way of truth-producing and the way it reflects the global power structures and geopolitical interests of certain states or groups.

Consequently, we come to the main **goal** of the study, which is to explore how meaning, identity, and power are constructed through language in the media discourses surrounding North Korea's nuclear tests in September-December 2017. Surely, it would not be possible to embrace all the countries' narratives and all the periods of North Korean history in one thesis. That is why reasonable limitations would be a great opportunity for more thorough analysis and mindful research on the topic. Therefore, I have decided to limit my research to three countries that due to some historical, military and economic factors are playing the key role in contemporary world politics. These are the USA, the People's Republic of China (further China) and Russia. All of these three countries are the permanent members of the UN Security Council, share somewhat different views on both world's structure of power globally and the North Korean nuclear issue specifically and are also one of the few countries in the world possessing nuclear weapons,

² Reference to the 1959 discussion between Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon about perspectives of communism and capitalism, where Khrushchev said that the USSR will "catch up with and surpass" the USA and will "show the US Kuzma's mother". Sometimes this expression was also used in the Soviet Union to describe the *Tsar Bomba*, thermonuclear bomb tested in 1961 at the Novaya Zemlya.

³ For more information see Harland 2003.

therefore bound by various non-proliferation treaties and somewhat the same agenda on the nuclear weapons possession by the smaller nations. Furthermore, all three both before and after the 2017 have had quite a rich history of interactions with North Korea, either figuring as its main allies (as in the cases of China and the USSR and then Russia) or as one of the main enemies and “imperialist powers” (as it figures in North Korean sources) that aims to bring down the North Korean regime with its “puppet states” like South Korea (which is the case when we are talking about the USA).

The period of September – December 2017 was also chosen due to several reasons. First, it has been almost 8 years since the events were taking place, so all of the narratives produced by that time media in the USA, China and Russia can be analyzed in retrospect, keeping in mind to what consequences these events have led. Second, these nuclear missile tests, including the hydrogen bomb testing and the launch of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) were to date one of the last global nuclear crises that led to imposing one of the strictest sanctions regimes in contemporary human history. However, the tests of September – December 2017 were not the first ones conducted by the DPRK even in that particular year. Therefore, we may observe in some way established discourses throughout all the three aforementioned countries and analyze the period when these discourses were to some extent not shaping, but rather polishing and formalizing. Particularly, it was a period when the US, China and Russia have formalized their stance both on the sanctions’ regime and the measures to be taken to deescalate tensions and bring to an end the problem of denuclearizing Korean peninsula. Even though discourses are not stable and can be reshaped and contested due to various internal and external factors (for example, both Russian and North Korean narratives towards each other were significantly changed after the Russian 2022 full-scale invasion in Ukraine⁴), in terms of international relations the DPRK still continues to live in the discourses shaped throughout the year 2017 and still faces their consequences, such as sanctions, fact of the nuclear weapons possession and the overall countries’ stance on that issue. That is why, in my opinion, this period is very important and has big potential in terms of further research. This work therefore aims to provide some “basic strokes” for the future in-depth research of the whole period of the North Korean nuclear issue, different countries’ discourses about it or even some quantitative analyses on the media coverage and discourse shaping.

⁴ For further reading see Kuzmenko 2025 and Howell 2024

To make the analysis more thorough and rely on various sources, I have decided to choose two different medias from the US (namely *The New York Times* and *FoxNews*), China (namely *People's Daily* and *China Daily*) and Russia (namely *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*). That will help me not only to compare the certain narratives from these countries, but also to see whether any of them are contested in the other media (which for instance can be expected in the case of the US media due to their different ideological orientation) and whether any alternative opinions are provided in a single country case. I have decided to concentrate on the mainstream media, thus taking in scope of my research the one most popular news media outlet of the countries and the second one listing as one of the most popular, but different in terms of ideology it represents or the entity it subordinates to. Finally, I have ended up with *The New York Times* and *FoxNews* as the mainstream US media, *People's Daily (Renmin Ribao)* and *China Daily (Zhongguo Ribao)* representing Chinese discourse and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* together with *Izvestiya* as the ones to reflect the Russian position on the issue. All the media were chosen according to their popularity at home, their political position and their likeliness to cover topics related to international relations. From each of the media outlets a limited number of articles (20-35 depending on the articles' length) was selected and then the discourse analysis based on the various poststructuralist discourse and genealogy theories was conducted. Other scientific articles related to the topic in terms of the issue and/or the methodology were also used to get a broader picture of events taking place and approaches to their interpretation.

According to the theoretical background provided above, I have decided to focus my research on these main research questions:

- A. How do key signifiers such as “*security*,” “*threat*,” “*peace*” and “*sanctions*” functioned within American, Chinese, and Russian media discourses on North Korea in 2017?
- B. What past events are used by the media to contextualize the North Korean nuclear issue and in what way they echo broader historical continuities and discontinuities?
- C. What broader geopolitical rationalities are reflected in the US, Chinese and Russian discourses and how it reveals the realities these countries were supposed to exist in the late 2017?

Additionally, the North Korean counter-discourses will be analyzed through involving articles issued by the *KCNA.co.jp* English-language units, aiming to examine how the hegemonic powers' discourses are contested and what alternative frame of events may North Korean media

propose to challenge or destabilize major powers' media promoted meanings? This may give us deeper understanding on why the North Korean media discourses struggle to reach the broader range of audience and what alternatives may be seen to contest the established narratives on North Korea to make its image fuller and more nuanced.

This all leads us to the structure of the work that will be divided into four main chapters. In the first one I am going to provide some theoretical background, describing various methods and approaches I will use in terms of poststructuralist analytical frameworks. In Chapter 2 I am going to consider the nodal points, such as “peace”, “stability”, “threat” etc., as organizing the discourse in each context and to deconstruct these discourses using the described in Chapter 1 methodology. In Chapter 3 I will try to provide the historical and political contexts of the meanings revealed in Chapter 2 and how the so-called “truth regimes” are reinforced in terms of these contexts. Finally, Chapter's 4 main goal will be to briefly overview the North Korean counter-discourse and how it aims to contest the hegemonic narratives revealed in Chapters 2 and 3. I will then end with conclusion that will aim to bring together all of the work's findings and try to finally give a comprehensive answer to the research questions formulated above.

1. Theoretical part: Key concepts of poststructuralist methods and ways to apply them in practice

1.1 Deconstruction, genealogy, nodal points and hyperreality as the key elements to understanding poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is a relatively new concept of analysis, based on the various methods of working with texts, social discourses, contradictions within these discourses and the postmodern society itself. These methods are based primarily on works of the authors like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Jean Baudrillard etc. They have written lots of works dedicated to that topic, where they are mostly dealing with the issues of signification, meaning, way of understanding symbols and metaphysics and propose some innovative ways of analysis of written and spoken language.

When analyzing the key concepts in poststructuralism, it is important to briefly overview the concepts set by the previous researchers and philosophers, most notably, structuralism that was one of the key ways in narratives' studies until the second half on the 20th century and that served as a base for poststructuralist approach. In his work *Superstructuralism* (2003), Richard Harland is trying to show, how the structuralist approach to semiotics led to creating what he calls superstructuralism (which is basically the 'ending point' of structuralism, when it reaches its limit to describe the world) and that brings out the dilemma of analysis of the present time, when the superstructuralism is applied not to the societies of the past or the possible societies of the future or to the "other" societies, but to the contemporary one, the society we are currently living in. He formulates that dilemma as follows: "The more power they attribute to signs and social meanings, the more they deprive themselves of the right to take up a position outside the capitalist and consumerist system, the more they deny themselves the right to reject or envisage alternatives to it" (Harland 2003, p. 123). After that, he proposes how the poststructuralists' works would deal with that dilemma, not by making either/or choice between the biological needs of the people or by the concept of free will that goes from within the people as social beings, but by creating the two different concepts of sign, namely the Social and Anti-Social. With that, they embrace the whole idea of the continuity, not distinguishing between past, present and future and between biological and social, but rather by the signs with already created or imposed meaning and signs, whose meaning is unstable, therefore benefiting for the signs' movement, reproduction and

multiplying. In other words, the Anti-Social signs are rather the empty, unstructured set of signifiers that combining together may create an understanding that people would be able to rely on. And this is a crucial idea when it comes to analyzing the media and their coverage of closed societies, such as the North Korean one, because when most of the people are not able to reach some certain society, they cognize it through signs sent by the ones, who have the “power” and “knowledge” sufficient enough to produce these signs.

One of the brightest examples of an early poststructuralist approach would be the works of Derrida, such as his books *Of Grammatology* (1967) or *Writing and difference* (1978). There he discusses some classic philosophic books and tries to deconstruct them, while at the same time arguing that the meaning of many (if not all) of the signifiers is not stable and therefore any deconstruction provides a limitless variety of further deconstructions. One of the most relevant questions he faces while writing the books is that of the relationship between past and present, which structuralists faced struggles with distinguishing. Thus, he proposes the idea of a trace or continuation, where everything that is going on in the present time is not produced now, but rather is a product of what was going on before and what traces it was left in our subconscious. In that way, to understand this assumption better, Derrida proposes the analogy from Freud’s essay *Note on the Mystic Writing Pad* (1925). There, he shows the relation between consciousness and subconsciousness as the process of writing on the children’s toy called “mystic writing pad”, which is the three-level pad, consisting of a waxed base, a sheet of greaseproof-like paper and a transparent celluloid. However, if for Freud the writing on the pad precedes the formation of the writing and thus creates the trace, for Derrida the trace on the wax is already created in some way by the previous writings and the process of creation of the pad. Consequently, when some “writing” (i.e. event or thought) is invoked in our consciousness, it is rather the process that can be described as the development of the previous subconscious signs that were already existing in our mind and that were pushed out through the contact with the trigger (in the case of the mystic writing pad, a stylus) existing in the same system as we are (Derrida, 1978).

Another important question to answer is that of the essence of writing itself, whether it could be successfully deconstructed and if so, how? In terms of that question, it is important to make a note that for Derrida, even though the writing appeared later than the speech and therefore can be considered as less natural, writing is the more prior and advanced form of language, as it inescapably gives us signs that can be observed and can constitute a meaning. More precisely it

can be observed in the direct citation of Derrida on that issue: “Now we must think that writing is at the same time more exterior to speech, not being its ‘image’ or ‘symbol’, and more interior to speech, which is itself already a writing” (Of Grammatology by Jacques Derrida, [1967] 2019). Therefore, the written language is the language that could be deconstructed and there are some useful hints on how to do that that are linked to the French reading tradition, called *explication de texte*. And even though, while discussing the Derridean analysis, the author of the book *Understanding poststructuralism* mentions that ‘the term “play” is used by Derrida to show how structures have a looseness and openness at their very heart’ (Williams 2014, p. 40), these hints are still relevant as they give some limits on how this “looseness” can be applied. First, it is important to look at the very essence of the text to find the strongest argumentations in it. That will help us to understand what is missing in this argumentation, how it can be supplemented and how it can therefore be reshaped or even negated through the points missing in the arguments. Second, it is important to keep in mind that words’ meaning is not stable and within one work we will not be able to reach the very essence of the words. Furthermore, if we put these words in a different context, for instance, give a chance to make this analysis to another person from a different time or cultural background, the way of their deconstruction and shaping the meaning may be completely different. But that should not frustrate anyone, as every such attempt will bear a sense of time, culture and personal experience with it, creating new thoughts and contributing to the general pictures of how the discourses create the meaning. In the end, science always has its own limits, and we do not have to refuse to research any topic just because our limitations are greater than the ones in the future. At least, it is true if we follow Derrida’s passages about science.

With that being said, we will proceed to the next theory I am going to build my research on. That is the Foucault’s genealogy. Of course, while looking at history through Foucault’s lens, we should not also dismiss his approach to archeology as a form collecting signs and looking for the historical continuities and discontinuities that made such set of signs possible to combine. That is why, in some way, it would be useful to look at his book from a “structuralist” period, which is called *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969). Another important work that reveals the concept of genealogy in a more distinctive way are the three volumes of his *History of Sexuality* (1976). In it, he examines how power that can be directed both from a body and over a body and how the relationship between these powers creates historical continuity. It all unites in a completely new way of how history should be written and what questions the Foucauldian historian should answer.

Particularly, according to Foucault (1969), history is not a set of continuous actions that cause each other, nor is it the absolutely undetermined set of people's deeds through exercising their free will, but rather a combination of both. History is determined in terms of how power was exercised by different actors, but it is also a matter of will to how discontinued events will influence the people exercising their power in the future. In that way, Williams' parallels with an emergence and researching new musical styles seem very relevant. While one historian may group some differences and similarities into a certain genre (e.g. jazz, hip-hop, rock), the other one will point out to sub-divisions within these genres and thus will highlight some "branches" in them (e.g. jazz-rock, big band, cool jazz or East-Coast hip-hop, West-Coast hip-hop, Conscious hip-hop etc.). But then, these genres and their sub-divisions may once again be brought together via researching the set of rules or statements that led to the creation of certain genres (e.g. soul, disco and hip-hop music emerged in some way due to the willingness of black Americans to distance themselves from the whites, who have "stepped onto the territory" of music previously considered as "black", thus exercising their power as a majority in the USA), and also how these rules were varied in different periods of history and how they led to the creation of particularly these certain genres or their sub-divisions (Williams, 2014, p. 116). Consequently, the Foucauldian historian should look at how the relations of power led to the creation of certain concepts and thus dissemination of other discontinuities that may be taken into account by the other people exercising their power.

What we should also keep in mind while applying Foucault's genealogy approach is that everything in this world that relates to power both of the body and over the body is political. Thus, it gives us some set of ideas of how we perceive power and what events may be regarded as political. In his book *Power/Knowledge* he gives an example of a worker who has a conflict with their boss and how the action of taking the boss down by the collective of workers may be considered as political event: "This would not be a real act of popular justice unless the target and the potential outcome were integrated into the overall political struggle of the workers in that factory" (Foucault 1980, p. 31). Therefore, for an event to become political, it should have a common meaning among the people taking part in that event, and the meaning is usually achieved through symbols. As Harland explains in his book: "A meaning arises only when workers and bosses stand in a relation of absolute, formal difference, when what workers *are* is what the bosses *are not*". "So, as in Derrida's theory of Writing, two levels of the sign emerge: an institutionalized

level of socially controlled discourse, and an anti-institutional level of the body's own revolutionary symbolism" (Harland 2003, p. 163).

Now, speaking about politics, it is reasonable to pass to the next philosophic approach highly connected to it, but in a more orthodox way, which is the general theory of radical democracy of Laclau and Mouffe. The main setup of their theory is developed in the 1985 work called *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. In their work, they are developing post-Marxist approach to discourses and examining the structures of power and hegemony. The main point in their studies of discourse is denial to some extent of Marxist class determination and development of the assumption that class consciousness or class solidarity is hardly possible by default because of the unstable nature of people's identity and the fact that this identity is always contested by the society the person lives in. Consequently, in order to achieve this solidarity (or any other forms of solidarity like gender, race, national etc.) they should be shaped in a discourse that will allow people to see the boundaries of that solidarity. Furthermore, people can solidarize themselves with many different groups that can further solidarize among each other and contest the established discourse inside the given group. In that way, any discourse is in the state of constant struggle with others, and the consensus is never achievable.

However, the discourse, consisting of dozens of empty "signifiers", can be shaped or organized for some time, within which people are going to exist. This organization goes on through collection of meanings within the so-called "nodal points". These nodal points, however, are not stable and, as the identities, can be reshaped by various actors or simply abandoned and reorganized into another nodal points. For example, in terms of American narrative about North Korea and the recalling of a Cold War in it, we can see, how the references to the communist nature of the North Korean regime slowly decreased within 2000s, and from "Stalinist" (or other terms, related to the Cold War socialist states' ideology in American media) state it became described more as a "totalitarian" or "terrorist" (Dai & Hyun 2010). This reshaping seems like a never-ending process, however, it can stabilize for some time, when the hegemonic discourse is established. In that establishment state usually plays one of the most crucial roles, as it is one of the primary sources of political authority and consequently, according to Gramsci, one of its core dimensions is the organization of consent (Hoare et al. 1999). That is why it is important to research big established media, as they tend to reflect either the official positions of the government or to contest them within the frame of alternative forces taking part in political struggle inside the

country. However, while analyzing the discourse contestation, we need also to examine whether they exist in the same paradigm, so the hegemonic discourse can be traced. As Laclau wrote, “the imaginary is a horizon: it is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility and is thus the condition of possibility for the emergence of any object.” (Laclau 1990, p. 64). It can reflect both the process of the discourse establishment, when it presents itself as the only alternative possible to another and the process of the old discourse’s decomposition, in which the identities can be shaped more openly, even though they still operate within the set “horizon”.

