



# The Politics of Flooding and Stability in North Korea

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** In July 2024, torrential rain poured down on North Korea. Thousands of homes were flooded, and more than 40,000 people in North Pyongan Province and other nearby provinces had to be evacuated. This was not the first natural disaster North Korea has experienced during the tenure of Kim Jong-un. Under his father's rule, drought, heavy rains, and a dysfunctional government that was unwilling to allow foreign non-governmental organizations to directly assist North Korean citizens led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Kim Jung-un's decision on how to cope with this summer's natural disaster gives us indications of how he governs the country.

The North Korean humanitarian crisis engendered by the severe flooding of July 2024 could have served as an opportunity for Kim Jong-un to approach the South for humanitarian aid, including food and medical assistance. Kim decided not to take this step, preferring instead to receive food aid from Russia.

This was a practical demonstration of the way relations have improved between North Korea and Russia. This warming was particularly apparent at the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, when Pyongyang offered Moscow public support and sold weapons to Russia. Kim Jong-un and his sister, Kim Yo-jong, have both threatened South Korea in recent months, so asking the South for assistance with the humanitarian crisis might present the North as weak.

The humanitarian support Pyongyang accepted from the Russian administration is another demonstration of a shift in Kim's regional policies. South Korea did extend an offer of humanitarian aid to North Korea, but Kim rejected it. He might fear that accepting help from the South would underscore his inability to manage the crisis, thereby undermining his leadership. Accepting aid from Seoul could have opened the door to the first official dialogue between the two Koreas in years, a step Kim appears reluctant to take under the current circumstances.

July's flooding disaster has the potential to develop into a serious food and health crisis that might reflect on Kim's leadership. To prevent this, he has begun a propaganda blitz to forestall any attempts by internal or external actors to use the crisis to raise doubts about his leadership. North Korean state media outlets have reported on all of Kim's visits to the flooded areas and praised him as a leader who will do whatever is necessary to help the people of North Korea. The media have shown Kim traveling to flooded areas, getting into the water, and giving instructions on how to rehabilitate the region and build housing for the evacuees. He was portrayed not just as a rebuilders but as a leader who provides instruction to evacuated children. He was shown as the father of the nation, empathetic to people in need, an image also put forward by his grandfather, Kim Il-sung. Soldiers and students took part in evacuating and rebuilding the damaged areas. They also took part in Kim's propaganda blitz, which was meant to send a message not only to North Koreans but to foreign actors who might try to exploit the crisis to suggest that Kim's health issues do not allow him to rule, or that his regime cannot function during a humanitarian crisis.

Kim Jong-un's approach to disaster management has undergone a significant transformation, as evidenced by his response to the July floods. Typically, his involvement in disaster-stricken areas has been minimal. His last visit prior to the recent one in July was in August 2020 to North Hwanghae province, and that was preceded by an inspection of recovery work in a flood-damaged northeastern city in September 2015. In other instances of flooding, it was typically senior North Korean officials who were dispatched rather than Kim himself. These rare appearances were seen as efforts to bolster his image as a leader concerned about public welfare, particularly during times of economic hardship exacerbated by events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The July 2024 floods, however, saw a marked change in KJU's approach. Unlike previous appearances, when he arrived only after the rains had ceased and maintained a safe distance from the affected population, Kim was now seen directly engaging with the aftermath of the floods. Images captured him braving rain and wind, with North Korean Air Force helicopters in the background. He was later photographed kneeling in the mud, sitting with evacuees in tents, and driving through floodwaters in his car. This hands-on approach diverges significantly from his earlier visits, when he remained in his black SUV or viewed the damage from afar, maintaining a physical and emotional distance from the affected people. Kim's July performance indicates a significant shift in his leadership style of disaster management.

As is customary in North Korea, state media played a crucial role in shaping this new narrative. They stressed that Kim had "personally directed the battle against the floods" and declared parts of three provinces "special disaster emergency zones". The media's portrayal of Kim as a "benevolent" leader risking his life to help his people was juxtaposed with their criticism of local officials for their "serious neglect" in responding to the disaster. This strategy effectively reinforced Kim's caring leader image while deflecting blame onto lower-level bureaucrats.

The scale and sophistication of the rescue efforts also appeared more extensive than in previous disasters, suggesting improvements in North Korea's crisis management capabilities. For example, the deployment of Air Force helicopters in rescue operations demonstrated enhanced resources and preparedness. This might be attributable to strengthened relationships with China and Russia, which may have provided the country with additional support.

However, Kim's response also unveiled deeper anxieties about external influences on North Korean society. During his recent visit to the flood-hit region, Kim accused South Korean media of fabricating stories about the damage and death toll, calling their reports "fake news", "conspiracy propaganda" and "blasphemy" from "the country of waste". South Korean media, citing unnamed government sources, had reported that approximately 1,500 people were dead or missing due to the flooding. Kim's aggressive stance towards South Korean media is particularly noteworthy as such verbal assaults have typically been the domain of his sister, Kim Yo-jong.

Kim's harsh criticism likely reflects his concern over North Koreans' increasing access to outside information. Advancements in technology have made it easier for North Koreans to receive information from beyond their borders. Additionally, the flooding affected both North Korea and China along the Yalu River, potentially allowing North Koreans to hear about the disaster from Chinese sources. By accusing South Korean media of spreading misinformation, Kim is trying to control the narrative and prevent external influences from undermining his regime's authority. This approach also serves to exploit the natural disaster as a means of limiting South Korean influence among North Koreans by redirecting criticism outward, particularly amid recent escalations in inter-Korean tensions, exemplified by South Korea's activation of propaganda loudspeakers along the DMZ in response to North Korea's launch of trash balloons.

Kim Jong-un's recent actions during the floods reflect a dual strategy: positioning himself as a compassionate, hands-on leader while aggressively countering perceived threats from external influences, particularly South Korea. This approach underscores the regime's ongoing efforts to maintain control over its population amid increasing challenges from within and outside the country.

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