

# The Cornell Daily Sun

## PRK Goes Viral

By: Chris Mills – April 12, 2013

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We've got a problem on our hands, and it's not necessarily a missile.

North Korea has officially gone viral — and it could be playing into Kim Jong-un's hands.

On April 9, the Pew Research Center reported that “[a]bout a third of the public (36%) says they are paying very close attention to news about North Korea’s military threats and plans to restart its nuclear reactor, making this the most closely followed foreign news story of the year.”

And who wouldn't? With a series of threats against [3] the United States and South Korea, nuclear capabilities, a young and little-understand dictator, bizarre and campy propaganda videos [4] and an amusingly misleading official website [5], North Korea is armed with variety of means for gaining attention — whether calculated or inadvertent.

Last week, North Korea was Twitter's third-highest trending topic [6] (behind Easter and Good Friday). Even Buffalo Bills wide receiver Steve Johnson joined the mix, taking to twitter with an off-color request. “War is nothing to be played with. I apologize North Korea,” tweeted Johnson, “but if y'all do bomb 1st ... Bomb Foxboro, Mass [(home of the rival New England Patriots)].”

Yet despite the jokes and whimsical amusement at the country's antics, North Korea is accomplishing a valuable piece of its agenda in the process.

“In tension-building, North Korea is succeeding beyond expectations,” assessed Andrei Lankov, a North Korea expert at Seoul's Kookmin University, cited in a recent Washington Post article [7]. “This is the most publicity North Korea has gotten in 30 years, and perhaps since the Korean War.”

What is of note is that, according to Pew, “[t]hose who are following news about North Korea's threats very closely are far more likely than those following it less closely to say that the government should take the threats very seriously (73% vs. 46%).” 47% of survey respondents also believe that North Korea can strike the United States, which is most likely false unless one includes Alaska or a Pacific military base, such as Guam. Further, 59% of close followers believe Kim Jong-un is willing to attempt a nuclear attack on the United States regardless of the odds of success. This sentiment may imply a lack of understanding about North Korea's capabilities or a misportrayal of a North Korean threat through media headlines.

South Korean Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-jae, meanwhile, described the mood in his country as “a very ordinary situation,” in part because of a history of aggressive rhetoric

from the PRK. Many in the United States, however, are being newly exposed North Korea through their computer and television screens. If one of Kim Jong-un's objectives is to maintain western concessions, then he may have a better chance of succeeding if popular sentiment influences the actions of United States politicians.

"It does not make sense to credulously take their fake belligerence at face value and give them the attention they want now," writes Lankov. "It would be better if people in Washington and New York took a lesson from the people of Seoul."

Still, a North Korean threat, no matter how small, must be handled with caution. The country briefly placed a missile in an upright position [8] on Thursday, amid new warnings of conflict. Although the state would most likely not be able to strike the U.S. mainland, American connections to South Korea and Japan have major implications.

"North Korea's limited geographic threat highlights a very important point," writes Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. "Pyongyang may pose a security threat to South Korea and a modest danger to Japan. But if the United States did not ... maintain military bases in those two countries — nearly seven decades after World War II, six decades after the Korean War and more than two decades since the end of the Cold War — North Korea's saber-rattling would be of little relevance to Americans. In a normal international system, Japan and South Korea would be able to (and be expected to) handle an obnoxious neighbor like North Korea. But both countries have instead chosen to free-ride on U.S. security guarantees for decades. That has created an unhealthy situation on both sides."

Although Carpenter's opinion is of the libertarian brand, he keys on the root of the concern — United States defense arrangements with South Korea and Japan, and the thousands of U.S. troops stationed across the Pacific. The reality of the situation is that thousands of Americans, and millions of allied citizens, are at some risk of an inadvertent or, however unlikely, intentional military strike.

As the public continues to obsess over North Korea, it is important to realize the country's limitations and not put pressure on our politicians to call for conflict or unnecessary appeasement. Simultaneously, we must recognize a legitimate threat to U.S. interests and that the PRK, no matter how viral, is no laughing matter.