Based on that theoretical background, it would be both challenging and intriguing to try to apply the post-Marxist approach not only to the media analysis, but also to connect them to the studies of international relations. Even though post-Marxism agrees with an orthodox Marxism and neo-Marxism in their general understanding of the world system and critique of capitalism, it also denies economic determinism, showing that the world in which the people of the late 20th and early 21st centuries exist is much more complex and that the concepts of identities and discourses should not be underestimated while describing the ongoing affairs. Therefore, we can end up with the quite sophisticated combination of critiques of the capitalism as a form of an ownership of the means of production, world-system theory as a basis for the international relations analysis and discourse analysis through a poststructuralist and post-Marxist lens that may help to deconstruct and reconsider the identities of the countries and how these identities shape the discourse of these states and constitute the reality in which the world exists.

Here we finally come to the last poststructuralist approach to text analysis, which is represented by works of Baudrillard. His works may seem the most nihilistic, radical and detached from the reality among all four authors, but in my opinion, they also have some rationale behind them and may contribute to the research nicely. In his writings, he takes the political aspect of the poststructuralists’ analysis, more precisely, he attacks the Marx’s contradistinction of “use-value” and “exchange-value”, showing that in the modern capitalist system, where everything can be measured and everything has its own price, the first is a sort of an “alibi” for the second. Therefore, in his work *The Mirror of Production* (Baudrillard, 1973) he proposes the idea of the so-called “control of the code”, under which the modern society lives. Consequently, the modern capitalist world turns into a postmodernist spectacle, where signs lose their signifiatory function and become completely meaningless forms that can be overcome only by perceiving them as absolutely

empty entities. In his 1983 book *In the Shadow of Silent Majorities* he, according to the concept mentioned above, proposes his own vision of overcoming the consumerist society: “A system is abolished only by pushing it into hyperlogic, by forcing it into an excessive practice which is equivalent to a brutal amortization. ‘You want us to consume – O.K., let’s consume always more, and anything whatsoever; for any useless and absurd purpose.’” (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 46) This is also a way through which we can overcome the discourse struggles, and that is what North Korea with its media really contributes to and which I am going to elaborate on in the last chapter of my research.

1.2 Methodology: the way of researching applying the poststructuralist theory

Now, after looking at all the theoretical background I have described above, one may ask quite a relevant question: how to use all these theories in practice and is there any relevant methodology to do research according to these concepts and principles? Is it going to be just taking some text samples, broadly citing them and then trying to look for the meaning of each and every word in the sample? Furthermore, can we look at the Derrida’s theory of methodology and assume that ‘methodology’ is impossible, for the empirical and the transcendental always contaminate one another? The answer to this question may be a little bit tricky and ambiguous, however I believe that generally we can create some sort of poststructuralist methodology to answer the research questions. However, we always need to keep in mind that, according to the poststructuralist theories, we are not dealing with some stable measurable entities, that is why research questions formulated in the introduction may seem too broad. It is also important to remember that while analyzing we are going to deal with authors from various contexts, with different biases towards North Korea and different regimes of “truth” they are willing to create. We will even engage with different media cultures, ecologies and media with various ranges of democracy inside them. So, it will be useful to recall the words of Anna Marie Smith when she was analyzing the issue of methodology within the Laclau and Mouffe’s theory: “As we study different types of institutions and different discursive constructions of identities, we should expect to find a complicated network of similarities and differences between and among them” (Smith, 1998, p. 160). But even though these networks seem entangled, it will still be possible to find out some patterns certain medias use in their coverage, see what emotions and what motives they are trying to invoke and compare main language practices used for those purposes.

First, I will once again mention the time limitations and sample of the research, so it will become clear what topic the thesis will cover. I decided to choose the time frame that covers a period of September – December 2017 due to several reasons. This was the period when the world's attention was focused on North Korea due to two series of nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests. The period itself is, on the one hand, broad enough to trace the rhetorical changes and see how discourse has changed throughout the time and, on the other hand, narrow enough for one person to thoroughly research the issue and not to get lost in the scope of data. Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish some certain dates or periods of time that may be considered as turning points that provoked a new wave of discussions, additional attention from media and some shifts in establishing the narrative about North Korea. These are the days of tests (September 3 of the thermonuclear bomb and November 29 of the ICBM *Hwasong-15*), days of the United Nations Security Council resolutions tightening sanctions against the North (Resolution 2375 on September 11 and Resolution 2397 on December 22), Trump's speech at the UN General Assembly (September 19) and re-listing of the DPRK as a state-sponsor of terrorism by the US administration (November 20). All these events sparked an active discussion not only in American, but also in Russian and Chinese media and led to some changes in their rhetoric which I am going to elaborate on further.

Another important limit to mention is the sample of media. As I mentioned earlier, I am going to analyze two media outlets from each country, namely *The New York Times* and *FoxNews* from the USA, *People's Daily* and *China Daily* from China and *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* from Russia. The media from Russia and China were chosen according to the list of the most popular media in each country (*Top Newspapers in China by Web Ranking* | *4imn.com*, 2019; *Media Citation Rate in 2017*, 2018), among which I have decided to choose the one most popular in the list and another one from the five most popular ones, but different in terms of the agency they belong to or the ones that are more likely to cover international political news (e.g. I have decided not to concentrate on *The Economic Daily* because it is more likely to cover economic news rather than political). I was guided by the same principle while choosing the American media, but another important feature I was looking at in the US case is the orientation of the media in terms of political spectrum (Newman et al., 2017). As *The New York Times* represents the center-left viewpoint and is more oriented to an audience with liberal political position (if we use the American terminology), then the second media outlet has to represent the conservative side of

political spectrum. As previous quantitative researches found no grave differences between the coverage of news related to the DPRK in center-left and center-right newspapers in the US (Gusterson, 2008; Choi, 2010), I have decided to go further to the right and look for the more conservative, but still popular news media among the Americans, and stopped at the *FoxNews Online* as a sufficiently good option in terms of political orientation, coverage of the international news and popularity.

I have made a search of sample data through every media's website with the search query "North Korea AND sanctions", "North Korea AND war", "North Korea AND peace" and "North Korea AND nuclear" (or the relevant translations if the media's language is other than English) among the articles' texts. Then, I have shortened the number of articles to 20-35, depending on how much news related to the topic there were in the certain media, how many topics within the main issue were covered and how long the articles were overall. This shortage was done for a several reasons, firstly, to exclude the articles on less relevant topics (such as the statements of Chinese ambassadors in the USA or topics related to policies towards Iran or Syria rather than to North Korea), and secondly, to have the similar scope of articles from all medias and to be physically able to effectively process this scope alone. I have also given priority to the articles covering the same topic among the different media (e.g. articles covering Trump's speech at the UN General Assembly) to have a broader base for comparison between the different discourse practices. As my research mostly uses qualitative methods, these limitations of the number of articles helped me to analyze them more thoroughly on one hand, and, on the other, to elaborate more on the discursive patterns and not to research everything related to the language, expressions and topics covered. Therefore, I have finished up with this number of articles as a comprehensive one to fit the goals of my research and to answer exhaustively the questions I have formulated.

I feel it is also important to clarify some definitions of the words I have used before and will be using throughout my thesis. Particularly, I would like to elaborate more on the meaning of the words "signifier", "discourse" and "narrative", as they have various meanings in social sciences, so providing a clear explanation of what is meant by these words would help to reduce the possibility of misinterpretations or misunderstandings. These definitions are inspired by and based on various poststructuralist approaches, so they will be parts of the frame I decided to build my research on. According to the previously provided theoretical background an impression of the word "signifier" can be created as if it is a word used to describe the other words and expressions

that are meaningless and not carrying any semantic load. It is right to perceive this term as something describing words and expressions; however, they are not meaningless by themselves but can be characterized as a word with an empty meaning. By using the word empty I mean the one having its own shape (initial or general meaning), but not structured into a particular words system, thus cannot be fully comprehended without a context provided. A signifier can be compared to an empty transparent bead that, combining with the other beads can create a new form and become a part of a well-structured chain of relations between various signifiers, thus obtaining a new tone or function. Continuing the metaphor of the beads combining into a product, the discourse can be compared to the ready-to-use jewel, so a “discourse” can be defined as a way of organizing meanings into an established idea that may be additionally immersed into a context to further articulate the set of meanings. I also tend to use words “discourse” and “narrative” interchangeably, even though it can be concerned too rough. Someone may point out that a narrative can be a particular way of organizing meanings and discourses, therefore making them more ideologically loaded. However, referring to Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of hegemony (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), I can argue that the process of organizing signifiers into a discourse already presupposes the idea that discourses are politically loaded as they aim to serve the goals and interests of a certain group of people and are thus organized by them. That is why, in my opinion, it would not be a gross error to use the two words as synonyms, though bearing in mind that they may be used as separate concepts to create another undertone for the statement.

My analysis will be built up on constructing the path from the nodal points and scope of meanings, created by the over and over repeated discourses, which may allow us to deconstruct such discourses and see some lower, underground part of these nodal points. Then, this path is continued by showing how all these discourses and meanings depend on the historical continuities and events that were taking place in past and perception of which shapes our perception of reality. Finally, it can all be ended in the point where all the “truth” we know about North Korea – is just a hyperreal spectacle in which we all exist by consuming the media’s discourses and to which North Korea itself willingly contributes. Of course, if looking at the events through a positivist lens, this hyperreal spectacle would not be the case, as many events described in various media were real and took place at the time. But since my work is concentrated mostly on the discourses and the interpretation of the events by various parties, it is worth making an assumption that these discourses are fully artificial and create their own world, so in my opinion, it would be a good

ending for the research to try to apply Baudrillard's way of text analysis and to show how North Korean media facilitates the other countries' discourses about itself while trying to contest them. In the end, Harland while describing Baudrillard's late works, said that they "seem to be closing doors rather than opening them" (Harland 2003, p. 183), so it would be reasonable to end this thesis embracing as many poststructuralist approaches as possible and to finish it with the one that could be described as explicitly deep in terms of its stance on discourse analysis.

1.3 Literature review

It is also time to cover some literature I am going to base my research on. The topic of media coverage of North Korea, particularly its politics, nuclear tests and overall nuclear issue is not very popular among the researchers. In their quantitative analysis aimed to examine how popular are the research papers on representation of North Korea in media among the researchers writing in English shows there were not so many articles or works on that topic, especially when it comes to a comparative analysis of different media (Seo & Nah, 2020). Most of the works I could find on that topic were about the American or British media and their language practices while covering North Korea. Many of them come to a conclusion that the Western English-language media have constructed the image of North Korea as an enemy for years, at least since its first nuclear tests in 2006 (Gusterson, 2008; Dai & Hyun, 2010; Kim, 2014; West, 2017; Curran & Gibson, 2020; Chernykh, 2023). They also mention the lower journalist standards when it comes to a coverage of North Korea (Gusterson, 2008); recalling the past conflicts, such as the Cold War times binary oppositions or the socialist nature of the North Korean regime (West, 2017; Dai & Hyun 2010; Kim, 2014); and failures to find significant differences while comparing narratives of center-left and center-right media outlets about the DPRK (Choi, 2010; Curran & Gibson, 2020). In these terms, one of the most comprehensive works on the issue of constructing governmental discourses about North Korea since the time of its creation shows the book *Inventing the Axis of Evil: The Truth about North Korea, Iran and Syria* (2004) by Bruce Cumings, Ervand Abrahamian and Moshe Ma'oz. In the first chapter of the book called *Decoupled from History: North Korea in the 'Axis of Evil'* Cumings reconstructs the path of North Korea in the US official governmental narratives from the communist state established with the help of Moscow and to be deterred by the "democratic forces" in 1950s to the image of an evil and rogue state sponsoring terrorism in early 2000s. Even though I consider this work as too emotional and lacking criticism of the North

Korean regime, it is still a very decent attempt to show how the narratives of a Cold War era, Pearl Harbor attack in 1941 and the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 contributed to the agenda pushed by the neoconservatives in the USA after the year 2001.

Another important point of view was provided by those aiming to research the coverage of the DPRK related issues in Chinese and/or Russian media. For instance, the thesis of Kozlova (2025) provided a very detailed excursion into linguistic practices used by the Chinese official media and news commentators while talking about North Korea. This research shows a very big discrepancy between the official governmental narrative that, even though modestly condemning the North Korean nuclear tests or other policies, still tries to keep a moderate tone while talking about North Korea, and the regular internet commentators that tend either to idealize the DPRK regime or to treat it with a great contempt, sometimes even throwing verbal abuses to Kim Jong-un or North Korea overall. Another research contributing to the topic was conducted by Chan and Bridges. In their article the authors analyze the discourses about North Korea circulating in various Chinese political forums, dividing the political spectrum conditionally on the radical left, moderate left, moderate right and radical right and comparing the opinions the Internet users voice about the DPRK and Chinese policy towards it (Chan & Bridges, 2018). The authors conclude that among the segments of Chinese political spectrum the position of moderate left commentators is the closest to the official governmental discourse of China and they tend to support the Chinese policy towards North Korea the most, even though their rhetorics does not differ too much from the moderate right users. Another research I would like to briefly introduce was about the penetration of North Korean media narratives to the Russian and Chinese media during the nuclear and ICBM tests in 2017-2018, particularly in forms of citations or representation the official North Korean position on the issue. The authors end up by stating that the Chinese media tend to cite their foreign colleagues more frequently than the Russian, that Russian and Chinese media cite the North Korean resources more either after the US-DPRK summit in April 2018 or when the US sources were cited and that Chinese and Russian media contribute to legitimizing North Korea's official discourse through greater penetration of its position representation in the media (Hinck & Cooley, 2020). However, this research used mostly quantitative methods, and the authors were not fluent neither in Russian nor in Chinese, that is why they used a machine translation, so some important details may be lost in translation. That is why this research, even though conducted very thoroughly

and succeeding in answering the main research questions, has a limited scope in applying it to my thesis.

While talking particularly about poststructuralist researches of the discourse formation in media about North Korea, the work of Robert West stands out, as it provides the great example of applying Foucault's conceptions of archeology and genealogy into practice of media content analysis. His research constitutes a great level of deconstruction of British media, particularly of the right-wing newspaper *The Mail*, discourse on the DPRK in 2014-2017. He also shows a very deep knowledge of the poststructuralist theory, which helps him to conclude two main things: *The Mail* tends to oversimplify the image of North Korea for it to be more understandable for general audiences while also invoking the feeling of nostalgia about the Cold War times binary oppositions; and that it tends to denigrate the regime and victimize the population of the DPRK with the so-called "parasitic messages" referring to the British history (for example, the comparison of Kim Jong-un's bad health to the Henry VIII's one), thus emptying the context of the North Korean nuclear and human rights issue leaving the audience without any deep understanding of it.

However, his research also has three significant limitations. First, the author, even though sometimes referring to *The Guardian* articles, purposely chooses *The Mail* describing its political right-wing orientation, "attention-grabbing headlines" and "sensationalist, and often alarmist, reporting" (West 2017, p. 594). That, in my opinion, makes the media discourse easier to deconstruct, as sensationalist reporting usually tends to omit ambiguity and send a clear message to the audience, so another test of other both left-wing and right-wing media is needed to confirm the article's findings. Second, the work does not set the aim to compare narratives with the other media outside the United Kingdom, which therefore gives some space for future research on that topic. And third, West admits that according to Foucault's theory, not only do the researchers tend to deconstruct certain discourses, but the audience as well, so the future research is better to include not only the analysis by the authors but also interviews or other forms of communication with the people actively consuming certain media outlets' information. That invokes some reasonable thoughts on the future of my research, as interviews with the media audience may contribute a lot to any project aiming to analyze media discourse and may provide some useful insights into the context about the media language practices.

While speaking about the North Korean media and narratives in it, the book that I find very useful is *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves – and Why It Matters* (2010) by

B. R. Myers. It provides a great background on how the official North Korean narratives were evolving from the 1950s until the beginning of 2010s, as well as on the issue of depicting the international relations and foreigners in North Korean media, literature and official speeches. He successfully proves that even though Western media tend to describe North Korea in terms of the Cold War oppositions of liberal democracy and capitalism versus socialism and communism, North Korean official narrative is much closer to the nationalist than to Marxist and that they adopted much bigger amount of narratives from the World War II Japanese propaganda (even though official North Korean sources deny it), such as racial and national purity, desire for independent policies, belief in Korean (or sometimes even particularly North Korean) exclusivity and referring to Korean traditions rather to the fundamental Marxist works. That is why; after getting familiar with this book, it is really easy to make a conclusion that North Korean image as a communist or even a socialist state has a low validity, at least in terms of discursive practices.

As for the literature for the theoretical part of my work, there were a few books that significantly contributed to my understandings of Derrida, Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe and Baudrillard's approaches to the text analysis. Most importantly, they gave me a prospect of how to work with these methods in practice. One of such books was *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (2013) by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle. They propose the spectrum of various approaches related to the discourse formation and contestation classifying them from very thin to very thick and particularly analyzing methods, such as rationalism, communicative action, reflexive and poststructuralism. Also, they provide some great example studies for each approach, for instance, I have found Holland's book *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses after 9/11* (2012) as making a profound of American, British and Australian discourses about the September 11 attack and further justifying military invasions into Afghanistan and Iraq. And even though Holland's book does not relate enough to my research topic, it can still be regarded as a decent example of work using poststructuralist and discourse analysis methods.

