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April 3, 2014

The Role of Media, Activism, and the Government in the North Korean Refugee Situation

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

East Asian Studies

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Abstract

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By Kerry McGlinchey

Despite the growth in North Korean refugee resettlement from the mid-1990s until the present, current media and literature have consistently portrayed North Korean refugees as the defenseless victims of an unjust regime. Prior to 2002, the North Korean refugee population in China consisted primarily of defectors motivated by famine or economic reasons. These defectors were not organized as a group, had no rights in China, and were subject to the exploitation of smugglers and human traffickers. In 2002, a shift in media framing provided an opportunity for North Korean refugees to obtain asylum through unconventional methods. From this point onwards, refugees took the initiative in finding their own path to resettlement. Through collaboration with the media and exploitation of government loopholes, refugee agency became the driving factor behind the resettlement of North Korean refugees. From 2002 onwards refugee agency grew until the refugee population became a key player with the ability to affect the government through its actions. Over the period from 2002 to 2010, North Korean refugees have found their own voice in society as key players in dealing with North Korean human rights issues and the North Korean refugee situation.

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Sun-Chul Kim for his invaluable insight and support throughout this process. Dr. Kim has inspired me in my writing throughout my time at Emory, and I am very grateful to him for acting as my advisor through the lengthy process of writing this thesis.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Cheryl Crowley and Dr. Erin Suzuki, for being patient with me throughout the process and offering me valuable advice on how to develop my thesis into what it is today. Thank you for your kind encouragement and support.

I would like to thank my wonderful family – My mom never gave up on me, even when I almost gave up on myself. She taught me to work hard and excel; to strive to surpass your dreams, because none of us truly know what we are capable of accomplishing. My dad was always there for a quick joke or stress reliever, and he did his best in order to make sure that I wouldn't have to deal with too many external stresses.

I would like to thank my friends – the ones I would message at four in the morning when I could barely stay awake to keep working – talking to you was better than any caffeine.

I would finally like to thank Emory University. The opportunities we get as students at Emory are invaluable in fostering our academic growth and exploration. Throughout my time here, I have met countless inspiring people, both professors and students. This atmosphere has allowed me to branch out and find my passion, and has brought me here today.

Thank you.

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Timeline of Events



Figure 0-1

Chapter 1 Introduction

North Korean defectors are frequently portrayed in the media as the helpless victims of an unjust regime. Driven out of North Korea by reasons such as hunger, fear of persecution, or severe economic hardship, defectors find themselves unable to obtain political asylum once in China. Due to fear of repatriation defectors must stay hidden, and are frequently exploited by human traffickers and dishonest employers under threat of exposure. However, the defector population in China is not helpless – from 1996 to 2010, shifts in the roles of the media, government, and activists facilitated the development of agency within the defector population.

North Korean defectors are typically seen as passive victims that are subject to exploitation and have little opportunity in China. The women, in particular, were subject to exploitation through human trafficking:

"I was helpless; I had no money, I didn't speak Chinese, and I had my daughter to support," said Young, who agreed to an interview in Seoul on condition that only her first name be used. "If you are a North Korean woman crossing the border, it's almost impossible to survive without being abused or sold. It happens to almost all of us, because they know we are vulnerable." ¹

Women would be sold into slavery or arranged marriages in order to pay back brokers that would "rescue" them from the patrol guards or threaten to repatriate them should they disobey. Many women crossed the border alone or with children, as it was much more difficult for a male to cease working without questions being raised in North Korea. For those men that did cross the border, it was very difficult

¹ "N. Korean Women Find Life of Abuse Waiting in China." *Washington Post* 3 Mar. 2004: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

² Haggard, Stephan, and Marcus Noland. *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights*

to find work due to a lack of required documentation – in a survey by Haggard and Noland, only 22% of defectors surveyed in China said that they had a job. Of those who were holding a job, only 13% said they were being paid a fair wage².

Employers were at risk by hiring North Korean defectors, so they were often hired for the most dangerous or undesirable jobs. However, as described in Lankov's "North Korean Refugees in Northeast China", the defectors had little other option – the South Korean government was reluctant to accept any pleas for refuge, and "If a refugee manages to contact a South Korean consulate or embassy, he or she will not find support there unless the situation is deemed exceptional"³. Only those that had some particular value to South Korea – either as propaganda or for information – were offered asylum by the embassy. It was possible for defectors to hire smugglers to help them move from China to South Korea via a third country, but doing so required either money or a contact in South Korea or the United States that was willing to fund their escape.

While defectors were subject to significant hardship in China, they were not helpless. Prior to 2002, defector agency had little opportunity to manifest itself due to the lack of alternative options for defectors in China. However, as new opportunities opened up due to collaboration with activist groups and a shift in media framing, defectors began to take an increasingly significant role in planning and executing their escape through asylum-seeking action. As defector agency grew,

² Haggard, Stephan, and Marcus Noland. *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011. Print. 33-34.

³ Lankov, Andrei. "North Korean Refugees in Northeast China." *Asian Survey* 44.6 (2004): 856-73. *JSTOR*. Web. 23 Dec. 2013.

refugees began to take organized action in South Korea and continue making efforts to improve the North Korean refugee situation.

In my thesis, I argue that the interplay among activist organizations, governments, and the media created an environment conducive to North Korean refugee development of a sense of agency. The place of North Korean refugees in society and the methods through which they gained asylum shifted as the roles of activists, governments, and the media shifted in 2000, 2002, and 2008. Over the period from 1996 to 2010, the role of North Korean defectors shifted from passivity and adherence to state-issued guidelines for seeking asylum to initiative and creation of their own path in securing asylum and fighting for improvements in North Korean human rights.

The term **refugee** is defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention as an individual that “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”⁴. Throughout this paper I use the term **refugee** to refer to any North Korean defectors that have gained asylum or permanent refuge in a third country, while I use the term **defector** to refer to any North Korean defectors that have left North Korea of their own volition but have not been granted refugee status. Classification of North Korean defectors as refugees has been widely debated, as studies have indicated that the majority of North Korean defectors left due to economic hardship. However, North

⁴ U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, December 2010

Korean defectors face sentences ranging from imprisonment for a few months to public execution and the imprisonment of their family members upon repatriation to North Korea.

The North Korean refugee issue has been of growing prevalence in the international community over the past two decades. Over 20,000 North Korean refugees have resettled in South Korea to date – averaging between 1500 and 2500 per year since 2006. In comparison, only 947 North Korean refugees had entered South Korea up until 1998, and a total of 1043 refugees entered South Korea between 1999 and 2001⁵. Based on a 2010 estimate by South Korean Minister of Unification Hyun In Taek, there may be as many as 100,000 North Korean defectors remaining in China. The exact number is impossible to determine, as North Korean defectors are at risk of repatriation should they reveal themselves. China has pursued a policy of repatriation towards North Korean defectors under the stance that they are economic migrants, regardless of how long they have lived in China or what consequences they might face upon their return to North Korea.

Severe famine in North Korea after 1996 led to increased defection and movement across the border between North Korea and China. The shortage in food supply began in the late 1980s due to deteriorating relations with the Soviet Union and its subsequent collapse. The Soviet Union demanded repayment for its earlier financial support to North Korea, and cut off trade of industrial supplies when they found the North Korean government unable to pay. The lack of industrial supplies

⁵ "통일부 자료마당 통계자료 북한이탈주민정책." 통일부 자료마당 통계자료 북한이탈주민정책. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Apr. 2014.
<http://www.unikorea.go.kr/index.do?menuCd=DOM_000000105006006000>.

led to decreased agricultural output, which led the North Korean government to decrease rations and establish a “let’s eat two meals a day” program in 1990. In 1995, severe flooding across North Korea destroyed crops and led to the aggravation of the famine in North Korea. Despite receipt of food aid, North Korea was unable to supply sufficient rations to feed its population under the Public Distribution System⁶. With the failure of the government to provide for the population, those affected resorted to coping methods such as scavenging, participation in black market activity, and defection across the border between North Korea and China.

The 1998 implementation of the Sunshine Policy in South Korea and historic inter-Korean summit in 2000 led to increased international attention on the relationship between North and South Korea. The Sunshine Policy represented a shift in government policy towards fostering diplomatic relations between North and South Korea. The inter-Korean summit in 2000 contributed to the growth in media reporting of the North Korean refugee issue, contrasting with South Korea’s tactic of “silent diplomacy”, in which refugee affairs were managed through under-the-table negotiations in order to avoid the attention of North Korea. When a group of refugees captured in Russia was repatriated back to China and then North Korea, the South Korean government attempted to quietly resolve the matter with first Russia and later China. However, the media reported on the diplomatic negotiations and published speculations on whether or not the refugees would be repatriated.

⁶ Haggard, Stephan, and Marcus Noland. *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011. Print. 6.

When the group was sent back to North Korea despite being granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the South Korean government accused the media of putting China in a situation where it had to repatriate the group due to publicization of the issue. South Korea replaced the foreign minister in charge of handling the situation and vowed to take a different approach towards the refugee situation in the future.

In 2002, United States President George W. Bush's inclusion of North Korea as a part of the "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address led to increased tensions and the start of the second North Korean nuclear crisis. Foreign activist groups became heavily involved in refugee asylum-seeking action by organizing defector groups and developing strategies for unconventional asylum-seeking action. In 2002, a Tokyo-based foreign activist group organized an event in which a group of 25 North Korean defectors broke into the Spanish embassy in Beijing and demanded asylum under threat of suicide⁷. The activist group, Life Funds for North Korean Refugees, sent a statement to local media outlets on the behalf of the defectors and collaborated with international media outlets in order to capture the break-in on video. The success of this method led to a shift in media reporting of the North Korean refugee situation away from impersonal reports of factual data and towards more personalized, human-interest stories that attracted sympathy from an international audience.

While this alternative method of asylum-seeking activity was first organized by groups of foreign activists, as defectors in China saw the success of their actions

⁷ "Koreans' Asylum Bid Wrong-foots Chinese." *The Independent* [London] 15 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

they began to organize on their own. Through collaboration with the media and exploitation of loopholes in government policy, defectors were able to develop their own strategies to secure permanent resettlement. In 2002, a significant portion of all refugee asylum-seeking action was through publicized break-ins at foreign missions in China. When massive groups of hundreds of North Korean defectors arrested in Southeast Asian countries in 2004 and 2006 were transported to South Korea, asylum-seeking activity shifted once again. By sneaking into certain countries in Southeast Asia and turning themselves over to authorities, defectors could be “repatriated” to South Korea at the expense of a small fine and possibly a short period of arrest.

In 2004, the United States ratified the North Korean Human Rights Act and declared its intention to make preparations to accept North Korean refugees for asylum. However, they remained focused on the North Korean nuclear crisis and did not accept any refugees until 2006, at which time they began to accept small numbers of refugees subject to selection by the United States government. Tensions between North and South Korea gradually began to ease up once again, culminating in the second inter-Korean summit in 2007.

By 2008, a group of North Korean refugee-activists had emerged as a key player in the North Korean refugee movement in South Korea. Government change in South Korea led to stricter policies towards North Korea and a subsequent cooling in relations between the two countries. As tensions escalated and North Korea took on a confrontational stance towards South Korea, media attention shifted away from the plight of North Korean defectors in China and began to focus

on the situation on the Korean Peninsula. When the activities of refugee-activist groups in South Korea elicited the response of the North Korean government, the South Korean government changed its stance towards the refugee-activists. While the South Korean government disapproved of their activities, the refugee-activists repeatedly refused to cease, and the government was unable to take action due to the legality of the refugee-activists' actions. After the events of 2008, the deterioration of relations between North and South Korea continued through 2010, when North Korea allegedly sunk a South Korean ship and attacked the South Korean Yeonpyeong Island.

Over the period from 1996 to 2010, the aforementioned shifts in the role of media, activism, and the government in the North Korean refugee issue shaped the situation for North Korean defectors. These shifts provided them with the resources and opportunity to develop their own sense of agency in securing asylum and creating a path for future refugees.

Chapter 2 Data and Methods

Overview of Data

In order to take a closer look at the trends in the North Korean refugee situation I created an archive of news articles published on the subject during the period from 1996 to 2010. I used this archive in combination with historical information and reports on the overall political situation surrounding the key players, including North Korea, South Korea, China, and the United States. I then looked into the interplay between media framing, activism, and government activity surrounding the North Korean refugee issue. These three factors shifted three times: in 2000, 2002, and 2008. Each of these shifts redefined the role of North Korean defectors in society, as they moved from being on their own to being led by foreign activist groups, to finally becoming the drivers of change as activists themselves.

Assessment of Sources

I used the LexisNexis online academic database as my source to find the articles in my data set. According to its website, the LexisNexis Academic database features news articles, legal and business information from over 15,000 credible sources⁸. In order to justify the completeness of LexisNexis as the source for my data, I compared results for the sample years 1996 and 2006 across LexisNexis and ProQuest. I also found that both had a comparable number of articles, and all major events were covered in both databases. The concentration of articles related to each event was also comparable, where those events that were highly covered were in both databases.

⁸ "LexisNexis® Academic." *Academic*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Apr. 2014.

Articles on LexisNexis are reported by a diverse collection of news sources, including both local and national newspapers from South Korea, the United States, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, and Japan, among others. Through this, LexisNexis satisfies the assumption that articles are represented equally regardless of country, so I am confident in the ability to accurately analyze the demographics of the reported data. While there could be a potential bias because articles from North Korea were not recorded in the database, they were also not recorded on ProQuest. Furthermore, I have found from looking through my data that news sources from third countries are reporting any statements or actions by China and North Korea.

There is a potential bias in my use of articles in English alone, which may cause non-English speaking countries to be underrepresented in my data. Furthermore, due to the prominence of the North Korean refugee situation in South Korea, the majority of articles are from news outlets based in South Korea. However, it would be detrimental to use non-English language articles, as there would be a high risk of translation error. There may also be bias in how the media frames a certain event or episode, but I am using a diverse set of news outlets as my sources and have done extensive research on the major events and episodes in order to understand what exactly happened at that time. Furthermore, my primary focus in looking at these articles is to examine the events themselves, rather than the opinion of the author.

