IQAS Vol. 52 / 2021 1–2, pp. 79–98

How to Treat Your Sworn Enemy: North Korea's Securitisation of the United States

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Abstract

Despite the growing literature on the securitisation of North Korea, securitisation *in* the authoritarian state has been understudied thus far. Through analysing North Korean primary sources, this article presents the complexity of North Korean securitisation by examining how the United States is securitised in the North Korean newspaper *Rodong Sinmun* and by North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, looking at data from between 2017 and 2020. By expanding a framework that is centred in the illocutionary logic of securitising speech acts and by incorporating socio-political authority into its analysis, this article shows that securitisation in North Korea goes beyond the sole purpose of leader-legitimation. Instead, North Korea strategically (de)securitises by having certain governmental speakers utilise only specific strands of securitisation in such a way that potential contradictory changes in securitisation content do not substantially harm the credibility of the North Korean leadership. As a result, if there is a political, economic or other gain to be had, the North Korean government can change its depiction of the US with a negligible legitimacy loss and can comparatively easily resecuritise the US again when external conditions change.

Keywords: Securitisation, resecuritisation, non-democratic securitisation, North Korea, North Korean media, autocratic legitimacy

Even though the scholarly attention paid to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; in the following "North Korea") has risen steadily in the past decades, research into security within North Korea is still heavily skewed towards an external perspective. Arguing that domestic factors are either irrelevant or not analytically graspable, most scholars adopt a realist / essentialist perspective and conclude that North Korea's security objectives are dictated by the international system and that the North Korean government's most important goal is regime survival (e.g. Lim 2014, Düben 2017, Chang / Lee 2018). Though

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not necessarily explicitly, this kind of research contributes to an understanding of North Korea as something inherently incomprehensible, "a state unlike any other in the twenty-first century" (Düben 2017: 6). The problem with this approach to North Korea is that it obstructs any sort of enquiry into the nature of the North Korean regime or its motivations. This becomes apparent when the failed dialogue between North Korea and the United States between 2017 and 2020 is explained by some as simply reflecting North Korea's unwillingness to denuclearise in the first place (Narang / Panda 2018) or Kim Jong-un's[1] inherently incompatible true intentions (Kim / Snyder 2019). If these explanations are true, why did North Korea agree to a politically and diplomatically risky dialogue with the United States if it had never wanted to reach common ground in the first place? Asking this question highlights a major shortcoming of most security-related research on North Korea: the lack of attention to domestic factors and primary sources.

More recent studies have produced valuable insights by adopting constructivist or post-structuralist approaches to North Korean politics. It has been shown, for example, that North Korea's diplomacy is tied to the internal construction of an external threat (the United States), a nuclear identity, and how the North Korean government uses this threat to garner vital support among the populace (Ballbach 2015, 2016). With the prospect for dialogue between the US and North Korea having come and gone, the question then is to ask whether a security threat, whose existence North Korea's government considers vital for its own survival, can be "negotiate[d] away" (Ballbach 2015: 44). Why would North Korea negotiate with the US when it could simply securitise its archenemy to gain domestic legitimacy?

This article sets out to answer this question by analysing North Korea's securitisation of the United States of America between 2017 and 2020, as this time period shows both rapprochement and conflict in the relations between the US and North Korea and is therefore exemplary for identifying shifts and continuities in securitising behaviour. By analysing the *Rodong Sinmun*'s coverage of various summits, Kim Jong-un's New Year's speeches, the Report of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Central Committee Plenary Session 2020, as well as statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) during said period, we gain insights into securitisation in a highly non-democratic state.

Securitisation refers in its most basic form to the social construction of threats by actors to gain advantageous political effects, such as legitimacy or support. The present article treats securitisation primarily in the form of illocutionary speech acts "where an existential threat is produced in relation to a referent object" (Vuori 2011: 107) and the act of securitisation effects a status transformation of the related issue (Vuori 2011). However, the context of securitisation

1 Except for common names and places, this article employs the McCune-Reischauer transcription for Korean terms.

is considered as well by examining the socio-political authority of securitising actors within North Korean society and the differentiation between specific target audiences. In short, this article employs and explores an understanding of securitisation as both manifested in the power of speech itself and related to the context and structures within which it is produced.

Theory-guided approaches, such as securitisation, are mostly underexplored in North Korea studies. Non-democratic states securitise not only to justify the breaking of rules, but for a variety of reasons (Vuori 2008). Situated in this illocutionary logic-oriented, speech act-centred, approach to securitisation, this article contributes to the current discourse on securitisation and North Korean politics by showing how the North Korean government securitises the United States along different strands in conjunction with different issues to garner domestic support as well as influence (inter)national politics. Identifying the different strands in North Korea's securitisation strengthens our understanding of North Korea's security objectives, its domestic conception of security and the role of security in maintaining domestic support. Furthermore, the evidence shows that even a very highly non-democratic and opaque state such as North Korea securitises in an analytically graspable way and with prior consideration of domestic or international audiences.

