

On Containing China: A Realist Case for American Engagement with North Korea

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Abstract

The rise of China fundamentally altered the balance of power in East Asia against the United States. Although North Korea-U.S. relations have been poisonous for decades, this paper makes the case that the United States can and should engage with North Korea to correct that degrading balance of power. First, I explain the rationale for working with the North Koreans and argue that North Korea is a formidable asset for great power competition with China. Second, I show that current policies toward North Korea are utter failures and should be abandoned. Third, I demonstrate by using the declarations of leaders and other N. Korean materials that Pyongyang, too, is deeply worried by Chinese power and would welcome U.S. and allied overtures to form a balancing coalition against Beijing. Finally, I propose a few policies both realistic and riskless to kick-start the process of rapprochement.

Key Words: balancing, China-North Korea relations, engagement, North Korea-U.S. relations, realism

Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) is probably the most enduring adversary the United States ever had. Bilateral relations have been poor since the inception of North Korea in 1948, and the two states do not even maintain diplomatic relations; in fact, they have been officially at war since 1950. The rise of North Korean nuclear ambitions in the 1980s led to recurrent crises and war scares. However, the changing balance of power in Asia and the emergence of China as a peer competitor make it impossible to approach North Korean-U.S. relations in a purely bilateral setting anymore. Now that China is officially the number one foreign threat for America,¹ the North Korean problem can only be tackled through the lens of the intense security competition between Beijing and Washington. But, oddly enough, the United States' North Korea policy does not match this new reality. While North Korea is a weak power compared to China and Russia, Washington remains committed to isolate and contain Pyongyang.

Through this paper, I argue that the situation is ripe for a "Nixon moment." Washington has a unique opportunity to break the stalemate with North Korea and turn Pyongyang from an enemy to an ally to counter China because the North Koreans also fear the rise of China. To show that, I notably analyze North Korean leaders' declarations and the *Rodong Sinmun*, an official newspaper. Consequently, I conclude that the United States can find in the DPRK a formidable trump card to play against China.

Arguments that North Korea and China distrust each other are nothing new.² Observers of Sino-N. Korean relations generally claim that North Korea's aggressivity and recurrent provocations embarrass China because

1 U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; U.S. Government, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; and U.S. Government, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

they may disrupt regional trade and thus Chinese economic development. Conversely, they believe North Korea wary of Chinese influence but in dire need of Chinese economic support. Nevertheless, these studies often remain mostly historical in nature and pay little attention to the changing balance of power in Asia.

Points resembling mine have been made elsewhere. For Blank, “fostering North Korean independence to the greatest possible degree by taking into account North Korea’s need for security offers the United States the tangible possibility of reshaping regional dynamics to its advantage.”³ Minnich proposes that “as China and Russia actively contest U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific, Washington should seize the opportunity to draw Pyongyang into its security architecture with Seoul and Tokyo” to “reshape Northeast Asia for the next century as Washington shores up its military alliances and shifts a unified security focus from a North Korean threat to strategic security challenges that emanate from Beijing and Moscow.”⁴ That said, an examination combining international relations theory and

2 For example, Jae Ho Chung and Myung-hae Choi, “Uncertain Allies or Uncomfortable Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949-2010,” *Pacific Review*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2013): 243-64; Thomas Fingar and David Straub, “Geography and Destiny: DPRK Concerns and Objectives with Respect to China,” in *Uneasy Partnerships: China’s Engagement with Japan, the Koreas, and Russia in the Era of Reform*, ed. Thomas Fingar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 169-88; Sukhee Han, “Alliance Fatigue amid Asymmetrical Interdependence: Sino-North Korean Relations in Flux,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2004): 155-79; You Ji, “China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 10, no. 28 (2001): 387-98; and Min-hyung Kim, “Cracks in the Blood-Shared Alliance? Explaining Strained PRC-DPRK Relations in the Post-Cold War World,” *Pacific Focus*, vol. 32, no. 1 (April 2017): 109-28.

3 Stephen Blank, “Is the Northern Alliance Making a Comeback? Do Russia, China and North Korea Constitute an Alliance?” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 31, no. 2 (June 2019): 224.

4 James M. Minnich, “Denuclearization through Peace: A Policy Approach to Change North Korea from Foe to Friend,” *Military Review*, vol. 100, no. 6 (November/December 2020): 22. Also, Anastasia Barannikova, *United States-DPRK Relations: Is Normalization Possible?* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019); Vincent Brooks and Ho Young Leem, “A Grand Bargain with North Korea: Pyongyang’s Economic Distress Offers a Chance for Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 29, 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-29/grand-bargain-north-korea>; William R. McKinney, “Korea at a Crossroads: Time for a US-ROK-DPRK Strategic Realignment” (38 North, September 17, 2018), <https://www.38north.org/2018/09/wmckinney091718/>; and Dylan Motin, “Stir Up the Hornet’s Nest: How to Exploit the Friction between China and North Korea,” in *The Future of the Korean Peninsula and Beyond: Next Generation Perspectives on Korean Peninsula Security*, ed. National Committee on American Foreign Policy (New York: NCAFP, 2022), 148-58.

policy is lacking. No study has systematically investigated North Korean views of America and China in a realist setting.

I explore the North Korean issue from the standpoint of realism, an approach of international relations that aims at explaining the behavior of states that live in an anarchic system. Deprived of a superior authority to protect them, states have to rely on their own devices to survive. In such a world, states' primordial goal is security. Military power is the best guarantee to deter, fend off, or coerce other states and safeguard one's interests.⁵ Choosing a realist approach has the merit of bypassing the insoluble debate concerning North Korean intentions. Pundits are generally divided between those who believe that N. Korean goals are minimalist and limited to the survival of the regime, and those who see the DPRK as revisionist in nature, aiming at least to reunify Korea under its rule.⁶ Realists see the issue of intentions as relatively unimportant because rational actors behave in predictable ways and North Korea appears to be a rational actor, since "the regime is capable of acting pragmatically in furtherance of its own self-interests."⁷ States are revisionist when they can and status quoist when they must.⁸ Intentions are an outcome of capabilities.⁹ If the North Koreans had an easy opportunity to reunify Korea under their control, they would. As long as they cannot, they should be content to guarantee their survival.