Another scope of books on a poststructuralist theory is related to the direct analysis of the fundamental works on that school of thought. These were the books *Superstructuralism* (2003) by Richard Harland, *Understanding Poststructuralism* (2005) by James Williams and *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (1998) by Anna Marie Smith. These books give a comprehensive perspective on how the theory functions, as well as on the background of these

authors, their cultural context and contributions of their studies to various branches of political studies. They are also full of great examples of theory usage and functioning, have lots of comparisons of the key concepts to the other events, which contributes to an understanding of the original works, and contain a thorough explanation of how poststructuralism relates to the previous epochs' philosophers and schools of thought. Particularly, they outline how different ideas of Plato, Spinoza, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Althusser etc. contributed to the birth of poststructuralism and what are the key differences of it from structuralism that was based on the works of almost the same scope of philosophers.

Speaking about the contemporary framework, it is of course hard to write a research paper without utilizing some modern technologies. Recently, the technology of AI has become really popular among Internet users, as it may help people to solve various daily problems. That means that it can be possible to utilize artificial intelligence for research as well. However, I believe that the usage of AI should be limited in one's research to omit plagiarism and unscrupulous work with data. This is why I have tried to avoid the use of AI technology as much as possible in my work or while using it, to check the facts it provides. But it should be said as well that one of the main advantages of AI is its ability to structure the information greatly. That is why I have found it very useful when it comes to formulating ended thoughts and sorting out your ideas. At the beginning of the work, when I had only read the books on theory, I had lots of notions and alternatives of what to do with the data, but I was struggling to see the full concept of how my research should look like. Therefore, I shared my thoughts with the chat-bot ChatGPT, and it helped me to put them in order and to come up with refined research questions and methodology. During the process of writing the main part of my work I tried to avoid the use of AI in cases other than grammar checking, as I wanted to share my personal view on the topic and to be sure that I contributed enough to my thesis.

2. “Threat”, “security” and “peace”: the way of creating a discourse about the nation and how to organize it through nodal points

2.1 Practical steps on analyzing media discourses

Before starting to share my findings and analyze the media more precisely, I feel some additional notes on particular ways of analysis have to be made. In this part I am going to describe

the certain steps I have taken during my research and reflect a little bit on them, so it will become clear what I am going to achieve, why and how. As I have mentioned above, I ended up with six media outlets from three countries, namely *The New York Times*, *FoxNews*, *China Daily*, *People's Daily*, *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* from the US, China and Russia. According to the 2017 World Press Freedom Index provided by the organization Reporters Without Borders, these countries had that index of press freedom (I will also mention the place of the state in brackets and two countries they were between in the rating for the broader context): USA 76,12 out of 100, where the best score is 100 and the worst is 1 (43 place in the world, between Burkina Faso and Comoros); Russia 50,55 (148 place, between the Mexico and Tajikistan); China 22,34 (176 place, between Vietnam and Syria) (World Press Freedom Index, 2017). These indexes may give us a prospect of how much influence the states used to have on the media discourse formation and how possible there are any articles in established newspapers criticizing their government. Even though in terms of my research we need to keep in mind some other characteristics such as editorial policy, political orientation of the media and the core audience they are oriented towards, we can already make some presuppositions on the media ecology these newspapers exist in.

Given the media freedom indexes, we can preliminarily conclude that even though all of them tend to reflect their countries' agenda, they still may look on it more critically and either broadly or narrowly represent the scope of thoughts existing inside the society. For example, taken the US media freedom index we can conclude that the media ecology there is relatively free and both *The New York Times* and *FoxNews* can contest the official governmental narratives, so it is reasonable to research them both as they represent different sides of American political spectrum. As for the 2017 the US president was Donald Trump, it is logical to expect the *FoxNews* publications being more favorable to the US administration policy and taking a harder stance on North Korea, while *The New York Times* are expected to criticize Trump's administration more and to push relatively moderate agenda based on the Democratic Party policy.

On the other hand, when we look at the Chinese media. As they are considered unfree, we can expect that even though there is also a wide spectrum of political positions within the Chinese society, which is proven by the Chan & Bridges 2018 work, established Chinese media may tend to construct the discourse that will be more or less common among these media. Another contribution to this assumption is that both *China Daily* and *People's Daily* subordinate to different governmental institutions, with *China Daily* directly ruled by the Central Propaganda Department

of the Chinese Communist Party (further CCP) and *People's Daily* being the direct voice of the CCP. Therefore, they are not expected to provide some gravely different information, but as *China Daily* is an English-language newspaper mostly oriented on spreading the Chinese discourse to the outside world, it may be expected to have some softer line towards the US government. The Russian media outlets (at least for the 2017) represent some sort of an “in-between-story” of the US and Chinese media. Both *Izvestiya* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* were founded in the first half of the 20th century and were ruled by the Soviet administration during the USSR era, but after Russia becoming independent, they were privatized and now are subordinated to the different media holdings. As for the 2017, *Izvestiya* are the part of the *Natsionalnaya Media Gruppy* (National Media Group, or NMG) that was founded in 2008 by Alexei Mordashov. Since 2014, one of the key figures of the media holding is Alina Kabayeva, who is referred in Russian-language media as a wife of Vladimir Putin (Mediazona, 2022). *Komsomolskaya Pravda* belongs to the corporation *Izdatelskiy Dom Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Publishing House Komsomolskaya Pravda) whose ownership is uneven, however, according to the Russian media, its main beneficiary may be Sergei Rudnov (AdIndex, 2017). He is the son of Oleg Rudnov, founder of a Baltic Media Group who died in 2015. Russian media consider Oleg Rudnov as a friend of Vladimir Putin (*Kommersant*, 2007). Consequently, even though two Russian media are owned by the different private companies, they still may be able to push the same agenda and to reflect official Russian narrative. However, as Russia is widely considered as an oligarchy state with some sort of autonomy of the key business figures, it can also reflect some personal views on the issues that may be slightly different from the mainstream Russian discourse. Therefore, that assumption should also be examined.

After examining the media freedom level and analyzing some additional background for the research, it is time to proceed to certain approaches I am going to use to work with discourses. When collecting data, I gave priority to the news articles and opinion eds (further op-eds) as they are the main text materials to shape a discourse. After finishing collecting data, I made an initial coding of the scope of articles I have chosen. For coding purposes, I have used QDAcity software, as it is free, easy to use, can group coding and provides you with additional statistics that may be helpful for further analysis. To trace discourses systematically, I divided them into 9 categories that may intersect and thus combine signifiers into some certain meaning. These categories included:

- representations of North Korea – direct descriptions of it and words frequently used in relation to the country and/or its nuclear program (e.g. “threat”, “rogue”, “sovereign state” etc.);
- representations of sanctions – words aiming to show the nature and aims of sanctions and what role do countries see in them (e.g. “necessary measure”, “stabilizing tool”, “ineffective approach” etc.);
- representations of the country the media belongs to – the way how country describes itself and its role in the conflict;
- representation of the other countries in the region and what stabilizing or destabilizing factors they contribute to the conflict;
- use of moral language – how the media use the discourse of fear and condemnation both to shape the perception of North Korea and to show the perspectives of the conflict (e.g. such words like “provocation”, “nuclear war”, “peace”, “stability” etc.);
- metaphors, analogies and phraseology to invoke some familiar images in the heads of the local or foreign readers (e.g. expressions like “rocket man”, “nuclear gamble”, “paper tiger” etc.);
- intertextual references – past historical events aiming either to show the context of the conflict and how it is related to the current escalation process or to provide some comparison to the country’s history to get the reader out of context and to make the story more relatable to them;
- possible solutions, or particularly what each country says about the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, how do they see this conflict in future and what ideas they propose to resolve it peacefully (as all media state peaceful resolution is the best option for them);
- citations and third-party opinions, as it is another important source for shaping the discourse, either to contest it or to contribute to the general picture of North Korea and how the world functions when it comes to the nuclear issue. In this section I have included only citations made by foreigners, which means that I counted any citation by the countries’ nationals as a representation of their own country, but not as a citation, as it may also show the dynamics of us-them relationship.

As in my research I am looking at a process rather than at certain stable frames, I tended to omit including repeated words in an article as separate codes (i.e. if the word “rogue” was repeated three times within one article and its usage does not vary significantly, for instance, was not used separately in citation and the main text of the article, this is counted as one code, not as three separate ones). Then the codes can be grouped into a set of nodal points, which may expand the topic of how different countries’ media use the language differently to shape the discourse they want to articulate. I will then provide a comparative table with that data and main changes in the

rhetoric, if there were any. That table can be a template for a discursive map for future research which can be supplemented with additional signifiers used in different time periods.

The next step was to look at the coding and to identify consistent patterns in the coverage of North Korea's nuclear tests. This will help me to build a complete picture that certain media tries to construct and to find out a concept or lens through which I can look at the issue and to identify some strong and weak points in the narrative. Another task which may be beneficial for discovering the image of North Korea would be to look at some binary oppositions created by the media and aiming to reflect the us-them division. In other words, I am going to show how countries shape not only the meaning of North Korea or themselves in a vacuum, but how do they consider their relations within the whole world, where what North Korea *is*, the other country *is not*. If there are such binary oppositions, they may provide a better prospect not only to how the message of the media is articulated, but also to what inconsistencies there are in their own vision of the North Korea's or their own position in the conflict.

Further research on that topic should also articulate what historical events have contributed to the understanding and perception of the image created in 2017. Thus, it will be important to highlight the main contextual topics in which the discourse exists and discover how it further emphasizes the overall image. In these terms, one of the main broad contexts we are going to observe are the contexts of Cold War and post-9/11 events that played a significant role in existing relations between countries and their visions of each other. In the case of North Korea, its image was first set in media in terms of a Cold War binary oppositions of capitalist-socialist and democracy-authoritarian worlds (Cumings, 2006). Then, after collapse of Soviet Union and establishment of the unipolar world, as North Korea remained one of the "adepts" of past values and whose stance led to its self-isolation, this narrative was further reshaped by the media. Events of September 11, 2001, have further contributed to fixation of a new opposition of civilized-rogue states, where North Korea was actively pushed towards the latter category (Dai & Hyun, 2010; Kim, 2014). At least, this path is true when we are looking at US media and trying to examine their stance on the issue. These narratives have definitely had their influence on Russian and Chinese discourses, as these countries have existed for some time in a unipolar world. However, since mid-2000s Russia and China gradually started to contest the world's unipolarity and create their own approaches on how the world should function (Lind, 2018; Bezerra, 2020). In this situation, the former friendly relations with North Korea may be invoked by the period I am researching and

some opposition to American division of the world may be proposed. That is yet another important question to be answered, namely are there any alternative contexts or divisions Russia and China are willing to propose when it comes to North Korea and its nuclear issue?

Another topic to be examined while analyzing initial coding is the question of how the media put existing institutions into the context? Which role do they give to themselves, what image of United Nations they construct, and do they consider other countries as destabilizing elements or partners willing to contribute to the issue resolution? By answering these questions, we may see the media reflection on the rationality and division of power. That may lead us to understanding how powers are exercised and what regimes of truth that power creates. Consequently, we will end up with a way of the established media messages deconstructing among the three countries and will be able to see how they impact the overall image of the world and of North Korea in it.

Yet another approach will be applied in the last part of my research, where I will be aiming to reflect on how successful North Korea is in contesting the established media discourses. There, instead of researching the regimes of “truth”, I am going to proceed from the assumption that all the established narratives are in some way false. Thus, the same coding process will have to be done with the North Korean media, namely *KCNA.co.jp*, after which an analysis will be provided on how it exceeds its established representation. Here, my focus will be on exaggeration of a narrative, the way it creates another reality and whether it can be convincing in terms of reality created by the big powers.

2.2 The things we know about North Korea and how they are constructed

The first thing we need to do while proceeding to the empirical part of the research is to set the main knowledge we can get about North Korea from the three countries’ media. To do this, it is important to outline the main events that were taking place in the time frame of the research, and then to look at the interpretations that were given to these events. This is the brief list of such events in chronological order:

- September 3, 2017 – thermonuclear bomb test in Pyunggye-ri. The test caused an earthquake detected in South Korea and China;
- September 11, 2017 – UN Security Council emergency meeting. During the meeting the Resolution 2375 was adopted, tightening sanctions against the North Korea. All 15 members (including USA, China and Russia) voted unanimously in favor of sanctions;

- September 15, 2017 – Hwasong-12 missile launches from Sunan airfield. The missile flew over the Japanese island Hokkaido and landed in the Pacific Ocean;
- September 19, 2017 – UN General Assembly meeting. During the meeting Donald Trump revealed his speech, where he called the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un the “rocket-man on a suicidal mission”;
- November 20, 2017 – the US government relisting of North Korea as a state-sponsor of terrorism. After this, additional sanctions from the US were imposed;
- November 28, 2017 – Hwasong-15 ICBM launch from Pyongsong. The missile is believed to be the first one that could be fueled horizontally and have a range of 13,000 km, thus being able to reach the continental US targets;
- December 22, 2017 – UN Security Council meeting regarding the latest North Korean ICBM test. Resolution 2397 was adopted, being to date the last one concerning DPRK.

Almost all these events were in some way covered in all six aforementioned media outlets. As we can see from the list of the events, most of them were concerning either the nuclear or missile tests themselves or the American administration response to these events, whether it is a president’s speech or an announcement of North Korea as a state sponsoring terrorism. This can already give us some perspective on what events were considered as relevant by the media and that the whole conflict is perceived by them in terms of the struggle between the DPRK and USA. This may also give us some important information on what relation of powers exists in this conflict and contributes to further understanding of the issue of media coverage.

But before we proceed with the power relations that will be described in Chapter 3 of this research, it is important to outline the actors within the North Korean discourse. First, and the most obvious actor here is North Korea, and to see how it is represented in media we need to know how likely the US, Chinese and Russian media cover that country, their own countries’ stance on the issue or other countries’ role in the conflict. To see this, it would be useful to look at Table 1, which illustrates the quantitative part of my coding process, particularly how many certain codes I have found in the news articles on certain discursive points. To add some additional comparative analysis, I provided not only the absolute number of codes on each topic, but also the number of certain codes per article, so it will become clear how densely each discursive point is covered in each media. The total number of articles is also provided and can also reflect the level of interest media show in the issue.

The first thing we can notice from the table below is that the representation of the DPRK and its regime in the US newspapers is much higher than in articles of Chinese and Russian media.

It can show bigger involvement of American media to the issue, as they are, on one hand, one of the main targets of supposed North Korean aggression and, on the other hand, one of the key subjects of the conflict and show more interest to solve it. From the other side, American media are also more likely to show their own country's strategy in the conflict, thus creating a discourse about the USA more actively than the discourse about the other countries involved.

Table 1

Number of codes per category and number of codes per article for each media analyzed

	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>FoxNews</i>	<i>China Daily</i>	<i>People's Daily</i>	<i>Izvestiya</i>	<i>Komsomolskaya Pravda</i>
Total number of articles	39	23	21	35	39	31
Representation of North Korea	192 (4,92)	136 (5,91)	54 (2,57)	65 (1,86)	92 (2,36)	60 (1,94)
Representation of sanctions	62 (1,59)	43 (1,87)	35 (1,67)	37 (1,06)	34 (0,87)	13 (0,42)
Representation of the country	102 (2,62)	83 (3,61)	43 (2,05)	89 (2,54)	35 (0,90)	55 (1,77)
Representation of the other countries	97 (2,49)	89 (3,87)	79 (3,76)	110 (3,14)	92 (2,36)	83 (2,68)
Moral language	68 (1,74)	77 (3,35)	62 (2,95)	115 (3,29)	49 (1,26)	54 (1,74)
Metaphors and analogies	54 (1,38)	32 (1,39)	11 (0,52)	15 (0,42)	40 (1,03)	7 (0,23)
Intertextual references	170 (4,36)	69 (3,00)	22 (1,05)	35 (1,00)	50 (1,28)	33 (1,06)

Possible solutions	45 (1,15)	26 (1,13)	21 (1,00)	27 (0,77)	17 (0,44)	6 (0,19)
Citations	59 (1,51)	26 (1,13)	39 (1,86)	59 (1,69)	13 (0,33)	57 (1,84)

Note: Total number of codes shown first, the number of codes per article is shown in brackets.

When looking at the content of the US articles, we can notice some differences in image of North Korea in *The New York Times* and *FoxNews*, particularly in their names of North Korea and its leader. While the former newspaper tries to remain neutral, calling Kim Jong-un “Mr. Kim”, the same way they call the US president “Mr. Trump”, and may refer to North Korea with various names, the latter pronouncedly uses only the name “North Korea” and refers to Kim Jong-un only by his surname Kim, while, for instance, calling Donald Trump “President Trump”. Even when the official name of the DPRK occurs in some citations, editorial board of *FoxNews* always gives an explanation in brackets with the name North Korea, thus underlining the US main agenda that the country is not recognized by American administration (*Fox News*, October 16). This already shows us the division between the discourses in conservative and liberal groups within American society. When going deeper on that topic, it becomes obvious that the right-wing media tend to escalate the image of North Korean threat to a higher degree and set it in darker tones. They constantly use such words as “rogue nation”, emphasize its mass violation of human rights and refer to the country as poor, backward and totalitarian. At that time, left-wing media tend to take a more sophisticated picture while showing different points of view on North Korean issues and proposing more peaceful solutions to the crisis, emphasizing diplomacy, soft power and agreements with China and Russia. This does not correspond with the previous findings that tend to show that the image created by left-wing and right-wing media in the USA does not share grave differences, but if we look at the issue from the power struggle angle, we may notice some logic in depicting the things described above.