Theoretical and methodological considerations

The main question this article explores is why North Korea engaged in talks with the United States between 2017 and 2020, when it seemed more sensible for the country to simply continue securitising the United States. The aim of securitisation studies is, as Vuori formulates:

> to gain an increasingly precise understanding of who (securitising actors) can securitize (political moves via speech acts) which issues (threats), for whom (referent objects), why (perlocutionary intentions), with what kinds of effects (interunit relations), and under what conditions (facilitation/impediment factors). (Vuori 2014: 35)

The Copenhagen School defines securitisation as the "intersubjective establishment of an existential threat with a saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects" (Buzan et al. 1998: 25). Starting from this basic definition, the field of securitisation studies has evolved into many different directions of research, each contributing to securitisation theory and its framework (McDonald 2008, Stritzel 2014). While some have argued for a focus on security practices instead of speech acts (Huysmans 2006, Balzacq 2011, Bigo 2014), others argue for a historical exploration of the securitisation concept (Bonacker et al. 2017). Some, however, have argued for a renewed focus on speech act theory (Vuori 2008, 2011; Oren / Solomon 2015).

In applying securitisation theory to North Korea, this article adds to existent studies of less- or non-democratic states. Vuori shows how securitisation can be used by non-democratic governments to gain legitimacy, stressing that even non-democratic governments need to justify their actions to their citizens (Vuori 2008). Lentz-Raymann further explores this by connecting securitisation with other forms of legitimacy in non-democratic contexts that differ from the common democracy-centred conception (Lentz-Raymann 2014). The present article connects to this idea by applying it to one of the most autocratic regimes in the 21st century. The broader implication is: if even North Korea shows signs of nuanced legitimacy-seeking behaviour, we can reasonably expect non-democratic regimes in general to show this sort of behaviour. Furthermore, by analysing mass media this paper demonstrates how speech act-centred securitisation analysis helps explain the importance of security logic for the continued sustainment of authoritarian regimes in the daily lives of people – an often neglected aspect of this approach (Szalai 2017, Pratt / Rezk 2019).

By using securitisation theory in the North Korean context, the present article explores a yet unused theoretical avenue in North Korea studies. Securitisation theory is a way of grasping a state's security thinking, as securitisation processes "reveal the state's threat perception and consequently inform its alignment preferences" (Chand / Garcia 2017: 312). Therefore, its relevancy for the case at hand lies in making it possible to grasp North Korea's security thinking vis-à-vis the United States before, during and after diplomatic talks, as well as revealing the details of the role of the United States regarding security in North Korea in general and the construction of legitimacy through security in particular.

Where can we see securitisation in speech acts? Vuori argues that securitisation is a complex speech act that consists of at least three elementary speech acts (also called illocutionary points). Securitisation can differ in perlocutionary intentions and illocutionary points (Vuori 2008). Possible combinations of these perlocutionary intentions and illocutionary points produce the following five strands (or types) of securitization: raising an issue onto the agenda, legitimating future acts, deterrence, legitimating past acts / reproducing securitisation, and control (Vuori 2008). This article adopts this overarching illocutionary logic-oriented framework and subsequent approach by conducting a manual content analysis of a text-based corpus that identifies the specific strand, reference objects of security and depiction of the United States. Speech acts that did not fit any specific strand were disregarded.

However, three caveats need to be stated. First, this article argues for the recognition of an additional sixth strand of securitisation, called the "primer" (Figure 1). This is necessary because the analysed material shows many securitisation-relevant depictions of the United States that employ a sequence of two elementary speech acts but lack the distinct third elementary speech act described in

Vuori's theory. This primer is critical in describing the domestic-centred securitisation process North Korea employs when depicting the United States and the construction of facilitating conditions for future securitisation. A primer speech act consists of the elementary speech acts claim and warning. Its illocutionary point is declarative, while its perlocutionary intention is to bring attention to its referent object and main point. A primer speech act differs from the speech act of raising an issue onto the agenda because its illocutionary point is not to bring somebody to perform a certain action (Vuori 2008). Rather, its illocutionary point means it is aimed at changing the social state of affairs merely by a successful utterance.