This paper also has scholarly implications. I demonstrate that the

5 Oft-cited major realist works are Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations* [Peace and War among Nations] (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2004); Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919 - 1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1964); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1985); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

6 For example, David C. Kang, "International Relations Theory and the Second Korean War," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2003): 301-24; and Robert E. Kelly, "Does North Korea Want to Absorb South Korea or Just Leach Off of It?" *National Interest* (September 23, 2021), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/does-north-korea-want-absorb-south-korea-or-%C2%A0just-%C2%A0leach-it-194241>.

7 Jacques L. Fuqua, *Nuclear Endgame: The Need for Engagement with North Korea* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), xix.

8 Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 1-49.

9 Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/15): 48-88.

DPRK has incentives to form a coalition with the United States to balance against China. Realist thinkers usually argue that states balance against stronger powers regardless of ideological or cultural concerns. We would have a strong confirmation of the explanatory power of realism if even North Korea, often seen as an ideological and traditional ally of China, fears the rise of Chinese power and wants to balance against it.

I develop my argument in four parts. First, the paper presents why Washington should engage with North Korea to out-compete China (and secondarily Russia). I notably explain that allying with Pyongyang is a costless fix to counterbalance China's growing military capabilities. Second, I argue that the three strategies pursued by the United States towards N. Korea - denuclearization through sanctions, multilateral diplomacy, and human rights promotion through sanctions - are failures and should be abandoned in favor of engagement. Third, I show that North Korea also has a deep-seated interest in allying with the United States. Primary and secondary sources demonstrate that the North Koreans fear Chinese power and understand the potential for a balancing coalition with America. Fourth, I propose a few realistic steps to start improving relations between Pyongyang and Washington.

The Rationale for Engagement: China, Russia, and China

In this first part, I demonstrate that N. Korea would be invaluable to correct the balance of power in East Asia and promote U.S. interests regarding China and Russia. First, I establish that North Korea is not a major threat, unlike China and Russia.

Is North Korea Likely to Attack the United States?

To wage war against the United States is a rational choice only for a small club of states. A would-be aggressor must possess the capabilities to

conquer or annihilate the United States or its allies and have a reasonable chance to survive a war with the United States or an important U.S. ally relatively unscathed. A state which cannot defeat the United States or its allies and to get away with it has no rational incentive to attack in the first place. A decision pathology could still push that state to take its chance; but because it has little hope to decisively win, it does not belong on the list of the most likely aggressors.

Can North Korea defeat the United States? A conventional attack against the United States would fail to do much harm. North Korea lacks the naval and air power to sustain an attack against U.S. territory. Its conventional-tipped missiles are unlikely to debilitate U.S. armed forces. North Korea also possesses nuclear weapons. An out-of-the-blue nuclear attack would become reasonable in two situations: if North Korea believed it was under an immediate threat of U.S. attack or if it believed it had a “splendid first strike capacity” to debilitate U.S. reprisal capabilities. But North Korean nuclear-tipped missiles lack both the numbers and the precision to destroy the American nuclear weaponry.

The North Korean threat is, however, mostly discussed with regard to U.S. allies in Northeast Asia: Japan and South Korea. Similar to the U.S. case, North Korean conventional forces have few means to decisively defeat or conquer Japan. It is unclear what Pyongyang could hope to achieve by a first nuclear strike on Japan, a treaty ally of the United States. The DPRK would likely attack Japan only if it believed a U.S. attack was imminent and that bombing Japan would offer a military advantage in the conflict.

North Korean forces are better positioned to threaten South Korea and could cross the border on short notice. Although North Korean troops are more numerous, South Korea’s army is more modern, better funded, and trained. Furthermore, Seoul is a treaty ally of Washington, and American ground and air forces are deployed on South Korean territory. If war breaks out, North Korea will thus need to both defeat the South Koreans and throw the Americans into the sea. Most analysts believe that South Korea and the United States can push back a North Korean

invasion.¹⁰ Also, in this case too, it is hard to imagine the DPRK destroying South Korea with nuclear weapons without enduring devastating reprisals.

A Chinese or a Russian planner may conclude that it can win a war with the United States or its allies. It is far less likely that a North Korean planner would come to the same conclusion. An overambitious or irrational one still could, but this is true of almost any other state on the planet. Thus, the United States appears driven to confront North Korea more due to historical legacy and ideological differences than to an imminent military threat. This does not mean that North Korea is no threat at all. Any nuclear-armed state can do terrible harm to the United States and its interests. However, this is true for others like Britain, France, India, Israel, and Pakistan, which obviously are not treated as imminent threats by U.S. policymakers.

On the contrary, Russia and especially China are formidable powers in their own right and already require an extensive U.S. political-military effort to defend Europe and Asia. But the quasi-alliance of Beijing and Moscow forces the United States into a gigantic effort of dual containment. China and Russia coordinate their policies to reduce U.S. influence and maximize their chances of reaching regional hegemony in at least the Western Pacific and Eastern Europe.¹¹ To prevail in that two-front competition, America needs to leverage the geography and capabilities of its old allies while also making new friends.

Although the United States has been “great-power competing” with

10 Dylan Motin, “Conventional Balance and Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula” (Jeunes IHEDN, 2020), <https://jeunes-ihedn.org/conventional-balance-and-deterrence-on-the-korean-peninsula/>; Michael O’Hanlon, “Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea Is Easier Than the Pentagon Thinks,” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 135-70; and Jae-Jung Suh, “Blitzkrieg or Sitzkrieg? Assessing a Second Korean War,” *Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (June 1999): 151-76.

11 Tongfi Kim and Luis Simón, “Greater Security Cooperation: US Allies in Europe and East Asia,” *Parameters*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2021): 61-71; and Ionut Popescu, “American Grand Strategy and the Rise of Offensive Realism,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 134, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 382-94. Also, Charles A. Richard, quoted in David Vergun, “Collaboration between China, Russia Compounds Threat, Stratcom Commander Says,” *DoD News*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2749664/collaboration-between-china-russia-compounds-threat-stratcom-commander-says/>.

China and Russia for a few years already, it has so far failed to articulate a North Korean policy coherent with this larger goal. There is a discrepancy between the traditional approach which treats North Korea as a major threat for the United States and the growing focus on out-competing China. This discrepancy is all the more surprising due to the importance of North Korea for Beijing: “Korea is more salient to China than are most countries because the two share an 880-mile land border adjacent to one of the most populous and prosperous regions of China, and because North Korea is only a few hundred miles from Beijing.”¹² How does North Korea fit within the U.S. overarching goal of containing Chinese power?