The most obvious explanation to this kind of discrepancy between the two American media is rooted in the country’s division of power between the two mainstream parties, namely Republican and Democratic. Since the times of Bill Clinton presidency (1993-2001) there has been a big division between these two parties’ standpoint on North Korean issue and how it should be resolved. While the Republicans, where neo-conservatives became the leading faction by the end of the 20th century, preferred to take more hardline position on North Korea, the liberal faction of

the Democratic party were much more likely to negotiate with the DPRK (Cumings, 2006; Gusterson 2008). However, one may point to various inconsistencies in that division of power, such as the fact that it was Clinton's administration who ruined the nuclear deal in the 1990s, it was George W. Bush who crossed North Korea off the list of state-sponsors of terrorism in 2008, and, after all, it was Donald Trump who held one of the most successful negotiations with North Korea in the two countries' bilateral relations history in 2018. This is where we can go back to Laclau and Mouffe's statement that it is never possible to achieve a fully-fledged consensus within society (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 17), so all powers are constantly influencing one another's decisions. Another explanation that could be given on that issue is the different parties' attempts to discredit one another's approaches to gain more popularity among the voters caring for international policy of the US. In that case, both Republicans and Democrats may start from the assumption that the war with North Korea is hardly possible, as well as the two countries normalization of relations, so any engaging with North Korea itself will not lead to any result, but may be used as a tool to show their counterparts' method is ineffective, thus proving their stance on North Korea is right. It may be partly confirmed by the Mutz's research showing that many voters in the US are concerned with international politics and what was one of the key reasons for Trump to win the 2016 elections is his tendency to politicize international issues (Mutz, 2018). And while North Korea is shown in American media as a close ally of China, which became one of the biggest concerns for Americans in international politics, it becomes obvious that by deterring China the US government may also successfully deter North Korea. However, these findings have to be further tested to prove that assumption.

What also makes difference between *The New York Times* and *FoxNews* coverage of the issue is their tone about the North Korean nuclear program and the description of its capabilities in terms of reaching the US continental territory. The right-wing media tends to adopt the tactics of creating the atmosphere of fear in their messages, thus showing ambiguity in terms of the possibility of war. As Ventsel et al. show in their research, ambiguity in narratives is one of the most important fundamentals for creating a feeling of fear (Ventsel et al., 2019), and that fear of war is on one hand cultivated in the *FoxNews* with citations from the North Korean officials such as "the nuclear war may break out at any moment" (*Fox News*, October 16), and on the other hand the attempt to show that North Korean threat is overestimated, demonstrating that any attempt of North Korea attacking the US would mean the defeat of the "rogue" regime (*Fox News*, December

10). At the same time, *The New York Times* takes somewhat softer approach and tries to question the danger of North Korean nuclear weapons for the US. For instance, when describing DPRK's nuclear capabilities and their tests, they usually provide the description with a supplementary comment that the ability of the country's ICBM to reach the US is unconfirmed. This is an example of how they commented on a Hwasong-15 launch in November: "the distance traveled, while impressive, does not necessarily translate into a working intercontinental ballistic missile that could deliver a thermonuclear warhead" (*The New York Times*, November 28); "Some experts doubt whether the Hwasong-15 missile can deliver a nuclear weapon" (*The New York Times*, November 29). This can be understood as an attempt to create a counter-discourse to the right-wing media "fear"-tactics and show that North Korea is negotiable and may not possess a direct threat to the US. That once again reemphasizes the liberal assumption that talks with North Korea is more effective measure than a "deterrence game".

The finalizing note should be made about both newspapers' stance on North Korea and what unites their position. Regardless of whether they portray North Korea as a threat or as a rogue nation not capable of defeating neither the US, nor South Korea in a potential nuclear conflict, whether they propose the idea of diplomatic or military pressure on the North, they both spread pro-American point of view and do not go beyond the limits set by the US mainstream narrative. In other words, even though, for instance, some conservative media may accuse liberals of appeasement of the enemy due to their commitment to negotiations rather than tightening sanctions or deterring the North, both conservative and liberal camps in American politics share the same level of dissatisfaction of the DPRK's policy and provide almost the same critique of Kim's regime, but doing it differently to invoke different emotions and reactions in their readers' minds. Consequently, they come to different, but yet believed to be attractive for the US, ideas of how to reduce tensions on the peninsula with almost the same point within the moderate proposes (sanctions and talks with more emphasis either on sanctions regime or on negotiations) and the same goals within radical options, such as abrupt increase of investments into North's economy or naval blockade of the DPRK.

Another image is constructed in Chinese and Russian media. These two countries have a long history of relatively friendly relations with the DPRK. One of the articles in *People's Daily* is even dedicated to the topic of Chinese-North Korean friendship, underlining the tradition of exchanges between the CCP and Korean Workers' Party and making a statement that China-DPRK

relations hold a significant impact on regional security (*People's Daily*, October 21). There is nothing surprising about this, as China is still the biggest trading partner of North Korea, while the North is one of the main powers to contain the United States in the region. As during the mid-2010s the crisis between Trump's and Xi Jinping's administrations started to rise, the importance of the North Korean leverage also started to grow (Kim, 2016; Chan & Bridges, 2018; Sheen, 2021). However, China is still explicitly critical of the North Korean nuclear program, always reinstating in the press that they do not accept the DPRK's status as a nuclear power. They usually describe North Korean nuclear and ICBM tests as provocations or actions "running against their own interests" (*China Daily*, September 5). They also cite lots of foreign media and officials while talking about the condemnation of the North's actions, even though acknowledging that North Korea is not the only side of a conflict that should make concessions in it.

Chinese media seem to take much more discreet standpoint on North Korea, presenting it not as a sole cause of problems on the Korean peninsula, but rather as one of the many. This results in their coverage of North Korean actions in a more dry and adjusted manner than the American media do. On the other hand, they are much more prone to moral language, reemphasizing their commitment to peace and stability in the region. And in terms of it, Chinese position does not seem clear enough when it comes to China's own role as country that has big influence in the region. And even though Chinese government have proposed one of the most comprehensive and pragmatic solutions to the conflict, on which I will elaborate later, they still seem to balance between the two sides, thus diminishing effectiveness of the measures they propose to be taken on North Korea.

Russian media, even though acknowledging the rich history of Soviet-DPRK and Russian-DPRK relations, look even more distanced from the North Korea and the ongoing nuclear crisis. Even though since 2014 Russian policy towards the DPRK have changed and countries' bilateral relations became significantly closer (Weitz, 2015), it was still seemed more like demonstration of Russian power in international relations rather than full-fledged rapprochement as it was after the 2019 Putin-Kim summit (Toloraya & Yakovleva, 2021) and especially after military involvement of North Korean forces into the military actions in Kursk oblast in November 2024. Possibly, due to that reason, there was still some notable penetration of the US discourse into the Russian media. For example, one of the articles' titles in *Izvestiya* is called "Pariah in a 'nuclear supermarket'", referring to the American narrative about North Korea as a rogue state, isolated

from the outside world (*Izvestiya*, October 13). While describing North Korean leader, they may also use some “parasitic messages” that were previously researched in American and British media (Seo, 2023), for example, referring to Kim Jong-un’s health, telling his health issues may be a reason behind the nuclear tests’ slowdown (*Izvestiya*, November 19). In that same article they refer to the Western tabloids *Daily Mail* and *Daily Star* to spread the assumption of Kim having gout, diabetes, heart disease and hypertension.

In contrast to *Izvestiya*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* tried to keep more moderate tone while talking about North Korea, ending up with citing Russian and foreign officials more than giving their own analysis of the situation. When they were trying to, their language was also closer to the language of the American media with presenting North Korea as a threat when, for example, talking about the history of attempted murders of Kim dynasty representatives: “Now, there is a third representative of the ruling family under attack – Kim Jong-un, who becomes more and more dangerous to his neighbors every year” (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 7). But even though they admit the role of North Korea as a threat to regional peace and stability, they still recognize (rather through citing Russian officials’ words) that USA plays an important role in the conflict escalation and that the US are the main target for the North Korean nuclear weapon.

After briefly describing the facts all three media presented about North Korea, it is time to ask the next question: how do countries distance themselves from the DPRK? What role do they see for themselves in the conflict? If they all see North Korea as a threat (even though not the only one in the conflict), do they try to distinguish their own image and agenda from the North Korean one? And do they show any real involvement in the issue or just cover it as a regular event? These are the questions I will be trying to answer in the next section.

2.3 “Peace-willing” China, “detached” Russia and the “evil-fighting” USA

Now, for better contextualizing power-relations within the case, a description of the way the countries see themselves is required. After doing that, the discursive map can be built about the perception of various aspects of international relations when it comes to the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2017. It is also important to trace how the three countries’ discourses are related

to their broader hegemonic projects, such as the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind”⁵, Russian pursuit for sovereignty⁶ or “America First” policy⁷. In that context a considerable note should be made, as the countries tend to describe themselves not only explicitly with words and direct dissemination of their agenda, but also through implicit levels, such as contradistinction between themselves and North Korea, thus creating an image of a country that is in some way different from the DPRK. Description of other countries may also be contributing to the research, as it may reveal how they see each other in the conflict and what roles do they give to the others in resolving the issue.

The US media quite obviously point out that North Korea is one of the “wicked few” jeopardizing the world peace and stability. While *Fox News* tells it directly, using sentences like “The scourge our planet today is a small group of rogue regimes that violate every principle on which the United Nations is based” (*Fox News*, September 19) (it is also worth noting how they refer to the UN and its principles) and citing Donald Trump saying that USA have one problem and it is North Korea (*Fox News*, November 3), *The New York Times* tries to look for a more moderate language for voicing that opinion. For instance, they describe North Korea as “the most totalitarian state in the world” (*The New York Times*, October 5) or provide North Korean expressions such as “just as a wolf cannot become a lamb, so an American imperialist can never change his aggressive nature.” (Ibid) In this way, they not only show they have no sympathy to North Korean regime but also reinstate their commitment to seeing North Korea not as it is right now, specifically not totalitarian and not seeing Americans as imperialists. And even though they admit the US administration does not do everything correctly with its policy towards the DPRK, for example, describing both Trump and Kim as “two neophyte leaders with strange hair and thin skins” “insulting each other in bizarre ways” (*The New York Times*, September 23), that only happens due to their rejection of the neo-conservative way of changing North Korea and its regime.

⁵ Part of the Chinese Dream policy under Xi Jinping’s rule in the PRC that advocates for better cooperation in economic and cultural affairs between countries and non-interference in domestic politics of sovereign states. For more information refer to Khan et al., 2021.

⁶ The concept used by Russian president Vladimir Putin, mainly on the territories outside of the former Soviet Union, which emphasizes countries’ sovereignty and end of a unipolar world. For more information refer to Bezerra, 2020.

⁷ Nationalist policy proclaimed during the first presidency of Donald Trump (2017-2021) that sets American interests as the main priority in the US foreign policy, with deterrence of China as the main geopolitical contender and prioritizing immediate preferences over long-term goals for building free society on the Earth. For more information refer to Haass, 2021.

While describing the US and their own politics towards the North, both newspapers describe the leading role of their country in East Asian affairs, even though also doing it in a different way. Conservative media tend to outline the role of the US in adopting the sanctions regime in the UN, pushing China and Russia for voting in favor of sanctions and being a main power bringing democracy to the region. In one of its articles *Fox News* even explicitly accuse Russia of backing the North Korean regime and resisting “US-mandated regime change” (*Fox News*, September 14), even though the official rhetorics of Donald Trump and his administration was that they are not willing to overthrow Kim Jong-un’s administration. Liberal media tend to criticize Trump’s retreat from the region and inability or unwillingness “to put together a realistic and coherent strategy” (*The New York Times*, September 6), even though through the lens of this criticism one can clearly see the US’ claim for a leadership or hegemonic position in the region. Even when admitting doubtful effect of sanctions against North Korea and overall Trump’s strategy on it, *The New York Times* journalists struggle with proposing any feasible alternative to the diplomatic pressure. They admit that the US will never recognize North Korea as a nuclear power and North Korea will never negotiate on complete nuclear disarmament, but at the same time when it comes to propositions on how to deal with the conflict, the most realistic and thorough approach still includes destabilizing Kim’s regime and using some sort of sanctions. This is what Nicolas Kristof writes about it: “Third, human rights have to be part of the agenda, backed by the threat of suspending North Korea’s credentials at the United Nations. Fourth, we should support organizations that smuggle information on USB drives into North Korea; this would be cheap and might contribute to change in the long term. Fifth, increase cyberwarfare, which the U.S. has already used effectively against North Korea. Sixth, let’s enforce tighter sanctions, but only if harnessed to a plausible outcome.” (*The New York Times*, October 5) Here we can also see how the human rights agenda is pushed to the front, which may tell about the ambitions of the US to play a leading role in that issue and exercising power over the country through a human rights discourse.

Same as in the US media, we can see claims by Chinese newspapers for being a hegemonic power in the region. However, they articulate that claim in a slightly different way, shaping the image of China as a country constantly advocating for peaceful resolution of the conflict. They openly condemn North Korean missile tests, at the same time blaming USA for escalating the conflict and saying the US has to change their strategy towards North Korea. On the other hand,

they actively emphasize the role of Russia in proposing peace initiatives and working together with Chinese administration on the issue. Unlike the US, Chinese media show little interest in changing the North Korean political regime, but rather to deter ambitions of the DPRK. However, they still consider their country as a key player in the region, implicitly hinting at the US inability to solve the conflict on their own. The whole essence of the Chinese narrative on its own position in the crisis can be described by the citation from the op-ed in *People's Daily*, criticizing the US approach of tightening sanctions and exchanging threats with the North Korean government: "China is willing to play a responsible role as a major country, but will not shoulder the responsibility for the selfish interests of the US." (*People's Daily*, September 20) In other words, we can see three main messages Chinese media are trying to emphasize in various articles (and in this particular citation) on the topic: China is a major power and wants to behave responsibly; the US is a major country, but irresponsibly follows its own interests instead of building a stable peace on the Korean peninsula; the strategy of the DPRK's containment is right, but has to be done according to Chinese plan.

Another important issue when it comes to China-DPRK relations is the sanctions regime and China's fair implementation of it. Chinese media consistently underline their commitment to the UN resolutions and that China comprehensively implements them. While speaking about the UN Security Council resolutions, media always highlight that resolutions were adopted unanimously, however without specifying the role of China in these resolutions' adoption. In his research about China's stance on the North Korean nuclear issue, Sheen mentions that since the middle 2010s official Chinese rhetorics towards North Korea have shifted from negotiations in form of Six-Party Talks (which included North Korea, South Korea, USA, China, Japan and Russia) to the strategy of using sanctions to pressure the DPRK in addition to call for talks and peaceful solutions (Sheen, 2021). What causes even greater opposition from Chinese media are possible secondary sanctions from the US that may influence Chinese businesses and government. In one of their news articles, *People's Daily* provides words of Chinese ambassador in the USA Cui Tiankai saying, "China is a wrong target for sanctions related to the DPRK's nuclear issue." (*People's Daily*, September 17) In the other articles of the media we can also see some news related to China's implementation of sanctions. Authors claim China cuts its oil supply to North Korea after its September nuclear test (*People's Daily*, September 23) and will close its joint ventures with the DPRK within 120 days after the adoption of the resolution (*People's Daily*, September

29). However, even in these articles they also mention the need for sincere following of the UN resolutions, probably hinting at the sanctions US imposed on North Korea in addition to the ones adopted by the UN Security Council.

Chinese media also actively push forward their proposals on the issue, namely the dual-track approach and suspension-for-suspension initiative. In short, these initiatives mean suspension of North Korean nuclear and missile tests, as well as simultaneous suspension of the US-ROK military exercises. This may seem like an acceptable way for China both to reduce tensions on the peninsula, decrease American influence in the region and improve the China-DPRK relations after the latter's termination of nuclear tests. In this situation, it will be much easier for Chinese officials to establish hegemonic relations between China and other countries in East Asia and thus promoting and developing a concept of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind, which has been a foreign policy slogan of the PRC during Xi's rule. The realization of that plan may be regarded as the Chinese global strategy of building a so-called "Chinese Dream" which is also associated with Xi Jinping's strategy for Chinese development.

