First Drafts of Korea: The U.S. Media and Perceptions of the Last Cold War Frontier

Edited by
Donald A. L. Macintyre, Daniel C. Sneider, and Gi-Wook Shin

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For its generous financial support of the conference, we thank the Pantech Fund for Korean Studies. We also thank, as ever, Walter H. Shorenstein for his steadfast interest in and support of this and other activities at the research center that bears his name. Shorenstein APARC staff, too, were crucial to the entire process—Heather Ahn organized the conference and handled complex logistics, while Victoria Tomkinson edited and designed the resulting volume. Fayre Makeig provided able and unflinching copyediting.

We hope that the publication of this volume, with its deliberate mix of academic scholarship and journalistic storytelling, will assist scholars, policymakers, and the general public in understanding how news coverage decisions and the stories that followed have shaped the way Americans conceptualize both Koreas, the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the North Korean nuclear crises.

—Donald A. L. Macintyre, Daniel C. Sneider, and Gi-Wook Shin
June 2009

A foreign reporter takes a picture of a South Korean coast guard during a press tour. *Credit:* Stringer Korea/Reuters.

Introduction

Donald A. L. Macintyre, Daniel C. Sneider, and Gi-Wook Shin

Few countries in the world rival the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) in its strategic importance to U.S. foreign policy. For more than half a century, tens of thousands of American troops, including major units of the U.S. Army and Air Force, have been stationed in South Korea—the front line of the United States' guarantee to defend that nation. South Korea is considered essential to the defense of Japan, an ally that is the linchpin of American interests in East Asia. Meanwhile, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), now armed with nuclear weapons, has consistently topped the list of potential security threats to the United States.

South Korea's emergence as a prosperous and dynamic market-based democracy has added another dimension to its weight in American strategic calculations. Its economy is the thirteenth largest in the world, almost equal in size to that of India and larger than that of Mexico. South Korean corporations are leaders in the high-technology sector, and their products join those of Japan and Germany as prized consumer goods. South Korea ranks among the top trading partners of the United States, and South Koreans constitute one of the largest groups of international students on American college campuses.

Despite its importance to U.S. interests, however, South Korea has rarely, and only episodically, registered on Americans' radar screen. U.S. involvement in Korea at the close of World War II was almost accidental, with little of the planning given to the postwar occupation of Japan. American troops withdrew from Korea by 1948, and had Kim Il-sung not launched his ill-advised invasion of the south in 1950—premised on the belief that the United States would not intervene—the U.S. commitment to Korea would likely have been limited. Even after the Korean War, though U.S. troops remained, American interest in the peninsula quickly waned.

In subsequent years, South Korea has been underrepresented by the U.S. media. Other allies such as the United Kingdom and Japan attract four and six times the amount of media attention, respectively. And although its economic importance to the United States is comparable to that of Russia, Israel, and France, all three receive significantly more news coverage than the ROK. Instead, South Korea's coverage is comparable to that of Switzerland, Argentina, and Indonesia, each of which is less important to the United States from an economic and security perspective. As Daniel C. Sneider points out in chapter 3 of this book, "American policymakers have historically given very

little thought to Korea itself . . . [and the] U.S. media have tended to follow this same pattern."

This book examines the previously unexplored gap between American perceptions of South Korea and the nation's strategic importance. In particular, the authors look at how the American mass media have helped shape those perceptions and thus affected foreign policy and international relations. True, cultural influences have likewise begun to influence mutual perception. In recent years, South Korean products such as Samsung cell phones and Hyundai cars have become popular among American consumers. South Korean students still flock to U.S. higher education institutions and America's Korean American population continues to grow. Nevertheless, Americans have tended to view both North and South Korea through the eyes of the media, not firsthand.

How, then, have the American media covered the Koreas? What issues dominate the agenda of American reporters and editors? What has the tone of the coverage been like? How have the scale and scope of U.S. media coverage of the Korean Peninsula stacked up against reporting on other parts of the world? How has coverage of North Korea compared with that of South Korea? And how have these trends evolved over time?