The Conventional Military Balance with China

The current stalemate on the Korean Peninsula skews the balance of military capabilities in favor of China and against pro-U.S. forces in Asia. Bad relations between the United States and its allies on one side and North Korea on the other force North and South Koreans alike to devote almost all of their attention to defend against each other. Their two massive militaries and their latent power are unavailable for balancing against China, which is thus free to focus its energy on other theaters.¹³ South Korea maintains a modern military of nearly 600,000 and is an economic powerhouse. The North Korean military, although of dubious quality, counts more or less one million troops.¹⁴ In addition, the United States and Japan earmark forces to deter the DPRK that could be put at better use elsewhere.

¹² Thomas Fingar, “China and Korea: Proximity, Priorities, and Policy Evolution,” in *Uneasy Partnerships: China’s Engagement with Japan, the Koreans, and Russia in the Era of Reform*, ed. Thomas Fingar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 127-8.

¹³ A discussion of Chinese military capabilities with regard to Korea is Jina Kim, “China and Regional Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula,” in *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, ed. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 55-66.

¹⁴ For the North Korean military, see Min-seok Kim, “The State of the North Korean Military,” in *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, ed. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 19-30.

A U.S.-aligned DPRK would be a game changer in Northeast Asia. South Korea would have more strategic leeway to balance against China and even to participate in a Taiwanese contingency.¹⁵ The North Korean military, although outdated, remains a formidable mattress that could cushion South Korean and U.S. forces from Chinese power. North Korea could become a blotter for sucking Beijing’s attention away from regional hegemony and force the Chinese to commit considerable forces to garrison their northeastern border. That would allay Chinese pressure on like-minded states such as Taiwan, Vietnam, or India, thus stabilizing Asian politics. To show that point, consider China’s force posture along its borders (*Table 1*). Although available Chinese ground forces represent around one million troops, China’s armies are already stretched thin and a hostile N. Korea would force Beijing into painful trade-offs.

Table 1. Chinese brigades and regiments, 2020

Brigade type	Southern Theater Command	Western Theater Command	Eastern Theater Command	Central Theater Command	Northern Theater Command	All commands
inf	4	7	5	7	6	29
mech inf, mech, mot	2	12	3	13	5	35
armd	5	7	6	8	7	33
arty	2	7	3	5	3	20
marines, spec ops, amph, air aslt*	8	4	9	4	5	30
Actual total	21	37	26	37	26	147
<i>Korean contingency</i>	10	35	5	10	87	147

SOURCE: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), chap. 6.

* inf: infantry, mech: mechanized, mot: motor, armd: armored, arty: artillery, spec ops: special operations, amph: amphibious, air aslt: air assault

¹⁵ Oriana Skylar Mastro and Sungmin Cho, “How South Korea Can Contribute to the Defense of Taiwan,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 109-29.

The Southern Theater Command is arguably the weakest one. Its most likely and threatening rival is Vietnam with its over 400,000-strong army. Also, although relations with Thailand are cordial, Bangkok remains a treaty ally of the United States. Among non-conventional threats are instability in Myanmar and a Hong-Kong contingency. We may assume that Beijing will want to keep at least ten brigades there.

The Western Theater Command is one of the two most capable. The main adversary is India, which possesses a large and seasoned military and is the strongest rival of China on mainland Asia. The Chinese also need to guard against non-conventional threats such as potential Uighur and Tibetan uprisings, while preventing Islamist infiltration from Central Asia. Beijing is currently reinforcing the area and may thus want to maintain its current posture there - around 35 brigades.

The Eastern Command faces no land threat: although Beijing may prefer to keep some units to monitor Taiwan and prevent eventual popular uprisings, we assume that it keeps only five brigades there. The Central Theater Command faces no land threat either but oversees the political

Table 2. Brigades and regiments of neighbors and China, 2020

Brigade type	India	North Korea	South Korea	United States	China	Northern Theater Command
inf	93	95	57	0	29	-
mech inf, mech, mot	14	12	9	0	35	-
armd	23	18	14	1	33	-
arty	31	33	22	1	20	-
marines, spec ops, amph, air aslt*	4	33	22	0	30	-
Total	165	191	124	2	147	87
Conservative total	65	64	124	2	147	87

SOURCE : International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), chap. 6.

* inf: infantry, mech: mechanized, mot: motor, armd: armored, arty: artillery, spec ops: special operations, amph: amphibious, air aslt: air assault

heart of China. It also serves as a strategic reserve for contingencies in border areas. To safeguard the rule of the Party, the capital area, and keep some reserves, we can imagine that Chinese leaders would prefer to maintain at least ten brigades there. As a consequence, if we assume that China needs to keep at least 60 brigades in other theaters, it would have 87 brigades available to reinforce the Northern Theater (see *Table 2*).

North Korean brigades are likely weaker and less competent than Chinese units; for the sake of conservatism, we could assume that N. Korean forces are three times weaker than their Chinese peers. Even in that scenario, North, South Korean, and U.S. forces still represent the equivalent of 190 brigades against 87 Chinese brigades. The Indians have to deter Pakistan; a large part of their army cannot be arrayed against China. Even if they have only 65 brigades earmarked for a Chinese contingency, U.S.-friendly forces on mainland Asia would still represent 255 brigades against overall 147 Chinese ones and this does not even account for Vietnam and other partners.

On the sea, a friendly North Korea would help bottle up China's North Sea Fleet. Although the Chinese would rapidly get rid of the DPRK's navy, they may incur some losses to the North Korean large fleet of submarines.¹⁶ Thus, the main benefit of rapprochement with North Korea is to create a strong buffer between China and U.S. forces and allies in Northeast Asia and seriously complicate any willingness the Zhongnanhai may have to reshape the region by force.

Pressuring Russia

To a lesser extent, North Korea can also promote U.S. interests concerning Russia. With the end of the Cold War and the Sino-Russian warming, Moscow largely demilitarized its southeastern borders and has

¹⁶ Around twenty combat-worthy boats (and two frigates). IISS, *Military Balance*, 275. Also, Sukjoon Yoon, "Expanding the ROKN's Capabilities to Deal with the SLBM Threat from North Korea," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 70, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 49-74.

been free to focus on Europe. The Eastern Military District overseeing the long border with China and Korea has combat forces corresponding to around only eight divisions supported by surface-to-surface missile units.¹⁷ Better relations with the DPRK could have a ripple effect on Europe and oblige Russia to earmark more forces to defend Vladivostok, which is only around 150 kilometers away from North Korea, and allay pressure on European partners. Furthermore, by the same token, it complicates the life of the Russian Pacific Fleet based there.

