



ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Violence and Demonstrations in North Korea

Background

North Korea's 2020 security gridlock marks the reversal of a peace process that began with the joint participation of both Koreas in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics. This period was marked by a pattern of concessions and hostilities as peace negotiations – among them three inter-Korean summits, and three summits between North Korea and the United States – moved forward and then deteriorated.

Many historic firsts occurred in 2018 and 2019: the first time a North Korean leader crossed the DMZ into South Korea post-armistice; the first summit meeting between North Korea and the United States; and the first time a sitting American president set foot on North Korean soil. As a result of the peace process, the two Koreas made numerous small yet notable moves toward disarmament. Progress was made with regard to demining activities, the dismantlement of guard posts, and the suspension of army training exercises and artillery drills near the border. North Korea also took several steps forward in an effort to continue with negotiations, such as suspending missile and nuclear weapons testing, dismantling various missile and nuclear testing sites (Tongchang-ri, Yongbyon, Sohae), replacing several top military officials, toning-down anti-American propaganda activities, and releasing three American detainees into US custody.

The gains made during peace negotiations were largely reversed following the failure of the summits and subsequent working-level talks to make substantive progress toward peace. In response, North Korea reportedly executed five senior foreign ministry officials, began restoring part of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, and built a new ballistic missile submarine. North Korea then conducted missile tests on a total of fifteen separate occasions between May and December 2019, at which point North Korea declared that it would no longer be abiding by its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) testing. The period of peace ended with no progress made on big-ticket negotiation items, such as a peace treaty, sanctions, or denuclearization. Missile testing continued into 2020, with North Korea firing short-range ballistic missiles on four occasions in March and one in April. The latest round of missile testing by North Korea drew pushback from the international community for continuing military provocations amid the global coronavirus pandemic.

When it comes to coding in line with ACLED methodology, coding high profile missile testing and peace agreements is clear-cut, but addressing other conflict activity in North Korea is less so. As a



free and open press does not exist within North Korea, it is oftentimes near impossible to independently confirm reports of various events – such as mass arrests, protests, violence against civilians, sexual violence, abductions, and other human rights abuses. As a result, ACLED data on North Korea are sparse and rely secondarily on declassified information, open-source satellite imagery, and anonymous reporting from within North Korea, as well as North Korean state media and qualitative analysis by country experts.

How does ACLED code strategic developments in North Korea?

Because of the difficulty in accessing reliable information from within North Korea, and given the nature of the conflict between North and South Korea, the vast majority of events in the North Korean dataset are coded as “Strategic developments”. These events are defined by ACLED as offering contextually important information regarding the activities of groups, but which are not themselves demonstrations or violence; these events may trigger future such events or contribute to political dynamics within and across states. More detailed information on the scope and useability of these types of events can be found in the [ACLED Codebook](#) and in [this primer](#). The following are several examples of “Strategic developments” likely to be captured in the data.

Missile tests and launches

The launching of missiles and other unidentified projectiles make up the bulk of ACLED’s North Korean events. The locations of such events are coded at the site of landing, or, if that information is unknown, the general area in which the missile landed (i.e. the Coast of North Hamgyong, coded then with a geo-precision of 2 or 3, per ACLED methodology). Coding the site of impact is consistent with how other long-range missile events under the “Explosions/Remote violence” event type are coded, as it captures the important trend of missile range. The *Notes* column will contain any additional information provided by the source, such as the launch site (if known), and any temporal relevance (e.g. if the launch occurred shortly after the breakdown of talks).

Arrests, defections, and executions

ACLED codes defections and arrests of high-level officials and military personnel using the “Other” and “Arrests” sub-event types, respectively. Political arrests of a large number of people in a single instance (25+) are also coded, in accordance with standard ACLED methodology. If executions are reported, the event may be coded under either the “Other” sub-event type (if it is of a high level official or activist, and with judicial process), or the “Attack” sub-event type (under the “Violence against civilians” event type) if the execution is considered non-judicial. Arrests and executions of foreigners are more likely to be coded as “Violence against civilians”, unless context dictates otherwise. An example of the latter would be the disappearance of an Australian student at



Pyongyang University in June 2019, and their later re-emergence a week later under state custody (coded under the “Abduction/forced disappearance” sub-event type).

