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Trends

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- Soviet criticism of Iranian intransigence
- Unemployment in USSR
- Reconsidering the Dubcek era
- Pyongyang on KAL airliner
- Beijing on arms control

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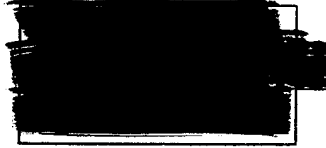
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This report examines selected foreign media, with emphasis on the controlled media of communist countries. The analyses are based exclusively on media content and behavior and are issued without coordination with other U.S. Government components.



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Korea

Pyongyang Gives Low-Key Treatment to KAL Incident

Pyongyang appears to have decided to maintain a relatively low profile in its treatment of the recent crash of a South Korean passenger plane over Southeast Asia. There are anomalies in North Korean media handling of the incident that set it off from treatment of serious incidents in the past.

Despite worldwide attention to the disappearance of the plane on 29 November, which Seoul promptly alleged was the result of a bomb planted on board by North Korean agents, North Korean media did not report the incident until 4 December, an unusual delay compared with Pyongyang's normal response time to such situations. Pyongyang offered its first comment on the incident in a 5 December "KCNA spokesman's" statement, a vehicle rarely used and one that seems to rank low in the North's hierarchy of authoritative statements. The statement, carried in full in English-language transmissions for overseas consumers, denied that the North was responsible for the plane's disappearance and suggested that it may have crashed due to mechanical difficulties. It acknowledged that two suspects had been questioned in Bahrain and that one had committed suicide, but it claimed flatly that both were Japanese who have no connection with North Korea. Neither the statement nor subsequent commentaries dealt with the question of the bogus passports the two carried, a point mentioned prominently in Western and South Korean press reports.

The spokesman's statement claimed that South Korean ruling party presidential candidate No Tae-u had seized on the incident to bolster his chances in the election scheduled for later this month, but it stopped short of directly charging that he was behind the plane's disappearance. Lower level comment, however, has developed the theme of a link between No and the missing plane. A 7 December *Nodong Sinmun* commentary claimed that "world opinion" suspected South Korean "intrigue" was behind the incident and raised what it claimed to be a number of suspicious factors pointing toward the possibility of South Korean involvement. Nevertheless, *Nodong Sinmun*, like the KCNA statement, stopped short of directly charging the

South with complicity. However, the clandestine radio Voice of National Salvation, beamed from North to South Korea, which typically goes beyond central media in these types of situations, did explicitly charge that No plotted the plane's destruction and suggested that he deserved punishment.

Implicitly acknowledging that the incident could hurt the North's image, the KCNA statement, ending on an unusual note, protested defensively that the North would not carry out any action "harming the South Korean workers who were on board the passenger plane." Neither the statement nor the *Nodong Sinmun* commentary, however, repeated the standard line that the DPRK does not engage in acts of terrorism.

Kinds of Statements In the past 30 years KCNA is known to have issued only four other "spokesman's" statements—two, in 1978 and 1982, on the issue of Japanese fishing boats violating North Korean waters, and two more, in 1974 and 1980, on the issue of anti-North Korean propaganda from the South. Incidents similar to the South Korean plane's disappearance, in which the North has been charged with having a hand, and serious clashes between the DPRK and U.S. or ROK forces are normally handled in an "authorized" KCNA statement. Such statements—which explicitly note that the news agency has been instructed to comment on a particular topic, thus clearly indicating that they have the weight of authority behind them—were used to put forth the DPRK position after the 1983 Rangoon bombing, the 1976 Panmunjom ax-slaying incident, and the 1974 assassination attempt against Pak Chong-hui.

On various occasions in the past, the North has refrained from issuing an authorized KCNA statement and instead used lower level statements to signal a desire to defuse tension or to prevent an incident from escalating into something more serious. Following the downing of a U.S. military helicopter by the North in July 1977, for example, Pyongyang merely issued a KCNA "report," suggesting its desire to quickly settle the matter. Similarly, in August 1981, following U.S. charges that the North had tried to shoot down an SR-71 reconnaissance plane, KCNA issued a denial not identified as an official statement, suggesting that the incident, which occurred at a time when the North had just begun to invite U.S. scholars for visits, was one Pyongyang wanted to get past quickly.

In a revealing demonstration of the North's use of the hierarchy of statements, Pyongyang's first reaction to the November 1984 Panmunjom shooting incident came in the form of a KCNA "information" release, a lower level

expression of protest. The North escalated its protest to an "authorized" KCNA statement several days later, after concluding that Seoul was not going to match its efforts to play down the incident in order to protect the newly emergent inter-Korean dialogue.

Other Comment In line with Pyongyang's apparent attempt to play down the incident, North Korean media have devoted only minimal attention to it in the wake of the KCNA spokesman's statement. Pyongyang radio carried a station commentary and a statement by a low-level official of the North's trade union organization on 5 December. The only *Nodong Sinmun* commentary devoted exclusively to the incident was the one on the 7th. On the 9th, the newspaper carried a commentary protesting the possibility that a female suspect in the case might be transferred from Bahrain to South Korea. Otherwise, central media treatment of the incident has been confined to pickups of comment by third parties. By contrast, Pyongyang media devoted considerable attention to the charges of DPRK culpability following the Rangoon bombing assassination attempt by the North against ROK President Chon Tu-hwan in October 1983. At that time Pyongyang mounted a media campaign aimed at the domestic audience, while attempting to portray the population as rallying to the government's defense.

The 7 December *Nodong Sinmun* commentary, in directly responding to charges that the North had carried out the incident to obstruct the South's presidential campaign and the 1988 Seoul Olympics, cited the observation, expressed in the Japanese press, that the North had more to lose than to gain from such an incident. (The North took a similar tack following the Rangoon bombing. At that time, it cited foreign media comment as saying that it would make no sense for the North to have carried out such an act in Burma and jeopardize its relations with the Burmese.) *Nodong Sinmun* went on to assert that the North would "not engage in acts that would help the South Korean military fascist elements in their maneuvers to retake power." This theme was also sounded in remarks by an official of Chongnyon—the pro-DPRK organization of Koreans living in Japan—in an interview reported by the Kyodo news agency on 7 December.

Party Plenum The KAL incident comes at a time when the North may once again be in the middle of a debate over sensitive policy issues, suggested by an unusual delay in holding a party plenum, which has not been held in nearly a year. There have been few such long intervals between plenums in the party's 42-year history; intervals of seven months or less are the norm. The longest interval—14 months—was

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between the December 1984 and the February 1986 plenums, at a time when there was evidence of internal leadership debate over such sensitive issues as policy toward South Korea and the United States.

Moscow, Beijing Moscow at first obscured, and then ridiculed, the claims of DPRK involvement in the incident. A commentary aired on Moscow television on 2 December noted charges by South Korean airline officials that the plane crashed as a result of sabotage, but it ignored Seoul's allegations of Pyongyang's complicity, pointing the finger only at "unidentified terrorists." On the 3d, however, both TASS and Moscow television carried commentaries on the incident, noting South Korean charges against the DPRK but implicitly ridiculing them by referring to the involvement of "mythical agents from the North." Moscow media reported without comment the 5 December KCNA statement.

The Chinese, whose relations with the North have become increasingly strained in recent years, have been noncommittal on the possibility of a DPRK connection to the plane's disappearance. After promptly reporting the incident and the South's claims that sabotage was involved, Beijing media have been virtually silent on the subject since 1 December, breaking their silence only to report the KCNA spokesman's statement on the 5th. (U/FOUO)

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