To answer these important questions, Professor Gi-Wook Shin and his research team at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center carried out a detailed study, the first of its kind, of American media coverage of the Korean Peninsula. The study gathered data that underpin a long-term quantitative analysis of the coverage that three major American newspapers—the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*—accorded to the peninsula between 1992 and 2003. *First Drafts of Korea* focuses specifically on the amount and tone of American coverage of the Koreas during this period. A second book, which explores the broader theme of how the media in *both* South Korea and the United States have influenced U.S.-ROK relations, is currently being prepared for publication.[1]

Shin's research team found new evidence—detailed in chapter 1—of several significant trends in American coverage of the Koreas. These are generally consistent with conventional expectations but are, in some cases, counterintuitive. First, the study data clearly indicate that coverage of Korean affairs is driven even more heavily by the dynamics of "hot-spot" journalism than are other major stories. As Shin and his coauthor, Kristin C. Burke, point out, "all three newspapers exhibit significant 'spikes' in coverage around 1994, 1997, and 2002–2003. These periods of relatively high coverage correspond to major crises and their fallout—the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the Asian financial crisis, and the second North Korean nuclear crisis, respectively."

Such hot-spot journalism also accounted for an earlier spike, around the time of the democratic uprising against authoritarian rule in 1987. During this period, the media covered some events but focused in particular on anti-American sentiments in South Korea. After this spike, however, coverage of ongoing key

issues—such as democratization and economic transformation—dropped off dramatically and has seldom been revived.

Second, the Shin research team study examined the U.S. media's tone in coverage of South Korea, whether in news articles or in editorial and opinion pages. The study concluded that the overall tone is somewhat negative—in part because of the media focus on crises—and particularly when it comes to news stories. A negative slant is even more discernible in coverage of North Korea, which tends to focus on the country's nuclear weapons program and on issues such as human rights violations and mass famine. This finding confirms the public perception that the media often gravitates toward negative stories on the basis that bad news sells.

The study's third conclusion is that American media coverage of the Korean Peninsula is persistently focused on security issues in general, and on those related to North Korea in particular. This is more true for some papers than for others. The *Washington Post*, for example, devoted far more ink to security issues than did the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, suggesting that the agenda of Washington policymakers drives the coverage of that influential daily. Moreover, the reporting for stories on security issues originated almost as frequently from Washington as from Seoul or the region; this was the case even for stories about North Korea's nuclear program, where Washington-based reporters originated more than half the coverage.

While these broad research results may come as no surprise, the finding that U.S. media coverage of South Korea tends to downplay the U.S.-ROK security alliance, despite the massive presence of American troops there, is unexpected.[2] Instead, American journalists focus on domestic events in South Korea—ranging from politics to culture—and also, to an important extent, on the economy, including trade relations with the United States. As Shin and Burke write, "the ROK, as a major trading partner, has importance to the United States beyond the security alliance; indeed, the alliance is not the primary basis for American interest in the country." It is little wonder, then, that many Americans view South Korea as synonymous with electronics and cars, and have only vague and static notions of the country's military importance to the United States.

In July 2007 key results of the Shin research team's macro-level, data-driven study were presented to a gathering of prominent Western journalists, many of whom had actively covered the Korean Peninsula since the 1980s, together with former and current U.S. officials deeply involved in U.S. public diplomacy toward the region. The group convened at Stanford University to reflect on the study and to share their personal experiences in creating the "first drafts of Korea." The journalists were grouped into three categories, by area of focus:

- South Korea, including its democratization, the rise of anti-Americanism and Korean nationalism, and the nation's emergence as an economic powerhouse

- North Korea (with extensive experience in directly reporting from the North)
- The North Korean nuclear crisis (with reporting done largely out of Washington)

Journalists in all three groups were asked to reflect on their personal experiences and answer several basic questions: What did they cover and what drove their coverage decisions? How much did the U.S. government set the agenda for their coverage? What other factors determined the level of U.S. interest in Korea? Finally, what were the chief obstacles to providing balanced coverage?