Russia takes somewhat different approach in its hegemonic project, usually emphasizing creation of a community of sovereign nations (Deyermond, 2016). This is the prism through which they address the North Korean issue as well. For instance, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in one of its articles refers to Senator of the Federation Council Frants Klintsevich saying, "if the DPRK continues to defend its sovereignty in that way, it 'may lead to an emergence of a very serious conflict'." (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, September 3) In this statement we can clearly see that Russian foreign policy, even though is led by the principle of countries' sovereignty, admits that sovereignty has its own limitations when interests of Russia are at stake. That is why they often mention Russia will not accept nuclear status of North Korea and emphasize their role as a potential mediator of the conflict. They further emphasize this role while speaking of the US call for Putin to help with resolving the crisis (*Izvestiya*, November 11), even though Russian media admit their complicated relations with the US in 2010s. They also advocate for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and acknowledge the role of both the DPRK and the US in aggravating tensions on the Korean peninsula. In terms of the propositions Russia stands for, it is the plan created together with China and stating this plan is underestimated by other sides involved in the conflict. Particularly, Russian contribution to the plan is the proposal of a three-stage "roadmap" that describes step-by-step deescalation of the crisis through renunciation of North Korean nuclear tests

and US-South Korean military exercises during the first stage. Second stage includes direct negotiations between the US and the DPRK, while the third one calls both North and South Korea to the inter-Korean dialogue.

Russia and its media also express the most voiced critique of sanctions regime against North Korea. Even though Russia have voted in favor of the two UN resolutions regarding North Korea in the late 2017, Russian media still highlight the ineffectiveness of sanctions and their unwillingness to worsen their relations with the DPRK. In one of *Izvestiya*'s articles authors cite the Russia's Deputy Head of the Ministry of Foreign Relations Sergei Ryabkov calling the US sanctions against the North "dull and miserable." (*Izvestiya*, September 13) In another, they refer to Putin saying sanctions against the DPRK are ineffective and will not help denuclearizing Korean peninsula (*Izvestiya*, September 5). They also emphasized Russian influence in the sanctions' regime discussion, particularly the role Russia have played in excluding the call for them to stop its air traffic (*Izvestiya*, September 14) with the DPRK and wrote about the US sending humanitarian aid to North Korea despite the sanctions' regime (*Izvestiya*, September 22). Finally, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* has published the article about the Russian Defense Ministry's delegation visit to North Korea in December 2017. Even though they state they do not know exactly what the delegations were talking about, they spread the information referring to rumors (they use expressions such as "people are saying" or "according to unofficial data") that the discussion was about the North Korea's readiness for talks with the US, security guarantees for Russia during the next nuclear tests and North Korea's plan in case of war with the US (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 14).

Consequently, we can now build a comparative discursive map, presented in Table 2. There we can see four different nodal points like "threat", "security", "sanctions" and "peace", which were the main points shaping discourse about North Korea in 2017. Discursive map aims to show and compare how narratives are differently articulated throughout all three countries' media through different signifiers. Later, I will refer to Table 2 to elaborate more on how the power of the countries is exercised towards North Korea and what outcomes they were seeking to achieve. For now, we can see these nodal points bear somewhat different meanings in each country's discourse about the DPRK. Even though for all of them North Korea is a threat to peace in the region, one of the main security concerns and a country to impose sanctions on, it is still perceived differently depending on the hegemonic project and countries context of relations with North

Korea. US media constantly highlight North Korean hostility towards their country, thus making assumptions that in case of war they will be one of the main targets. That requires an urgent response, when both hard-liners and soft-liners need to answer questions like who is their enemy and what should they do about it? And although they may give different answers, they both provide the message through somewhat the same signifiers, highlighting human rights discourse, contraposing world community against the isolated countries and following the aim for USA to remain a leading force in the region. For China and Russia, North Korea does not possess a direct threat, even though it remains a constant source of instability. That makes North Korean actions seem irresponsible, provocative and too aggressive. At the same time, neither of them considers the US as a strategic ally in the crisis, which leads to contesting American narrative and proposing their own version of the story that depends on certain country's ambitions, level of involvement in the crisis and understanding of the world order.

Table 2

Discursive map of nodal points organization in a country's media in relation to the DPRK

	USA	China	Russia
Threat	Linked to "rogue regimes", "totalitarianism", "communism", inability to control	Linked to "provocations", "irresponsible behavior", mutual hostility	Linked to "provocations", "Western influence", lack of sovereignty from the major power
Security	Emphasizing the role of alliances and US leadership, referring to "deterrence"	Emphasizing importance of friendly coexistence and need for mutual concessions, feasibility and responsibility	Emphasizing "stability", "security guarantees" and smaller pressure
Sanctions	Important measure to "deter" "evil regimes",	Forced and necessary measure but need to come together with	"Dull and miserable" measure with questionable

Peace	effectiveness is questionable, but theoretically may lead to a regime change	“peace talks”. Should lead to denuclearization of smaller powers	effectiveness. Pressure instrument on countries’ sovereignty
	Desired outcome, but not the only option. Linked to “stability”, “democracy” and collective pressure on those considered as “hermits”	The only acceptable option. Linked to “stability”, “friendly relations” and responsibility of “major powers”	Desired outcome. Linked to respect of each country’s concerns and needs, “friendly relations” and “restraint of actions”

3. Korean War, Cold War and 9/11: Contextualizing 2017 North Korean nuclear crisis

3.1 Communist, totalitarian or terrorist: how global discourses echo each other in the case of North Korea?

After looking at the way American, Chinese and Russian media present North Korea, their stance on the nuclear crisis, sanctions and overall place of their countries in the conflict, it is important to look at how these media further contextualize the events that were going on in the second half of 2017 on the Korean peninsula. What historical events have shaped the image of North Korea in media at the time? What discursive dichotomies do they refer to and how it helps the reader to get deeper understanding of the situation? And finally, which contexts are emphasized in the six newspapers and what can this context say about the countries’ own geopolitical rationalities? These are the questions I will try to answer during the third chapter of my research. In the first part, I will briefly describe attempts of North Korean crisis contextualizing in different media. In the second, I am going to summarize as many discourses about North Korea as possible and provide a consistent image of it in three countries. Additionally, I will show the dynamics of such images during September-December 2017 if there were any. Finally, in the third part of the

chapter, I will end with analyzing contradictions within the established discourses and try to explain, how all three countries theoretically may be more interested in keeping the status quo than in resolving the situation and bringing Korean tensions to an end (or at least to deescalation).

As I have outlined above, there are three main historical contexts in which the North Korean issue exists since the division of Korea in 1945. These are the Korean War (1950-1953), Cold War that took place since the middle 1940s until the end of 1980s and terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The Korean war was one of the biggest conflicts in terms of countries and people involved since World War II. It signaled about the grave differences existing between the capitalist and socialist blocs and ended up with fixing the division of Korea on its North and South parts, thus provoking economic, political and military competition between the newly established states. The war did not end with a peace treaty, so the peace talks between the DPRK and the ROK are still going on and risk of the new phase of war outbreak is regularly emphasized in the media during any military crisis on the peninsula. Narratives of Korean War were further transformed into the Cold War ones that divided the world into two implacable camps trying to deter each other. In this dichotomy, North Korea was placed into the socialist camp, and this perception shaped its image throughout the whole 20th century, further migrating to the 21st century discourses, dividing countries into rogue and civilized, good and evil, opened and isolated. The division was reemphasized after the 9/11 attack and proclamation of the global “War on terror”. In that context, countries considered to be “rogue” were suspected of trying to contest the existing world order with terrorist attacks and sponsoring aggressive destabilizing anti-establishment groups in “civilized” societies. These are the three main lenses through which politicians and journalists are trying to construct the image of North Korea, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with the established narrative (Dai & Hyun, 2010; Seo & Nah, 2020).

When it comes to revoking the images of the past, US media are the ones giving by far the most extensive context of the issue, which leads to a “bombardment” by signifiers, and it becomes hard to highlight the main historical events they are trying to refer to. That is why I will split the intertextual references from the US media into two parts. First, I will describe the role the context of the three aforementioned events plays in shaping the discourse, and after that I will show what other events are present in the American discourse and how they are represented in the newspapers. *The New York Times* describes Korean War as the “Forgotten War” that was eclipsed in American collective memory by the Vietnam War (*The New York Times*, September 23). However, they still

emphasize its role in Korean collective memory, referring to it as to a “Kim’s bloody mistake” and admitting its role in establishment of the power architecture in East Asia as the one that “forged the bond” between the two newly founded communist states (namely China and North Korea). It gives us further prospect of how post-Korean War dichotomy revealed division of powers in the region and how it was represented in the US narratives. It is elaborated even more in *Fox News* articles. Even though they mention Korean War only briefly, saying it ended with an armistice instead of a peace treaty, they tell much more about the Cold War and their perception of their opponents, such as the USSR, China and North Korea. The Cold War events are put in the context of an existential struggle between two different worlds. The outcome of the struggle was the US’ and their allies’ successful containment of “supposedly crazy or irrational leaders with nuclear weapons – such as Josef Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao Zedong in China” (*Fox News*, November 17), which then led to establishment of American liberal model and its success throughout the world. But not all “evil” forces were defeated during that struggle, that is why North Korea in the US conservative media (and in some way in liberal too, but in a more nuanced way) is presented as an occasional “survivor” from a Cold War period.

Being a deliberately losing power in contemporary world, North Korea is rather portrayed as some sort of an atavist state, existing on a periphery of international relations and proved to be unable to co-opt into the existing system (*Fox News*, June 3; *The New York Times*, December 27). Both liberal and conservative media in the USA actively mention attempts made by Clinton and Bush Jr. administrations to negotiate with North Korea, but with little success. This is how they proceed to the third discourse of the ones mentioned above, which is a discourse of rogue states’ terrorism. Here, the logic is quite straightforward: rogue states tend to contest the existing world order through sponsorship of terrorist groups or committing actions that can be classified as a terrorist attack, so to stop them “civilized” world should unite in deterrent of the rogue states (*Fox News*, September 19; *The New York Times*, December 3). For the purpose of identification of such states, the US State Department created a list of countries-sponsors of terrorism in 1979. As for the beginning of 2017, the list included Syria, Iran and Sudan. North Korea was initially included in the list in 1988 after bombing South Korean civil aircraft in 1987. It was also accused of attempt to kill then-South Korean president Chun Doo-hwan in 1983 in Myanmar. It was then removed from the list in 2008 by George W. Bush as a concession for planned negotiations with North Korea. However, in 2017 the talks were recognized as failed, and North Korea again appeared in

the list, this time accused of killing Kim Jong-un's half-brother Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia using a forbidden nerve agent in February 2017 and of death of Otto Warmbier, American teenager who was imprisoned in North Korea for an attempt to steal a propaganda poster and supposedly being tortured while in prison⁸ (*Fox News*, November 20; *The New York Times*, October 22). *FoxNews* also added the accusations of selling weapons to terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Relisting of North Korea faced ambiguous reaction in American media. They state the proposition of relisting North Korea was met with approvement among both parties' members in Congress, however, both conservative and liberal media question the effectiveness of such measures and the way sanctions will be implemented, saying that USA have already imposed severe sanctions on the North and relisting feels as rather symbolical move (*Fox News*, November 20; *The New York Times*, November 21).

This media reaction can signal both their frustration with the relisting and their passive support of current things. I have already discussed both liberal and conservative media supportiveness of sanctions implementation to some extent, so the designation of North Korea as a state-sponsor of terrorism raises questions of what will happen next. And while conservative media propose imposing sanctions on Chinese and other companies doing business with North Korea, liberal media show less enthusiasm on the issue, highlighting different positions in South Korean society on that issue and trying to doubt Trump's strategy of maximizing pressure and calling for negotiations at the same time.

Even though Korean War, Cold War and 9/11 contribute to 2017 North Korean crisis' contextualization richly, they are not the only events American media use to shape historical background of the issue. They widely use both fewer known facts about North Korean history and some comparisons with past events that have no relation to the conflict and aimed to distract the reader. Deeper contextualization includes naming such events, as 2006 US court decision of North Korea training and providing funding to Hezbollah for their various attacks on American citizens or 2013 declaration by North Korean officials their relations with South Korea as a "state of war". However, what says much more about the method of discourse construction, are examples of comparison of past events to the ongoing crisis. In them, American media tend to explicitly

⁸ Even though this was the reason mentioned in American media, US Congress bill S. 672 requiring re-designation of North Korea as a state-sponsor of terrorism lacks mentioning Otto Warbier case (North Korea State Sponsor of Terrorism Designation Act of 2017).

mention their stance on the issue and sometimes the ideal way of the conflict resolution. For instance, here is what *Fox News* wrote about North Korea when comparing it to pre-World War I Serbia: “Like Serbia in 1914, North Korea is unpopular with virtually every nation in the world, including China. On the eve of World War I, the Guardian newspaper noted sarcastically that “if it were physically possible for Serbia to be towed out to sea and sunk there, the air of Europe would at once seem cleaner.” Most of the world would readily apply this description to North Korea.” (*Fox News*, December 10) Here, they quote the opinion of Douglas Macgregor who was an author of the article and who clearly refers to the easiest, and arguably most philistine view on North Korea, where in the ideal world it could be easily annihilated without any talks or attempts for a peaceful resolution. But, as it is impossible in reality, the only right option for the USA to do is “do not take the bait” and do not start a war with North Korea. *The New York Times* unsurprisingly tries to deliver the same message on the issue, also using comparisons, but in a more refined way. They highlight how the close relations between China and North Korea become toxic for the former and compare them to American alliances with the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel, who are one of the main partners of the US in the region, but at the same time the ones constantly ignoring American agenda (*The New York Times*, September 6). These comparisons can be interpreted as a way of soft pressure on China, aiming to show the sanctions regime is beneficial for them as well, as it may help to “pacify” their ally.

Another important global issue that was happening in 2017 and that partially shaped the discourse at that time was the Trump’s quit from talks with Iran on nuclear weapons. *The New York Times* constantly mention that action as a destabilizing one, as it removes one of the last US leverages in dealing with North Korea. They also refer to the Libya case, whose leader Muammar Gaddafi abandoned the country’s nuclear weapons program after talks with the US and who was then attacked by the US army during the civil unrest in 2011 (*The New York Times*, September 4; *The New York Times*, September 6). These two cases clearly demonstrate awareness American media have about their country’s limited influence on North Korean politics and how it was further diminished in 2011 and 2017, and that once again shows the dependence of the US administration on the good will of China and Russia in terms of sanctions implementation.

When speaking about the contextualization in Chinese media, it was done in a slightly different manner. They do not deny the Korean War and Cold War contexts, but their attempts to put the North Korean crisis into context end up with very brief and dry description of events, such

as an attack on a Korean Air flight in 1987 or arrest of Otto Warmbier in 2016. At the same time, they provide various instances of the US failures in talks with North Korea, thus showing how they contributed to the situation the world was in 2017. Chinese media mention the collapse of 1994 framework agreement, US attacks on Iraq and Libya (*China Daily*, September 4), American uneven stance on the so-called “Four No’s” policy of Moon Jae-in⁹ that was agreed with Trump administration in 2017 (*China Daily*, September 23) and US withdrawal from the agreement with Iran (*People’s Daily*, December 20). When talking about the relisting of North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism, *People’s Daily* refer to the DPRK’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying, “since 1979, the United States has been labeling the countries that are not obedient to it as ‘state sponsors of terrorism’.” (*People’s Daily*, November 23) They do not provide any alternative discourse from the US media, which may contribute to legitimizing North Korean narrative on that issue. Chinese media also emphasize their country’s role in attempts to solve the nuclear crisis, particularly by mentioning Six Party talks (*China Daily*, September 4) or talks between Chinese and Russian Foreign Ministers at the United Nations in 2017 (*People’s Daily*, September 19).

Russian media followed almost the same line as their Chinese counterparts. They also acknowledged the US administration struggling with their policy towards North Korea, giving examples of Iraq and Libya. *Izvestiya* also mention how the USSR and Russia have contributed several times to the North Korea signing nuclear non-proliferation treaties (*Izvestiya*, September 26). This all creates an image of both Russia and China as the powers that are able to build constructive dialogue with the DPRK and serve as examples for the US administration of what way they should follow. Therefore, their discourse was not aimed to push North Korea towards the way of denuclearization, but to show what the US did wrong when they were trying to talk to North Korea. This also implicitly recalls the Cold War division, when the DPRK was on the same side with China and the USSR and these countries had much bigger influence on their ally than the US. That is why, when it comes to the relations with North Korea, USA simply cannot play the leading role if they want the goal of North Korean denuclearization to be achieved. It then leads us not only to the differences in discourse formation in USA, China and Russia, but to the very essence of their projects of power reproduction, the way these states see the world and their

⁹ South Korean president Moon Jae-in presented his “four no’s” policy during his July 2017 visit to G-20 Summit in Germany. The policy proclaims no hostility to North Korea, no intentions to attack it, no attempts to change the DPRK’s government and no pressure on the issue of reunification (*Hankyoreh*, July 3)

ideas of how the world should be. This is what I am going to talk about in the next part of my research.

3.2 Civilized world and “the wicked few”: what perceptions of the world do media reflect and how it helps to exercise power

After looking at what narratives do media produce and how they articulate their relation to North Korea, it is now time to go back to the global relations of power perceptions and try to look how discourses reflect these “truth regimes”. Particularly, I will focus on the division on civilized and rogue countries in order to show how this narrative unites American, Chinese and Russian discourse and how it helps them to reinforce their countries’ power. In my opinion, this division is crucial when it comes to a discourse construction for various reasons. First, as USA served as a hegemonic power in the world for a few decades and were the ones pushing such narrative since 1990s, this discourse’s reflection can be found in any other media, regardless of whether they agree with it or not. Second, as major powers in the region, China and Russia tend to adopt that discourse to some extent and to implicitly transmit it in their own way. Third, this division then becomes one of the most crucial points when it comes to containment of North Korea or other smaller actors, such as imposing of sanctions or diplomatic pressure.