Figure 1: Primer speech act

Elementary speech acts	Illocutionary point	Perlocutionary intention
1. claim 2. warning	declarative "in utterances with a declarative point the speaker brings about the state of affairs […] solely in virtue of his/her successful performance of the speech act (Searle / Vanderveken, 1985: 37–8)" (Vuori 2008: 81–82)	bring attention to referent object / main point

Source: Compiled by author

Second, acknowledging the critique by scholars such as Ciută, this article agrees that it is not sensible to define a priori that securitisation speech acts must refer only to an existential threat and at the same time claim that the formulation of the meaning of security can be observed this way (Ciută 2009). Therefore, the categorisation of speech acts includes not only those that explicitly declare an existential threat, but also those that implicitly claim a state of threat below the threshold of existential threat.[2]

Third, in this article the socio-political standing of the speakers is classified on a numerical scale to visualise the securitising actor's place within the North Korean social hierarchy (Figure 2). This is done to explicitly show which strands of securitisation are used by which (more or less) privileged actor.[3] (1) is the highest authority (i.e. Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il or Kim Il-sung), (2) represents any sort of North Korean governmental authority, (3) makes no mention of any par-

2 While this still implies an a priori construction of security, it is more inclusive and flexible than a fixation on existential threats; for a more in-depth discussion see Vuori (2011). More recent securitisation studies generally seem to make no explicit distinction between normal and existential threats (Sjösted 2020).

3 While Buzan et al. (1998) have already pointed out the importance of being privileged to speak security, no definite method of determining this privilege has emerged yet.

ticular authority and (4) represents foreign authorities. Foreign authorities are put below no mention at all because no mention implies a degree of objectivity, whereas speech acts from foreign authorities are made explicit in the source material.

Figure 2: Socio-political ranking of securitising actors

Socio-political rank	Corresponding actor / authority	Sample in-speech act description
1	North Korean leader: Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un	"The dear and respected Supreme Leader and President Trump […] expressed their conviction in being able to develop DPRK-US relations." (Rodong Sinmun 2019a)
2	North Korean governmental authority	"A spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea released the following statement on 18 September." (MFA 2017)
3	no particular actor / authority	"The US is threatening Korea's peace and safety with its indiscriminate erratic behaviour." (Rodong Sinmun 2018b)
4	foreign authority	"Director of Russia's foreign intelligence service Sergey Naryshkin criticised US-American sanctions as a common trick." (Rodong Sinmun 2019c)

Source: Compiled by author

It should be noted that these values are assigned to emphasise the differences among speakers and are not a ranked indicator of the amount of privilege an actor has. Nevertheless, it is important to comprehensively consider the social authority of a speaker, as this affects the assessment of the role of the audience in accepting, rejecting or acquiescing in securitisation moves – even more so in an authoritarian setting such as North Korea. By branching out from the usual approaches to illocutionary securitisation, this article addresses known criticisms toward speech act-focused approaches, such as a narrow focus on the form of speech acts, a neglect of the relation between speaker and audience and a failure to take the context of securitisation into account (McDonald 2008).

Analysing desecuritisation in a non-democratic context is challenging. Holbraad and Pedersen (2012) have already shown that the distinction between normal and extraordinary measures in non-democratic contexts is much less clear, which

makes it difficult to treat desecuritisation as "the shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere" (Buzan et al. 1998: 4). However, classifying desecuritisation speech acts as moves in specific categories (Hansen 2012, Bourbeau / Vuori 2015) can help us make sense of what desecuritising actors are trying to achieve. As the North Korean case is understudied in this regard, the present study resembles a simplified exploratory approach. This mode of identifying speech acts related to desecuritisation is similar to that used for securitisation-related speech acts, meaning that the focus was on complex speech acts that included at least two elementary speech acts (claim and warning) and a possible third elementary speech act, not defined beforehand. Desecuritisation moves identified this way are put into context by drawing on Bourbeau and Vuori (2015), who develop ideas by Hansen (2012).

As this article is novel in its application of the theory to North Korea, it examines two of the most prominent channels the North Korean government uses to communicate with a domestic and an international audience: the *Rodong Sinmun* and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The investigated period extends from 1 January 2017 to 1 January 2020. Since this alone would generate thousands of articles, the analysis was narrowed down to several meaningful events, assuming securitisation acts to be featured most prominently before, during, and after these events.[4] The *Rodong Sinmun* is North Korea's largest newspaper and serves as a mouthpiece for the government. Since securitisation acts manifest themselves as public speech acts, we can assume that securitisation moves in the *Rodong Sinmun* will have the largest possible domestic audience. In order to capture securitisation acts that are presumably targeted towards a more international audience, statements by the MFA regarding the United States, as well as general statements to the United Nations, were collected. Overall, this amounts to an analysed corpus of 60 *Rodong Sinmun* issues (40~50 articles per issue) and 21 MFA statements.

