

Washington Post Stories on North Korea Are Highly Speculative

'Wrong as Often as Right' Is Good Enough When Reporting on an Official Enemy

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Region: [Asia](#)

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North Korea may have executed this general with anti-aircraft guns. Or he may be alive and well. The Washington Post thought you might like to read some guesses about him.

The Washington Post ([5/12/15](#)) has a sensational story about North Korean Gen. Hyon Yong Chol:

North Korea's equivalent of a defense minister has been executed by anti-aircraft gun for insubordination and treason—including for sleeping during a meeting where Kim Jong Un was speaking, South Korea's intelligence agency said Wednesday.

Reporters Anna Fifield and Yoonjung Seo continue:

The report, if true, would starkly illustrate the brutal extent to which the young North Korean leader is going to consolidate power.

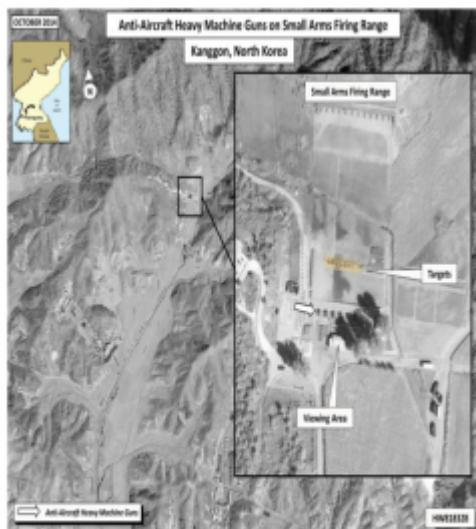
And if it *isn't* true? I suppose it would starkly illustrate the low standards the Washington Post sets for itself when reporting about an official enemy.

Most of the information in the article is based on what "officials from the [South Korean] National Intelligence Service told local reporters at a briefing in Seoul"—local reporters, meaning not the Washington Post. What did the Post hear directly? "An NIS spokesman confirmed to the Post that it believed Hyon had been executed."

So the sensational stuff in the article is what local South Korean journalists said they were told by South Korean intelligence about that country's bitter rivals. But South Korean intelligence is a reliable source, right?

Well, no—not according to the Post. In the article's eighth paragraph, the reporters note: "The NIS report could not be independently verified. NIS's claims turn out to be wrong as often as they are right."

Is it really the Washington Post's policy to base stories on claims that are "wrong as often as they are right"?



The small map inserted at the top left corner shows the location of the site in the image. It is located on the outskirts of Pyongyang. The larger background image is a photo of the site and its surroundings. The inset on the right side of the image is a close up of the small arms range showing the viewing area, the anti-aircraft heavy machine guns in front of the viewing area, and targets on the range.

The Washington Post presents images of “some sort of targets” on a firing range as evidence that North Korea is executing prisoners with anti-aircraft guns.

In this case, presumably the Post felt confident betting on “right” rather than “wrong” because someone who blogs about North Korea said the report “rang true.” Isn’t this the kind of bizarre thing the North Koreans are always doing?

The Post also tried to shore up this highly speculative story by referring to another highly speculative story the paper recently published. The new article noted:

A recent report from the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea contained satellite imagery apparently showing [several people standing in front of anti-aircraft machine guns](#) at a military training area 13 miles north of Pyongyang in October last year.

The link in that passage goes to an article the Post published on May 1, with the lengthy headline, “Does North Korea Execute People With Anti-Aircraft Guns? New Satellite Images Suggest the Rumors May Be True.” The article reports that the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea released images that

appear to show several individuals standing in front of anti-aircraft machine guns at a military training area.... It appears, though it cannot be confirmed, that these people are being executed.

Actually, if you follow the Post’s link to the [report](#), the committee itself says that the images show “what appear to be some sort of targets” on a North Korean firing range—and then concludes, mainly because the firing range doesn’t look to be designed for high-caliber weapons, that “the most plausible explanation of the scene captured in the October 7th satellite image is a gruesome public execution.”

Maybe. Or maybe “what appear to be some sort of targets” on a firing range actually *are* targets. Or maybe they are people who are lining up not because they are about to be shot, but because they are engaged in military training, which frequently involves lining up.

But this is North Korea we’re talking about, so “maybe” is good enough to pin a story on.

h/t: [Left I on the News](#)

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