In this paper, I use some outside information or literature on the North Korean refugee situation to supplement my own data. However, unless noted, my narrative is based on the newspaper sources in my data set.

Data Collection Methods

I gathered news articles on the topic of North Korean refugees by searching the terms “North Korean refugee” and “North Korean defector” on the LexisNexis database. I gathered articles for every even year from 1996 to 2010 for technical reasons – the number of articles for each country was simply too large to examine every year from 1996 to 2010.

1. The Great Famine of North Korea from 1995-1998 was a prime factor in the increase of defections from North Korea⁹. Due to North Korea’s dependence on the Soviet Union and China for assistance, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in an economic disaster in North Korea. In 1995, severe flooding destroyed crops, and North Korea did not have the resources to import food or supplies. While North Korea received food aid from 1995 onwards, North Korea’s Public Distribution System was still unable to provide rations to feed the entire country. Those without food developed coping mechanisms, including scavenging, dealing in the private black markets, and for those in the Northern provinces, defection across the border to China.
2. 1996 was the first year with a significant number of articles recorded on the North Korean refugee situation. There were a total of 16 articles in 1996, primarily focusing on high profile defections, but also addressing various rumors about the North Korean regime.

⁹ Haggard, Stephan, and Marcus Noland. *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011. Print.

3. 1996 was the first even year following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994. By examining articles from 1996 onwards, I was able to avoid the possible confounding factor of regime change in my analysis of the North Korean refugee situation.

I chose 2010 as my end point in order to once again avoid the possible confounding factor of regime change as a result of the death of Kim Jong Il in 2011.

I assigned each article a unique ID that indicated the year and grouped the articles by event and episode.

- **Events** refer to any statement or action that happened at a singular point in time.
 - **Significant Events** refer to any statement or action that happened at a singular point in time and was reported in three or more articles. This indicates that these events were at least significant to the media.
 - **Total Events, or Events** refers to any statement or action that happened at a singular point in time and was reported in at least one article. Significant events are also included in this count.
- **Episodes** refer to any chain of related events over a period of time. Therefore, each episode has a number of associated events and a duration over which it occurred.

By creating a list of significant events based upon a threshold of three or more articles, I was able to examine which event types drew the most media attention as well as examine the growth in media coverage of singular events. I selected three of

the most highly covered episodes as case studies to examine the relationship between the type of event, the political situation surrounding the event, and the response of other actors to the event.

My three case studies occurred at the major turning points in North Korean refugee relations – 2000, 2002, and 2008.

- During 2000, the media began to focus attention on the North Korean refugee issue. The number of reported events rose from 6 in 1996 and 3 in 1998 to 22 in 2000. It is also the first time that the media picked up on and widely reported an event related to North Korean refugees.
- During 2002, the media reframed its reporting of North Korean refugee events in order to present the refugee issue through more of a human interest lens. While previously the media had primarily reported statistics and general facts, after the shift the media reported about the group of defectors involved at a personal level, including publication of their names, ages, occupations, and experiences in North Korea and China. This change was driven by activist organizations, which collaborated with the media in order to publicize the defectors' plight and gain sympathy from an international audience. During this period, while defectors stage asylum-seeking events, they are primarily guided by activists that informed the defectors on exactly what to say and do.
- During 2008, with the change in government and move away from the Sunshine Policy, we see the emergence of a group of vocal activists protesting the regime in the North and promoting human rights for refugees. This group

consisted primarily of former North Korean refugees that had arrived in South Korea in prior years. While a high number of refugees continued to arrive in South Korea each year until 2009, the media focus shifted away from asylum-seeking action and towards the events surrounding these refugee activists.

By examining these three events together, I was able to discover these major turning points and examine how each point marked a shift in the behavior of the media, activists, and the government towards the North Korean refugee situation.

Based on the reading of articles, I categorized my total events list by **defection/asylum-seeking activity, repatriation/arrest, activism, government activity, and other**. The list of all events consisted of any reported events, as opposed to only those reported in three or more articles. I chose to do so because many events important to understanding the refugee situation as a whole were simply not picked up and widely reported by the media. Furthermore, the level of media attention to an issue may be influenced by the international situation at that time, and may vary depending on where the media is focusing its attention

- **Defection/asylum-seeking activity** refers to any attempt by North Korean citizens to defect from North Korea to either South Korea or a third country, or expression of the desire to be sent to a country other than North Korea through various means.
- **Repatriation/arrest** refers to the arrest or repatriation of any North Korean defector or individual with an active role in assisting North Korean defectors.

- **Activism** refers to any effort to raise awareness and assistance of North Korean defectors by non-diplomatic parties.
- **Government activity** refers to any statement, action, or diplomatic stance issued by either the government of a state, its political representatives, or the United Nations.

The list of total events differs from the list of significant events in that I counted each move by the key players as a separate event. In the significant events section I counted the event itself and any statements associated with it in the same time period as a single event, while in the total events section any stated response to an event was counted separately from the event itself. While counting an event and its associated statements as one in the significant event section allowed me to look at the overall coverage of the event, counting them as separate in the total event section allowed me to examine the chain of responses within one event.

I divided the **other** and **government activity** sections into several subcategories in order to examine the type of event taking place. In the **other** section, I categorized events in subcategories of **defector achievements**, **criminal activity**, **political office**, and **other**. Events in the **other** category included those that were significant in understanding trends and development in the North Korean refugee situation, but did not fit into any of the categories I had defined above. Two such examples include rumors of the defection of the former wife of Kim Jong Il, and the nomination of a North Korean defector to the GNP party in South Korea. The former was used in media reports to explain increases in high-profile defections in

1996, but was later proved false. The latter was indicative of the growing influence of North Korean refugees in South Korean society.

I divided **government activity** into **government statement**, **government policy change**, **government action**, and **diplomacy** in order to look at the different roles that governments played in dealing with the North Korean refugee situation.

- **Government statement** refers to a general statement or bid, generally directed towards another governing body and not asserting the policy of the issuing body. Examples of this include statements that clarify or reconfirm a government's position towards the refugee issue, such as China's frequent affirmation that they do not regard North Korean defectors as refugees, or South Korea's expression of disapproval over the repatriation of the group of seven North Korean refugees in 2000.
- **Government policy change** refers to any official change in policy, as announced by the governing body, in regards to the North Korean refugee situation. Examples include the United States' ratification of the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004 and the South Korean adoption of extended screening procedures for North Korean refugees upon arrival in the South.
- **Government action** refers to direct actions taken by the government. Examples include the implementation of new job training programs for refugees in South Korea, inspection of border towns in China, and the expulsion of South Korean workers from the Kaesong Industrial Complex in 2008.

- **Diplomacy** refers to any talks or visits between two or more parties with the aim of increased cooperation. Examples include the inter-Korean summit and diplomatic trips, such as the trip of Seoul's Minister of Foreign Affairs to Beijing in order to strengthen lateral ties in 2000.

Government Activity By Country/Type				
Country	Statement	Policy Change	Actions	Diplomacy
SK	15	7	15	4
US	16	5	1	1
NK	5	0	6	1
CH	3	1	0	4
Mongolia	1	0	0	2
UN	3	0	0	0
JP	2	0	0	0
EU	1	0	0	0
RU	1	0	0	0
Thailand	0	0	3	0

Figure 2-1

I used these categories in order to examine what types of government activity were prevalent and whether the prevalence of each type varied by country. As seen in **Figure 2-1**, South Korea greatly outnumbered all other countries in government action at a total of 15 events. North Korea also had a significant number of government action events, with a total of 6 events. This is unsurprising, as South Korea has the world's largest resettlement program for North Korean refugees, and North Korea not only took action against the South, but periodically tightened restrictions in order to weed out potential defectors. South Korea and the United States were fairly equal in government statement events with 15 and 16 respectively, but had at least three times as many as any other country. South Korea and the United States were also relatively equal in the number of events reporting

policy change, but apart from those two only China had a reported instance of policy change. Considering the United States only committed to its involvement in the North Korean refugee situation in 2004, the comparatively high number of reported government statements and policy changes indicates that the United States was active on the policy front after 2004. However, the United States had a relatively low number of reported government action or diplomacy articles when compared to countries in the East Asian region. In terms of diplomacy, South Korea and China had an equal number of events, while the United States, North Korea, and Mongolia were reported in one or two events.

I further examined the events categorized as government action by issuing country and audience in order to better understand whom the major speakers were and towards whom they were directing their attention. I calculated the number of events per year for each country in order to examine when countries began to pay attention to the North Korean refugee situation and whether they became more or less involved in the issue over time. For each event for which more than one case of government activity was recorded, I examined the order in which these responses occurred, and which countries were involved. I found that typically, countries that become involved in an episode during the first event were more likely to respond to a later event in the same episode than new countries were to respond to an event later in the chain of an episode.

In this paper I examine the ways in which media framing of events, government activity, and activism contribute to changes in the role of defectors and the overall refugee situation. My data is sourced from newspaper articles published

at the time, which not only allows me to look at the various events that occurred and how they represented changes in the refugee situation, but also allows me to examine how the media portrayed each of the key actors and events.

Chapter 3 Findings

Total vs. Significant Events

The majority of events and episodes were reported sparsely by individual media outlets, while a small portion were picked up by multiple media outlets and widely reported. As stated in the “Data and Methods” section, I will define any events reported in three or more articles as significant events, as these are the events significant to the media. Of 44 total events and episodes reported in more than three articles, twenty-one were reported in three to four articles. Ten events were reported in five to six articles. This further decreased to three events reported in seven to nine articles, and three reported in ten to nineteen articles. From twenty articles there was an unusual uptake in the number of episodes reported, with seven episodes being reported in twenty or more articles. These events were the ones that drew the greatest media attention. Media attention to events affects public opinion, raises awareness, and shapes how the audience understands the events. Therefore, events that were picked up by the media drew the attention of an international audience. The events themselves were those that the media knew would “sell” when framed in a way to draw public interest. Of these, one was reported each year from 2000 to 2006. In 2008, three episodes were reported in 20 or more articles, but none were reported in 2010.

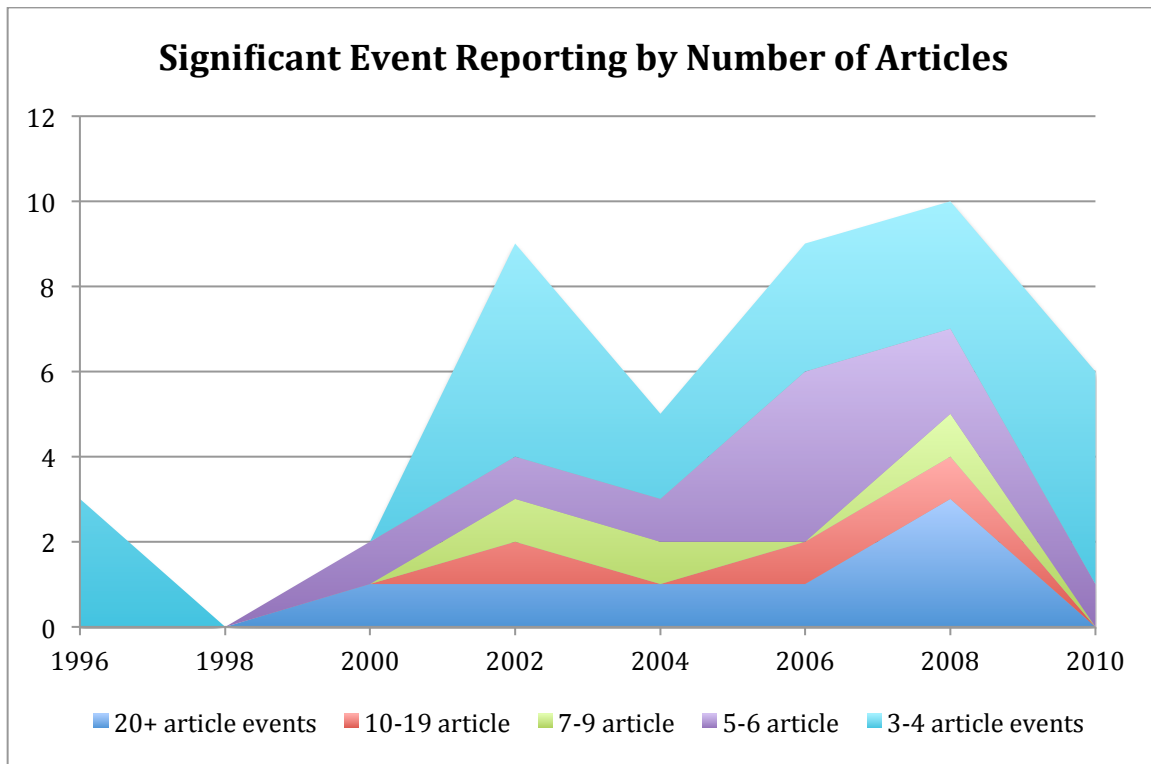


Figure 3-1

Of the episodes reported in twenty or more articles, two were on the topic of arrest/repatriation, two were on the topic of asylum-seeking activity, two were on the topic of activism, and one was on the topic of criminal activity by a defector. Of the four episodes on arrest/repatriation and asylum-seeking activity, the government response led to the successful resettlement of the groups in question into South Korea. The first episode reported in twenty or more articles took place in 2000 and resulted in the repatriation of a group of refugees to North Korea. While the South Korean government attempted to handle the issue through quiet negotiations, media reports on the event afforded it unwanted international attention. In 2002, there was a shift in media framing from reporting news and statistics to reporting events with a human-interest focus. Newspapers reported the names, ages, and hardships faced by the refugees, and provided the audience with

images and videos. This elicited a sympathetic response among the readers, which then created accountability for the parties involved.