In addition, an alliance with North Korea would maximize U.S. options during a bilateral war with Russia. During the 1980s, the U.S. Navy contemplated that in case of a Soviet attack in Germany, it could open a new front in the Russian Far East to pin down Soviet reserves in an area of secondary importance for NATO, away from Central Europe. It notably envisaged air and missile attacks and landings against naval facilities, air bases, and other military objects in Primorye, Sakhalin, and Khabarovsk regions as well as cutting the Trans-Siberian railway to isolate eastern Russia from its western core. Although this so-called “Lehman Doctrine” was unrealistic during the Cold War due to the inherent difficulty of an amphibious assault on the territory of another great power,¹⁸ an alliance with North Korea combined with the current skeletal force posture of the Russian army on its eastern flank would create a major headache for Moscow.¹⁹

The Nuclear Balance

Another benefit of friendly relations with the DPRK is to alleviate nuclear threats hovering over the United States. North Korean nuclear

¹⁷ IISS, *Military Balance*, 203.

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, “A Strategic Miscalculation: The Maritime Strategy and Deterrence in Europe,” *International Security*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 3-57; and Narushige Michishita, Peter M. Swartz and David F. Winkler, *Lessons of the Cold War in the Pacific: U.S. Maritime Strategy, Crisis Prevention, and Japan’s Role* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2016).

¹⁹ Michael Fitzsimmons, “Horizontal Escalation: An Asymmetric Approach to Russian Aggression?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 114-7.

ambitions took root during the mid-1950s and gained momentum during the 1980s, ultimately leading to the detonation of a nuclear weapon in 2006.²⁰ North Korea is generally considered in the public debate through the sole prism of the nuclear danger it poses to the United States and Washington has no reliable way to prevent a North Korean nuclear strike.²¹ Normal diplomatic relations would decrease the risk of an unwanted nuclear exchange by multiplying the channels of communications between Pyongyang and Washington.²²

Going further, North Korean nuclear weapons can become an asset. Now that North Korea is capable of launching nuclear-tipped missiles on any of its neighbors and even on the continental United States and that N. Korean nuclear weapons are an inescapable fact of life, do American policymakers prefer North Korean missiles to point towards Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington or toward Beijing?

Indeed, a benefit of engagement is to complicate Chinese nuclear planning. When contemplating a nuclear attack against the United States, China will fear that a U.S.-aligned DPRK will choose to side with Washington and the whole range of North Korea's nuclear arsenal is capable of striking China. Hence, Beijing will be forced to earmark nuclear weapons for North Korea or even bomb it preemptively, thus diminishing the number of weapons available for waging war on the United States.

To sum up, at a time where U.S. forces are spread thin, adding one million soldiers and their nuclear weapons is an easy fix to correct the balance of power in America's favor. Therefore, Pyongyang's military power could turn from a threat to a formidable asset. Engagement with

20 Walter C. Clemens Jr., "North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January/April 2010): 127-54.

21 Jaganath Sankaran and Steve Fetter, "Defending the United States: Revisiting National Missile Defense against North Korea," *International Security*, vol. 46, no. 3 (Winter 2021/22): 51-86.

22 Chung-in Moon and Seung-Chan Boo, "Hotlines between Two Koreas: Status, Limitations, and Future Tasks," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2021): 192-200; and Bennett Ramberg, "North Korea's Ongoing Nuclear Missile Tests Prove It's Time to Normalize Relations," *Think* (October 22, 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/north-korea-s-ongoing-nuclear-missile-tests-prove-it-s-ncna1282118>.

North Korea could fundamentally alter the balance of power for little cost.

Economic Benefit and Regional Cooperation

Parallel to balancing against China (and Russia), engagement offers economic opportunities to the United States and promotes peace on the Korean Peninsula.

U.S. companies would gain from relations with N. Korea. Eventually, Pyongyang will open its economy more largely to the outside world. “Iran’s and North Korea’s infrastructures are in disrepair, their natural resource sectors are underdeveloped, and their populations are largely cut off from Western economies,” noticed Lawrence, “but absent sanctions, Western firms could pursue untapped opportunities in such sectors as oil and mineral extraction, transportation, and port infrastructure, many of which would involve industrial equipment that U.S. workers could build at home.”²³ However, if the current stalemate persists, China and Russia will have a first-mover advantage and monopolize a big part of North Korea’s market. Even if North Korea is and will remain a small market, the United States and like-minded states should preempt this by positioning themselves as economic partners for Pyongyang.

U.S. engagement with the DPRK to counterbalance China is also likely to fundamentally improve relations between Pyongyang and Seoul. European integration after World War II started because of the overwhelming threat from the Soviet Union.²⁴ More recently, Russia’s resurgence kick-started integration efforts in Central Europe, like the Three Seas Initiative. The rise of China forced Indo-Pacific states to work together

²³ Christopher Lawrence, “Making Peace with Iran and North Korea Could Be Good for U.S. Workers,” *Foreign Policy* (March 25, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/25/iran-north-korea-united-states-middle-east-trump-biden-diplomacy/>.

²⁴ Sebastian Rosato, *Europe United: Power Politics and the Making of the European Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Norrin M. Ripsman, “Two Stages of Transition from a Region of War to a Region of Peace: Realist Transition and Liberal Endurance,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4 (December 2005): 669-93.

through the Quad, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and other initiatives.²⁵ The threat of seeing the Peninsula dominated by Beijing could do more to promote peace and integration between the two Koreas than everything tried up to now. South Korean openings towards the North throughout recent decades rested on the liberal and constructivist logic of “more interactions, more peace” and led nowhere.²⁶ But a North-South-U.S. understanding based on a shared sound strategic interest - containing a common threat - would bring stability in inter-Korean relations.

