Decoding North Korea: What 1,238 headlines reveal about the cult of Kim Jong Un

Analysis of Rodong Sinmun exposes effort to distance leader from economic problems, but credit him for political success

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North Koreans read an issue of the Rodong Sinmun on display in the Pyongyang metro. | Image: NK News (Sept. 2018)

Ever since 1946, North Korea's state-run *Rodong Sinmun* newspaper has been churning out articles on a daily basis, including in an online English-language version since 2012.

And while the monotony of the ruling party's mouthpiece certainly makes for dry reading, the thousands of articles that it publishes every year offer a goldmine for those willing to look beyond the surface.

Using web-scraping tools and data science methods, the author gathered and analyzed 1,238 headlines from the English-language politics and economy sections of the *Rodong Sinmun*, spanning from Jan. 1 to Nov. 30, 2023.

What this analysis reveals is a veiled propaganda strategy for building up the cult of Kim Jong Un, burnishing his political leadership while distancing him from responsibility for the country's economic problems.

PERSONALIZED POLITICS

Topic modeling, a machine-learning technique that analyzes text data to determine groups of words, allows us to group the *Rodong Sinmun* headlines into three categories for politics and four for economy.

This produces the following breakdown of the most reported topics in 2023:

POLITICS SECTION (770 headlines)			
Most reported topics	Diplomatic greetings and congratulations to/from Kim Jong Un	Anniversaries and celebrations (Workers' Party of Korea, Army, etc).	Love and devotion from Kim Jong Un to his people

Number of articles	258 (33.51%)	131 (17.01%)	96 (12.47%)
Representative terms of the cluster	Kim, Jong, Un, Respected, Comrade, Received, President, Greetings, Send, Floral, Message	DPRK, Party, Birthday, Committee, Meeting, Spread, Held, Centenarian, Revolutionary, Stand	People, Story, Devoted, Premier, Great, Love, Inspect, Leader, Unforgettable, War
Most representative headline	"Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Receives Floral Basket and Congratulatory Letter" (2023-02-08)	"Foundation of Juche-type Revolutionary Party" (2023-10-10)	"Unforgettable Stories about His Devoted Efforts for People" (2023-07-04)

ECONOMY SECTION (468 headlines)

Most reported topics	Modernization projects (economic plans, projects, and technological innovations to improve the country's economy)	Agriculture technification (improvements in farming practices around the country)	Industry, production, and construction projects (including housing projects)	Agricultural developments (agricultural activities, successes, and developments in different provinces)
Number of articles	114 (24.36%)	93 (19.87%)	54 (11.54%)	35 (7.48%)
Representative terms of the cluster	Farm, Made, Construct, DPRK, Plan, Technique, Machine, Rural, New, Material	Effort, Province, Innovation, Harvest, Project, Power, Work, Steel, Promote	Brisk, Product, Increase, Sector, Progress, Industry, Station, Coal, Equipment, Year, House	DPRK, Nation, Factory, Wheat, Area, Put, Crop, Transport, Build, Activity
Most representative headline	"Mass Movement for Raising Level of Mechanization in Farming" (2023-10-24)	"Vigorously Advancing Forward through Collaborative Innovations" (2023-04-17)	"Brisk Campaign for Rural Housing Construction in DPRK" (2023-06-30)	"Sowing of Winter Wheat and Barley Concluded in South Hwanghae Province" (2023-10-17)

A preliminary analysis shows a marked emphasis on political content: over 62% of the headlines fall under the politics category, significantly exceeding some 37% dedicated to the economy.

The data also suggests a stark dichotomy in how the newspaper presents political versus economic narratives. Politically, the focus is intensely personal, centering on the actions and image of Kim Jong Un. Conversely, economic coverage is more collective in nature, emphasizing national projects and achievements.