When it comes to the US media narratives, the division on civilized and rogue states becomes obvious from the very beginning. They were explicitly formalized in the Trump’s UN speech, where he emphasized the existing of “the righteous many” and “the wicked few.” (*Fox News*, September 19; *The New York Times*, September 6) Even though he did not specify the comprehensive list of countries belonging to these categories, it is clear that this division formally exists in the mind of the US policymakers, at least in the ones of Trump’s administration. However, this division further introduces questions, for instance, what place in this distinction do China and Russia have? The answer to this question is uneven, as on the one hand, media tend to admit the importance of Chinese and Russian help when it comes to the talks with North Korea or pressuring it (*Fox News*, September 11). On the other, American media, especially the conservative ones, tend to accuse China and Russia in violating sanctions regime or pressuring the UN Security Council to make sanctions less tough, as they are not interested in the regime change and further tensions inside the North Korean society (*Fox News*, December 31). That is why, when it comes to a consistent strategy on the issue of China’s and Russia’s support, the consensus seems hardly

achievable as the US administration always has to balance between relying on the countries that are not their allies and trying to convince them that US plan is the most appropriate one to adopt in current circumstances.

Consequently, both *Fox News* and *The New York Times* propose various solutions to the issue, starting from naval blockade and ending with the increase of American investments into the North Korean economy (*The New York Times*, September 5). And this may reflect overall media frustration from the events going on, due to lack of consensus neither among politicians, nor among US society. It then comes to some sort of implicit recognition by the US media the fact that their policy towards North Korea is failed and their influence on the situation is limited without Chinese or Russian support. That is why, the only thing left for the hard-liners within the US (that are mostly associated with conservatives' politics) is to designate North Korea and other countries like Iran, Syria or Cuba, as rogue regimes, referring to the UN principles and advocating for tougher sanctions against these countries, and talking about their commitment to defend their allies in the region, such as Japan and South Korea. They construct reality, where the North is already lost, so the US do not have to involve in active conflict with it, but rather to sanction it as much as possible and to leave the things as they are unless they will collapse by themselves. It is also worth noting that *Fox News* rarely refers to the UN or some other international organizations as to the source of power, sometimes even calling them "feckless." (*Fox News*, December 31) However, it is unclear what alternative to this type of organization do they propose. Therefore, these words seem to be used to contest the idea of a multipolar world proposed by Russia and China, where the US will once again have a limited influence in global decision making.

At the same time, for liberal media like *The New York Times*, there is some space for maneuvering, even though it is also limited. They emphasize importance of direct talks with North Korea but simultaneously recognize the limitations their country has in convincing North Korea either to abandon their nuclear program or at least to stop their nuclear tests (*The New York Times*, September 18). Another important idea *The New York Times* provides is the idea of power struggle between USA and China in the region, therefore proposing the need to actively involve Russia in talks with North Korea. However, some authors still highlight the need for the US administration to weaken North Korean government, as it potentially may pose a threat in alliance with China and Russia, so the US should not abandon the idea of influence on the DPRK directly (*The New York Times*, October 5; *The New York Times*, December 3). Here, through all of the calls for pressure

and talks with other major parties, we can see how the American media try to highlight power relations in the region, where the US should achieve more influence on the DPRK, thus keeping its hegemonic position and serving as a country not willing to give up its positions.

Unlike the US, Chinese media do not tend to portray North Korea directly as a rogue regime. Furthermore, they emphasize the history of Chinese-North Korean friendship and try to provide more “carrots” than “sticks” for Kim’s regime and to criticize USA to the same degree (or someone may argue that they criticize the US even more) as the DPRK. But through this higher degree of criticism, we may see two different sides worth mentioning. First, we can recall the phrase about China’s intention to play a role in the conflict as a “major power”, which may mean their criticism is dictated by the image of the world where China, US and Russia are such major powers, at least in terms of East Asian region. This means that these countries have to bear the same level of responsibility for the behavior of minor powers, as it is they who play a key role in international relations and can come up with an idea of compromise when the minor power feels threat to its existence or safety from the major one. Second, their stance towards the US and reference to a major-minor powers division can be explained in terms of a power struggle in the region, where Chinese discourse tries to emphasize its country role as a peacekeeper and mediator, one of the few forces able to act responsibly and serve interests of global peace (Dai & Hyun, 2010; Meyskens, 2019; Kozlova 2025). Therefore, in terms of the current crisis, USA is the main force to talk with, as China was already successful in pressuring North Korea to join Six-Party talks before.

When it comes to international organizations, such as the UN, *China Daily* and *People’s Daily* are much more prone to refer to the international law in terms of North Korea. They voiced one of the most severe critiques of the US unilateral sanctions and emphasized the importance of following the UN resolutions (*China Daily*, November 30). This is probably due to a Chinese fear that US sanctions may be imposed on Chinese companies as China was the main trading partner for North Korea at that time. However, another explanation can be provided as well. Taken the self-proclaimed role of China as a mediator in the talks around the crisis into consideration, I may propose the idea that Chinese media see their position in the conflict as the strongest one, as they are able to talk both with the US and with the DPRK. USA in this case is an “irresponsible” major power that emphasizes the role of alliances in the region much more than the desire for global peace. At the same time, Chinese interests are concentrated much more on the issue of deterring

the US rather than changing the North Korean regime, so in terms of the UN resolutions they have more power to influence decisions of the Security Council, as they are at the same time the key partner and competitor of the USA. This also means the stability of the region depends on how responsibly Chinese government follows the sanctions regime, so they can achieve a bigger authority in global affairs.

The main question remains is why do Chinese media consider North Korea as a “hermit regime” and whether they do it at all? To answer this question, we need to look once again at the set of signifiers Chinese media tend to describe themselves, North Korea and the world around them. First, I would notice that Chinese media regularly point out that the North Korean nuclear tests face widespread condemnation from the whole world (*China Daily*, September 15; *China Daily*, December 1; *People’s Daily*, November 29), contraposing the DPRK government to the rest of the world. Second, while contextualizing the 2017 crisis or describing Chinese role in it, they often mention the meetings of Chinese officials with their counterparts. For instance, they mention such events as BRICS summit in Xiamen (*China Daily*, September 6), Chinese-US presidents meeting in Mar-a-Lago (*China Daily*, December 14), meeting with delegations from Nepal, Russia and Mongolia (*People’s Daily*, September 7; *People’s Daily*, December 4). So do they when speaking about the US or other countries, referring to the Eastern Economic Forum (*People’s Daily*, September 6), Trump’s diplomatic trips to East Asia (*People’s Daily*, November 30) or his meeting with the delegation from Kuwait (*People’s Daily*, September 8). However, when it comes to North Korea, the only image of it occurring in Chinese media are the threats to the US voiced by its officials or rare visits paid by Chinese officials to North Korea and vice versa. Third, Chinese media and officials always make statements they will neither recognize North Korea as nuclear state (*China Daily*, September 5), nor do they mention any guarantees they will defend the DPRK in case of a war with the US, same as USA do with their allies in the region to deter China. And even though it may be treated as Chinese government commitment to peaceful solutions of potential tensions, these measures do not provide full and comprehensive solution to the issue, therefore consolidates North Korea’s status as an isolated state in the eyes of Chinese newspapers readers and once again puts it into the position of a de-facto rogue regime.

Russian media position on this issue was in some sort similar to the Chinese one. What distinguished their media from the Chinese ones in terms of presenting the North Korean nuclear issue is their level of involvement into the issue. As can be already seen from the Table 1, Russian

media overall tend to have less codes per article in most of the categories, which may also mean that their articles on the issue contain less words overall. Even though they cover the tests and potential outcomes in some way, it can be assumed that the issue has little interest in them at all. This can be clearly seen by the evident contradictions in their narratives, such as criticizing sanctions in one article (*Izvestiya*, September 5) and then writing about Russian support of UN Security Council resolutions regarding their nuclear program (*Izvestiya*, November 30). Another signifier that proves that assumption is the quality of articles, especially in the case of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. They are both significantly shorter than the articles from the other media and feature various mistakes and misprints that could be easily removed if editor read them properly. Even though in 2017 Russian relations with Europe and the US were getting tenser, it looks like they did not consider the DPRK as a potential partner in long perspective and thus did not involve in the issue more than it was required as a neighboring country or as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In these terms, the North Korean isolationism is further emphasized by Russian media as well.

3.3 “Peaceful” sanctions and negotiable “fire and fury”: inconsistencies within media discourses

Now it is time to reflect on the media slippage which they inescapably have while describing any issue. Due to various people taking part in articles creation, writing and editing in media, they sometimes may find themselves in various vicious circles of contradictions. These contradictions may not influence the general message of these media and play a significant role in ordinary readers’ perceptions, but they are indeed crucial when it comes to tracing the narrative and attempts to figure out some weaknesses of theories proposed by the media. That is why this part of the research will be dedicated more to asking questions than looking for answers, as one of the most important parts in tracing narratives is to look at what is left behind, not only to what is actually written. For that purpose, it is beneficial to compare the narratives between different countries’ media, as they tend to underline different positions and inconsistencies related to each other’s narratives and illustrate what their counterparts in other countries purposefully or accidentally forget. That means that I am going to apply Derridean approach to the language as writing while structuring information on the issue, first looking at each country’s strong positions and arguments and then trying to deconstruct them by noticing how these narratives fail to explain

the whole picture of the issue and what can be done to narrow American, Chinese and Russian pictures of the world. Additionally, this chapter will serve as a connecting link to what will be shown in Chapter 4 of my research, where I will apply the lens of Baudrillard's "hyper spectacle" to show how narratives and counternarratives may appear absolutely helpless in explaining the real situation.

At first glance, all media analyzed in the research show different levels of involvement in the issue and share different ideas on how the nuclear crisis was going on and what their countries should do in this situation. American conservative media use more hostile rhetoric, pointing out to the strength of the US (mostly economically, but also militarily) and isolationist nature of the North Korean regime. Liberal media are more accurate in their words but still tend to push American agenda forward and to hint on American hegemonic role in the international relations. Chinese media see North Korea as a source of instability, but prefer more moderate view on the conflict, underlining only peaceful resolution of the conflict. Russian media seem not covering the conflict enough, taking observational position, talking about the issues in a much more neutral tone. These are all the strong sides of each country's narrative. North Korea is definitely a threat to region's peace and stability; however, it is also not only the DPRK's regime responsible for the escalation in East Asia. And the conflict will definitely not be resolved only when one country makes suspensions, as well as China would be the biggest beneficiary if the conflict resolved peacefully, which would inevitably lead to the PRC's strengthening positions in the region. Therefore, the first impression from getting familiar with different countries' media coverage would be the understanding of how complicated and nuanced the issue is. What makes it even more intricate for the information consumer is the lack of any sustainable strategy that would go beyond the idea of power struggle in the region. Consequently, the image of useless "bombardment with information" can be created, where the main goal of the media comes down to convince the reader of continuing to preserve the status quo.

What distinguished *The New York Times* and partially *Fox News* editorial board from their Chinese and Russian counterparts is their openness to various opinions and different ways to resolve the nuclear crisis. They openly publish even some radical and unpopular opinions by their readers or experts, like increasing investments to the North Korean economy or naval blockade of North Korea. This may say a lot about the level of public discussion in the media at that time. However, their narrative becomes more unsteady when it comes to the realistic vision of how the

conflict should come to an end in the foreseeable future. Both media outlets explicitly or implicitly recognize the North Korean possession of nuclear weapons is a fact and there can be no negotiations on DPRK to completely abandon their nuclear program at that stage (*The New York Times*, November 29; *Fox News*, November 17). They also admit the fact that the war with North Korea would be a catastrophe both for the USA and their allies in the region. However, when reading their articles and op-eds, it becomes obvious that the existing way things are going is the best option for the US media. They may criticize or propose some options that differ from the current US approach but still mention sanctions as one of the main leverages to deter the DPRK and to maintain relatively peaceful situation in the region. The main question remains is whether the sanctions regime will in any way help to resolve disputes between the North Korea and the USA, at the same time keeping in mind South Korean and Chinese interests? The approach discussed in the methodological part suggests it is impossible due to various reasons.

The main point here is that US media is one of hegemonic powers in terms of spreading information in the region. Even though its media are to some extent independent from the direct governmental control and obviously more independent than the Chinese and Russian ones, their goal is still to advocate for the US agenda and to spread the American point of view. As was summarized in Table 2, security for the US media is linked to US leading role in the region and military alliances with East Asian countries. And North Korean crisis is a direct threat to American approach to the narrative about the international relations and world order. Resolving this conflict in the long term in both liberal and conservative media is inevitably connected to the regime change in the DPRK, either through sanctions or “soft power”, such as sponsorship of unofficial US and South Korean content delivery to North Korea. If the conflict is solved peacefully without a regime change, it might show weakness of the US image and limits to official American narrative. Therefore, for now it seems much easier for them to keep the status quo, pressure North Korea with sanctions and hope for the regime change soon instead of, for instance, accepting the Chinese or Russian plans to end the conflict.

It is also a good point for debates on how the US narrative of democracy and human rights limits its own power in terms of decision-making. Position of the USA on respect of human rights and support of democracy is obviously one of the strongest points in American discourse on international relations, as it emphasizes civil liberties, individual freedom and possibility of nonviolent government change. Even though it does not always follow its discourse, it is one of

the greatest values for USA to emphasize in their propaganda. According to Gallup polls, in February 2018 55% of respondents said they think people share favorable perception of the USA in the world, while February 2017 poll showed 72% of the people think the US are playing leading or major role in world politics. Furthermore, in 2017 87% of respondents told it is very important or somewhat important for the US government to “promote and defend human rights in other countries.” (Gallup Inc, 2008) This may be partially due to the effective discourse reproduction and active involvement of the US media into circulation of information in the world.

However, this democracy narrative can set additional limits on the US position towards North Korea. On the one hand, it may narrow possibilities to influence the North Korean politics, as the view on peace and stability in the region is different in the DPRK and in China, its closest partner. On the other, the US media may find themselves in a “trap”, when softening their stance on North Korea may show their weakness and inconsistency, while at the same time tightening relations may be catastrophic for the US militarily and economically and, consequently, once again show their weakness. Finally, USA may find themselves in a position when productive solution of the conflict with North Korea may lead to the need for a discourse change in the US media. And that will start the chain reaction, when changing the discourse will influence the system where US narratives were working, while these changes will jeopardize the power-exercising by the US in terms of their discourse.

Slightly different situations are with China and Russia in that case. While being closer to the North Korean system politically and proposing more feasible solutions to the conflict, they were at the same time challenging the US hegemony and providing counter-narrative to established American media. Chinese media tend to emphasize their government’s plan as the most realistic and responsible, thus making this responsibility and pragmatism their strong side. However, their pragmatism also has its own limits, as the DPRK did not show any willingness to negotiate their nuclear status, so the biggest achievement China may have in terms of the conflict is reduction or renunciation of nuclear tests by North Korea. In his article on Chinese strategy towards North Korea, Li mentions the two main ways China can choose from in long perspective while dealing with the nuclear issue (Li, 2020). The first one is to accept North Korean nuclear status and learn to live with a “buffer zone state” having its own weapons of mass destruction. This may lead to the damage of Chinese image of a country counterbalancing the USA and proposing better system, at least in terms of discourses. The second option is to increase pressure on the DPRK and further

tightening sanctions, which China consistently opposes because of the fear for sanctions affecting North Korean ordinary citizens and its own image losses. It is important for China both to keep North Korea as one of its allies in East Asia, as it helps to deter the US, and to prevent North Korea from challenging their own power structure, as it may contest the dependency of North Korea on China. This will also lead to the unwanted shifts in the system of relations in the region.

What also makes the cases of the USA and China similar, is that for China, further best-case scenario would also be a regime change in the DPRK. Chinese media do not explicitly articulate this need, at least when we look at the 2017 crisis, when they proposed only short-term alternatives. However, if we take a closer look at the Chinese public opinion and some researches on Chinese-North Korean relations, we may find out that for Chinese government and loyal center-left groups of Chinese citizens the most desired solution would be a reform of the North Korean government using the Chinese model of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening-up (Chan & Bridges, 2018; Sheen, 2021; Kozlova, 2025). This will not mean radical changes and shift to liberal democracy, as proposed by the United States, but this kind of reform is important for the North to integrate better into the world community and for China to have a more predictable and negotiable neighbor on the East. This will also mean a shift towards less aggressive rhetoric from the North Korea's side and thus more control on its discourse from the Chinese side.