Agreements

Significant agreements between two states are coded under the “Agreement” sub-event type. The date of the event is coded as the day the agreement comes into effect. Bilateral or multilateral summits that do not actually result in an agreement are not coded, unless they are specifically high-profile or occur in a significant location, such as the DMZ. In the latter cases, such events would be coded under the “Other” sub-event type.

Change in the power structure

Changes in top military leadership, or changes heavily signaling or actually involving regime change, are coded under the “Change to group/activity” sub-event type. Any violence reported in conjunction with such changes – such as casualties during a coup or abductions – are coded per standard ACLED methodology, under the “Violence against civilians”, or “Battles” event types, depending on the situation.

How are locations coded in North Korea?

ACLED provides up to three administrative divisions for each of its country datasets. Typically, these levels are based off of official administrative boundaries. In some cases, official boundaries may not exist for higher level divisions. In other cases, ACLED may forego including higher level divisions if they are not deemed useful – such as in North Korea, where the Admin 3 divisions are essentially the same as named Locations, and are thus not included in the data. Below are the administrative divisions included in the North Korean data.

ADMIN 1: **Province** and **Special city**

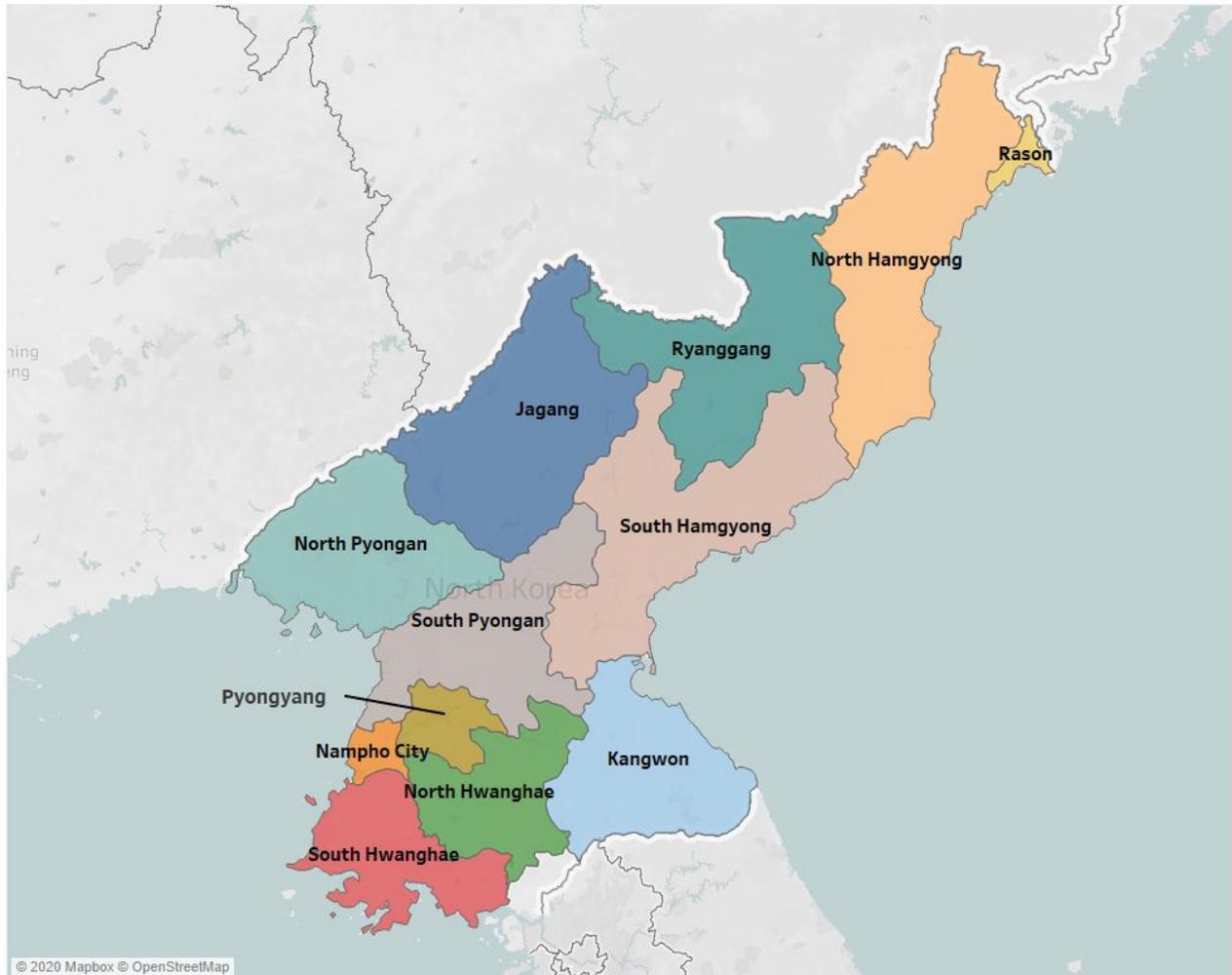
ADMIN 2: **County, City, District,** and **Special City**