The journalist accounts gathered in this book illustrate, often in very personal detail, the challenges of covering Korea. They confirm the problem of hot-spot journalism and the difficulty of maintaining sustained coverage of complex issues, such as democratic transformation, once the media crisis spotlight had moved elsewhere. "Hot spots are not all bad," observes Karl Schoenberger, who covered the Koreas for the *Los Angeles Times* beginning in the late 1980s. They can bring international attention to an important event, as was the case with South Korea's democratic uprising in 1986–1988. Unfortunately, as he points out in chapter 2, "most of the foreign journalists packed up and left for better hunting grounds not long after the closing ceremony of the Seoul Olympic Games, leaving audiences to guess what happened to the progress of a nascent democracy."

In chapter 3, Daniel C. Sneider reflects on his experiences covering Korea for the *Christian Science Monitor* during the 1980s. He considers how South Korea's democratic transformation, including the rise of anti-Americanism that accompanied it, became the dominant story that he and his colleagues told at the time. That coverage peaked between 1987 and 1988, almost entirely due to the dramatic political story that was unfolding. Security issues related to the United States were a minor theme, Sneider writes, marking a rare moment when "Koreans were the main actors, with Americans playing an important but secondary role."

This focus on Koreans themselves was fleeting and almost never repeated except at long interludes. Even during spikes of coverage, such as the one brought about by the second nuclear crisis of 2002–2003, the Koreas remained a relatively minor story. In chapter 11, David E. Sanger, the chief Washington correspondent for the *New York Times*, points out a particular irony he noted in the course of covering the North Korean nuclear issue. In 2002, while the media were focused on allegations that Iraq was harboring weapons of mass destruction, they paid very little attention to North Korea's open move toward developing nuclear weapons. Sanger identifies the government's power to set the news agenda as the underlying reason for this blind spot. "Precisely because the president wanted to focus American attention elsewhere," Sanger remarks,

"journalists found it extremely difficult to spark much interest in the strategic implications of a North Korea with eight or more weapons."

Barbara Slavin, who covered the nuclear crisis for more than a decade for *USA Today*, offers similar glimpses of administration officials' efforts to shape and influence stories about North Korea's nuclear aspirations. In chapter 10 she too notes how, with the Iraq war buildup in full swing, Bush administration officials "refused to label the situation a crisis, and my editors seemed to agree." North Korea's reluctance to grant U.S. reporters access to cover the situation added another layer of difficulty.

In chapter 13, Chris Nelson is sharply critical of the media's failure to get beyond official pronouncements in its coverage of the Korean Peninsula in general and the North Korean nuclear crisis in particular. The editor of *The Nelson Report*, the authoritative newsletter on Asia policy, he presents the results of a survey of policymakers focused on the peninsula, who detailed their use of American media and other sources of information to influence public debate. It is a mixed and not entirely encouraging picture; Nelson points to the "vast room for improvement" in the performance of both U.S. and South Korean news editors and reporters.

The efforts of American officials to shape coverage pales in comparison with the North Korean regime's crude attempts to control the depiction of their country in the Western media. Three chapters in the book—chapter 6, by Donald A. L. Macintyre, *Time* magazine's former Seoul bureau chief; chapter 7, by Anna Fifield of the *Financial Times*; and chapter 9, by Caroline Gluck, formerly of the BBC—provide detailed and fascinating accounts of their multiple but often frustrating visits to the so-called Hermit Kingdom. Gluck, for example, recalls that her travel into North Korea in the early 2000s, "like all trips to the North, was carefully choreographed." Even when there was what seemed to be a spontaneous encounter with an ordinary North Korean, the reporter could never be sure if it was truly unplanned. "Nothing is quite as it seems in North Korea," she concludes.

To be sure, obtaining reliable sources of information about North Korea remains a constant challenge. "I know of no Western journalists who have sources in North Korea in the usual sense of the word," writes Macintyre. North Korean defectors whom he sought out provided a wealth of information on everyday life, as well as topics such as the spread of the underground economy. At times, however, they could be less than reliable, particularly on nuclear and security questions. In the end, Macintyre asserts that coverage of North Korea was perpetually subject to the circumscribed and shifting attentions of editors and others back home. "Unless events are likely to have a direct impact on the United States," he states, "there is often little interest."

Financial Times correspondent Fifield, who tried to reach beyond the nuclear issue to write about economic and social changes in North Korea, observes that "interest in North Korea tends to fade quickly—the July 2006

missile tests were in the news for only a few days, soon bumped by the Israeli-Lebanese conflict. Indeed, interest in the tests fizzled almost as quickly as the devices tested."