Some may fear that U.S. engagement with North Korea could harm U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea but such fears are unwarranted. Japan is worried by North Korea’s nuclear program and still resents Pyongyang’s kidnapping of Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁷ Nevertheless, Japanese leaders made clear that the main threat to Tokyo’s security is China and its growing navy.²⁸ As long as this remains true, there is no reason to believe that engaging North Korea would break the Japan-U.S. alliance. Seoul has generally been more eager than Washington to engage with North Korea since the era of the W. Bush administration. South Korea would thus welcome a U.S. effort to settle relations with Pyongyang. In addition, a large majority of South Koreans see China as a major threat.²⁹ Therefore, U.S. engagement with the DPRK is unlikely to risk the alliance with South Korea either.³⁰ Instead, South Korea would have greater leeway to focus on the Chinese threat. After all, both the Japan-U.S. and South Korea-U.S. alliances survived the Mao-Nixon rapprochement of the early 1970s, which

25 Mark Beeson and Troy Lee-Brown, “Regionalism for Realists? The Evolution of the Indo-Pacific,” *Chinese Political Science Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2021): 167-86.

26 Inhan Kim, “No More Sunshine: The Limits of Engagement with North Korea,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 165-81.

27 Takahiro Yamamoto, “Abduction: Japan’s Blunders in Negotiations with North Korea,” *North Korean Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 34-42.

28 Tim Kelly, “Japan Lists China as Bigger Threat than Nuclear-Armed North Korea,” *Reuters*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-idUSKBN1WC051>.

29 “7 out of 10 S. Koreans See China as Biggest Threat: Poll,” *Yonhap*, December 29, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211229004900325>.

30 A case can be made that U.S. intransigence towards North Korea is actually weakening the alliance with South Korea. Robert S. Ross, “China Looks at the Korean Peninsula: The ‘Two Transitions’,” *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2021): 129-58.

was an order of magnitude more unsettling than a possible North Korea-U.S. one.³¹

The Current Approach Is Counterproductive

The Futility of Sanctions

Policymakers and pundits usually claim that the current stalemate will eventually denuclearize North Korea and force the regime to liberalize and respect human rights. They make the case that economic sanctions incentivize North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons while the United States coordinates with regional powers, said to all have a deep-seated interest in stopping the North Korean nuclear program. If sanctions are thoroughly enforced while U.S. policymakers reach out to the Chinese, the Russians, and others, then the North Korean arsenal will eventually fade away.³² In parallel, sanctions will make the Pyongyang regime realize it must respect the rights of its people and adopt a more liberal model.

The failure of the sanctions to denuclearize the DPRK is obvious and requires little development.³³ However, the assumption that the United States should partner with China and Russia against North Korea is more

31 Midori Yoshii, "The Creation of the 'Shock Myth': Japan's Reactions to American Rap-prochement with China, 1971-1972," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2008): 131-46.

32 Patrick M. Cronin, "Maximum Pressure: A Clarifying Signal in the Noise of North Korea Policy," *Texas National Security Review* (2018), <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-good-choices-comes-north-korea/>; Ruediger Frank, "The Political Economy of Sanctions against North Korea," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2006): 8-12; Sung-han Kim and Scott A. Snyder, "Denuclearizing North Korea: Time for Plan B," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 75-90; Dianne E. Rennack, *North Korea: Economic Sanctions* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2006); and U.S. Department of State, "Press Availability with Secretary Gates, Korean Foreign Minister Yu, and Korean Defense Minister Kim" (July 21, 2010), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145014.htm>. An overview of the debate is Patrick McEachern, "Marching Toward a U.S.-North Korea Summit: The Historical Case for Optimism, Pessimism, and Caution," *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 118-29.

33 Christopher J. Watterson, "What Next for Sanctions against North Korea?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 75, no. 5 (2019): 247-51.

intriguing and is discussed at more length. Status quoists also believe that sanctions help to promote democracy and Western values.³⁴ In a second section, I show why such a thesis is untenable.

Washington's stated goal towards North Korea is its complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID). However, refusing to work with the DPRK because it does not comply with CVID sacrifices U.S. interests while it is unlikely to eventually denuclearize North Korea.³⁵ The DPRK endured decades of budget spending, sanctions, and suffering with the sole aim of building a working nuclear arsenal. It now possesses a fully functional nuclear arsenal offering a potent deterrent against foreign threats. North Korea estimates that it developed an effective strategic deterrent and is now investing in tactical nuclear capabilities.³⁶ Only an irrational North Korean leader would suddenly drop the ultimate survival guarantee and accept CVID. Even under overwhelming diplomatic and economic pressure, no one would expect China or Russia to give away their nuclear arsenal. Why would anyone expect North Korea to suddenly throw in the towel and give away its hard-won weaponry?

I do not make the case that sanctions are universally useless. They can impact the balance of power by harming the target's economy and military capabilities.³⁷ If one thinks counter-factually, sanctions probably limited the development of N. Korea's conventional capabilities by shattering its economic growth and reducing the DPRK's access to foreign weapons, technologies, and skills. However, sanctions are unlikely to ever roll back North Korea's nuclear weaponry, which is already a hard fact.

³⁴ Haeyoung Kim, "Stifled Growth and Added Suffering: Tensions Inherent in Sanctions Policies against North Korea," *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2014): 91-112.

³⁵ Mayumi Fukushima, "Time to Shelve Denuclearization and Negotiate a Halt to North Korea's ICBM Program" (War on the Rocks, April 14, 2022), <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/time-to-shelve-denuclearization-and-negotiate-a-halt-to-north-koreas-icbm-program/>. A presentation of N. Korean nuclear capabilities is Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons, 2021," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 77, no. 4 (2021): 222-36.

³⁶ Ankit Panda, "A Call to Arms: Kim Jong Un and the Tactical Bomb," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 7-24.

³⁷ Daniel McCormack and Henry Pascoe, "Sanctions and Preventive War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 61, no. 8 (2017): 1711-39.

Who's Afraid of Big Bad Instability? Not China and Russia

Proponents of denuclearization also believe that if Washington engages with Beijing, at some point, China (and Russia) will turn against the North Korean nuclear program and stop it.³⁸ The argument goes that Chinese and Russian policies are driven by the fear of instability in Korea and that multilateral talks will lead to the disappearance of the N. Korean bomb. In the next section, I explain that China and Russia are unlikely to rein into North Korea because it would go against their interests and that the vaunted multilateral approach will remain fruitless.