Of this group of seven episodes I chose to look at three in further detail as case studies. I chose one arrest/repatriation episode from 2000, one asylum episode from 2002, and one activism episode from 2008 in order to look in detail at how the media, activist groups, and governments involved responded to each situation. These three case studies effectively portray the shifting roles of these key players and how their actions affected the refugee situation as a whole.

From the overall data on significant events, I found that the number of significant events and total events both peaked in 2002 and 2008. These two years were turning points in which activist tactics and media framing shifted, resulting in increased media coverage and a shift in government response. Total events per year peaked in 2002 and 2008. The number of defections/asylum seeking activity events was highest in 2002, when the emergence of a new strategy in which activists staged highly publicized events in order to gain the sympathy of an international audience. The number of events around government activity peaked in 2008, when President Lee Myung Bak came into power. At this time, Lee Myung Bak downsized the Ministry of Unification and declared that aid to North Korea would be dependent on its nuclear disarmament. This angered North Korea, who had become accustomed to receiving aid under the Sunshine Policy, causing the immediate cooling of North-South relations and spurring anti-North activist groups to become increasingly vocal in the South.

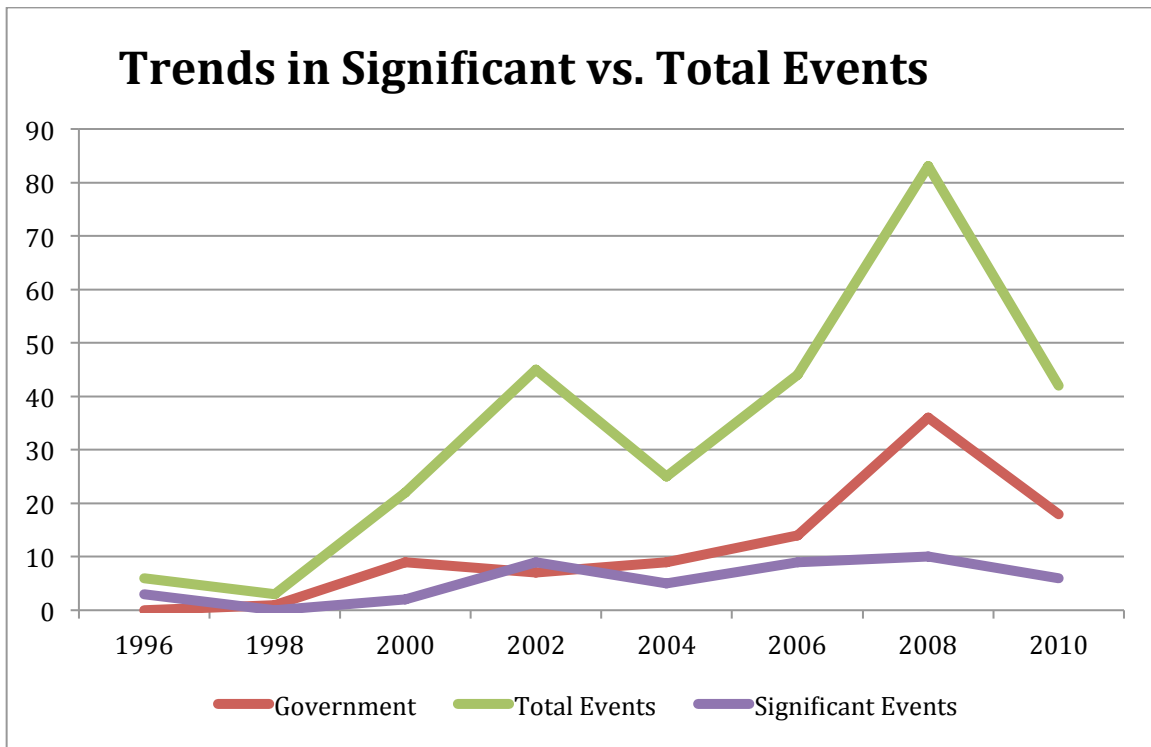


Figure 3-2

While there was significantly less variation in significant events than in total events, this can be explained by both the smaller number of significant events overall as well as the inclusion of multiple government statements in a single event as counted in the significant events section. In 2008, when three major events of 20+ articles were reported, the multiple government responses within the event would have been counted separately in the total event count, but together in the significant event count. These three events include refugee-activist protests at the Olympic Torch relay, the capture of a North Korean spy posing as a defector, and refugee-activists flying anti-North propaganda across the North-South border. Each of these events created a diplomacy issue that led each of the countries involved to issue its own statement. Therefore, the variation between total and significant events indicates that the spike in government activity and total events in 2008 is due to an

uptake in government response to the reported events during that time, as seen in

Figure 3-2.

Year	Defection/ Asylum Seeking	Arrest/repatriation	Activism	Government	Other	Total Events	Total Articles
1996	5	0	0	0	1	6	16
1998	0	0	2	1	0	3	6
2000	4	3	6	9	0	22	40
2002	19	4	10	7	5	45	114
2004	8	3	3	9	2	25	71
2006	6	11	9	14	4	44	126
2008	10	8	18	36	11	83	236
2010	3	1	12	18	8	42	102
Total	55	30	60	94	31	270	711

Figure 3-3

Asylum Seeking Activity

Based upon the officially reported numbers of the Ministry of Unification, the number of refugees resettling in South Korea per year grew to almost 3,000 per year in 2009 before it began to drop in 2010. As seen in Figure 3-4 the number of refugees recovered slightly in 2011 but dropped severely in 2012. Possible explanations for this change include the move away from the Sunshine Policy with the election of President Lee Myung Bak in 2008, government crackdown in the North as a result of Kim Jong Il's failing health during the period from 2008 to 2010, and the regime change in North Korea in 2011. During late 2011, Kim Jong Il passed away and the succession process was initiated.

Number of refugees to South Korea per year, Ministry of Unification			
Year	Refugees	Year	Refugees
1998	947	2007	2554
2000	1043	2008	2803
2002	1142	2009	2914
2003	1285	2010	2402
2004	1898	2011	2706
2005	1384	2012	1502
2006	2028	2013	1516

Figure 3-4

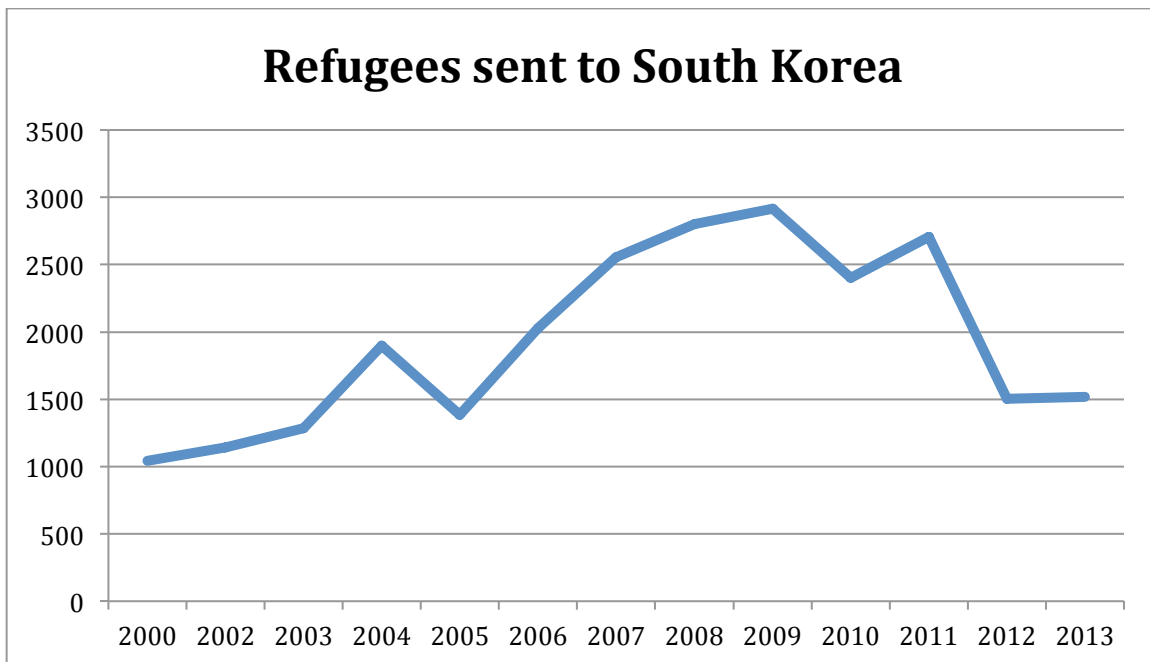


Figure 3-5

While the prevalence of asylum-seeking activity does not directly correlate with the number of refugees sent to South Korea per year, there is a visible trend of increasing resettlement during periods of high asylum-seeking activity, as seen in

Figure 3-6. During 2002, asylum-seeking activity as reported by the media spiked to 19 reported events, which coincided with the shift in media framing of asylum-seeking events. In 2004, the number of refugees to arrive in South Korea spiked, but the number of reported events decreased. However, the number of reported events fails to account for the number of refugees involved in each event. During 2004, South Korea accepted a group of more than four hundred refugees as part of one recorded event, while in previous years each event involved at most two or three dozen refugees. After 2004, the number of asylum-seeking events generally correlated with the number of total refugees to be sent to South Korea for each year. However, the number of significant events reported in three or more articles regarding asylum-seeking activity decreased after 2006, as the media shifted towards mass-reporting political conflicts and the growing trend of local, defector-initiated activism over asylum-seeking activity.

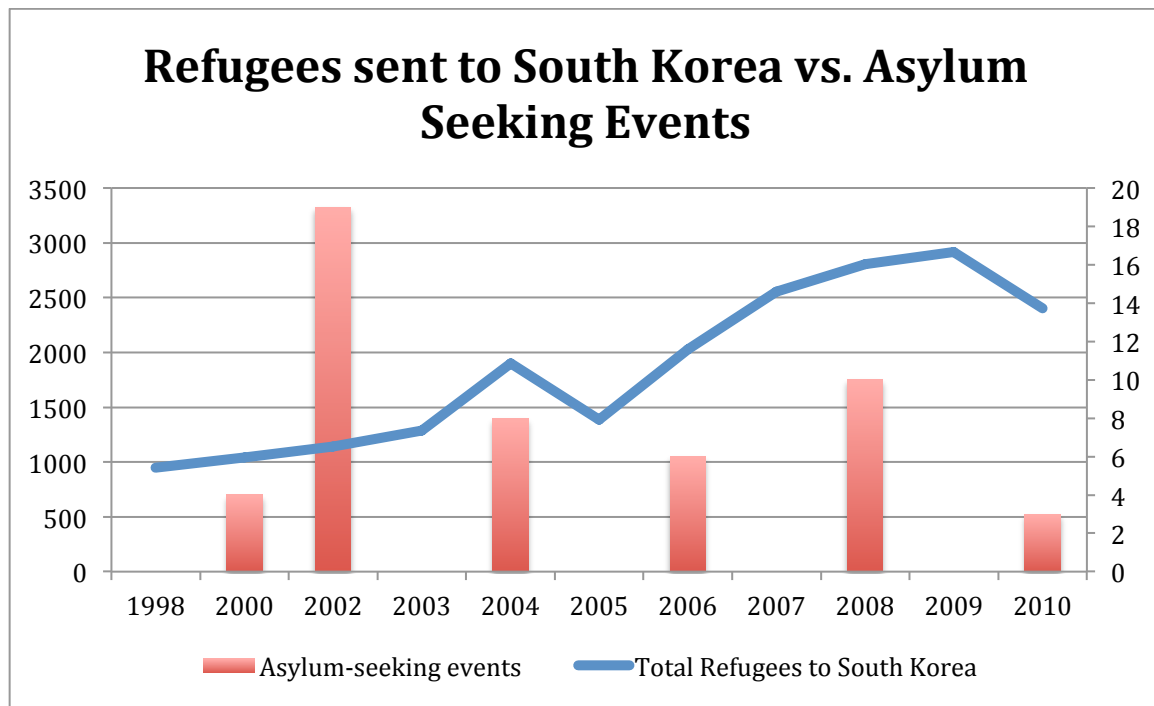


Figure 3-6

Government Activity

Government activity is defined as any statement, action, or diplomatic stance issued by either the government of a state, its political representatives, or the United Nations. As seen in **Figure 3-7**, statements issued from the United States to China were most frequent, with a total of eight separate events reported over the period from 1996 to 2010. However, the United States pursued no government activity in regards to the North Korean refugee situation before the year 2004. While the United States only developed an official stance towards the North Korean refugee situation as of 2004, they fall in second in terms of the total number of events in which the government took action between 1996 and 2010, behind only South Korea in that respect.

Government Activity by to/from country											
		To									Total
		CH	NK	SK	NGO	US	UN	JP	RU	N/A	
From	SK	6	3	0	2	2	1	0	1	26	41
	US	8	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	23
	NK	0	0	5	1	0	0	0	0	6	12
	CH	0	2	2	0	0	1	1	0	2	8
	Mo ngo lia	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3
	UN	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3
	JP	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	EU	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	RU	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Th aila nd	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Tot al	17	11	7	3	2	2	1	1	51	95	

Figure 3-7

Although the United States was mentioned in reports prior to 2004, their increased involvement in the North Korean refugee situation from 2004 onwards is consistent with the implementation of the North Korean Human Rights Act. The North Korean Human Rights Act was passed in 2004 to facilitate the United States' support for North Korean human rights groups and allow defectors to seek refugee status in the United States¹⁰. While United States took on a more active role in dealing with the North Korean human rights issue after 2004, the first group of refugees were not granted asylum until 2006.