Since North Korea is an autocratic state that is highly suspicious of foreign interference, the use of domestic sources is not without difficulties. While still being opaque, however, North Korea is not the nation-state equivalent of a black box. The *Rodong Sinmun* publishes its full print editions online,[5] making it possible to work directly with the North Korean source material as it is published in Korean. This is preferable to analysing English translations, since a part of the original message may be inadvertently lost in translation. Additionally, any

4 The events in question are: Donald Trump's speech at the United Nations on 19 September 2017, the Hwasŏng-15 rocket test on 28 November 2017, the P'anmunjŏm Declaration of 27 April 2018, Kim Jong-un meeting Moon Jae-in on 26 May 2018, the first US-NK summit in Singapore on 12 June 2018, Moon Jae-in visiting Pyongyang from 18 September to 20 September 2018, the second US-NK summit in Hanoi from 27 February to 28 February 2019, diplomatic exchanges during June 2019, the US-NK meeting in P'anmunjŏm on 30 June 2019, the US-NK dialogue in Stockholm from 4 October to 5 October 2019, and the Korean Worker's Party Central Committee Plenary Session on 1 January 2020.

5 Available at http://www.dprkmedia.com/.

translation also runs the risk of being changed intentionally in meaning or wording, as the North Korean government can expect English articles to garner a higher amount of interest among foreign policy makers, scholars or journalists. The same applies to statements from the MFA. Naturally, the risk of censorship and post-publication altering of information is a given in North Korea. Still, this article revolves around very recent events and directly involves a minimal number of North Korean officials who could, theoretically, have been purged. Therefore, the risk of missing out on a substantial quantity of securitising speech acts is negligible.

North Korean securitisation of the US and depiction of the US

The following chapter discusses the depiction of the United States and the different uses of strands of securitisation in North Korea, specifically their orientation towards domestic and international audiences. In general, the depiction of the US changed over the course of the observation period from an aggressive and/or sanctioning and/or nuclear threat in the beginning, to an enemy of old, who nonetheless displays a general potential for betterment and could be a dialogue partner during a period of improved relations (Figure 3). Afterwards, the depiction returned towards a more hostile image of US aggression. Shifts in depiction were not abrupt, as the periods around April to June 2018, around September 2018, and June to October 2019 show a less directly hostile US image.

Figure 3: US depiction and respective behaviour over observed time periods

Time period	Main US depiction	US depiction behaviour
September 2017 to April 2018	aggressive / hostile	stable
April 2018 to June 2018	imperial	transitioning
June 2018 to June 2019	dialogue partner	stable
June 2019 to October 2019	imperial	transitioning
November 2019 to January 2020	aggressive / hostile	stable

Source: Compiled by author

Instead, in these transitional periods the United States is portrayed as an imperial country that is seeking to expand its powers (Figure 4). Changes in depiction were introduced from the top, specifically through securitising actors ranking 1 or 2. These shifts are gradual in timing as well as internal logic. Furthermore, the shifts do not follow abruptly after the talks showed positive results but are employed prior to talks. This points toward a deliberate effort of the North Korean government to actively change the tone in anticipation of the talks, with the intention of influencing both domestic and international audiences.

Figure 4: Examples of differences in depicton of US

US depiction	Example
aggressive / sanctioning / nuclear threat	"The US-American anti-Korean sanctions and pressure, designed to destroy our sovereignty and our right to life and to harm our most dignified socialist system, incite through their atrocious and provocative character the rage and fury of our army and our people." (Rodong Sinmun 2017a)
imperial / power-seeking country	"Critical voices of the US, which is becoming desperate to station Missile Defence Systems, have started to appear. Above all, it is criticised as a fulfilment of a [US-American] strategy of domination." (Rodong Sinmun 2018a)
dialogue partner	"[…] in order to ease the tensions on the Korean peninsula, advance peace and complete denuclearisation, both parties planned to make efforts to build mutual trust." (Rodong Sinmun 2019a)

Source: Compiled by author

Two points are of interest for international audience-oriented securitisation. First is the deterrence speech act, which is explicitly geared towards an international audience (Vuori 2008). It is used in North Korea only by securitising actors with a socio-political rank of 1 or 2. Depictions of the United States contained in deterrence speech acts conform to the general shifts outlined above. Deterrence is used by North Korea both in times of confrontation regarding its nuclear arsenal and in times of relative cooperation, coercing the US to reach an agreeable stance. Second, not only deterrence speech acts are performed with an international audience in mind, as speech acts to legitimate future acts display similar characteristics. They, too, are employed by high-ranking securitising

actors only and feature the same shift in US depiction. Further still, their main points also conform to this shift, seeing as without the prospect of talks, North Korea argues for a future course of self-reliance without the United States because of its threat potential. With the possibility of talks, North Korea argues that a dialogue with the US is needed to preserve peace in the region and secure North Korea's safety. Judging from North Korea's formulation of speech acts of deterrence and legitimating future acts, its intended international audiences represent foreign governments and decision makers, for whom North Korea tries to justify specific, internationally relevant policy decisions. The fact that these two complex speech acts are similar in securitising actor, timing and content shows that North Korea effectively employs speech acts of both deterrence and legitimating future acts to directly[6] convey messages to international audiences.