In an ideal world, the Chinese and the Russians would likely prefer a non-nuclear North Korea. Both China and Russia openly expressed their displeasure towards the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons. No Chinese premier visited Pyongyang between 2005 and 2018 and relations between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un were at first particularly frosty. After Xi took power in 2013, North Korean media coverage of China grew far more negative than before.³⁹ The Chinese and the Russians similarly disliked the 2016 nuclear test.⁴⁰ However, Beijing and Moscow failed so far to seriously pressure Pyongyang because they fear antagonizing it.⁴¹ China overwhelmingly views North Korea as a buffer against foreign threats,

38 Duk-kun Byun, "N. Korea a Major Area of Cooperation between U.S., China: NSA Sullivan," *Yonhap*, November 17, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211117000200325>; Samuel S. Kim, "China's New Role in the Nuclear Confrontation," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2004): 147-84; and Xiaohui Wu, "China and the U.S. beyond the Korean Peninsula," *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2006): 317-38.

39 Dongxun Piao, "Changes in North Korea's Cognition to China and Policy Adjustment during Kim Jong Un's Period - Based on the Analysis of China-related Reports in Rodong Simmun Newspaper (2009 - 2018)," *Unification Policy Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2020): 115-40; and Debin Zhan, "Analysis of Changes in North Korea's Cognition of China through Its Media Coverage," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 28, no. 2 (June 2016): 199-221.

40 Niv Farago and John Merrill, "The North Korean Card in US-China Relations: How Should It Be Played?" *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2021): 564; Fingar and Straub, "Geography and Destiny," 178-9; Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea-US Relations: From Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 134, 142-3; and Daniel Wertz, *China-North Korea Relations* (Washington, D.C.: National Committee on North Korea, 2019), 13.

41 Farago and Merrill argue that China has little actual leverage on North Korea to start with. Farago and Merrill, "The North Korean Card."

primarily U.S. power.⁴² Russia is engaged in an intense security competition with NATO and North Korea's nukes are but a tertiary threat. To both, the DPRK is an ally and a buffer too valuable to be antagonized for the sake of denuclearization.

For many observers, China and Russia are desperate to stop the North Korean nuclear program because they fear "instability." As the argument goes, instability in Korea - whatever that means - could lead to hordes of refugees pouring through their borders and significantly harm their economies.⁴³ Many take as self-evident that China and Russia's main goal is to avoid instability and the supposed fear of Korean refugees and economic losses is orthodoxy among Korea watchers. However, this assumption is groundless and unlikely to inform the choices of the Kremlin or the Zhongnanhai.

First, the threat of millions of refugees pouring into China or Russia is fanciful and does not hold up against scrutiny. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, 6.6 million refugees have left the country (out of around 21 million inhabitants). Around 3.6 million resettled in Turkey, a country of 84 million people - the equivalent of less than five percent of the population.⁴⁴ North Korea is close to Syria with a little over 25 million people. If we imagine a disaster equal to Syria's, it means that eight million North Koreans would exit the country. Even if all these people were to flee into China, it would represent only 0.6 percent of the total population. A part of them may prefer to go to Russia; even an incredibly high number of five million North Koreans entering Russian territory would represent only 3.4 percent of the baseline population, far less than what Turkey

⁴² Hongseo Park, "A Neorealist Explanation of Chinese Military Intervention in the Korean Peninsula: Power Shifts, Threat Perceptions, and Rational Choice," *Korean Political Science Review*, vol. 40, no. 1 (March 2006): 181-200.

⁴³ For example, Gregory J. Moore, "How North Korea Threatens China's Interests: Understanding Chinese 'Duplicity' on the North Korean Nuclear Issue," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2008): 18-20; Wertz, *China-North Korea*, 1; and Zhiqun Zhu, "Comrades in Broken Arms: Shifting Chinese Policies toward North Korea," *Asian Politics & Policy*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2016): 586.

⁴⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Emergency" (March 15, 2021), <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

received. Although Chinese and Russian authorities may recoil at the thought of having to deal with refugees, these hardly represent an existential threat pushing the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai to preemptively turn against the DPRK.⁴⁵

If anything, a wave of refugees would offer a malleable workforce to re-dynamize Chinese and Russian regions suffering from economic stagnation. Because young Chinese tend to leave northeastern China to pursue a more comfortable life in coastal regions, cheap workers for the decaying heavy industries of Manchuria would be a gift more than a liability.⁴⁶ The same is true for Russia, which desperately needs lumberjacks, agricultural and construction workers, and hunters to develop Siberia and the Far East.⁴⁷ For example, instead of chasing them away, Moscow has been trying hard to attract Ukrainian refugees into Russia since 2014.⁴⁸ Even if both states ultimately decide that refugees are an unbearable burden, they could easily send a great number of them to South Korea, their final destination anyway. If refugees were a major worry for the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai, they had decades to build impregnable walls and close off their borders with North Korea, which, obviously, they did not. In a nutshell, China and Russia are formidable states that have little to fear from a few hundred thousand North Korean refugees.

45 Bridget L. Coggins, "Dramatic Change in North Korea: Instability and Human Flight Propensity," *North Korean Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2018): 49-70.

46 Sidney Leng, "China's Northeastern Rust Belt Struggling to Retain Population as Economic Slowdown Speeds up Exodus," *South China Morning Post*, May 8, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3009213/chinas-northeastern-rust-belt-struggling-retain-population?module=perpetual_scroll&pgtype=article&campaign=3009213; and Yin Yeping, "Apple Suppliers in China Face Labor Shortage, May Drive Up Prices," *Global Times*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231869.shtml>.

47 Ivan Stupachenko, "Workforce Shortage Stalemates Progress for Russian Fisheries," *SeafoodSource* (July 18, 2019), <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/workforce-shortage-stalemates-russian-fisheries>; and Ivan Zuenko, "Russia's Far East Seeks Partners beyond China" (Carnegie Moscow Center, March 13, 2020), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81278>.

48 Irina Kuznetsova, "To Help 'Brotherly People'? Russian Policy Towards Ukrainian Refugees," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 72, no. 3 (April 2020): 505-27. Also, Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 110.

Second, are China and Russia likely to oppose the DPRK's nuclear program due to the fear of economic fallout? Chinese and Russian trade volumes towards North Korea are insignificant. Only trade with South Korea merits examination. In 2019, China's exports to South Korea represented \$108 billion while South Korea exported to China for \$136 billion. These exports correspond to only 0.8 percent of China's gross domestic product, while the trade relation is unbalanced in favor of South Korea. If anything, China should be happy to see a ferocious trade competitor and major strategic hurdle, South Korea, having trouble. Also, Russia's trade relations with South Korea are negligible.⁴⁹ Furthermore, if Beijing and Moscow valued economic partners so much, one wonders why they would ever pick quarrels with neighbors like Georgia, Ukraine, India, Australia, and others. To sum up, it is unlikely that economic gain drives China and Russia's North Korean policies.