ADMIN 3: ***Not Applicable*** (ACLED does not code ADMIN 3 in North Korea)

LOCATION: **A populated place** (city, village, etc.), **natural landmark** (hill or mountain, bay, etc.), **or a distinct location outside the borders of a population center** (military bases, rural airports, etc.)



Map 1: First Order Administrative Divisions of North Korea



Are there locations in North Korea coded below the city level?

According to standard ACLED methodology, cities are only broken down into smaller subdivisions (e.g. neighborhoods or city districts) if doing so serves a greater analytical purpose, such as in very large or populated cities. Given the low number of events reported from North Korea and the fact that most of the recorded events are “Strategic developments” affecting the whole country, the coding of city subdivisions would not offer any analytical benefit and is hence not included.



Coding events along or across the DMZ

Any violence reported along or across the DMZ is coded similarly to border events in other regions (for example, how we code border events along the Line of Control in Jammu & Kashmir). If one-sided – such as an artillery attack across the border with no response – the location is coded as the site of impact. Locations of cross-border violence – such as firing from both sides – default to the location with the most information or the most casualties, with further information noted in the Notes section of the event. For example, the event *“North Korean military reportedly fired several bullets at a South Korean guard post in the DMZ near Cheorwon in Gangwon province in South Korea, and South Korean military responded with a total of 20 rounds of warning shots”* is coded at Cheorwon in South Korea, with a geo-precision of 2, given the amount of information on the South Korean side. In cases where there is equal information for both sides, the *Country* variable is defaulted to North Korea to err on the side of capturing events in the country despite such conservative coding. In all circumstances involving cross-border engagements, the geo-precision is coded as 2, denoting the fact that the event occurs over a larger area and at least two administrative divisions.

Any agreements taking place in the Joint Security Area are coded at a special location by that name, with the country coded as North Korea.

How are events sourced for North Korea?

North Korea’s totalitarian regime and distrust of international media make sourcing events capturing disorder from within the country incredibly difficult. For their 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders (RSF) ranked North Korea *last* on their list, citing the fact that “North Koreans can still be sent to a concentration camp for viewing, reading or listening to content provided by a media outlet based outside the country. The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) is the only permitted source of official news for the country’s other media” ([RSF, 2020](#)). There has been some minor flexibility in recent years for international media – such as the Agence France Presse (AFP) and Associated Press (AP) – in gaining access to official events. However, reporters are kept on a tight leash. Human rights groups inevitably rely on covert reports from contacts either within North Korea or from defectors who manage to escape across the border – both of which provide information which is not easily verifiable. Furthermore, the safety and security of these sources is in constant jeopardy, especially from within North Korea itself.

While ACLED continues to pursue partnerships with organizations that may have access to close contacts, it also recognizes some inevitable limitations on access to information, especially historical data. ACLED currently relies on two main avenues of sources. The for-pay North Korea



Professional Research Platform (NK Pro) provides reliable and comprehensive coverage and analysis of state media reports, missile launches, the movement of North Korean warships, and other strategic developments. While NK Pro does receive information from North Korean informants and defectors, it rarely provides information on discrete events of state violence or unrest. Beyond NK Pro, ACLED refers to a number of international news outlets such as AFP, AP, BBC, and RIA Novosti, who report on high profile events, such as the March 2019 execution of special envoys at Mirim airport in Pyongyang. The South Korean-based Yonhap News Agency (YNA) further supplements the data from a regional perspective. Both YNA and the international outlets noted above make use of satellite imagery and analysis provided by think tanks, such as Beyond Parallel (CSIS) and 38 North (Stimson Center).