How do speech acts with an expected domestic audience change their depiction of the United States? Speech acts for legitimating past/future acts, securitisation reproduction, raising issues onto the agenda[7] and control are said to be geared towards domestic audiences (Vuori 2008). However, the particularities of North Korea addressing international audiences with speech acts that legitimate future acts become clearer when discussed in connection with the control speech act. Speech acts to legitimate future acts allow some room for rejection on the part of the audience, since the third elementary part of the speech act is requesting (e.g. "accept that X is done to prevent Y") (Vuori 2008: 80–81). Control speech acts do not leave any room for rejection, since they feature the elementary speech act of requiring (e.g. "you must do X to prevent Y" (Vuori 2008: 88–89). Since the political system in North Korea greatly devalues the importance of giving room for refusal, the North Korean government presumably suffers no additional costs of employing control speech acts at home. On the international stage, however, the government cannot continuously refuse to give room for rejection in securitising moves, as its reputation would suffer even more, hindering the success of its efforts. Therefore, the North Korean government employs legitimating future acts speech acts in front of an international audience, while using control speech acts in front of a domestic audience.

Comparing the control speech act with other strands of securitisation further supports this argument. The speech acts legitimising past acts, securitisation reproduction and control are used almost exclusively until early to mid-2018, show almost zero use for the majority of 2019 and only show signs of increased use at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. Their similar depiction of the United States is that of an aggressive, nuclear / sanctioning threat. The sociopolitical ranking of the relevant securitising actors is also similar – mostly 3 and 2,

6 As opposed to indirectly, though possibly not inadvertently, through speech acts more directed at domestic audiences.

7 The speech act raising an issue onto the agenda has not been observed and is presumably not necessary, since its perlocutionary intention – convincing decision-makers – is not needed in a context where decision makers themselves decide what is important.

with occasional instances of 1. The established securitising acts geared towards domestic audiences show a partial break in US depiction. This is because the narratives being used are abruptly abandoned during times when they are not applicable and resurface just as abruptly when the talks stall and they become applicable again. Even to the most loyal North Korean follower this sudden shift in argumentation and depiction must come as a surprise. Securitisation theory thus far cannot explain a positive description of the United States. Judged only in terms of legitimacy gains, there seems no logical reason for North Korea to positively depict the United States. Still, not only does North Korea depict the US positively, it also shows breaks in narratives that apparently result in a loss of legitimacy and credibility.

These seeming problems can be reconciled by introducing the primer speech act. Through this speech act, North Korea establishes a less hostile, but still threatening, image of the United States as an ambiguous security threat for a domestic audience, mitigating the loss of legitimacy and discrepancies generated by the narratives. Like other strands, primer speech acts show no real shift in the depiction of the United States, as negative depictions are simply abandoned when they are not applicable and reused when they make sense again. When comparing the strands regarding timing, an extensive use of the primer strand from mid to late-2017 to mid to late-2018 is observed, then virtually no use until mid-2019 and then again frequent use after mid-2019. Essentially, when the primer speech act is used more frequently, the control, reproducing securitisation and legitimising past acts securitisation speech acts precede or follow shortly. The social rank of primer speech act speakers is virtually only 3 or 4, with very few instances of 2 in 2017. This points towards an intended domestic audience, since speakers with a social authority this low are not perceived as important abroad. The difference in speaker rank makes it possible for the North Korean government to conduct a credible shift in US securitisation overall without sacrificing the credibility of higher-ranking speakers. This way, conditions for other strands of securitisation can be facilitated through primer speech acts. In turn, through the combined use of different strands of securitisation, a shift in US depiction can be conducted convincingly.

In North Korea, securitisation of the United States is possible since it is supported by well-known narratives of an established threat. However, if the context of securitisation changes and there is no established threat to draw on, this type of securitisation behaviour is not convincing. This becomes clear when we look at the period of mid-2019. From January to July 2019, North Korea emphasised the need for talks and non-confrontation with the United States, describing the US as a worthy and (potentially) constructive dialogue partner. Against this background, a government official suddenly declaring the US to be an aggressive threat would constitute a break in narrative that would raise

Figure 5: Strands of US-securitisation in North Korea

Strand of securitisation	Intended audience	Speaker rank	US depiction
legitimating future acts	international	high	aggressive or imperial
deterrence	international	high	aggressive or imperial
legitimating past acts / reproducing securitisation	domestic	high	exclusively aggressive
control	domestic	high	exclusively aggressive
primer	domestic	low	mainly imperial

Source: Compiled by author

doubts among the domestic audience – after all, how could the same officials that just a few days ago emphasised the need for cooperation with the US now talk about how the US is aggressive and not to be trusted? Essentially, sudden changes in US depiction undermine the effectiveness of securitisation behaviour from high-level North Korean speakers.