Even though the position of Russia in the crisis was close or in some points even the same as the Chinese, their position in terms of system relations and effect of North Korean 2017 nuclear tests was somewhat different. As was mentioned above, North Korean issue at the time was not the main problem for Russia, as it was not the main economic and military partner of the DPRK at the time and was not a main target of supposed North Korean attacks. Therefore, Russian losses in the short term seemed to be not very sufficient. Furthermore, Russian media actively used their narrative on long history of Soviet-North Korean and Russian-North Korean relations to show they have leverages to influence North Korea, thus instrumentalizing this crisis and showing to the USA that it is better to keep friendly relations with Russia instead of sanctioning it. From that a conclusion can be made that Russian narrative on sanctioning North Korea and its possession of nuclear weapons was indirectly used to show the importance of Russia to the world community, but not to counterbalance the US or Chinese discourse on particular issue.

However, there is also another side of Russian discourse on North Korea. As Russia in terms of global discourses consistently advocates principle of countries' sovereignty, North

Korean nuclear tests may signal of other limits to that approach to the international relations. This raises questions such as to what extent countries may exercise their own sovereignty and what should be done when countries violate rules imposed by the world community? And when these questions are asked, it can be seen there is no other answer but to go on with the established practices such as imposing sanctions or constructing an image of a country as a threat. And in the long perspective this creates yet another country interested in keeping the status quo on the issue, as even discursive shift in country's policy may show limits to the self-proclaimed values and ideals.

After everything discussed above, the following assumptions can be made as a conclusion to the way discursive power is exercised in American, Chinese and Russian media:

1. In terms of discourses, North Korean nuclear tests show limits of American, Chinese and Russian approaches to the international relations. They tend to question the very essence of what is meant in big countries' discourses as "stability", "peace" and their own understanding of how the world should function. This leads to unanimous declaration of North Korea as a threat and further search for solutions that would be acceptable for each side.

2. Any productive long-term solution would mean the need for a system change, which would be dangerous for power-exercising by the USA, China and Russia. None of these countries are ready to give up their position in terms of a power struggle, so they prefer to propose only short-term solutions, where their interests would not be damaged.

3. Neither of the big countries' discourses is not able to provide exhaustive answer to the question "What the world community should do about North Korean threat?" Therefore, neither of these discourses is convincing enough when trying to be applied to the whole world community and show limitations not only to the discursive power of great countries, but also to the real consequences these discourses may lead to.

Consequently, it can be assumed that each of the three countries is not ready (or at least was not ready in late 2017) for any long-term solution. So, the solution found was to advocate for sanctions on North Korea and putting the issue of North Korean nuclear weapon on pause. And even though sanctions against the DPRK can be described negatively in Chinese and Russian media, they still remain the most acceptable way to deal with Kim's regime in the context of discursive power struggle.

4 ‘US Nuclear Blackmail Will be Unworkable for DPRK’: How narratives of the major powers are contested in the North Korean media

4.1 Concepts of “defending sovereignty” and “resisting imperialism”: what North Korea wants other people to know about it?

On September 3, 2017, *Korean Central News Agency* (further *KCNA*), based in Pyongyang and owned by Workers’ Party of Korea’s (further WPK) Propaganda and Agitation Department, stated in their article on the recent nuclear test that “the perfect success in the test of the H-bomb for ICBM clearly proved that the *Juche*-based nukes of the DPRK have been put on a highly precise basis.” Throughout the other articles written by *KCNA*, they constantly claimed this nuclear test was a sign of North Korean people’s readiness to defend their country’s sovereignty and success of the *Songun* policy, first proclaimed by Kim Jong Il in 1995. *Songun* translates from Korean as the “military-first” and was an official ideological landmark in North Korean discourse to justify greater expenses on military and overall militarization of economy (Purat & Bielicki, 2018). In addition to that, they lashed out with criticism towards the US imperialism, calling their policy a “nuclear blackmail” (*KCNA*, November 22), and denounced various crimes and international law violations by American government. Usually, *KCNA* did not point out to some certain examples of violations, but simply used general phrases like “history shows that.” (*KCNA*, November 28) What North Korean media also tend to ignore, is that the sanctions regime was supported by China and Russia or, at least, they do not mention it explicitly. When it comes to the countries supporting sanctions, the main blame falls on the USA and their “puppets” like South Korea and Japan (*KCNA*, September 4; *KCNA*, September 13). However, how does that differ from the previous coverage of international relations in North Korean media and was there something special particularly in 2017? How may the North Korean media rhetoric reflect the changing geopolitical reality and what image they are trying to construct? And finally, to what extent can their discourse be clear and convincing for the reader trying to learn the DPRK’s own stance on the ongoing processes? These are the questions I will try to answer in the last chapter of my thesis, thus finishing the recreation of discourse construction around the North Korean nuclear issue in the second half of 2017.

The DPRK is characterized by most international organizations as one of the least free states in the world in terms of freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom to criticize its own

government. In the global press freedom ranking made by Reporters Without Borders, North Korea was placed last out of 180 places overall, being on the same level as Eritrea (*World Press Freedom Index*, 2017). All the North Korean official media available for foreigners, like *KCNA.co.jp*, *Rodong Sinmun*, *Minju Choson* or *The Pyongyang Times* are aligned with the WPK and retransmit the official narrative of the North Korean government. Even though in their articles they try to speak on behalf of all North Korean population, it is quite hard to somehow measure the real position of the people on their government and to recreate the image of the world North Korean elites share. These questions require deeper analysis and bigger scope of data. However, I feel it is important at least to try to look on the other side of the story and understand how North Korea tries to counterbalance narratives of the bigger states. It can also be very useful to find out how this rhetoric may convince people outside the DPRK and how it may reflect the established world order. For this purpose, I have collected 41 articles on the nuclear issue topic, written by *KCNA.co.jp*, and have made the same coding process as with American, Chinese and Russian media.

First, I will try to find out what picture did North Korean try to create in 2017 and what rhetoric they have used when advocating for their right to possess the nuclear weapons. When analyzing it, it will also be important to examine how they used nationalist or Marxist rhetoric to justify their position, whom they see as their potential allies and what image of the world is constructed and articulated. Then, in the final part of my thesis, I will write about how the discourses from major powers and North Korea echo each other and how all the narratives produced in 2017 about the North Korean nuclear issue, while actively using the war rhetoric, finally led to deescalation of the conflict and its freezing instead of resolution.

When it comes to familiarization with North Korean media, one of the first things occasional readers may pay attention to is how persistently the DPRK media contrapose their country to the outer world. They always underline the importance of *Juche* and *Songun* policies and while describing them usually use such words as “self-reliance”, “military power”, “sovereignty and right to existence” and “socialism”. All these signifiers are in some way doubtful when it comes to empirical evidence of how North Korean state functions. The myth of “self-reliance” is easily refuted when looking at the level of dependence of North Korea on humanitarian aid, Chinese supplies of strategic resources such as oil and gas and overall integrity of Chinese and Russian sanctions regime (Lee & Gray, 2016; Wertz, 2019). “Military power” and “sovereignty”

of North Korea pose another point for discussion, as in the case of a military conflict on the Korean peninsula it would have hard time without support from China or Russia, especially in case the US and Japan decide to back South Korea. When it comes to socialism, it can be argued the DPRK is not a socialist country neither in terms of their economy¹⁰, nor in their discursive practices (at least, if we take Marxist understanding of socialism as a measure) (Myers, 2011). Additionally, it is worth noting that Korean socialist and more broadly left-wing tradition is much more rooted in ideas of Korean nationalism rather than conventional Marxist internationalism, which makes it even harder for the world community to solidarize with Korean left-wing agenda.

When it comes to descriptions of other countries, by far the most constantly mentioned state is the USA. They are regularly pictured as a “hostile” country, surrounded by “puppets and faithful dogs” like Japan or South Korea (*KCNA*, November 22). Along the way, various vices and hypocrisy of American regime are mentioned, again and again repeating the idea of resistance to what the US government symbolizes. When talking about what USA symbolizes in North Korean narrative, it is worth mentioning the “imperialist” nature of that country, which is a central part of the description of the outer world works. However, when describing the US imperialism in North Korean sources, Myers makes a good point that North Korean understanding of imperialism has nothing to do with the established conception of imperialism or neo-imperialism but is rather used interchangeably with such word as “bastards” and is applied only to the US (Myers, 2011). That, on the one hand, is recalling the Cold War division I wrote about earlier and, on the other, is putting words like “imperialism”, “evil”, “the US” into the same paradigm, thus reproducing it as identical concepts. In other words, while resisting the US imperialism, North Korea resists all evil forces on the Earth, which are directly associated with American influence and are consolidated around the USA. In addition to that, the US are also portrayed as incapable of negotiations, and it can be clearly seen when *KCNA* tries to contextualize the history of talks on the DPRK’s nuclear issue. There they provide a story of North Korea taking part in Four Party Talks and Six Party Talks during the 1990s and 2000s that aimed to officially end the Korean War with an armistice agreement and to negotiate on the nuclear status of North and South Korea. Without any further disclosure, it has been said that the US rejected all the agreements due to the assumption of the close collapse of the North Korean government (*KCNA*, December 22). Therefore, according to

¹⁰ For example, Lankov et al. see North Korea as a “mixed state-private economy” and describe North Korean development of market economy since the 1990s famine. (Lankov et al., 2017)

their logic, North Korea had no choice but to develop their own nuclear weapons to deter their enemy and guarantee their existence in the face of inescapable nuclear war on the Korean peninsula.

Another important enemy in the North Korean propaganda is South Korea as a state and South Korean conservative elite particularly. As for the ROK in general, it is worth mentioning how English-language North Korean media pronouncedly write its name “south Korea” with the lower case, thus rejecting its recognition of it as an independent state. It can also in some way recall the US conservative media practice to refer to the DPRK only as North Korea, thus implicitly transmitting the existing tensions between the two countries. When talking about the South Korean ruling class, authors mention Park Geun-hye’s recent presidency various times using such word as “traitor” to her administration and Park herself (*KCNA*, September 14). At the same time, the nationalist and liberal part of South Korean society is presented rather as “dancing to the tune” of the US than an independent power with its own interests (*KCNA*, September 18). They do not mention, for instance, the “four nos” policy the newly elected president Moon Jae-in (candidate from the liberal Democratic Party) was advocating for in 2017, calling it instead the “north policy” and criticizing it as being contradictory and unrealizable. As a consequence of such policy, North Korean authorities do not see any possible scenario but a “horrible nuclear disaster to south Korea”, unless South Korean authorities will start direct talks with North and abolish their idea of what is called “unification by absorption.” (*KCNA*, September 5)

When talking about the outer world, it is also worth mentioning who North Korea sees as its allies and who do they refer to as potential supporters of their ideas of how the world should be organized. In *KCNA*’s articles on South Korea, authors refer various times to candlelight demonstrations occasionally taking place in the ROK since 1990s. As of 2017, the most recent candlelight demonstrations were held in October 2016 – March 2017, demanding impeachment of Park Geun-hye and investigation of her crimes during the presidency. The protesters mindset was praised by the North Korean media and even though the protests did not overall have a pro-DPRK or anti-American sentiment, they were still contextualized as the protests showing the will of ordinary South Koreans to opt for a path of peaceful unification of Korea rather than an internal struggle between different groups in the South (*KCNA*, September 18). It further shows the picture of the world North Korean media were trying to build, where ordinary citizens of South Korea are dissatisfied with their government and at least look favorably towards the North as a feasible alternative to the current political elite.

At the same time, media almost always tend to omit mentioning China or Russia as their allies. Out of the 41 articles, only two contain the direct mentioning of one of these countries, the first one being the retelling of the *NBC* article about the US redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea because of the “nuclear threats posed by countries like the DPRK and Russia” (*KCNA*, September 15), and the second one being the refutation of the Japanese government’s narrative on threats from North Korea, China and Russia posed to the Japanese nationals (*KCNA*, December 26). However, they implicitly signal several times to Chinese and Russian governments about dissatisfaction with their policies towards sanctions regime. For example, this is what the official statement of Korea Asia-Pacific Peace Committee cited in the *KCNA* says about the UNSC sanctions adoption in September 2017: “It is pitiful to see the behavior of big powers and money-bribed countries which voted for “anti-DPRK sanctions”, disregarding justice, moral sense and conscience.” (*KCNA*, September 13) Here, it can be easily concluded that the statement says not only about the US and its allies, but also about China and Russia, who could have vetoed the sanctions resolution, but instead decided to vote in favor of it. This may additionally signal of tensions in relations with China and Russia, as they are not mentioned directly and are not referred to as friendly countries. Finally, that type of discourse in terms of portraying allies may be used for further reinforcement of the argument about North Korean self-reliance and its independent policy it exercises despite the whole world’s opposition.

Whom North Korean media explicitly mention as their allies, are various international organizations of enthusiasts aiming to study the ideas of *Juche* or somehow affiliated with North Korea. Particularly, they write about such organizations as “Treasured Sword of *Songun*” from Ukraine, Russian Group for Solidarity with the DPRK, Social Organization “*Borozino*” from Russia, All India Indo-Korean Friendship Association and various other similar associations, committees and organizations from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal and Belarus (*KCNA*, September 11; *KCNA*, September 15; *KCNA*, September 18). While these organizations are mentioned in articles as “hailing DPRK’s successful H-bomb test”, there is not so much information about them somewhere outside the North Korean media discourse. The website of All India Indo-Korean Friendship Association is temporarily unavailable, Russian Group for Solidarity with the DPRK has around 18 600 subscribers in the Russian social network *Vkontakte*, while the mentions of “Treasured Sword of *Songun*” in Russian- or Ukrainian-language media are mostly dated back to the beginning of 2010s and the current existence of such organization is

doubtful. However, these are the organizations whose statements *KCNA* refers to and that are considered as friendly. This gives us prospect of what structures are involved in disseminating North Korean discourse around the world and what their perspectives are in terms of creating counternarrative outside the DPRK. It is also worth noting that in the article about Tenth Plenary Session of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly the speech of North Korean deputy Ri Jong Hyok was given, where he expressed solidarity with people from Iran, Syria and Palestine, “who are struggling to put an end to the interference of foreign forces and to defend the sovereignty of the nation.” (*KCNA*, November 28) This is the only mention of the countries North Korea aimed to solidarize with, which may give some prospect of who may be considered as actual or potential allies in the official discourse.

Finally, it can be concluded that by the end of 2017 the DPRK posed itself to the outer world as a country in a never-ending existential struggle with imperialism, particularly the American one. Relations with China and Russia also got worse in some way, that is why (at least discursively) the DPRK was left alone facing either enemy countries like USA, South Korea and Japan, or “money-bribed countries” like China or Russia. At the same time, people from around the world (even though small number of them) support “Korean style socialism” and in future they may be a core of creation of just and peaceful world, which may give North Korea an excuse to possess nuclear weapons under current circumstances. This is the way the key concept of “sovereignty” may be understood through a North Korean lens, where they can possess nuclear weapons to counterbalance its enemies, while not seeking any conflict with any country. However, if the circumstances will demand a quick and effective response, North Korean political elite will definitely make a choice to attack the source of threat that naturally will be posed by the US, South Korea or Japan.

4.2 Reflection of 2017 international relations in North Korean media discourse

Surely, North Korea, even though trying to portray itself as unique country in terms of their self-reliance level and independence from the foreign countries, does not exist in a vacuum. In terms of their economy, North Korea depends on Chinese (and partially Russian) import and humanitarian aid even more, than almost any other country in the world (Lee & Gray, 2016). At the same time, in terms of narratives, they are also dependent on the image of the US and its imperialism they were describing for ages and portraying their own way of resisting the US as a

symbol (Myers, 2011). Therefore, when providing possible solutions to the conflict, North Korean media tend to insist on the idea of USA totally giving up their “blackmail policy” towards the DPRK. And these ideas of fighting imperialism define the dynamics of North Korean narrative, when regardless of actions taken by the US administrations, they still face condemnation and animosity in official North Korean rhetoric. That is why, in this part, I will try to briefly explain how the image of the USA in North Korean media echoed broader geopolitical contexts in major powers’ media and how it may influence the narrative of the world media about their country? Additionally, some ideas can be shared on how the North Korean narratives are perceived abroad both by its supporters and by its critics, as well as the way the DPRK de facto changes the status quo on the nuclear issue, remaining rogue and isolated country.

As I have said in the chapter 3 of my research, there are three main divisions existing in terms of a unipolar world in 21st century that could be applied to North Korea. These are the Cold War division on capitalist and communist states, 1990s division on opened and isolated countries and post-9/11 division on civilized and rogue states. It can be argued that the last two divisions are similar and contribute to one another, but here I tend to distinguish them to properly show the evolution of discourse. North Korea in these divisions was always used as antagonist to the USA-led forces that by the US media were considered as capitalist, opened and civilized (Cummings et al., 2006). Overall, all these descriptions can lead us to the summarizing concept, as these words serve to describe the democratic country and how it can be distinguished from the authoritarian one. This, in turn, has set the paradigm of what is considered to be “good” and how the modern country should look like. And while other media, even Chinese and Russian, are trying to show their openness and support of civilized world, North Korean ones try to propose somewhat different approach to respond to these divisions.