When running a TF-IDF analysis, a statistical measure used to evaluate how important a word is within the corpus of headlines, the most representative word in headlines that fell under the politics section was "Kim," followed by "Jong."
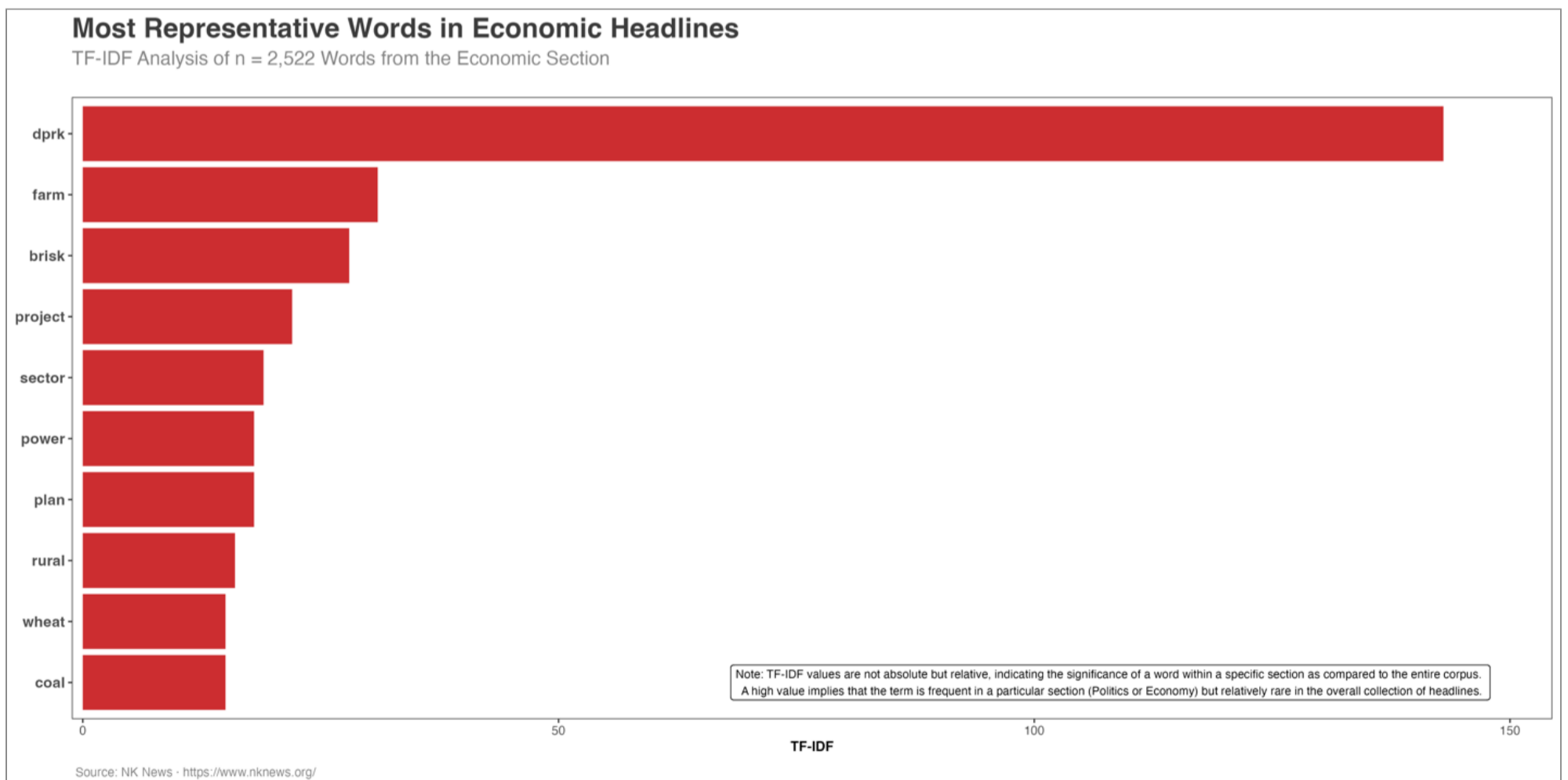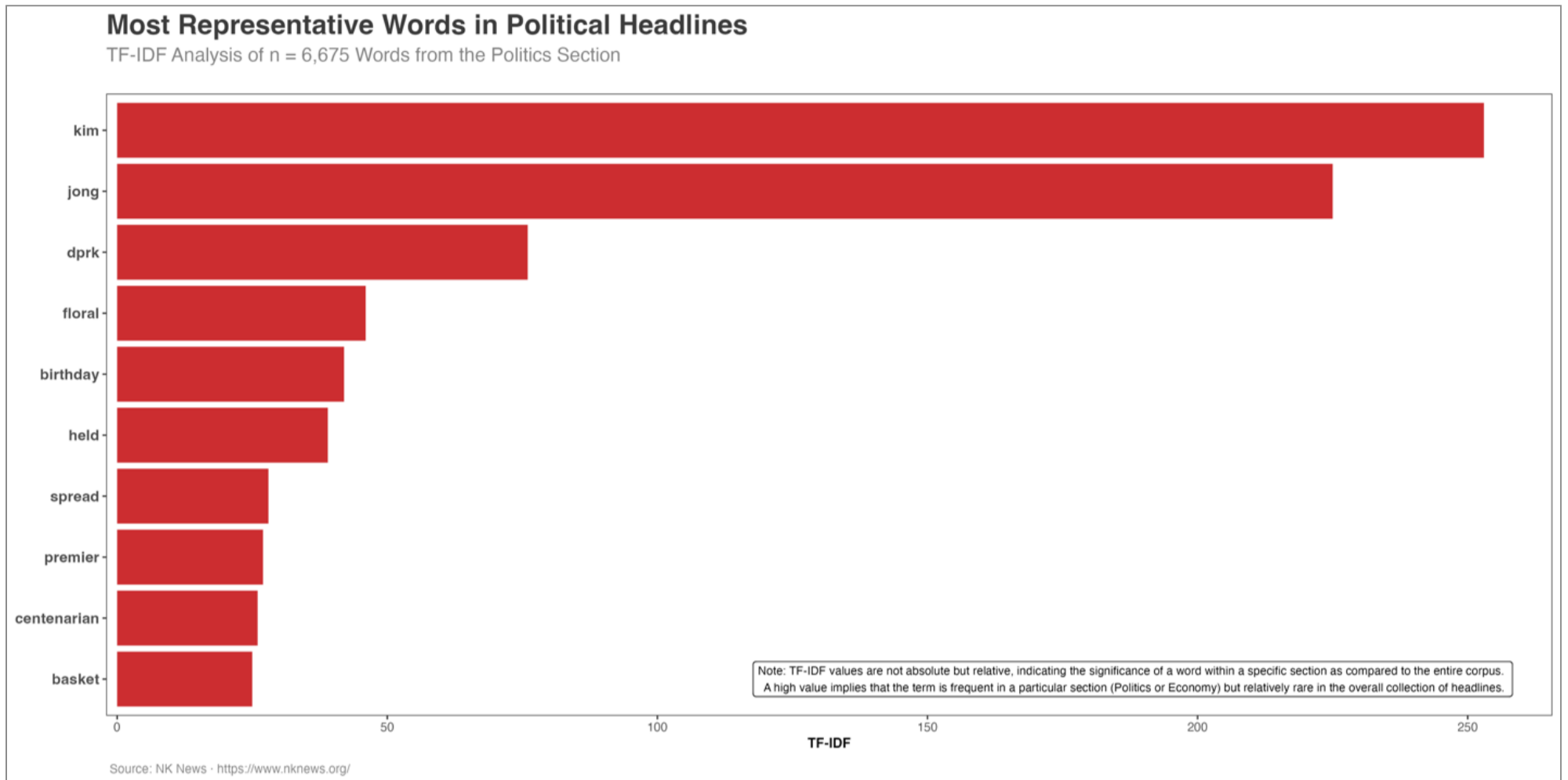
Conversely, in the economics section, Kim Jong Un is not mentioned at all, with the most common term being "DPRK."