The North Korean government avoids this pitfall by introducing a shift in depictions of the United States using primer speech acts first on a low speaker level (4) with a low intensity (the US being described as an imperial state) and with North Korea not necessarily being the referent object of security. No direct mention of a threat towards North Korea is made and no North Korean government official is speaking out. Yet, by emphasising the potential threat the US poses, an argumentative foundation is laid, on which other speakers can build. By using primer speech acts, domestic audiences are influenced to think of the US as an inherently threatening power. Additionally, supplementary argumentative force in primer speech acts does not stem from the speaker's socio-political authority, but rather from the repetition of the argument itself – which the observed data clearly shows.[8] In North Korea, the primer speech act serves as a stepping-stone for topical and policy-oriented securitisation, which is done mainly by high-ranking speakers with the strands of control, legitimating past acts and securitisation reproduction.

8 Out of 135 observed speech acts in total, 68 are primer speech acts.

To summarise (Figure 5): the primer speech act is used to convincingly induce changes in the depiction and securitisation of a certain object for a domestic audience in contexts where high-level speakers are, because of prior securitisation or outside factors, not able to do so without a loss in credibility. It does so by creating facilitating conditions for high-level securitisation using low-level speakers and low-intensity depictions. Through this process, facilitating conditions for further (re-) or (de-)securitisation are constructed. It is therefore essential for North Korea's domestic securitisation.

Desecuritisation and the role of referent objects

For communicating desirable political effects as well as security beliefs, North Korea's desecuritisation behaviour is just as important as its securitisation behaviour. The speakers who employ desecuritisation are predominantly ranked 1, with instances of 2 and very few instances of 3 or 4. Desecuritisation speech acts appear after 30 April 2018 and are found until 1 July 2019. The United States is depicted throughout as a dialogue partner, an enemy of old with a potential for betterment. Seeing as North Korea engaged this theme early on a high level, we can assume the following: by quickly legitimising a potential dialogue with the US, North Korea induced a shift in US depiction before the talks could show positive results. This supports the argument that North Korea changed its securitisation of the US deliberately to effect a positive diplomatic result, and not because the talks were going well. Put more broadly, North Korea's desecuritisation behaviour shows that the state judges a positive depiction of the United States to be extremely politically relevant for others. Consequently, (de)securitisation is used for communicating meanings of security towards domestic as well as international audiences.

North Korea's desecuritising behaviour also shows that the North Korean government was not willing to risk everything for a positive outcome. Though predominantly high-ranking speakers engaged in desecuritisation, they did so by employing speech acts more similar to those legitimating past and future acts, with room for rejection on part of the audience. By employing these less aggressive speech acts, the North Korean government made the official stance for the domestic audience clear, while also managing to mitigate the disruption of established narratives and depictions of the US. This points toward a desecuritisation behaviour as described by Bourbeau and Vuori, where a state employs desecuritising moves to avoid conflict with other states (Bourbeau / Vuori 2015: 259). However, it remains doubtful that this behaviour is oriented towards a full desecuritisation. It seems more likely to be a temporary lessening of the constant securitisation of the US to strengthen diplomatic efforts. Still,

the observed de- and subsequent resecuritisation also do not fulfil the criteria of a renewed securitisation climax (Lupovici 2016), since the resecuritisation does not include more intensive measures or additional drama.

We can conclude that North Korea is fully aware of how its treatment of the United States influences not only domestic perceptions, but also international perceptions of what North Korea thinks about the United States. While investigating North Korea's securitising behaviour has shown how the state thinks its depiction of the US influences its own legitimacy, it has told us little about North Korea's perception of the meaning of security itself. To investigate this aspect, a look at what referent objects of security North Korea mentions in its depictions of the US is warranted.

Referent objects of security are presented here along three different indicators: confrontational / cooperative time-period, speaker ranking and absence of certain argumentative patterns. During the confrontational period between September 2017 and mid-2018, referent objects of security for North Korea are almost exclusively North Korea itself as a state, its right to life (*saengjonkwŏn*) and its right to development (*paljŏnkwŏn*). These are recurring phrases when describing the threat potential of the United States.[9] When referring to the state, right to life and right to development being threatened, the US is described as an aggressive, nuclear, sanctioning threat.