On the one hand, they propose an alternative discourse to what can be considered as democratic and civilized. For instance, when talking about democracy, they constantly repeat the idea of the “choice of Korean people” they have made in 1950s and how they still support this course by following the WPK and North Korean army (*KCNA*, September 20). When describing the civilized countries (as they consider themselves to be), North Korean media tend to reinforce the statement of their country being a peace-willing, anti-imperialist and genuinely independent force. They even tried to counter the American narrative with basically mirroring it in one of their articles, where they talk about the US as being a truly rogue state (*Ibid*). There, conventional

description of the US policy was provided, and then the US were accused of being “a nuclear rogue state” which is able to use “its hegemonic position in the international area” to impose sanctions on the “civilized” countries like the DPRK. This characteristics of “a nuclear rogue state” is further proven by the US intentions to redeploy the nuclear warheads in the South Korea, Trump’s administration attempts to develop a miniaturized nuclear bomb of low intensity (KCNA, September 15) and 2017 US tactical nuclear bombs test (KCNA, September 14) mentioned in the other articles in September 2017. Here, democracy is closely linked to stability, when the choice made by Korean people in 1950s was made for a long perspective and for people to delegate the country’s policy to the party leaders, which in turn means the warranty by the party leaders to improve people’s life. At the same time, what is meant by the term “civilized” country is doubtful, as it can be either an appeal to a common sense or refer to a country that understands the nature of US imperialism in the same way North Korea does and that is able to successfully defend itself against American policy.

On the other hand, such characteristics as “capitalist” or “opened” country are totally refused as being positive. North Korean media instead propose the image of a self-proclaimed socialist country that stands for its own sovereignty and resists imperialism, thus being forced to isolate itself from the outer hostile world. For that purpose, the *Songun* policy is mentioned in many articles to show the effectiveness of such system and to share an alternative way to rule the country. As for capitalism, it is uneven whether it has conventional semantic load in North Korean narrative, as some researchers mention the DPRK government’s attempts to apply market approaches in the country’s economy (Lankov et al., 2017; Jung et al., 2018; Schwekendiek & Xu, 2020), which in turn makes it questionable whether the DPRK proposes any real alternative to the capitalist system itself. However, what can be interesting in that case, is a factual discrepancy of North Korean refusal of the post-Cold War understanding of what is considered being good and its simultaneous following the paradigm set by major powers in 20th and 21st centuries. In other words, they agree on the division of countries on open or isolated and identify themselves as being a socialist country but insist on Korean approach as being better in terms of global politics. In that case, openness of a country could be linked to its vulnerability, as by opening its market to the outside world country risks losing its sovereignty and becoming a part of US-dominated imperialist system. Therefore, it can be concluded that “socialism” in North Korean media is not linked to the division on capitalism and socialism as models of economy, especially due to the fact that

capitalism is not mentioned at all in the *KCNA* articles. It can be rather argued that North Korean media propose an image of “socialism” as an alternative to “imperialism”, which is defined through the nationalist (or even chauvinist) lens.

Speaking about imperialism, it is important to once again go back to the image of the USA in the North Korean media, as it would be absolutely fair to say that throughout the whole post-World War II history, they have become one of the key figures in North Korean narrative. This situation remained the same as for 2017 as well. The concept of the US imperialism and resistance to it can be traced throughout the whole researched period. It became even harsher by the end of November 2017, when Trump’s administration relisted North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism. It has caused massive condemnation from various DPRK governmental structures that perceived it as an additional tool to spread American agenda in the world and to pressure “not obedient” countries (*KCNA*, November 22). When the sanctions resolutions were adopted by the UN Security Council, North Korean media categorically rejected them, which at the same time helped them to reinforce the idea of the nuclear weapons possession importance. They [sanctions] were described as the ones insulting dignity of North Korea and being fabricated by the US (*KCNA*, September 13). Donald Trump in these articles is usually described as an “old lunatic”, “mad dog” (*KCNA*, November 19) or “maniac” (*KCNA*, November 22), which can be seen as a direct response to Trump’s own bellicose rhetorics. And it is important to bear in mind that such descriptions would be used for any other American president if they chose to increase tensions on the peninsula. All that continues the circle of discursive escalation, where both American and North Korean media respond to verbal attacks of each other and tend to accumulate their own country’s agenda support by insulting leaders of each other’s countries. Even though in the end it did not lead to a military escalation of the conflict, it still served the idea of accumulating the audience’s aggression and to show the country officials reaction to the potential threat they have described in their media. In some ways, it can be argued that such tough reaction of the ongoing issues helps legitimization of both the US and North Korean narratives and their governments.

Furthermore, when describing possible solutions, *KCNA* does not mention any feasible option that can be negotiated with the USA. They constantly emphasize the need for US administration to abandon their policy towards North Korea and to accept the change of status quo. It is always outlined that the nuclear status of North Korea is not negotiable and the US approach to sanction it will change nothing. However, North Korea also does not take any real measures

despite their media constant repetition of an idea that the US imperialists have to pay for their policy and face consequences of their hostility. It is mentioned various times that by tightening sanctions or redeployment of the US weapons on Korean peninsula USA basically declare war on North Korea, but these statements remain suspended in practice due to the factual absence of clashes between the two countries' armies. This all creates a state where real defeat of the USA and its allies would become useless in current situation as it will take one of the key arguments for North Korean narrative legitimation away. Therefore, there is no need to take any serious measures to solve the issue in relations with the USA as it can continuously play the role of a force to blame for the situation inside the country. Escalations of the conflict may be contributive on the one hand to the image of North Korea as an independent country that can resist its enemies, and on the other hand to the discursive practices inside North Korea to create an image of a hostile world that prefers to impose sanctions and threaten its rulers instead of establishment of friendly relations with it. This may further reflect the idea that the main aim of the North Korean political elites at the time was to remain in power and to prove their strength. And because the US and other countries actively contribute to the North Korean narrative through sanctions and aggressive rhetoric, it becomes easier to justify some obvious limitations the state should implement in order to resist the hostile forces.

Now, it is in some way clear how the North Korean narrative was constructed to explain its policy, but what could be said about the level of persuasiveness of North Korean narrative for the foreigners? The discourse of North Korea may seem unconvincing for most of the population outside the DPRK. For instance, in their book Miskimmon et al. provide description of what narrative can be seen as convincing depending on what aspect of the established narrative it tries to contest (Miskimmon et al., 2013, p. 111). If we look at what it says about what narratives are considered to be unconvincing, it can be argued that *KCNA's* articles can be hardly described as convincing due to their overly sentimental rhetoric, ambiguous values, too dogmatic and exclusive towards the outer world appearance and projection through questionable channels (mostly through some unpopular pro-DPRK organizations abroad). However, what can significantly contribute to the perception of North Korea abroad is effectiveness of its own and foreign discourses about it. Particularly, a very important aspect of possibility for people to believe the North Korean narrative is the person's own confidence that there is socialism in North Korea. Furthermore, it does not depend on people's own stance on socialism or capitalism, but particularly on their belief in

existence of some sort of “Korean-style socialism” in the DPRK. This can be proven, on the one hand, by the research made by Chan & Bridges (2018), where they analyze various Chinese forums stance on North Korea depending on their political position. There, it can be seen that both of the so-called far-left and far-right forums, even though giving absolutely different assessments on North Korea, both come from the assumption that there is socialism in North Korea and therefore Chinese people should either solidarize with North Korean political elites or to abandon the DPRK as a potential ally. It can also be seen through the rhetorics during the 1990s famine in North Korea, when the most voiced support to humanitarian aid supply to the DPRK was going either from those who strongly supported the WPK and its “socialist course” or from the people who considered themselves as strong opponents of the North Korean regime. This assumption may further contribute to the idea of how narratives produced both from the major, central powers and those considered as rogue or peripheral shapes the overall perception with regards to how the certain actions are interpreted.

Finally, it can be said that the DPRK successfully provides counter-discourse to the established ones, especially concentrating on the American, as resisting American imperialism is one of the central points in its narrative on foreign policy. In this case, American narratives influence North Korean in terms of creating the agenda which North Korea has either to reject or to respond to it. However, it can be also concluded that there is a mutual influence between the US and North Korean media, as both of them use such things as each other’s aggressive rhetoric or images of socialism to justify their policy and to explain to their readers rationalities behind their policies.

Conclusions and further perspectives

By the end of 2017, the DPRK has found itself in a position, where it was not only isolated from the outer world politically and economically, but also in terms of discourse projection. Not only was it rejected in its right to possess nuclear weapons by all major forces, including the USA, China and Russia, it was also widely criticized for human rights violations, provocative behavior, possessing threat to peace and stability in the region and refusal of dialogue with its rivals. Chinese and Russian media, even though admitting the US’ role in the issue and proposing relatively feasible (at least for them) solutions still blamed North Korean government for escalating the conflict and desire to become a new nuclear power. This has put North Korea in a situation, when

it had to look for a solution immediately, calm down its ambitions and hoping for the status quo change or further escalating tensions and bringing the world closer to the full-scaled nuclear conflict. Some sort of a way out was found next year, in 2018, when Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un met in June in Singapore on the US-North Korean summit, aiming to deescalate the situation on Korean peninsula. Even though the summit was not successful in terms of resolving the issue and bringing the confrontation to an end, it helped all actors of that issue to consolidate the existing situation and to once again freeze the conflict emerging in the powder keg of East Asia. Until now, the North Korea continues to live under sanctions regime, being highly dependent on friendly relations with China and Russia (and their level of sanctions implementation) and struggling to secure its own discourse internationally.

So finally, it is time to reflect on the research questions formulated in the introduction part and give a prospect of how they can be answered. Surely, it is not possible to comprehensively answer them in one master's thesis. It will definitely require further researches involving different periods of North Korean nuclear issue to trace how the narrative has changed with time, as well as some interviews or polls to research on how people unfamiliar with the topic get information about North Korea, how do they understand the nuclear issue and what other contexts can be used to decode and/or deconstruct signals sent from various media. Another dimension of the research which I find both intriguing and perspective is the research on how the issue was covered in non-governmental, oppositional media by Chinese and Russian nationals, such as blogs of Chinese independent journalists or, for example, *Meduza* and *Novaya Gazeta*. However, I still think it is possible to draw some important conclusions based on that case study and provide broader picture of how the events were seen by the media of three major countries with one of the biggest influences in the region.

First, in terms of discourses construction and circulation we can clearly see the discourses produced by American, Chinese and Russian media all reflect the global ideas of world system proposed at the time by the countries' governments. As dominant world powers, they all try to contest other narratives by providing readers with additional information on the issue and insisting on their own possible solutions to the nuclear issue. However, due to different media ecology American, Chinese and Russian press existed in 2017 and different level of motivation to contribute to the problem solving, there are significant differences in covering the ongoing nuclear issue. While American media, especially *The New York Times*, preferred to build a discussion

around the issue and to broadly contextualize it, the Chinese ones chose to insist on certain measures they found feasible and comprehensive and by these means to reflect their country's agenda instead of discussing the issue and looking for various scenarios. Russian media, in turn, seemed less involved in the issue than American and Chinese ones, and even though they almost totally agree on Chinese narrative and support Chinese initiatives, it still may leave a feeling of Russian media attempt to increase their own political importance in the face of worsening its relations with European countries by pushing forward their stance on Korean peninsula affairs.

Second, in terms of discourses' dependence on each other, it can be said that established discourses in American, Chinese and Russian press all exist in the same paradigm that was constructed throughout the second half of the 20th century – first decade of 21st century. It is mostly based on divisions established during the Cold War and post-Cold War ideas of international relations and reflect the major power control over the information flood. Here, both Chinese and Russian media tend to follow the context set by the US in some way, even though in 2017 they were also trying to present their own vision of the world and their own hegemonic projects. Statements about national interests and sovereignty became more common, which may contribute to the overall image of the world order presented by the major countries' leaders in 2010s. This included both Chinese and Russian concepts of communities of sovereign countries and Trump's America First policy as a part of Make America Great Again approach. However, these narratives still strongly depend on the established discourses of democracy, openness and civilization, which is either further reinforced or in some cases rejected and disputed.

Third, the established narratives provide clear divisions that major powers' media, intentionally or not, tend to follow and reinforce. Even though they all describe themselves as major powers, the idea of what major power means, how it should behave and who else is considered to have that characteristics is different. And all these ideas come from the divisions on capitalist-socialist, democratic-authoritarian, open-isolated and civilized-rogue states and how these divisions are understood by each media outlet and their country's government or significant political forces. Generally speaking, all of these divisions can be also described as either bearing an obvious good-bad connotation (for instance, in almost all cases open state is described in a more positive way, even though the level of openness and its characteristics may be different from country to country) or bearing some sort of ambiguous meaning (like with the capitalist-socialist

division, where better option is considered depending on the previous geopolitical positions of the country, especially during the Cold War period).

After all, the question remains about what to do with all that information and is there any chance of getting a real picture of the ongoing events through the mass media? An obvious and even in some way vulgar conclusion for the ordinary reader would be another confirmation of the idea that neither of the sides involved in certain issues will ever cover the topic in an absolutely neutral way, recognizing their own mistakes and pointing out every factor that is crucial. Therefore, it could at least serve as another reminder for everyone to check various sources on every issue and try to read them carefully to understand what explicit and implicit messages are invested into the narratives. However, successful understandings of all these issues directly depend on the person's involvement in the issue, their previous experience and knowledge, their political views etc. Furthermore, it seems impossible to get all the information about the issue and to understand every interpretation of the event, because every other source contributes more to the topic and provides its own vision of how the events were going and what can be done about it. It can be clearly seen in this research, where American, Chinese, Russian and North Korean media all contributed to the understanding of the nuclear issue and provided their own interpretations of geopolitical situation, international law, historical background of the issue, sometimes even contradicting each other. Consequently, every process of information perception is never full and objective, and it does not only depend on what meanings were embedded by the authors, but also on how the audience looks at the issue and how trustworthy sources of information seem for them.

Going back to the research questions, the following answers can be provided after analyzing the US, Chinese, Russian and North Korean media:

- A. The meaning of the key signifiers provided in the first research question and in Table 2 may seem obvious, as they all tend to be shaped by each country's own context they exist in. Even though American, Chinese and Russian media by the end of 2017 all considered North Korea as a threat, voted in favor of tough UN sanctions against the DPRK and were looking for a peaceful solution of the issue, they used different base to justify and explain their position. The countries' own international politics agenda have played very significant role in addressing the issue, particularly American narrative on human rights and society of civilized countries, Chinese idea of peaceful coexistence between different countries and systems and Russian discourse of sovereignty.
- B. When talking about the contextualization of the nuclear issue, the realities of Cold War divisions usually appear as the most significant ones. In that case, the US list of states

sponsors of terrorism is introduced and discussed within various media, mentioning various reasons why North Korea has been added to it, as well as the position North Korea took on the USA since 1950s. China and Russia actively underline the long history of their friendship with North Korea, both during the Cold War and after its end. Among the post-Cold War historical continuities and discontinuities, the 1990s agreements with the US are mentioned, as well as the Six-Party talks initiated by China. That all makes the image of the issue more volumetric, while at the same time echoing broader historical contexts of Cold War, Korean War, War on Terror, nuclear disarmament initiatives and international law interpretations.

- C. While analyzing the articles from the US, Chinese and Russian media, it can be concluded that all three countries minimal geopolitical goal for them is to return to status quo established before 2017. This is especially true for Chinese media that tend to call North Korean government to stop its nuclear tests and to reduce tensions with the USA. What is also shown in the media discourses about North Korea is the geopolitical projects proposed by Trump, Xi and Putin. And while American media tend to discuss and sometimes even criticize Trump's stance on North Korea, Chinese and Russian media usually agree and try to reinforce their governments' discourses on the issue. This may also contribute to the understanding of media ecology in these countries and realize the challenges conventional media were and are facing in all three countries.

In addition to the answers provided above, it should also be said that North Korean media also try to counterbalance the hegemonic discourses in their articles. They usually do it using the discourse set by the World War II Japanese propaganda, formalizing it through the prism of Korean nationalism and some references to the Orthodox Marxism. They widely condemn imperialist powers; however, these powers are usually limited to the USA and Japan. They also underline the self-reliance importance for North Korean economy and politics and provide the readers with their own explanation of international law, where they tend to refer to the disrespect to it by the US and its allies, which in turn makes it possible for the DPRK to violate it as well. They also explicitly accept their country's main political goal is to resist the USA and American imperialism, which cannot be changed politically or negotiated, therefore, in that case the end justifies the means.

All that together definitely creates the "hyperreal spectacle" described in Baudrillard's works, where every actor reinforces each other's decisions to keep the status quo. Ones tend to portray North Korea as a threat, provocateur, rogue and socialist state. North Korean media, in turn, create an image of a self-reliant country that stands against the whole world and fights American imperialism as well as the "money-bribed" countries voting in favor of the US initiatives

in the UN Security Council. They may even change the narrative for some time, but what remains unchanged is the fact that North Korea is de-facto a nuclear state and it comes from the fact of its government feeling insecure in the world where the US government controls significant amount of produced narratives and uses them to justify its aggressive policies towards its opponents. The world has to learn how to live with these issues, and it should get used to the changed geopolitical situation. In fact, it successfully does it, even though it does not want to explicitly admit that.

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