The dual narrative of personalized political headlines and collectivized economic headlines may serve as a sophisticated, yet subtle, form of propaganda.

By personalizing political and diplomatic achievements, the regime enhances Kim Jong Un's prominence, thus centralizing authority around his leadership.

In contrast, economic efforts are portrayed as collective, thereby mobilizing the populace toward common economic goals.

Notably, this approach strategically avoids personalizing economic shortcomings, preventing any direct association of failures with the leadership and thereby maintaining a positive image of Kim Jong Un.

Most Representative Words in Political Headlines
TF-IDF Analysis of n = 6,675 Words from the Politics Section

Note: TF-IDF values are not absolute but relative, indicating the significance of a word within a specific section as compared to the entire corpus. A high value implies that the term is frequent in a particular section (Politics or Economy) but relatively rare in the overall collection of headlines.

Source: NK News · https://www.nknews.org/

Most Representative Words in Economic Headlines
TF-IDF Analysis of n = 2,522 Words from the Economic Section

Note: TF-IDF values are not absolute but relative, indicating the significance of a word within a specific section as compared to the entire corpus. A high value implies that the term is frequent in a particular section (Politics or Economy) but relatively rare in the overall collection of headlines.

Source: NK News · https://www.nknews.org/

FLORAL BASKETS

Another noteworthy observation is that stories related to the economy omit references to foreign countries, while the politics section frequently mentions them, especially in the context of foreign relations.

A reliable indicator for identifying references to countries is the term "floral basket." Kim Jong Un has sent and received floral baskets from countries such as Cuba, Laos, Palestine, Vietnam, Syria, Mongolia and China.

But such reporting on foreign relations is characterized by a focus on political and ideological ties, while making little reference to economic or commercial interactions with these countries.