The same question recurs: why did the Chinese and the Russians support North Korea at almost every corner for over seventy years if refugees and economic disruption were major concerns for Beijing and Moscow? China and Russia had over three decades to possibly rein in the DPRK's nuclear program but they were content to pay lip service to denuclearization and apply international sanctions selectively to put on a good showing.⁵⁰ Specifically, the Chinese may not like the North Korean nuclear weaponry, but they understand that antagonizing Pyongyang over the nuclear issue would push it into the arms of China's rivals.⁵¹ Expecting China to suddenly "see the light," realize that North Korea's nukes are a problem, and work with Washington to take them away is delusional. Pundits have been clinging for decades to the assumption that only multilateral negotiations can solve the North Korean conundrum.

⁴⁹ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "China / South Korea" (June 2021), <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/kor#Profile>; and OEC, "South Korea / Russia" (June 2021), <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/kor/partner/rus?redirect=true>.

⁵⁰ Stephen Blank, "Silence of the Dragon: What Role Is China Playing in Korea?" *Global Asia*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2021): 68-73.

⁵¹ Blank, "Is the Northern Alliance Making a Comeback?" 220. Leading Chinese Korea experts say so behind closed doors.

However, multilateralism in that case is more part of the problem than part of the solution.⁵²

To sum up, a short or mid-term denuclearization with or without multilateral intervention is quixotic. With no realistic option to impose denuclearization, the United States is left with only “two possible futures: the one wherein North Korea is a nuclearized enemy state and the other where it is an interim-nuclearized friendly state.”⁵³ Although the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations arguably all understood this, the U.S. government has yet to come to terms with the sole logical conclusion: postponing the issue indefinitely. That would not be a first, as Washington did this for the seven other states that acquired nuclear weapons. Over the longer run, U.S. policymakers will eventually realize that they can live with the North Korean bomb.

Human Rights, Democracy, and Magical Thinking

Liberals and neoconservatives often justify the North Korean status quo by human rights and democracy promotion motives. Therefore, although this study takes realism as a framework, it is hard to eschew discussing the predicament of the North Korean people.⁵⁴ But if the current policy of confrontation and sanctions genuinely aims at allaying the plea of the North Koreans and promoting human rights, then its track record is abysmal.

The DPRK has had negligible economic intercourse with the U.S.-led world since its inception and has been under extensive sanctions for decades. Yet, this isolation failed to improve human rights. Political

52 A discussion of multilateralism’s failure is Leszek Buszynski, *Negotiating with North Korea: The Six Party Talks and the Nuclear Issue* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

53 Minnich, “Denuclearization through Peace,” 18. There is also the option of war with North Korea, but there is arguably no appetite in Washington for a large-scale conflict with a nuclear-armed secondary power.

54 For ethics in realism, see Duncan Bell, “Political Realism and the Limits of Ethics,” in *Ethics and World Politics*, ed. Duncan Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93-110; and Joseph S. Nye, “What Is a Moral Foreign Policy?” *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 2019/20): 96-108.

opponents - real or supposed - are still sent to the gulag.⁵⁵ Also, the debility of the agricultural system left North Korea vulnerable to horrendous famines, and international sanctions only exacerbate food shortages.⁵⁶ Even before the 2021 food crisis, “60,000 children [were] at risk of starvation due to existing sanctions regulations. The situation is beginning to resemble that of the foreign policy dilemma lawmakers faced with Iraq during the 1990s.”⁵⁷

Proponents of the forever sanctions fear that U.S. openings towards North Korea “legitimize the regime.” First of all, according to this logic, the United States should break all relations with China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and the like to talk only with liberal democracies. U.S. democracy promotion efforts may even worsen the fate of North Korean democrats and harden the regime. Public criticism of the regime and sanctions give ammunition to hardliners who see U.S. schemes to subvert the DPRK everywhere.⁵⁸ Democratic reformists come to be seen as foreign agents and airdropped politicians working against the national interest. Scholarship indeed shows that sanctions and threats targeting human rights-violating regimes generally have the opposite effect of strengthening them.⁵⁹ Indeed, foreign interventions

55 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020” (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>; and Kyung-ok Do et al., *2016 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2016).

56 Fuqua, *Nuclear Endgame*, chap. 7; Hazel Smith, “The Ethics of United Nations Sanctions on North Korea: Effectiveness, Necessity and Proportionality,” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2020): 191-4; and Michael Whitty, Suk Kim and Trevor Crick, “The Effectiveness of Economic Sanctions: The Case of North Korea,” *North Korean Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2006): 57-62.

57 Daniel Jasper, *Engaging North Korea: A Toolkit for Protecting Humanitarian Channels amid “Maximum Pressure”* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 2018), 24.

58 Meredith Shaw, “The Abyss Gazes Back: How North Korean Propaganda Interprets Sanctions, Threats and Diplomacy,” *Pacific Review*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2022): 202-28.

59 Sebastian Hellmeier, “How Foreign Pressure Affects Mass Mobilization in Favor of Authoritarian Regimes,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2021): 450-77; Robert A. Pape, “Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work,” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 90-136; and Dursun Peksen, “Better or Worse? The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Human Rights,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 2009): 59-77.

tend to excite nationalism, the most powerful political ideology on the planet.⁶⁰

Second, the legitimize-the-regime argument implies that simply interacting with Americans somehow increases the lifespan of the regime.⁶¹ One wonders what causal mechanism explains this miracle. If American presidents' handshakes have such supernatural power, one ponders how the Iranian regime in 1979 or the Afghan regime in 2021 could ever collapse. The assumption that U.S. presidents and diplomats are global kingmakers is dubious at best. But, as Morgenthau noticed long ago, "superstition still holds sway over" students of international relations and the "demonological approach to foreign policy" remains an earmark of the American worldview; however, "natural catastrophes will not be prevented by burning witches; the threat of a powerful Germany to establish hegemony over Europe will not be averted by getting rid of a succession of German leaders."⁶²

Third, even if the current regime collapses, there is no guarantee that its successor will be a liberal democracy. The end of the Kim dynasty could be followed by a military coup or extremist ideologues seizing power. If the government falls into disarray, Beijing may impose a pro-Chinese regime that will probably not defend human rights far better than the current one. Even in the optimistic hypothesis of a liberal regime taking hold in Pyongyang, the fate of the NATO-installed regime in Afghanistan makes abundantly clear that political systems living off foreign support do not fare well.