Between mid-2018 and mid-2019 (Figure 6), shortly before and during the talks between the United States and North Korea, the focus of North Korean referent objects changes. When desecuritising, North Korean speakers describe (world) peace, peace on the Korean peninsula, and the relations between North Korea and the United States to be the primary referents of security. This is an interesting shift in argumentation because North Korea implicitly argues that, while diplomacy may be useful in reaching peace and amicable relations, one's sovereignty is better protected through offensive and defensive capabilities. Thus, a central North Korean belief about security, although already known through North Korean publications about ideology (T'ak 2012), is shown directly.

The period beginning mid-2019 is dominated by primer speech acts that describe the United States as an egoistic and imperial country. Referent objects of security are predominantly other states. Particularly Russia, Syria and other states that share more amicable relations with North Korea are singled out as being threatened by the United States. In 2020 we see the first signs of North Korea returning to a depiction of the US as it was in 2017, with aggressive and nuclear threat-aspects being emphasised as substantial threats to North Korea. All in all, the calculated way referent objects of security are used by North Korean speakers leads to the assumption that the security nature of an

9 North Korea invokes these phrases primarily when arguing for the expansion of its nuclear arsenal or justifying its large conventional military capabilities.

Figure 6: Referent objects of security in North Korean (de)securitisation

Time period	Main (de)securitising behaviour and US depiction	Referent objects of security
September 2017 to mid-2018	securitising – aggressive depiction	sovereignty, right to life, right to development
mid-2018 to mid-2019	desecuritising – positive depiction	(world) peace, peace on the Korean peninsula, relations between North Korea and the United States
mid-2019 to 2020	securitising – imperial depiction	other states, North Korean allies

Source: Compiled by author

object is carefully manufactured by the North Korean state. This argument is further supported by the fact that some issues, most notably the North Korean economy, are omitted when it comes to describing the US threat under which North Korea sees itself.

Limitations of securitisation

A limitation that this study has not been able to overcome is the state-centric focus of its research direction. By confining itself to North Korean depictions of the United States as unitary nation state, singular instances of more detailed US depictions are lost. In one instance the *Rodong Sinmun* specifically criticises US citizens' lack of safety from gun violence (Rodong Sinmun 2019e, 2019f). In another instance, Kim Jong-un praises US-president Trump's "boldness" (Rodong Sinmun 2019b). Because of the extremely low number of such depictions, no solid conclusion can be drawn. Still, they show that North Korean security-relevant depictions of the United States have the potential to go beyond state-ism and merit further research. Furthermore, securitisation related to economic matters is almost completely absent from the analysed material. While this does not necessarily mean that North Korea thinks its economy to be security-irrelevant, it does show that an analysis of state-oriented securitisation potentially overlooks certain areas. To ascertain why North Korea does not substantially securitise its economy in relation to the United States could potentially be investigated by an analysis of overall securitisation processes in North Korea.

This article also points towards a need to examine the connection between targeted audience and speaker-authority invocation in securitising moves (Vuori 2008: 72). Concerning securitisation for deterrence (Vuori 2008: 82), it should be noted that the findings of this article suggest that a general a priori definition of which strand is aimed at whom is difficult to uphold. Rather, in North Korea the social ranking of the speaker is an indicator of the audience that a speech act is aimed at. A high rank, however, does not automatically guarantee a successful securitisation, which we can investigate here only vaguely in any case, since there are no opinion polls or elections. Still, if a single high-ranking actor were to make every securitisation move in a state, that actor would suffer a loss of credibility and legitimacy after any break with a previous narrative. To accommodate changes in narratives, low-ranking actors are needed to establish facilitating conditions.

The nature of the creation of facilitating conditions was briefly explored by introducing the primer strand of securitisation. However, it must be stressed that this article cannot fully resolve the concerns raised by other scholars (Vuori 2011, Stritzel 2014) regarding precisely what facilitating conditions are and how they can be measured. Still, the primer complex speech act is helpful in addressing the shortcoming of illocutionary logic-oriented, speech act-centred frameworks that cannot fully capture the North Korean securitisation of the United States without completely abandoning their core concepts. While it provides a satisfying explanation for the particularities of domestic securitisation in North Korea, its explanatory power should be tested in other contexts as well. It is likely that the primer speech act is related to resecuritisation processes, an "even less investigated phase of securitisation" (Sjösted 2020: 32). As these exhibit differences from standard processes of securitisation – even though North Korea has a highly different discursive context than other cases where this phenomenon has been studied (McDonald 2011) – further research in comparing resecuritisation in democratic and non-democratic contexts is needed.