Government Activity by Country/Year									
Country	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	Total
SK	0	0	6	4	3	4	17	7	41
US	0	0	0	0	1	7	9	6	23
NK	0	0	0	0	2	1	5	4	12
CH	0	0	1	2	1	0	3	1	8
Mongolia	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	3
UN	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	3
JP	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
EU	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
RU	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Thailand	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	0	1	9	7	9	14	36	19	95

Figure 3-8

As seen in **Figure 3-8**, the year 2000 saw a drastic uptake in government involvement in the North Korean refugee situation. Prior to 2000, only one event involving government activity was reported, but the level of reported government activity jumped to 9 in 2000, and continued to increase until 2008, apart from a slight dip to 7 events in the year 2002. 2000 was the year of the first inter-Korean

¹⁰ "US Push on Human Rights Divides Parties." *South China Morning Post* [Hong Kong] 1 Oct. 2004: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

summit, which facilitated increased cooperation through continued talks and economic cooperation between North and South Korea, and was heavily publicized in both nations¹¹. While it represented a significant move forward in relations between North and South Korea, it also brought international attention to the North Korean refugee situation. While South Korea maintained a high level of involvement after 2000, the United States, North Korea, and China also had relatively high levels of reported involvement in the refugee situation. The reported involvement of the United States in the refugee situation began in 2004 upon implementation of the North Korean Human Rights Act and increased to 7 reported episodes in 2006, surpassing the number of reported government activity by South Korea in that year. North Korean government activity as reported by the media increased as of 2008 but mainly consisted of confrontational action in response to the change in government in South Korea and cooling of relations between North and South. China maintained a moderate but fairly consistent pattern of action from 2000 until 2010. Apart from these four main actors, other government involvement in the North Korean refugee situation was limited to several minor events that directly involved the country in question, as opposed to taking an active role in the refugee situation. Mongolia and Thailand were primarily involved in the refugee situation as third countries through which defectors passed in an attempt to secure passage to South Korea. Japan became involved in diplomatic relations surrounding the Shenyang Incident of 2002, at which time Chinese police violated Japanese sovereignty by

¹¹ Lee, Jong-Heon. "Summit Scandal Hits S. Korea." *UPI Business News*. United Press International, Inc., 4 Feb. 2003. Web. 03 Apr. 2014.
<http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2003/02/04/Summit-scandal-hits-SKorea/UPI-69031044360356/>.

entering the Japanese consulate to forcibly remove a group of defectors. Russia was involved through its role in repatriating a group of refugees in 2000, and the European Union adopted a general resolution condemning North Korean human rights in 2010¹².

¹² "European Parliament Passes Resolution Condemning North Korean Human Rights." *Yonhap News* [Seoul] 9 July 2010: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

Chapter 4 Changes in Government Activity

The shifting roles of the government during the period from 1996 to 2010 shaped the international context surrounding the North Korean refugee issue. In addition to the significance of each government's stance towards North Korean defectors, the relationships between the countries themselves played a large role in dictating their actions. These relationships are particularly important when examining government repatriation policies and the effect of inter-Korean relations on the involvement of the two Koreas in the refugee situation.

In terms of repatriation, diplomatic relations shaped the behavior of governments in dealing with North Korean defectors. In 2000, the Russian government chose to send a group of defectors back to China after they were captured in Russia. While this was in line with Russian border policy, a Russian official cited the growing ties between China and Russia as a factor in their decision to repatriate the group¹³. After 2002 China allowed some defectors to leave the country once they had been granted asylum by a foreign body, but these defectors were sent via a third country in order to avoid upsetting China's relations with North Korea.

Under the Kim Dae Jung government of 1998-2003 and the Roh Moo Hyun government of 2003-2008, South Korea was heavily involved in diplomatic relations for defectors actively seeking passage to South Korea. The government attempted to handle these diplomatic affairs quietly during times of improving relations with

¹³ "Russian Ambassador Hints at Sending of North Korea Defectors to China." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 7 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

North Korea, but continued to accept an increasing number of refugees each year. In 2008, the new government under president Lee Myung Bak shifted away from its focus on refugee resettlement in order to avoid aggravating the already tense relations with North Korea.

During the mid-late 1990s, relations between North and South Korea went through a period of cooling and then gradually warming up to culminate in the first inter-Korean summit of 2000. The death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 and failure of South Korea to send its condolences led to this cooling in relations and the first North Korean nuclear crisis, which combined with regime change in North Korea led to a lack of dialogue between the two countries. Upon his election in 1998, South Korean president Kim Dae Jung implemented the Sunshine Policy in order to promote cooperation and dialogue between North and South Korea. The Sunshine Policy represented a shift in government policy towards cooperation and diplomatic relations with North Korea prior to any discussion of unification. Implementation of the Sunshine Policy resulted in the first inter-Korean summit in 2000, although it was later discovered that President Kim Dae Jung had funneled large amounts of money to North Korea in order to ensure that the summit would occur. This use of aid in return for diplomatic relations between North and South ultimately became detrimental to inter-Korean dialogue in 2008, when newly elected president Lee Myung Bak's declaration that aid would no longer be freely given led North Korea to cut ties with the South.

During the period of 1996 to 1998, only one instance of government activity was reported, in the *Korea Times* article "UNHCR to Express Regrets Over

Deportation of NK Escapees"¹⁴. This article detailed the response of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to a plea by South Korea to take appropriate action regarding the matter of China's deportation of North Korean defectors. This was in response to reports that about 150 North Koreans had been arrested and forcibly repatriated by Chinese authorities. However, when the Chinese authorities were contacted to verify the reports, they claimed that only 20 defectors had been repatriated, and that it was a regular occurrence that happened from time to time. The UN declared its intent to express regret towards China at the deportation, but at the same time expressed its lack of significant influence in the matter, as North Korean defectors were not officially recognized as refugees in an international context. The UNHCR has long maintained the stance that while North Korean defectors are people of concern, they not refugees by default, and refugee status must be decided on a case-by-case basis.

In this instance, South Korea chose not to make a direct statement itself, but rather to reach out to the UNHCR and ask that the matter be dealt with in a fair manner. During this time, South Korea was in the early stages of implementation of the Sunshine policy, and could not condemn China's actions without the fear of straining their budding relations with North Korea. The government had already made a significant investment towards developing relations between North and South, as they had offered over \$100 million in private loans to Hyundai founder Chung Ju Yang for investment in North Korea. These funds were transferred to

¹⁴ "UNHCR to Express Regrets over Deportation of NK Escapees." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 28 Dec. 1998: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

North Korea via Hyundai Asan in order to secure the commitment to hold an inter-Korean summit in 2000¹⁵.

The majority of covered government activity in 2000 was undertaken by the South Korean government in response to the deportation of a group of seven North Korean refugees from Russia to China and ultimately to North Korea. In contrast with its quiet plea to the UNHCR in 1998, over the course of this episode South Korea attempted to work directly with the Russian and Chinese governments to prevent the deportation of the group of refugees. While the South Korean government had taken direct action, their response was reactive to the situation and conducted primarily through under-the-table "silent diplomacy".

On January 7th, 2000 it was reported that South Korea had protested Russia's decision to send a group of seven North Korean refugees, including five men, one woman, and a child, back to China. Russia had explained its repatriation of the seven defectors to China as a result of their desire to pursue closer relations with Pyongyang, and elaborated that the UNHCR had been unwilling to label the group as official refugees despite UNHCR claims that they had been granted refugee status¹⁶. Although the South Korean government then turned to the Chinese government in the hopes of convincing them not to repatriate the group, the Korea Times reported that the prospects for the refugees had dimmed due to the Chinese government's

¹⁵ Lee, Jong-Heon. "Summit Scandal Hits S. Korea." *UPI Business News*. United Press International, Inc., 4 Feb. 2003. Web. 03 Apr. 2014.
<http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2003/02/04/Summit-scandal-hits-SKorea/UPI-69031044360356/>.

¹⁶ "Russian Ambassador Hints at Sending of North Korea Defectors to China." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 7 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

repatriation policy¹⁷. At the same time, other media reports both condemned China's policies and undermined the likelihood that China would immediately repatriate the group. In response, the Chinese government repatriated the group of refugees, and as a result, Foreign Affairs-Trade Minister Hong Soon Young was fired for his mishandling of the issue.

The Korean government criticized the involvement of the media, saying that the mass publication of the event was to blame for disrupting negotiations and ultimately leading to the repatriation of the group of refugees. At the same time, the *Korea Times* criticized the government's use of silent diplomacy, positing that had the South Korean government looked for international backing it may have been possible to ensure the safety of the group of refugees¹⁸. As I will later explain in my case study of this event, the disconnect between government policy and media framing in this instance contributed to the failure of both. After the group was repatriated to North Korea, Seoul requested that China work with North Korea in order to ensure the safety of the group of refugees. It created a channel between South Korea and China in order to secure more efficient communication and to improve negotiations over refugees. The UNHCR also held talks with North Korea, Russia, and China in order to clarify its stance on North Korean defectors and promote the safety of the repatriated group.

From 2000 onwards, South Korea pursued a policy of diplomatic relations with China on the matter of North Korean refugees. In 2002, Seoul and Beijing

¹⁷ "Seoul Protests Moscow's Action to Send 7 NK Escapees to China." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 7 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

¹⁸ "Diplomatic Shift on Refugees." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 19 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

agreed to boost cooperation and military exchange programs, with the intent that improved relations between the two governments may also result in better understanding regarding the matter of North Korean refugees¹⁹. On March 15, 2002 a group of 25 North Korean defectors were removed from the Spanish embassy in Beijing after they forced their way into the complex and threatened to commit suicide if not offered asylum. Seoul made a public statement calling for a humanitarian decision from China, to allow the safe passage of the group of defectors to South Korea. This episode was covered in a total of thirty-four articles, ten of which are involved with government activity.

News Source	Country	Number of Articles
Korea Times	South Korea	9
Korea Herald	South Korea	8
New York Times	USA	2
Financial Times	UK	2
The Times	UK	1
Daily Telegraph	UK	1
The Independent	UK	1
The Morning Star	UK	1
Washington Post	USA	1
San Mateo County Times	USA	1
The Gazette	CAN	1
Calgary Herald	CAN	1
Sydney Morning Herald	Australia	1
The Age	Australia	1
The Straits Times	Singapore	1
South China Morning Post	Hong Kong	1
Unknown	N/A	1

Figure 4-1

¹⁹ "Korean, Chinese Parliamentary Leaders Pledge to Boost Cooperation, Exchange." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 11 Jan. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

As seen in **Figure 4-1**, the Spanish Embassy event was reported by a variety of international news sources at both international and local levels. The widespread reporting of this issue combined with the extremity of the defectors' threat of suicide left China in a position where they could not stand by their policy of repatriation without risking the outrage of the international community. Therefore, they issued an official response that while their stance on North Korean refugees would not change, they would concede and send the group of 25 defectors to South Korea.

This pattern of negotiation between South Korea and China in an international spotlight continued throughout 2002, as various groups of defectors broke into consulates and Seoul requested that they be sent to South Korea. Japan also made its first reported statement during this time, in response to Beijing removing refugees from the Japanese embassy in Beijing by force. During this period of time, relations between North Korea, South Korea and the United States worsened once again. In January 2002, United States President George W Bush included North Korea in his "axis of evil" speech, marking the regime as a danger to the international community. North Korea responded defensively by building nuclear capabilities, strengthening its weapons program in secret, and engaging in confrontational dialogue. In June of 2002, North and South Korea engaged in a gun battle in the Yellow Sea at the cost of thirty North Korean and four South Korean lives²⁰. When North Korea admitted its secret weapons program in late 2002, the

²⁰ "North Korea Profile." *BBC News*. N.p., 26 Mar. 2014. Web. 03 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15278612>>.

United States halted oil shipments to Pyongyang and North Korea shifted towards a return to its nuclear program.

In October 2002, the political situation regarding North Korea took a drastic turn as North Korea admitted that it had been building its nuclear capacities in secret using enriched uranium. North Korea declared the nullification of its agreement with the United States to freeze nuclear weapon development, sparking the second North Korean nuclear crisis. It reactivated its Yongbyon nuclear reactor and expelled any international inspectors. In January of 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. North Korea, China, and the United States began talks about the North Korea's nuclear program in April. Six-nation talks between the United States, North Korea, China, Russia, South Korea and Japan were held from August of 2003 into mid-2004 in an attempt to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear program²¹.

2004 marked a shift in the key parties involved in the North Korean refugee situation, as North Korea began to aggravate diplomatic tensions regarding the issue of refugees. Seoul chose to accept a group of about 450 North Korean refugees from an unnamed Southeast Asian country. Due to the country's wishes to remain unnamed, the refugees were secretly transported to South Korea in two separate groups. The attempt to handle this issue quietly was unsurprising, as North Korea was still pursuing a policy of nuclear brinkmanship, but media reports on the event drew international attention to the mass defection. North Korea responded to this situation in July by accusing the South of an act of terrorism and kidnapping of the

²¹ "North Korea Profile." *BBC News*. N.p., 26 Mar. 2014. Web. 03 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15278612>>.

group of North Korean refugees. This statement was issued between the third and fourth rounds of six-party talks regarding North Korea's nuclear intentions, and North Korea boycotted any further talks as a result. In late August, Pyongyang issued a public call for its defectors to return to North Korea without fear of punishment, under the guise that they had been "abducted" by the South. Although the United States had passed the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004 and began to test its voice in dealing with the refugee situation, its focus was on the nuclear crisis in North Korea. In early 2005, Pyongyang declared that it had built nuclear weapons for self-defense. The second North Korean nuclear crisis began to defuse as the fourth round of six-party talks concluded in September of 2005 and North Korea agreed to give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for security and economic aid.

2006 saw the further diversification of the major parties involved in the North Korean refugee situation when the United States became more invested through its admittance of several North Korean refugees. While the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 allowed North Korean defectors to seek refugee status in the United States, the government had at the time elaborated that they would not yet grant any applications as they had yet to determine how they would deal with any North Korean refugees.