This makes sense when we consider the context of economic sanctions levied on the DPRK, which significantly proscribe the country's trade ties with the outside world.
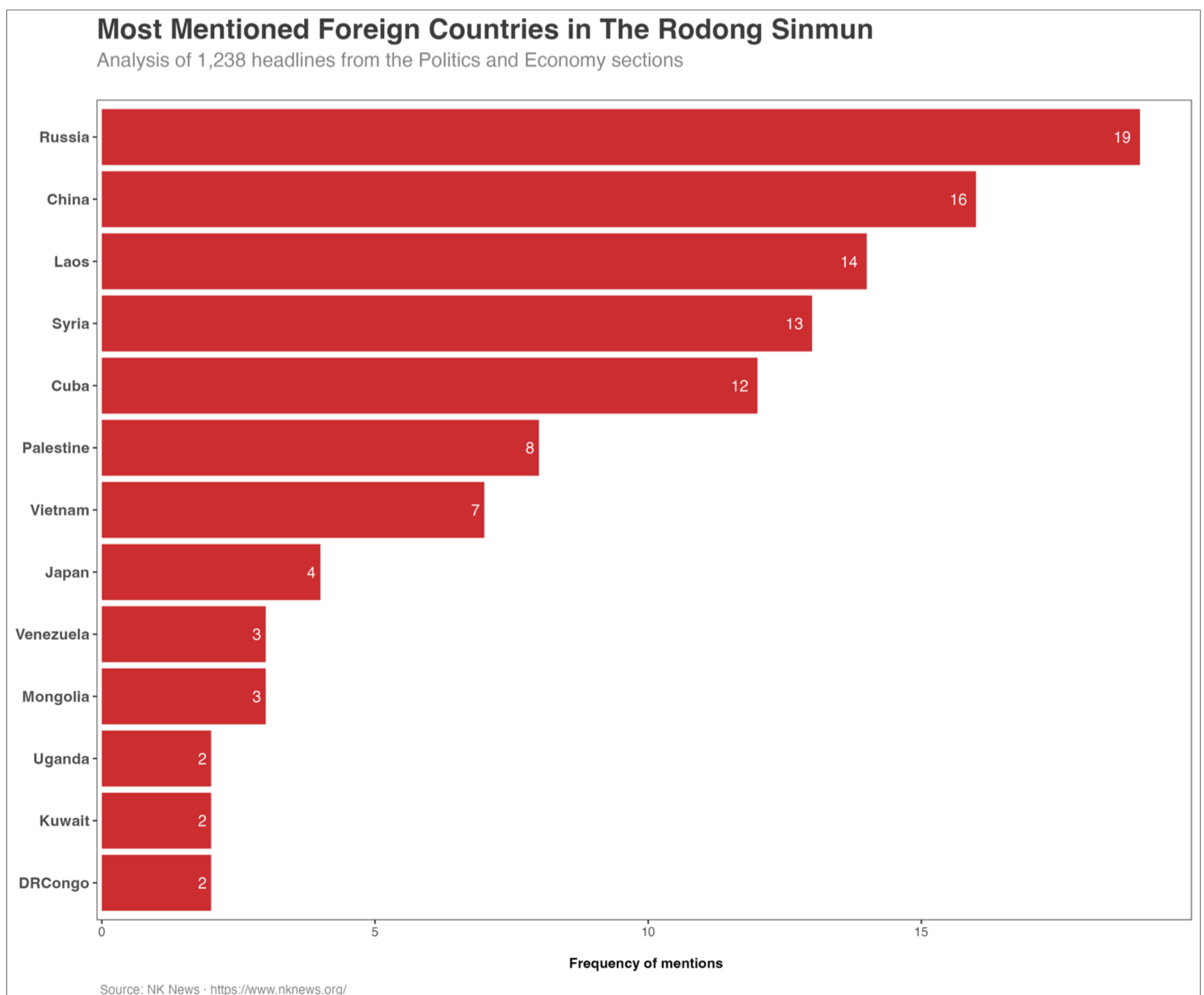
It also aligns with the regime's own policy of self-reliance, with articles in the *Rodong Sinmun* and other outlets frequently extolling the virtues of not depending on outside assistance despite the country's economic troubles.

Meanwhile, the number of references to various countries can provide a rough proxy for the importance that Pyongyang placed on bilateral ties throughout the year.

In the first 11 months of 2023, the *Rodong Sinmun* mentioned Russia more than any other state, a finding that hardly comes as a surprise after the two countries' push to bolster ties led to allegations of weapons trade and multiple diplomatic exchanges, including a summit between Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin.

The 13 countries referenced at least twice in the *Rodong Sinmun*, arranged by the number of times they were mentioned directly or indirectly, are: Russia, China, Laos, Syria, Cuba, Palestine, Vietnam, Japan, Venezuela, Mongolia, Uganda, Kuwait, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Another 40 countries were mentioned only once: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brunei, Cambodia, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, San Marino, Senegal, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Tajikistan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, United Kingdom, and Zimbabwe.

Most Mentioned Foreign Countries in The Rodong Sinmun
Analysis of 1,238 headlines from the Politics and Economy sections

Country	Frequency of mentions
Russia	19
China	16
Laos	14
Syria	13
Cuba	12
Palestine	8
Vietnam	7
Japan	4
Venezuela	3
Mongolia	3
Uganda	2
Kuwait	2
DRCongo	2

Source: NK News · https://www.nknews.org/

SILENT YET POWERFUL

Breaking down the content of headlines with the help of data science methods and tools can be instrumental in scrutinizing state propaganda nuances, gauging diplomatic priorities, tracking political trends and ultimately estimating the country's economic performance in the years to come.

Seeing Kim Jong Un more often in economic news, for instance, might hint that the country is making real economic progress.

Headlines are thus a silent yet powerful barometer for decoding the world's most secluded nation, providing unconventional ways to understand narratives and dynamics behind North Korea's carefully crafted facade.

Edited by Alannah Hill

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