Regarding the debate as to whether securitisation theory focuses too much on speech acts, the present study shows why we should not be too hasty in discarding them, as they are one of very few primary sources able for identifying securitising behaviour in non-democratic states. The fact that we cannot reliably investigate North Korean audiences or fully investigate a North Korean security-dispositif hinders the adoption of approaches suggested by scholars such as Balzacq (2011). Speech act-centred securitisation frameworks prove useful because they consist of an abstract, theory-based approach, clearly defined source material and a comprehensible way of analysing said material, thereby addressing key criticisms of North Korea studies. Additionally, studies of securitisation in North Korea may prove valuable to research into North Korean military provocations and strategic thinking, alleviating the lack of insight into domestic sources and security practices that these studies suffer from.

Further political and cultural North Korea studies may be valuable in generating insights about the characteristics of the audience concept in North Korea specifically and non-democratic states in general. The concept of North Korea as a theatre state (Kwon / Chung 2012) can be drawn upon to conceptualise ways that the North Korean state engages with its citizens. How North Korean citizens are enticed to join in state-organised performances and what role they have in these rituals correlates to the conceptualisation of an audience that is not inert, but also does not necessarily need persuasion (Oren / Solomon 2015). Rather, according to Oren and Solomon, the audience must join into a "collective incantation of ambiguous phrases" (Oren / Solomon 2015: 316) of security. The bulk of North Korean US-securitisation is oriented along ambiguous phrases like "foreign powers" (Rodong Sinmun 2019d) or "imperialism" (Rodong Sinmun 2017b) – the first phrase was explicitly identified by Ballbach (2015) in an international context. Further investigation of how the role of the audience in North Korea is constituted within performances of securitisation vis-à-vis the state may grant further insights into the role of the audience in non-democratic states, showing that not only democratic contexts feature an active audience.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored why North Korea engages with the United States of America politically and diplomatically, when the regime could simply securitise the US to strengthen its own legitimacy. In the period under study, North Korea engaged in talks if they potentially yielded political gains and were justifiable to its domestic audience. The country desired a positive outcome and saw such an outcome as a gain in security. Clear shifts towards a more positive depiction of the US before the talks began thus support the argument that North Korea deliberately changed its securitisation to effect a more favourable diplomatic outcome. Through ranking the securitising actors along their socio-political standing, the article shows that high-ranking speakers such as the North Korean leader or specific government organs dominate certain strands of securitisation, especially directly before diplomatic events up to mid-2019. Before and after the actual events, low-ranking securitising actors appear more frequently. In early and mid-2018 and after mid-2019 they partake in an essential domestic-oriented securitisation process in North Korea. By substituting certain strands of securitisation (e.g. legitimising past acts) with others (primer) up to and during diplomatic talks, the North Korean government manages to shift its US depiction without a strong loss of credibility among its citizens.

Going beyond North Korea, the findings suggest that a broadened speech act-centred securitisation approach is useful for identifying less obvious shifts

of security logic in non-democratic contexts. States must communicate with their people in some way – even if it is through propaganda. By considering less explicit speech acts, we can grasp how the logic of security touches the daily lives of people living in non-democratic states. While the approach in this article is not a substitution for opinion polls or interviews, it is an alternative tool for researchers who still want to investigate the role of the audience in contexts where the aforementioned methods are not feasible. Furthermore, analysing the logic of security in the mass media reveals how non-democratic states grapple with legitimacy problems when dealing with (former) enemies or threats. At some point, states may find themselves in a position where a threat, whose deterrence was once the main legitimising force for a government, has either changed or faded away. Rather than facing a legitimacy crisis by losing their main enemy, this article suggests that non-democratic states can make use of de- and resecuritisation to balance out losses of credibility and legitimacy. By refocusing on how non-democratic states legitimise their rule at home through security we can gain insights into why supposedly unstable nations or governments carry on without significantly visible change.

Overall, this article alludes not to the American threat being vital to North Korea's identity, but rather to a threat being vital for the way Pyongyang garners support for its policies and legitimacy among the populace. The way in which North Korea changed its depiction of the United States implies that the North Korean government presumably has the means – after a period of progressively changing its securitisation behaviour – to choose to securitise, for example, Japan or even China as its main enemy. In this way, the North Korean leadership could still claim domestically to be threatened from the outside while externally improving its ties with the United States. Seeing how securitisation is used in North Korea, this article supports the argument that the North Korean government has the option and the authority to decide of its own accord who or what it recognises as a threat and it does not rely on justifying its rule solely with the American threat, but rather with threat in general.

This means that North Korea is not exclusively bound by its prior securitisation and construction of the United States as a threat. If there is a preferable political, economic or other gain to be had, the North Korean government can, through its domination of the public discourse and the employment of certain strands of securitisation, change its depiction of the United States with a negligible loss of legitimacy. The risks for North Korea are low since the government can comparatively easily resecuritise the United States again in the case of a breakdown or failure of diplomatic talks.

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