On January 17th, 2006 the United States issued a statement declaring its intent to allow North Korean refugees to seek asylum status²². From that point onwards, they became more involved in refugee human rights negotiations with

²² "US Moves to Allow North Korean Defectors to Seek Refugee Status." *Yonhap* [Seoul] 17 Jan. 2006: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

China prior to ever accepting defector pleas for asylum. On March 3, 2006 it was reported that Los Angeles immigration had accepted the asylum plea of Seo Jae Seok, a North Korean refugee who defected to South Korea in 1999 and chose to go to the United States in 2003 after facing discrimination in South Korea. However, the decision to grant asylum to Seo was not in line with U.S. policy towards North Korean refugees. *Yonhap* article "South Korea says US granting asylum to North Korean defector 'not precedent'" quotes a statement by South Korean Justice Minister Chun Jung Bae saying that, "asylum by a North Korean defector with South Korean citizenship is unrelated to the North Korean Human Rights Act"²³. As a result, Seo was not counted as the first North Korean refugee to gain asylum, nor was he counted among the total number of North Korean refugees granted asylum in the United States, which totaled only nine in the first year. The event resulted in diplomatic negotiations between the United States and South Korea, who claimed that Seo's accusation was invalid and questioned the United States' decision to grant asylum to a refugee that already had South Korean citizenship.

On May 7, 2006 it was reported that a group of six North Korean refugees had arrived in the United States, considered the first group to be accepted for asylum in the United States. In late May, the United States once again made a statement claiming that it would accept a group of four North Korean refugees in China. Three of these refugees left China for the United States in late July. The fourth was reportedly denied asylum because he had worked for a prison camp while in

²³ "South Korea Says US Granting Asylum to North Korean Defector "not Precedent"." *Yonhap* [Seoul] 10 May 2006: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

North Korea²⁴. The International Herald Tribune published an interesting response, in which it called for states to accept those refugees that may have been involved in human rights abuses. The article elaborates that those defectors who states may feel inclined to deny asylum are those that would have the greatest impact on the regime:

What should be done about those **North Korean defectors** who have some dubious connections and might have been involved in human rights abuses?

These people are bound to be present among refugees, and if Pyongyang's regime starts crumbling, their numbers are likely to increase... if these people are guilty, their rejection is likely to increase the suffering of North Koreans, rather than ameliorate them...

So medium- and high-ranking officials may be afraid that a change of regime would mean not only loss of privilege and property, but of freedom and perhaps even life....

If we hope to bring change to the North, these people should be persuaded that they have a future in a different Korea. If defectors are denied asylum on the basis of their past deeds, this will send a clear signal to the North Korean elite: You have no place to go.

Their survival would then continue to depend on keeping the current system intact. That would mean more executions, more famine, more prisoners, more nuclear brinkmanship, drug smuggling, counterfeiting and dangerous adventures of all kinds."²⁵

Therefore, if the elite were denied any chance of forgiveness, they would feel threatened by any opportunity for regime change. However, while the United States made the decision to deny this single defector, he was not necessarily denied asylum – Seoul reported that resettlement in South Korea was a possibility.

In August of 2006, it was reported that another group of 25 to 30 refugees were to be brought to the United States. However, this was either a false rumor, or if

²⁴ "Mixed Response Follows Exile of 3 N. Koreans to US." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 26 July 2006: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

²⁵ "Let the Torturers Defect." *International Herald Tribune* [Paris] 23 June 2006: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

this group of refugees was admitted to the United States it was not under political asylum. Reports indicate that only nine North Korean refugees were granted political asylum in 2006, including the first six refugees at the beginning of May and the group of three refugees towards in July. This count does not include Seo Jae Seok, who was granted asylum after having received South Korean citizenship. According to the United States Department of Homeland Security's 2011 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, a total of 124 refugees arrived in the United States from South Korea between 2006 and 2011.

Number of North Korean Refugees to the United States by Year						
Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Number of Refugees	9	22	37	25	8	23

Figure 4-2

According to a study by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), of 238 applicant cases between fiscal year 2005 and March of 2010, a total of 94 refugees arrived in the United States²⁶. 107 refugees withdrew their applications due to either ineligibility or to the relative ease and speed of being processed for asylum in South Korea. Another 18 cases were rejected, 5 were closed, and 14 were still pending at the time of the study. In 2006, the United States became more active in granting refugee asylum and developing policies for how to deal with those refugees seeking asylum from the United States. In 2004 and 2005, the North Korean Human Rights Act represented a commitment to United States involvement in the North Korean refugee issue, but no refugees were admitted to the United

²⁶ United States. Government Accountability Office. *Humanitarian Assistance Status of North Korean Refugee Resettlement and Asylum in the United States: Report to Congressional Requesters*. By Thomas Melito. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Govt. Accountability Office, 2010. Print.

States for asylum because the government declared that they were not yet prepared to receive refugees from the North. As seen in **Figure 4-2**, while not as publicized in 2006, the United States continued to accept a steady flow of around 20 refugees per year, apart from the drop to 8 refugees in 2010. This drop in 2010 may also be related to the escalation of tensions between North and South Korea, when North Korea allegedly sunk the South Korean ship *Cheonan* and shelled the South's Yeonpyeong Island.

Reported government activity spiked in 2008, at a time of regime change in South Korea and deteriorating relations between the North and the South. The very first reported event of government activity during 2008 announces the decision of Lee Myung Bak to dissolve the Ministry of Unification, which is in charge of handling inter-Korean affairs, and to merge it with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Due to widespread backlash against Lee's decision the ministry was never fully dissolved, but was significantly downsized. Furthermore, as reported in *Yonhap* article "South Korea awards US human rights activist", President Lee declared his intent to take a harder stance towards delivering aid to North Korea, after which the communist nation withdrew from ongoing inter-Korean talks²⁷. While under the Sunshine Policy aid had been used as an unofficial incentive to promote North Korean participation in inter-Korean diplomatic affairs, the Lee Myung Bak government ended this practice and declared that aid would depend on North Korean denuclearization. This shift in South Korean government policy led North Korea to

²⁷ "South Korea Awards US Human Rights Activist." *Yonhap* [Seoul] 7 Oct. 2008: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

withdraw from their past stance of relative cooperation and to increasingly engage in confrontational behavior with the South.

In an effort to avoid inciting the anger of the North Korean government in a time of frigid inter-Korean relations, the focus of the South Korean government shifted away from human rights and efforts to secure the safe passage of North Korean refugees to South Korea. Instead, the government focused on adjusting the programs available for North Korean refugees in order to ease their adjustment into South Korean society. In March, the South Korean government announced that it would run a five-month intensive job-training program for North Korean defectors, who would be hired by CJ Foodville upon completion of the program. In mid-April, the Unification Ministry decided to launch another program to create box-making jobs for North Korean refugees in cooperation with international social welfare organization Merry Year Foundation. Over the course of the year the government worked on expanding the Hanawon resettlement center, doubling its housing capacity to 600 refugees by mid-December. These changes were initiated in order to lower the level of unemployment in the North Korean refugee population in the South, at a time when North Korean refugee activism was also growing.

Two major episodes of refugee-based activism sparked government responses during 2008. The first involved the Olympic torch protests in which North Korean refugees and their supporters clashed with Chinese anti-protestors at the Olympic torch relay in Seoul. In February, the Chinese government requested that the United Nations not accept any North Korean defectors for asylum status until the completion of the Beijing Olympics due to the increased level of international

attention on China. However, refugee activist groups saw this as an opportunity to draw attention to the North Korean human rights issue. When the widely televised Olympic torch relay passed through Seoul in late April, North Korean defectors and human rights supporters staged a rally to protest China's repatriation of defectors. Chinese anti-protestors attacked the activists with rocks, water bottles, and steel pipes. In response, police arrested several individuals, including one Chinese student, but released them shortly after the riot. Seoul publically expressed regret towards China regarding the behavior of the Chinese residents living in Korea. Chinese ambassador Ning Fukui apologized for the incident, but South Korea declared its intent to tighten visa requirements for Chinese students in South Korea. While Seoul announced its disapproval over the Chinese residents' actions, they did not publically take the side of the activist groups in terms of policy.

The second major episode of refugee-based activism involved activists sending anti-regime flyers across the border to North Korea, sparking a negative response from the North and further deterioration of North-South relations. Due to threats by North Korea, in October Seoul denounced the action of these activist groups in sending flyers across the border, and warned them to cease their actions due to the risk of worsening North-South relations. North Korea proceeded to warn Seoul that the continued distribution of propaganda leaflets could negatively impact the continued operation of the Kaesong joint industrial complex. In 2004, the two Koreas had agreed to cease the transmission of propaganda messages on both sides, but civic groups in South Korea ignored this warning and continued to send messages across the border to North Korea. Despite warnings from both North and

South Korea, civic groups refused to cease sending messages across the border, and in November North Korea shut down the Kaesong industrial complex and closed the border with South Korea. It blamed South Korea for destroying inter-Korean ties through confrontational policies, including the absence of Unification Minister Kim Ha Joong from the first anniversary ceremony of the 2007 inter-Korean summit and his failure to stop civic groups from sending leaflets across the border. While I will go into further detail in the case study of this episode, it is likely that North Korea was using the leaflets as an excuse to pursue confrontational policies, as the flyers themselves were not a new occurrence. This case portrays the role of refugee-activists in the post-2008 period as an organized group that has enough influence to elicit direct responses from the governments involved.

Overall, in 2008 there were a total of 36 events of government activity as opposed to 14 in 2006 and 19 in 2010. As seen in Figure 4-3 below, the major players during 2008 were South Korea with seventeen events, the United States with nine events, and North Korea with five events. At the same time, relations between North and South Korea deteriorated, and while the South Korean government shifted to pursue a more conservative policy towards North Korea, the level of reported activism peaked. The spike in government activity during 2008 was due to the increasingly confrontational attitude of North Korea as well as government response to the increased level of highly publicized, local, refugee-

based activism surrounding the North Korean refugee situation.

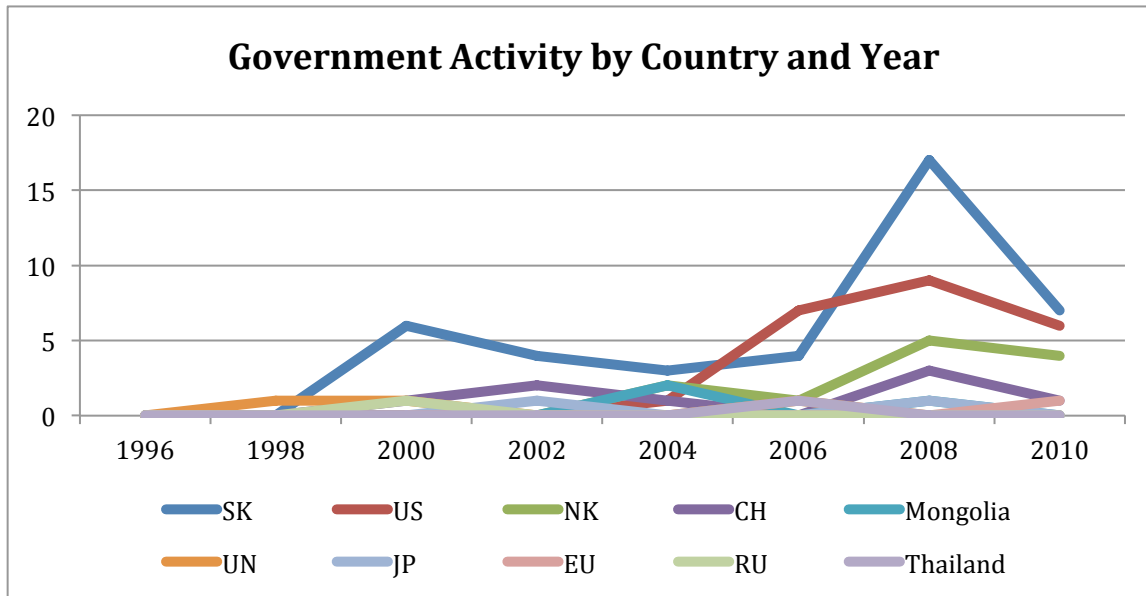


Figure 4-3

The effects of the move away from the Sunshine Policy and the delicacy of North-South relations continued to be seen in 2010, where South Korean government activity continues to focus on adaptation and resettlement policies for refugees as opposed to human rights and active protection of asylum-seekers. North-South relations worsened significantly as the North pursued a policy of military brinkmanship, including the sinking of the South Korean ship the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Reported statements from North Korea moved away from direct dialogue with South Korea and focused solely on tightening security and stamping out defections by requiring families to turn in photos of their missing family members, working to capture those who help defectors escape across the border, and threatening retaliation against any activities that may hurt the North Korean regime. During 2010 the United States focused on pushing for human rights reform in China and North Korea. In response to North Korea's alleged

sinking of the *Cheonan*, the United States pursued new sanctions against North Korea.

At this time in 2010, North Korea was forced to ease restrictions on the private markets after a 2009 currency revaluation disrupted the markets and destroyed savings. The old 10,000 won bills were replaced with 10 won bills of equivalent value in order to fight inflation. However, the government limited the amount of money that could be exchanged for the new currency to 100,000 won—equal to 100 won in the new currency, or US \$40 at black market rates. The limit was later raised to 150,000 and then to 300,000 amidst widespread protest. This limit, while intended to crack down on the private markets, primarily harmed those just above the poverty level, who had managed to scrape up some savings through market activity. Those who had become wealthy in the private markets carried their savings in stable foreign currencies, as did the elites and upper classes. With widespread protest over the revaluation and questions about the health of leader Kim Jong Il, public discontent in North Korea rose to a level that the government felt it necessary to tighten border restrictions and shift the blame for the incident. The government executed finance chief Pak Nam Gi, claiming that the reforms were part of a scheme to destroy the North Korean economy. The government issued an official apology, reversed the currency reform, and eased market restrictions in order to expedite the recovery process for those affected by the revaluation²⁸. In March of 2010, North Korea allegedly sunk the South Korean warship *Cheonan*,

²⁸ Branigan, Tania. "North Korean Finance Chief Executed for Botched Currency Reform." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 19 Mar. 2010. Web. 11 Apr. 2014.

leading to sanctions against North Korea by the United States and increasing tension between North and South Korea.