Journalists—especially foreign correspondents—are constantly vexed by the scant opportunities to place stories in their wider context. Limitations of space and attention often mean that events are treated as discrete entities, without reference to ongoing trends or their historical precedents. In chapter 8, B. R. Myers, a South Korea–based contributing editor for *The Atlantic*, argues that the Western media have failed to provide just such a context for writing about North Korea. "Western journalists," he writes, "regard North Korea's ideology and official culture as interference," preferring to focus instead on "Kim Jong-il's hairstyle and his taste in cognac." In chapter 4, Doug Struck echoes this sentiment. As the Tokyo-based correspondent for the *Washington Post* from 1999 to 2003, Struck covered a period that included momentous events in Korean history—from the first North Korea–South Korea summit meeting in 2000 to the upsurge in anti-Americanism that led Roh Moo-hyun to victory in the 2002 presidential election. In Struck's view, the published stories about these developments "offered up only a thin slice of the fuller explanation for those events." When it came to anti-Americanism, "the reporting was not wrong, but it failed to encompass enough of the emotional mix of the time. . . . we did not connect all the dots."

David Straub, who served in the U.S. Embassy in Seoul from 1993 to 2003, shares Struck's opinion. "The U.S. media," Straub notes in chapter 12, "were unable . . . to present a complete picture to readers and viewers, due largely to the complexity of the situation and the inherent limitations of reporting on foreign affairs for a general American audience." Straub also focuses sharply on how the shortcomings of the Korean media constrained U.S. diplomats' ability to shape perceptions of the United States and its foreign policy. South Korean journalists and editors, he notes, had locked themselves into a negative story line about the United States: "Items that fit into the 'Ugly American' story line were covered; those that did not, were not highlighted."

No treatment of journalism or foreign coverage would be complete without a lament, sounded by many contributors to this book, about shrinking coverage as a result of financial cutbacks. Historically, the Tokyo bureaus of major newspapers, television networks, and other news agencies, as well as the offices of wire services and freelance contributors based in Seoul, took responsibility for covering and managing the coverage of South Korea. In the late 1980s, however, South Korea's emergence as an economic power prompted some newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal*, to open full-fledged bureaus in Seoul. In recent years, other newspapers and magazines, such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *Time* magazine, followed suit. But as *New York Times* correspondent Martin Fackler reports in chapter 5 of this volume, financial pressures have since forced many Western media outlets to shutter not only their Seoul bureaus, but also to

reduce—if not close—their Tokyo operations. Today, with the exception of three newspapers (the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Financial Times*, and the *International Herald Tribune*), *BusinessWeek* magazine, and the wire services, the job of covering the Koreas is done in Tokyo, Beijing, or U.S. cities. As Fackler puts it, these developments reflect a shift in focus as well as finances. "Even the handful of newspapers, including the *New York Times*, that have maintained their overall number of overseas bureaus have been forced to shift resources out of Northeast Asia to offset the enormous costs of covering the war in Iraq," he observes. Moreover, the "news hole"—the amount of actual space available for stories in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*—has shrunk due to financial pressures. As Fareed Zakaria (editor of Newsweek International) has written, the United States has globalized the world but it has not globalized the perspectives of its own people—a shortcoming borne out all too clearly in U.S. press coverage of Korean affairs.

First Drafts of Korea offers a unique and sweeping view of American media coverage of the Korean Peninsula, its processes and pitfalls, and its impact on policymaking. Grounded in the quantitative and qualitative data analysis of Gi-Wook Shin and his colleagues, the book is complemented by the firsthand accounts of men and women who have worked to understand this vital part of the world. A complex and shifting portrait emerges, as befits a nation that is itself evolving and growing in global importance.

Notes

[1] Gi-Wook Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses: U.S.-Korea Relations in a New Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[2] In contrast, security is a major subject in Korean press coverage of U.S. and U.S.-ROK relations. Unlike Americans, many South Koreans are reminded of the alliance on a daily basis, confronted as they are by U.S. troops in their country. See Shin, *One Alliance, Two Lenses*.