Over the period of 1996 to 2010, government activity gained prevalence during 2000 with the historic inter-Korean summit, and continued to grow until it peaked in 2008 at the time of government change in South Korea. With the government change and move away from the Sunshine policy, government activity decreased from 36 reported events in 2008 to 19 reported events in 2010. However, it remained diverse, with seven reported events from South Korea, six reported events from the United States, four from North Korea, one from China, and one from the European Union. This showed an increase in international attention paid to the North Korean refugee issue as compared to 2000. During the initial growth in government activity in 2000, the majority of events reported involved South Korea, and no other government reported more than one event.

Chapter 5 Asylum-Seeking Activity and Media

Asylum-seeking activity is defined as any attempt, successful or otherwise, of North Korean defectors to gain asylum or resettlement in a third country. While a small number of refugees resettle elsewhere, the vast majority of refugees that are granted asylum are ultimately sent to South Korea due to its policy of automatically granting citizenship to North Korean refugees. Prior to 2002, defectors in China had to pay forgers and smugglers to gain passage to Seoul via a third country. Those defectors that did seek assistance at foreign missions were typically turned down. From 2002 onwards, refugees collaborated with activists and the media in order to publicize their pleas for asylum to an international audience, thus pressuring the governments involved to respond to the issue. In this section, I will look at how the shift in media framing and development of new asylum-seeking tactics resulted in a spike in asylum-seeking activity and subsequent redefining of the methods through which North Korean refugees sought passage out of China.

The level of asylum-seeking activity and defections by North Korean refugees as reported by the media spiked to nineteen events in 2002, about three times the average number of reported asylum seeking events over the period from 1996 to 2010. This spike in asylum seeking activity was accompanied by a spike in reported activism surrounding the North Korean refugee issue.

This spike in activism can be explained by three factors: First, international awareness of the North Korean refugee situation was increasing due to increased media coverage, both of the refugee issue and of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Second, the shift in media framing of the refugee issue elicited a sympathetic response from the audience and sparked outrage over the human rights violations. Finally, the success of events like the Spanish Embassy event led to activists' use of the same tactic on a more frequent basis. Shortly after the defectors involved in the Spanish Embassy event were granted passage to South Korea, human rights activist Dr. Norbert Vollertsen claimed that the activists were planning another event involving a group of 150 defectors²⁹. Another activist involved in the event claimed that they were planning for another group of defectors to storm several embassies at once, and that others were likely to follow on their own³⁰. While there are no reports of either event actually happening, a total of 64 defectors were granted passage to Seoul through break-ins at foreign missions as of June, 2002³¹, some of which, including the Shenyang Incident, were arranged by foreign activist groups.

Of these nineteen events, six were considered significant events by the media. The most prominent of these events was reported in 34 articles over the course of nine days. This event involved a group of 25 defectors, including six families and two orphans, who stormed the Spanish embassy in Beijing in a request for asylum. The event was first reported on March 15th, 2002, and the group of refugees was reported to have arrived in Seoul on March 19th. One month later, three more refugees were reported to have gained entry to embassies in Beijing within one day of each other, despite an increase in security measures following the

²⁹ "150 NK Refugees Preparing to Storm Another Beijing Embassy." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 16 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

³⁰ "Activist Predicts More North Koreans Will Follow Defectors' Example." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 19 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

³¹ "Defectors Make It out of China." *Herald Sun* [Durham] 25 June 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

initial event in March. This episode as a whole marked a shift away from the previous interaction of the government and the media, in which media coverage of the refugee issue contradicted the government's use of silent diplomacy. From 2002 onwards, foreign activist groups collaborated with the media in order to portray the defectors involved in a sympathetic light, resulting in a situation that was mutually beneficial for the activists, refugees, and the media. Widespread sympathy towards the refugees' situation put pressure on the governments involved on both sides of the issue to take action. During the Spanish Embassy event of 2002, the Chinese government was pressured to allow the defectors safe passage in order to appear in a good light. The South Korean and Spanish governments were pressured to make an effort to negotiate with China on the behalf of the defectors – South Korea because of its sense of responsibility towards North Korean refugees, and Spain because the defectors had sought asylum at a Spanish foreign mission.

In May of 2002, a group of five defectors including two men, two women, and one child rushed into the Japanese consulate in Shenyang. While the two men in the group were able to break into the consulate, the two women and the child were detained outside. Chinese soldiers entered the Japanese embassy and forcibly removed the two male defectors from the embassy. The Chinese police force's intrusion onto Japanese grounds sparked outrage from the Japanese government, who had neither given the police permission to enter the consulate nor given them permission to make an arrest on embassy grounds. While the Japanese government had maintained a relatively indifferent attitude towards the North Korean refugee issue in the past, they demanded that the defectors be returned to their custody. By

entering the Japanese embassy without permission, the Chinese police had violated one of the main principles of the 1961 Vienna convention on diplomatic relations. The response of the Japanese government was not as much for the benefit of the defectors involved as it was for the Japanese government to reassert their authority. Video footage of the women and child being forcibly stopped by the police served to incite the anger of the international community, which rose to support the Japanese and South Korean governments in their efforts to regain custody of the defectors. After two weeks of detention in China, the group of defectors was handed over and allowed to leave for South Korea by the Chinese government.

Foreign activist groups staged both the Spanish Embassy event in March and the Shenyang Incident in May. The Spanish Embassy event was staged by activist group Life Funds for North Korean Refugees along with Norbert Vollertsen, a German doctor whose desire to expose the human rights violations of North Korea stemmed from a period spent working as an aid doctor in the country. Independent activists in the United States, including South Korean-born architect Sin-u Nam, staged the Shenyang Incident. In both instances the activist groups involved collaborated with international media outlets to capture the event in video and photographs, and in both cases the defectors issued a statement provided by the activist groups. During the event at the Spanish embassy, activists collaborated with CNN to capture the defectors' act of entering the embassy on tape, and distributed statements and profiles of the asylum-seekers to various media outlets³². During the Shenyang incident, activists collaborated with South Korean media to capture the

³² "N. Korean Defections in China Staged by Activists." *The Straits Times* [Singapore] 16 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

video of the group attempting to enter the embassy. The video portrayed guards forcibly stopping the two women and the child and dragging them off the grounds of the embassy³³. News outlets broadcast the video worldwide, sparking outrage over the Chinese government's treatment of the defectors. Life Funds for North Korean Refugees sent a copy of the defectors' statement to local media outlets during the Spanish Embassy event. During the Shenyang Incident one of the defectors handed a written statement in English to one of the officials at the Japanese consulate, but according to media reports the statement was brushed aside due to the official's inability to read English³⁴.

The effect of the shift in media framing can be seen by comparing the Shenyang Incident of 2002 to the Double Repatriation event of two years prior. In the Double Repatriation event, a group of defectors was captured near the Russian border and sent back to China, where they were repatriated to North Korea. While the South Korean government was pursuing diplomatic negotiations throughout the event in an attempt to assure that they would not be repatriated, both the Russian and Chinese governments repatriated the defectors without notifying the South until several days later³⁵. The media reported this event extensively, but focused primarily on the diplomatic negotiations between Russia, China, South Korea, and the UNHCR. Apart from the fact that they had been granted refugee status by the UNHCR, nothing was reported about the refugees themselves. This type of media

³³ "Lessons from the Shenyang Incident." *Japan Times* 16 May 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

³⁴ "Ministry Withheld Fact of Asylum Seekers' Letter." *Japan Times* 16 May 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

³⁵ "ROK Mulls Diplomatic Steps against China." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 14 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

reporting drew political attention to the issue, but failed to attract a sympathetic audience. In comparison, during the Shenyang Incident a group of defectors were captured attempting to break into the Japanese consulate in Shenyang. The image of two women and a child being forcibly dragged away by police was broadcast around the world, and media reports provided each face with an identity. The group of defectors was a family – a two- or three- year old girl, her parents, uncle, and middle-aged grandmother³⁶. The Japanese and South Korean governments pursued negotiations with China while a sympathetic audience looked on, and the group was ultimately returned to Japanese custody and granted passage to South Korea. While in 2000 publicization of the Double Repatriation event contrasted with government policy and failed to elicit a sympathetic response from its audience, in 2002 the publicization of the Shenyang Incident humanized the defectors and worked in line with government policy to bring about their release.

According to an article by the Financial Times, 312 North Koreans reached Seoul through any third country during the first four months of 2002, which it claimed is equal to the total number of refugees to come to Seoul in 2000. This is consistent with both reports from 2000 and official statistics from the Ministry of Unification. In October of 2000, the Korea Herald reported that a total of 205 North Koreans had defected to South Korea that year. On February 16, 2002 the *Korea Herald's* report, "N.K. defector's escape account triggers calls for overhaul of refugee system" claims that the number of North Koreans to arrive in South Korea was 71 in

³⁶ "Philadelphia-area Architect on Mission to Help North Korean Refugees." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 15 May 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

1998, 148 in 1999, and 312 in 2000³⁷. Another *Korea Herald* report, “12 N.K. defectors reach Seoul” states the same numbers, along with a total of 583 refugees in 2001³⁸. According to official statistics by the Ministry of Unification, a total of 1,043-1,044 refugees defected to South Korea from 1999 to 2001, while in 2002 alone a total of 1,143 refugees entered South Korea. While the Ministry of Unification does not have the exact number of refugees per year recorded for 1999-2001, we can see that the numbers reported by news sources add up to exactly 1,043.

During the period leading up to and including 2002, major international events included George W. Bush’s inclusion of North Korea as a part of the “axis of evil”, North Korean market reform, the second North Korean nuclear crisis, and increased international attention to North Korean human rights. However, the majority of refugees seeking asylum in 2002 had defected to China in prior years, most likely as a result of the famine during the 1990s. Increased international attention to North Korea may have been beneficial for refugees in their pursuit of asylum due to general increased awareness about North Korea and its’ human rights violations, but it was not the refugees’ initial motive for defection. Haggard and Noland’s survey of North Korean refugees found that of refugees surveyed in South Korea, 44.7% had stayed in China for more than three years prior to leaving for South Korea. Only 20.3% of refugees stayed in China for less than a year before

³⁷ "N.K. Defector's Escape Account Triggers Calls for Overhaul of Refugee System." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 16 Feb. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

³⁸ "12 N.K. Defectors Reach Seoul." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 18 Jan. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

leaving for South Korea³⁹. Therefore, any defectors crossing the North Korea-China border due to the shifting international situation in 2002 were different than the group seeking asylum at that point in time. The refugees involved in asylum-seeking activity in 2002 consisted primarily of those that had defected due to internal factors such as the North Korean famine from 1995-1998. The fear of repatriation to a nuclear North Korea may have affected defectors' willingness to take risks, but the development of new asylum-seeking tactics among defectors in China facilitated the ability of refugees to take action.

While officials expressed concern that the highly publicized event involving 25 defectors at the Spanish embassy would spark further asylum-seeking activity, prior to that event about 100 refugees had already been granted asylum in South Korea. While the event did not entirely explain the increased number of defections in 2002, it did account for the increased media coverage of defections. Prior to the event at the Spanish embassy, reports of defection and asylum-seeking activity were short, focused on statistics, and reported by local news agencies such as Korea Herald and Korea Times. The 2002 event at the Spanish embassy signaled a shift among defectors towards using media coverage of asylum seeking activity as a tactic to pressure the Chinese government into allowing them to leave the country. After the event in March we not only see an increase in "human interest" style articles about asylum-seekers, but we also see that asylum-seekers are increasingly using the tactic of breaking into foreign missions. Between March and August of 2002, all

³⁹ Haggard, Stephan, and Marcus Noland. *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute For International Economics, 2011. Print. 33.

reports of asylum-seeking activity or resettlement involved small groups of defectors breaking into foreign missions in China. A total of sixty-four refugees attained passage to South Korea using the break-in method as of June, 2002. In August of 2002, a group of twenty-one North Koreans defected by boat directly across the military demarcation line from North Korea, bringing the total number of refugees to enter South Korea to 622 that year. 2002 was a period of nuclear brinkmanship in North Korea, and this event came at a period when North Korea was just beginning to loosen up and concede to talks with the United States, Japan, and South Korea. While the South welcomed the refugees, this act of directly crossing the border between North and South Korea was highly risky for both the refugees and for the unstable North-South relations.

During 2002, as the number of asylum-seeking events spiked, the instances of activism also increased from six events in 2000 to ten events in 2002. The increase in activist involvement in organizing asylum-seeking events led to an increase in asylum seeking as other defectors took notice and began to copy the tactics of those who had been assisted by activists. This increase in asylum-seeking activity led to further activism as groups expanded their activities due to the success of their first attempts. As North Korean defectors began to develop their own tactics for asylum-seeking activity in 2004, the level of activism sharply dropped to only three reported events that year. The number of reported defection/asylum seeking events also dropped in 2004, but the number of refugees sent to South Korea in 2004 remained constant due to an increase in the number of defectors involved in each event. In 2002, the event involving 25 defectors in March was the first time a

group of that size had sought asylum. The majority of events at this time involved individuals or small families, indicating that there was little organized activity within the North Korean defector population. However, in 2004 a group of over 450 defectors were brought to South Korea as a part of one single reported event, so while there was a drop in reported events, the number of actual refugees did not drop.

2008 was a crucial shift in attention away from foreign activism in third countries and towards refugee-based activism in South Korea. After the initial surge in activist-driven asylum seeking activity in 2002, refugees began to search for their own ways to create the same type of drastic move that could be their path to resettlement in South Korea. After an event in 2004 where a group of over 450 asylum seekers were brought to Seoul following their arrest in an unnamed Southeast Asian country, the practice of gaining passage to South Korea by sneaking into a third country and turning themselves in to authorities became a popular asylum-seeking strategy. Countries such as Thailand required that the refugees pay a fine for illegal entry, but maintained a policy of repatriation to South Korea in the case of North Korean refugees. As refugees gained experience in manipulating media reports and government policies in order to gain asylum, the number of North Korean activists in the South also grew. The change in leadership in South Korea in 2008 opened up a window of opportunity for these refugee activists as the government tried to shift attention away from the North Korean refugee issue.

Chapter 6 Examination of Case Studies

Overview

The shifting roles of the media, activism, and the government from 1996 to 2010 shaped the development of the refugee population as an independent actor. In this section I will look at three major turning points in which shifts in the roles of the media, activism, and the government enabled shifts in the roles of the defectors themselves. The three events I will examine are the Double Repatriation event of 2000, the Spanish Embassy event of 2002, and the Balloon Activism event of 2008. Each of these events acts as a snapshot of the North Korean refugee situation at the time. The level of influence the defectors held grew with each event – from 2000 to 2008 the refugee population went from having little power to affect the outcome of the event to driving the action behind the event itself. When examined together, these events show how as the changing roles of the media, activism, and the government fostered the development of defector agency.

Double Repatriation (2000)

In my first case study, I examine the 2000 repatriation of a group of North Korean defectors from Russia to China, and from they're to North Korea. While defectors in China were subject to exploitation under threat of exposure and repatriation, there were few means through which defectors could escape from China. At this time foreign missions offered little assistance to North Korean refugees, and paying the cost for a smuggler to forge travel documents was too high for most defectors to afford. In 2000, a group of seven defectors were caught by Russian authorities trying to cross the border between Russia and China. In this

case, although the defectors were granted refugee status by the UNHCR they were still ultimately repatriated⁴⁰. This event occurred shortly before the height of international attention to North-South relations in 2000, as it was during a time of warming relations between North and South Korea, yet took place before the announcement that the inter-Korean summit was to be held later that year.

When the group of defectors was captured in Russia, they were held for a period of time so that the UNHCR could interview the defectors and decide whether their situation warranted refugee status. While the UNHCR announced its decision to grant them refugee status, a top Russian envoy issued a contradictory statement that "Representatives of the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, who were given an opportunity to meet these North Koreans, refused to grant them official refugee status"⁴¹. At this time, Russia was pursuing closer diplomatic relations with both North Korea, so it was in their best interest to adhere to their border agreement with China, which dictated that they should turn the defectors over to Chinese custody⁴².

This was the first widely publicized episode regarding the North Korean refugee issue, and also the first episode in which a government issued a statement condemning the repatriation of a group of North Korean refugees. Previously, in 1998, the UNHCR stated that North Koreans applying for political asylum would have to show that they had entered China for fear of persecution, rather than due to

⁴⁰ "ROK Mulls Diplomatic Steps against China." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 14 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁴¹ "Russian Ambassador Hints at Sending of North Korea Defectors to China." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 7 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁴² *Ibid.*

famine. While they tried to brand this group of defectors as refugees, the UNHCR elaborated that the governing body – first Russia and later China – had the final say in granting the defectors refugee status⁴³.

In addition to diplomatic efforts on the part of South Korea and the UNHCR, the Korean National Red Cross (KNRC) also made efforts to appeal for the protection of the group of seven refugees in China. They sent letters of appeal to international human rights organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, International Federation of the Red Cross, and the UNHCR. Although the group of defectors most likely left North Korea because of famine, the KNRC argued that their fear of persecution upon repatriation should be sufficient reason for the group to be protected. Therefore, the international community should exert its influence to prevent the group of refugees from being forcibly deported to North Korea⁴⁴.

Media reports indicated that due to the involvement of the South Korean government and the UNHCR, as well as international publicization of the issue, the Chinese government would face a challenge if the group were to be repatriated. Therefore, while reports acknowledged that China's past history of repatriation was worrying, they also expressed the likelihood that China would retain the refugees for an extended period of time while considering the perspectives of both North and South Korea in the process of deciding the refugees fate. This speculation in the media was combined with an attitude of condescension towards the actions of the Russian and the Chinese governments.

⁴³ "No Breakthrough in Sight to NK Refugee Case." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 12 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁴⁴ "Red Cross Society Appeals to Int'l Organizations to Protect NK Refugees." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 9 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

Even as the media continued to speculate on whether the group would be repatriated, the defectors were sent to North Korea on January 12th. While the actions of the Russian and Chinese governments were in line with their policies, the media expressed international outrage over the inability of the South Korean government to ensure the safety of the defectors. The media blamed the government's ill-advised method in dealing with the situation through silent diplomacy, while the government remarked that media publicization of the event had forced China's hand in the repatriation of the defector group. The acting foreign minister of South Korea was dismissed, and the government announced its intent to review its diplomatic efforts to ensure that such an event would not happen again. The government also announced that it would do as much as possible to ensure the safety of the refugees in North Korea, despite the government's lack of means to do so.

In this case, the government and the media used incompatible methods to handle the issue. The government's use of silent diplomacy was designed to manage the sensitive issue through under-the-table negotiations due to Russia and China's diplomatic relationship with North Korea. However, the widespread publication of the issue was meant to pressure Russia and China by drawing international attention to the event. Media framing of the event around the diplomatic negotiations involved drew attention to the politics of the matter, thus negating the South Korean government's purpose of using silent diplomacy to settle the matter quietly. The media failed to attract a sympathetic audience because it portrayed the refugee situation in an impersonal light.

In this event, the North Korean defectors' ability to affect the outcome of their situation was limited to their attempt to escape across the border and their ability to convince the UNHCR that they warranted refugee status. Once they had met with UNHCR officials, the situation was entirely dependent on diplomatic negotiations. The defectors had no part in the media coverage of the event, nor did they have the means to contact news outlets and activist organizations for assistance.

The Spanish Embassy (2002)

In 2002, a group of 25 North Korean defectors disguised as tourists broke into the Spanish embassy in Beijing seeking asylum. The group consisted of six families and two orphans from various regions of China, brought together by foreign activist groups prior to the event. The key players in this event included China, South Korea, Spain, Tokyo-based activist group Life Funds for North Korean Refugees, and German doctor and activist Norbert Vollertsen. This event took place in March, before the outbreak of the second North Korean nuclear crisis but after United States President George W. Bush's declaration of North Korea as a part of the "axis of evil".

This event signified a shift towards growing defector agency facilitated by their increased ability to affect the outcome of their own situation. The level of foreign activist involvement in the North Korean refugee issue was higher in 2002 than in 2000. As a result, activist groups began to test tactics to help defectors escape from China. While at first foreign activists were involved in organizing and planning asylum-seeking tactics for groups of defectors in China, over time defectors

began to copy the successful asylum-seeking action of other defectors and strategize their own tactics for resettlement.

In addition to planning the break-in, Life Funds for North Korean Refugees worked with CNN and international media outlets to publicize the event. The break-in was captured on video, while a written statement and profiles of the defectors involved were sent to various foreign newspapers. Life Funds for North Korean Refugees distributed the statement -which elaborated on the hardships faced by the defectors and threatened suicide upon repatriation - to the media on the behalf of the group that had entered the Spanish embassy⁴⁵.

Media reports portrayed the group of defectors as helpless, starving, and desperate for freedom. According to diplomatic reports on the actual break-in, after the group of defectors entered the embassy they proceeded to move on to the kitchen, where they consumed a banquet that had been prepared for a Chinese minister⁴⁶. However, other media reports indicated that the group had entered the embassy and threatened to commit suicide, pleading for asylum from the Spanish authorities⁴⁷.

The situation surrounding this event differed from that of the first case study in that this event involved a group of defectors actively seeking asylum and seeking attention from the international community, rather than being caught while covertly attempting to sneak into a third country. While the first group expressed a desire to

⁴⁵ "Koreans' Asylum Bid Wrong-foots Chinese." *The Independent* [London] 15 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁴⁶ "N. Koreans End Protest at Embassy; Group in Spain's Mission Offered Asylum by Seoul." *Washington Post* 15 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁴⁷ "N Koreans Seek Asylum in Embassy." *Daily Telegraph* [London] 15 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

go to South Korea after being caught, their initial intent in crossing the border had not been to be captured and use that as a way to gain passage to South Korea. For the twenty-five defectors involved in this event, their entry into the Spanish embassy was a tactic to gain safe passage to South Korea. Once the defectors had entered the embassy, the Chinese government had no control over them. Even if China had not granted passage to the group of defectors, they would have been able to remain in the Spanish embassy due to Spanish national sovereignty on the grounds of its foreign missions. During the Double Repatriation event in 2000, the Russian and Chinese governments had the ability to repatriate the group of defectors, but during the Spanish Embassy event in 2002 refusing to grant the defectors passage would have only resulted in an extended period of negotiations over the group.

This group was also associated with and instructed by a foreign activist group. In this case, activists worked proactively by designing the actual escape strategy for the group of defectors, who they had found and brought together from various different parts of China. The group of defectors consisted of those with “relatively high social status” according to one of the activists, as they would have to speak with representatives from the Spanish embassy⁴⁸.

The tactic of entering the embassy and pleading for asylum was devised based on an event in 2001, where a group of refugees stayed for a few days in the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in China and ultimately allowed to leave for South Korea. In the 2001 event, China was pushed to make a quick decision

⁴⁸ "S. Korean, Foreign NGOs behind NK Defectors' Attempt for Freedom." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 16 Mar. 2002: n. pag. Print.

due to the ill health of some of the defectors. In this event as well, Life Funds for North Korean Refugees described some of the asylum-seekers as “diseased”, and some of the defectors threatened suicide should they be returned to North Korea. Claiming that the defectors were not all in good health gave China the option of allowing the defectors passage to a third country on the basis of needing medical treatment⁴⁹.

Life Funds for North Korean Refugees is a Tokyo-based human rights organization that works to deliver food directly to the citizens of North Korea, as well as sheltering, educating, and assisting North Korean escapees to resettle in a third country. According to their website, the organization was officially founded in 1998, but has been helping provide food to the citizens of North Korea since 1995. **Norbert Vollertsen** is a German doctor who worked in North Korea from 1999 until late 2001, when he was deported for his actions against the regime. He chose to remain in South Korea and work as an activist to help the people in North Korea and try to bring down the government from the inside⁵⁰. He became a key player in North Korean human rights in 2002 after he was deported from North Korea in late 2001.

Upon receiving the defectors’ plea for asylum, the Spanish embassy sent representatives to convey the defectors’ wishes to the Chinese government. The South Korean government announced its willingness to accept the group of defectors for resettlement, and the Philippines agreed to act as a stopover for the

⁴⁹ "North Koreans Who Sought Refuge in China Head for Seoul." *New York Times* 16 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁵⁰ Vollertsen, Norbert. "Inside North Korea." *C-SPAN.org*. N.p., 18 May 2001. Web. 03 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.c-span.org/video/?164335-1/inside-north-korea>>.

transit of the group. The UNHCR was not involved in this event, as the situation was resolved before the defectors could be interviewed for refugee status.

The role of the media was a key factor in the resolution of this event, as activists depended on the publication of materials they sent to international news outlets to gain sympathy for the defectors. In the first case study on seven refugees, the media involved itself in reporting the details of the negotiations between China, Russia, and South Korea. As seen in this quote from an article in the *Korea Times*:

...in the face of the South Korean government's requests not to send [the refugees] back to the North, and conscious of growing international attention to their fate, China is unlikely to repatriate them any time soon. Despite the government's optimistic expectation, the worry remains that China will turn them over to the North.⁵¹

The media condemned China and Russia for their human rights violations and made predictions about whether or not the group would be repatriated. During the Double Repatriation event, the media focused on the diplomatic matters rather than on the plight of the defectors themselves.

During the Spanish Embassy event, the media described the plight of the defectors and showed video of their daring entry to the Spanish embassy. They published a transcript of the defectors' plea for asylum, in which they announced their intent to commit suicide should they be repatriated. The names and ages of the six families and two orphaned girls involved in the event were published alongside their plea for asylum. The media portrayed the defectors as human beings, creating a personal experience for the readers and allowing them to sympathize:

⁵¹ "NK Refugees in Chinese Custody." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 13 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

The 25, who had escaped North Korea before only to be forced back by Chinese officials, threatened suicide if they were returned again, the Tokyo-based Life Funds for **North Korean Refugees** said.

Chinese guards grasped in vain at the group – including six families and two orphaned girls – as they sprinted through the embassy gates, cheering as they reached the other side, witnesses said.

“We are now at the point of such desperation and live in such fear of persecution within North Korea that we have decided to risk our lives for freedom rather than passively await our doom,” said a statement issued by the Tokyo group on behalf of the 25.⁵²

While the media’s method of reporting its opinions about the diplomatic relations during the repatriation event had been detrimental and out of line with the “silent diplomacy” of the time. However, the media’s move towards more of a “human interest” type of reporting as displayed in the Spanish Embassy event became a crucial part of the overall tactic for ensuring the safe passage of refugees. It drew public attention to the plight of the defectors without condemning the governments involved. This pressured the governments – primarily China - to allow the defectors safe passage by creating sympathy around the issue. Repatriating the defectors or refusing them passage would portray the country in a bad light, but allowing them passage to Seoul would portray them in a positive light. Therefore, it was most advantageous for China to allow the defectors safe passage if they could do so without alerting North Korea.

The time frame for a decision to be made was significantly shorter for the episode in 2002 than for the one in 2000. During the 2002 episode, the actual decision on what to do with the defectors was made within 24-48 hours. The

⁵² "Koreans' Asylum Bid Wrong-foots Chinese." *The Independent* [London] 15 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

defectors were quietly escorted out of the embassy en route to Seoul via the Philippines following the decision. For the repatriation event in 2000, the refugees were repatriated from Russia to China on December 30, 1999. They stayed in China until January 12, 2000, when they were ultimately repatriated to North Korea. The shorter period of stay of the defectors in 2002 was conducive to the group's resettlement as the shorter decision-making period meant that North Korea had less time to catch wind of the issue.

While the initial event took place over the course of a few days, including break-in, transit, and arrival in Seoul, it had a direct impact on the process by which defectors sought a path to South Korea. The activists involved in the Spanish embassy event announced their plans to carry out similar events in the near future, and China ramped up its security in areas with a high concentration of foreign missions. One month after the Spanish embassy event in March, three North Korean refugees gained passage to Seoul by breaking into foreign embassies. Another group of five refugees stormed the Japanese consulate in May in a move planned by activists in the United States and South Korea, but they were captured by Chinese guards and imprisoned. They were ultimately allowed to leave for Seoul after media reports and video of the refugees being dragged out of the consulate drew sympathy and widespread outrage over their arrest. As this method continued to prove itself successful, it became a regular tactic for North Korean defectors to seek passage to South Korea.

Balloon Activism (2008)

The final case study involved government response to a tactic that had long been historically prevalent. During 2008, several groups of refugee-activists announced their intent to send balloons across the North-South border with anti-North propaganda flyers in tow. While this was a commonly used tactic from 2003 onwards, in 2008 the North Korean government condemned the actions of activists and forced South Korea to take action.

Use of propaganda between North and South Korea was a regular tactic during the Cold War and up until 2004, when an inter-Korean military agreement stipulated that each country cease sending propaganda across the border. However, there was no legal means for South Korea to prevent activists from sending flyers across the border. As a result, South Korea was put in an uncomfortable situation when North Korea threatened to cut off inter-Korean relations should activists continue to send fliers, as their only means to prevent fliers from being sent was to appeal to the activists.

Key players in this event included three activist groups, the North Korean and South Korean governments, and prominent individuals in North Korean human rights. The initial two activist groups to be involved in this event were an organization of North Korean Christians headed by Lee Min Bok, and Fighters for Free North Korea headed by Park Sang Hak. These two groups consisted primarily of former North Korean refugees in South Korea. Choi Song Ryong and the Association of the Families of Victims Kidnapped by North Korea later joined the event.

The organization of North Korean Christians and Fighters for Free North Korea are activist groups primarily composed of North Korean defectors. The leader of Fighters for Free North Korea, Park Sang Hak, defected to South Korea in 1997 along with his mother and siblings⁵³. While the previous case studies primarily involved foreign activist and humanitarian groups, by 2008 North Korean defectors had taken on a crucial role as one of the drivers of the North Korean human rights movement. In this event private business also took on a key role, as the nearly 80 businesses producing at the Kaesong Industrial complex had a stake in assuring that the complex would not close as a result of the refugee-activists' actions.

North Korea became an active voice against refugee rights from 2004 onwards. In 2008, when the change in South Korean leadership led to strained relations between North and South, North Korea began to take a confrontational stance towards South Korea. North Korean newspaper Rodong Sinmun accused the Lee government of "recklessly suppressing" pro-unification democratic forces seeking to unify the divided nations⁵⁴. This is evidence that the North Korean government's motive in issuing threats over incidents of balloon-activism may have been more of an excuse to pursue confrontational policies than an actual response to the activists' behavior. Pyongyang threatened negative consequences to the

⁵³ "Interviews: Park Sang Hak." *Freedom Collection*. George W. Bush Institute, June 2010. Web. 03 Apr. 2014.

<http://www.freedomcollection.org/interviews/park_sang_hak/?vidid=424>.

⁵⁴ "N.K. Criticizes Anti-North Leaflets." *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 28 Oct. 2008: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

Geumgang Mountain Resort and Kaesong Industrial Complex should activists continue sending fliers across the border⁵⁵.

During the 2000 and 2002 episodes, the South Korean government worked in cooperation with activists to facilitate the resettlement of North Korean defectors. In the Double Repatriation case study, human rights organizations issued pleas to the governments, United Nations, and major international aid organizations to use their influence to prevent China from repatriating the group of seven refugees that had been caught in Russia. Once repatriated, the South Korean government called on international aid organizations to assist in assuring the safety of the seven refugees in North Korea⁵⁶. In the Spanish Embassy case study, the break-in event was solely planned and executed by the activists and their chosen group of defectors. The government had no part in the planning of the event, but rose to effectively deal with the diplomatic processes with China. During a later activist-planned event in 2002, when another group was arrested breaking into the Japanese embassy in Shenyang, the Japanese and South Korean governments stepped up to protest their arrest and were able to effectively bring the group of defectors to South Korea⁵⁷.

Seoul has traditionally supported the resettlement of North Korean defectors from China or a third country, but halted any activities promoting or supporting the promotion of defection or regime change in North Korea after 2004. In 2004, the government warned NGOs not to promote the defection of North Korean refugees

⁵⁵ "South Korea Asks Civic Groups Not to Fly Leaflets to North." *Yonhap News* [Seoul] 8 Oct. 2008: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁵⁶ "'Seoul Powerless to Help Repatriated N. Koreans'" *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 17 Jan. 2000: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

⁵⁷ "Five Asylum Seekers Talk to Officials in Japan." *Japan Times* 26 June 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

through propaganda after North and South Korea agreed to stop use of propaganda against each other. However, they generally turned a blind eye to activist use of propaganda against North Korea due to a lack of viable legal retribution. In 2008, the South Korean government took a harder stance towards activists because of the threat issued by the North Korean government.

In early October, North and South Korea held working-level military talks at the Panmunjeon truce village, in which Pyongyang called for Seoul to halt the distribution of propaganda fliers in North Korea. Seoul took the North's threat seriously and the Ministry of Unification advised activists to stop sending leaflets across the border to North Korea. Pyongyang had threatened to evict all South Koreans from the Kaesong Industrial complex and the Mount Geumgang tourist resort. At this time Seoul was in the process of seeking to ease tensions with North Korea and persuade them to resume talks that had been cut off after newly-elected president Lee Myung Bak vowed to take a harder stance towards North Korea.

Activist groups ignored the government's plea, questioning Seoul's role in attempting to stop the activities of a civic group and claiming that the North's response to the leaflets "only prove that they are indeed amid a crisis"⁵⁸. On October 27, North Korea once again warned Seoul that there would be a "negative impact" on the South's use of the Kaesong Industrial complex and the Geumgang tourist resort. A coalition of businesses representing those operating out of the Kaesong Industrial complex further warned activists that their businesses would suffer should the activists continue to fly leaflets.

⁵⁸ "N.K. Tense over 'paper Bombs'" *Korea Herald* [Seoul] 29 Oct. 2008: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

When the activists continued to send fliers across the border despite continued threats, the North Korean military visited the Kaesong industrial complex in order to perform an inspection of the personnel and facilities. This action was considered a threat from North Korea, as the officials inquired about the amount of investment, the amount of capital, number of workers, salaries, working conditions, and how long it would take to empty the complex⁵⁹. Officials in Seoul responded to the threat with doubt, saying that by staging the inspection of the complex North Korea proved that they were reluctant to close it down. A few days later, North Korea threatened to shut its border with the South, shut down its Red Cross liaison office and cut all telephone links at Panmunjeom. Seoul responded by calling the North's decisions "regrettable" and moving to find legal measures through which they could stop activists from sending leaflets across the border. Experts questioned whether North Korea's recent response to the leaflets, which had been sent across the border since the Korean War, had to do with the declining health of Kim Jong Il and ensuing instability in the regime.

It was only on November 25, after North Korea announced that it would suspend tours to the city of Kaesong, expel 50% of the Korean staff at the Kaesong industrial complex, and seal the border that the activist groups decided to stop flying leaflets across the border. However, on the same day the groups announced that they had changed their minds, and would continue sending leaflets to North Korea.

⁵⁹ "NK Military Inspects Gaesong Complex." *Korea Times* [Seoul] 9 Nov. 2008: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

On December 3rd, the activists intended to launch a series of balloons carrying leaflets across the border from Paju, but were met with counter-activists claiming that the leaflets were a threat to the peace of the Korean Peninsula. A violent fight broke out between the two groups and the police had to intervene to separate them. Finally, on December 6th, 2008, the activists agreed to temporarily stop sending propaganda leaflets to North Korea after a meeting with GNP leader Park Hee Tae. However, as a result of their earlier unwillingness to do so, the train between North and South Korea was blocked off, the number of South Korean workers at the Kaesong Industrial Complex was reduced by 50%, and the number of South Koreans at the factory complex reduced from 4,200 to 880⁶⁰. North Korea blamed this on the South's use of confrontational tactics, even as the South attempted to cooperate through condemnation of the refugee-activists' actions.

In 2000, the refugee population had little agency due to their inability to affect their own situation. In 2002, defector agency began to grow as foreign activist groups showed them how to develop their own tactics to find a path to resettlement – tactics that offered the defectors more control over their own situation through exploitation of the media and government loopholes in order to increase their chances of being granted asylum. In 2008, defector agency became a driving factor behind the movement for North Korean human rights as defectors that had resettled in South Korea began to organize and act as an independent player in the refugee situation.

⁶⁰ "Brawl Near Korea's Border: Activists Opposed to Inciting the North Scuffle with Group Launching Anti-Kim Leaflets." *Washington Post* 3 Dec. 2008: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

There are stark differences visible between the North Korean refugee population of 1996 and the North Korean refugee population of 2010. In 1996, the few refugees granted asylum or assisted by embassies were members of the upper class and elites that could provide valuable information to Seoul. Those with money or relatives in South Korea or the United States could pay a group of guides to be smuggled out of China. Defectors without money, connections, or influence were virtually powerless to change their situation.

In 2000, media coverage over the North Korean refugee issue began to pick up, as did government attention to the issue. When the group of seven defectors was captured during the Double Repatriation event, South Korea and the UNHCR negotiated with China and Russia for their safety while the media and international aid organizations looked on. While in this event the defectors received refugee status and the assistance of the South Korean government, they still had little opportunity to impact their own situation once captured.

In 2002, activist groups began to devise tactics that would give North Korean defectors a viable path to resettlement in South Korea. They organized groups of defectors and planned high-profile break-ins at foreign missions that would be published in the media. They collaborated with the media in order to ensure that a television crew was on hand to “capture the group’s bolt for freedom”⁶¹. The successful collaboration between activist organizations and the media led to a shift in media framing towards humanization of the defectors involved, as opposed to

⁶¹ "Activist Plans More Defections by N Koreans." *Financial Times* [London] 21 Mar. 2002: n. pag. *LexisNexis Academic*. Web.

neutral reporting of facts and statistics. This opened up a window of opportunity for other defectors to organize and create their own path towards resettlement. At this point in time, defectors began to gain control over their own situation, although they were still forced to rely on government diplomacy to negotiate their release.

In 2004 and 2006, the South Korean government began to accept large batches of North Korean defectors from countries in Southeast Asia. In 2004 a group of over 400 defectors were sent to South Korea, and in 2006 a group of 175 defectors were sent to South Korea from Thailand. While defectors continued to seek passage to South Korea through foreign mission break-ins after 2002, another tactic emerged as increasing numbers of defectors were sent to South Korea from Southeast Asia. Defectors would cross the border to a third country such as Thailand, where they would either seek refugee status with the UNHCR or turn themselves over to the authorities, who would require them to pay an illegal entry fee before repatriating them to South Korea. The refugee situation also became increasingly globally relevant, as the United States ratified the North Korean Human Rights Act and North Korea began to speak out in protest of South Korea's refugee policies.

In 2008 and 2010 the refugee situation shifted once again as the South Korean government under President Lee Myung Bak moved away from the Sunshine Policy and North Korea pursued increasingly aggressive policies towards South Korea. Refugee-activist groups became a more prominent voice for the North Korean refugee issue and North Korean human rights. North Korea took notice of the refugee-activist organizations, but because the refugee-activists acted

independently of the South Korean government neither the threats of North Korea nor the pleas of South Korea could deter their action. The refugee-activists emerged as an independent body that could act without dependence on the other players involved in order to bring about change in the North Korean refugee situation.

Over the period from 1996 to 2010, the North Korean refugee population developed its own sense of agency as it grew from a group of scattered, unorganized individuals with little political power into multiple groups that used organized action in order to further the improvement of the North Korean refugee situation. These refugee-activist groups became influential in affecting the future of the North Korean refugee situation, as they gained power through their independence from the government. While the South Korean government was trying to mend relations with North Korea in the wake of its withdrawal from inter-Korean talks, the activist groups were able to take action regardless of any consequence it might have on diplomatic relations between the two Koreas.

This sense of agency in the North Korean refugee population grew as a result of the changing roles of the media, activism, and the government shaping the North Korean refugee situation over time. From 1996 to 2010 the level of opportunity available to defectors grew through increased attention in the media, activist involvement in the refugee issue, and government willingness to negotiate on the behalf of the refugees. In 2002 activist groups provided defectors with the resources needed to strategize their own paths to freedom, and collaborated with the media in order to ensure that defector asylum-seeking action was broadcast to a sympathetic audience too large for diplomatic officials to ignore. The South Korean government

did not actively promote defection, but officially supported any defectors who wished to go to South Korea. Defectors were able to collaborate with activists and the media in order to turn their asylum-seeking action into a major event, which created international attention and prompted South Korea to negotiate on the behalf of the defectors.

In the future I believe we will see an increasing number of North Korean refugees in South Korea taking action towards improving the situation of North Koreans, in China, North Korea, and worldwide. As the number of refugees in South Korea continues to grow past 20,000, North Korean refugees will increasingly take on prominent roles in society. North Korean refugees are now appearing not only in activism, but in politics, business, and television in South Korea. The portrayal of North Korean refugees as victimized and helpless in the media has helped them gain sympathy from an international audience, but it is time to consider a new dynamic of the refugee population. North Korean defectors may be victims of unjust treatment in North Korea and China, but they have learned to effectively use whatever little resources available to make an impact on the North Korean refugee situation.

More research is needed on the different roles that defectors play in society. By examining who the refugee-activists are in relation to the refugee population as a whole, we can seek to understand the demographics of the North Korean refugee population and how this might change in the future. We should research the portrayal of the refugee population as victims in society and how defectors utilize this image in order to gain the attention and support of an international audience.

The North Korean refugee population will continue to grow and become more active in the future as the population of resettled refugees increases, and for the sake of future research we must learn to separate the refugee population from its portrayal in the media.

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