Consequently, the most sensible option is to build up relations with Pyongyang to obtain bargaining power and leverage over the regime. Once

60 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); and Benjamin Miller, "How 'Making the World in Its Own Liberal Image' Made the West Less Liberal," *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 5 (September 2021): 1353-75.

61 For example, Sung-eun Lee, "Trump Failed to Fight for Human Rights: Defector," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 24, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3068297>; and "President Trump Holds News Conference," *CNN*, June 12, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1806/12/es.03.html>.

62 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 9.

Washington has overall cooperative relations with Pyongyang, efforts to promote more humane policies will be more efficient. It would become possible to ask for gradual improvements in exchange for economic rewards. For example, the United States successfully pushed the Egyptian government to be lenient with several political prisoners by leveraging its support.⁶³ As a senior U.S. State Department official advised, “in some contexts, it’s not helpful to publicly bash governments doing the wrong thing there but to raise things privately.”⁶⁴

The liberal mind abhors North Korea’s ruthless regime - and rightly so. But betting foreign policy on a putative regime change is cavalier; the regime may collapse next year as it may collapse next century.⁶⁵ Like Kofman noticed, “the U.S. policy community is deeply ideological and tends to value intangibles above interests. Abstract concepts like the liberal international order, political values, and normative belief structures are more important to many in Washington than empirical pursuits.”⁶⁶ Although denunciations of the Pyongyang regime stem from good intent, diplomatic engagement with North Korea to discreetly push for more democratic practices is not only more efficient, more humane, but also more beneficial to U.S. interests.

⁶³ Jennifer Holleis and Kersten Knipp, “Egypt: ‘Facebook Girl’ May Be Free, but Oppression Remains Rife,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/egypt-facebook-girl-may-be-free-but-oppression-remains-rife/a-58579742>.

⁶⁴ Simon Lewis and Humeyra Pamuk, “Biden Put Rights at Heart of U.S. Foreign Policy. Then He Pulled Punches,” *WKZO*, September 13, 2021, <https://wkzo.com/2021/09/13/biden-put-rights-at-heart-of-u-s-foreign-policy-then-he-pulled-punches/>.

⁶⁵ Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 44-74.

⁶⁶ Michael Kofman, “Stranger Things in Helsinki” (War on the Rocks, July 23, 2018), <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/stranger-things-in-helsinki/>, quoted in Popescu, “American Grand Strategy,” 387. Also, Stephen D. Krasner, “Learning to Live with Despots: The Limits of Democracy Promotion,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020): 49-55; and Keith L. Shimko, “Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism,” *Review of Politics*, vol. 54, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 281-301.

North Korean Views of China and the United States

This part uses primary and secondary sources to understand the DPRK's approach towards China and the United States. First, I explain why Pyongyang should want to ally with Washington against Beijing. Then, I show that the North Koreans are worried by Chinese power and consider the United States as a desirable partner. This demonstrates that the Americans have an opportunity to turn North Korea away from China and make it an ally. I make a conscious effort to eschew historical-cultural arguments (e.g., "North Korea distrusts China because of the 1956 conspiracy of the pro-Chinese faction") because this kind of argument essentializes actors and attributes them an unchanging nature. In fact, alliances wax and wane depending on current circumstances more than on historical feelings or cultural proximity.

North Korea's Chinese Problem

As a general rule, international relations theorists expect states to balance against powerful neighbors. Indeed, the greatest threat to a state's survival comes from nearby formidable military forces able to cross one's borders on short notice.⁶⁷ Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, a small state like North Korea should fear the rise of a neighboring great power like China because if Beijing achieves regional hegemony, it will end up as a satellite of the Zhongnanhai and lose a big chunk of its sovereignty. Since states fear the emergence of a regional hegemon and are "willing to fight

67 Eric J. Labs, "Do Weak States Bandwagon?" *Security Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 383-416; Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495-1999," *Security Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January/March 2005): 1-33; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, chaps. 2, 4-5; Dylan Motin, "South America Off Balance? Aggregate and Military Power in International Politics," *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2021): 31-54; Zachary Selden, "Balancing against or Balancing with? The Spectrum of Alignment and the Endurance of American Hegemony," *Security Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2 (April/June 2013): 330-64; and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

for their independence and autonomy, efforts by a state like China to gain such ascendancy create deep tension and thus potential for conflict.”⁶⁸ We should thus see clues that Pyongyang feels unease about the rise of China and would like to balance against it.

China experienced an impressive rise in economic and military capabilities starting from the 1990s. Although it was still quite weak during that decade, the modernization of the People’s Liberation Army began to be felt during the 2000s. If realism serves as a guide, North Korea should have come to fear Chinese power around this time. This part is the most theoretically oriented of the paper. If even an ideological and traditional ally of China like North Korea is afraid of Beijing’s rise, then we will have shown that the incentive to balance predicted by realism is real and strong.

During the Cold War, North Korea usually played China and the Soviet Union against each other to prevent satellitization by one of the two and preserve its margin of maneuver. But due to China and Russia’s near alliance since the 2000s, North Korea cannot play one against the other as it used to. Nowadays, Russia focuses its limited resources on Europe and lacks the means to weigh in Asia, where Moscow has been relegated to China’s trailer. As put by two experts, “the problem is so endemic and the implications so consequential that DPRK officials devote much time and attention to anticipating, forestalling, and responding to what they perceive as harmful decisions by Beijing.”⁶⁹ Hence, North Korea has few choices other than to work with the United States to balance the rise of China.

According to Carlin and Lewis, the main goal of North Korean diplomacy is “a long-term, strategic relationship with the United States [and] has nothing to do with ideology or political philosophy.” This goal is “a cold, hard calculation” because the North Koreans understand “in their gut that they must buffer the heavy influence their neighbors already

⁶⁸ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 17.

⁶⁹ Fingar and Straub, “Geography,” 170-1.

have, or could soon gain, over their small, weak country.” Even “the Chinese know this and say so in private.”⁷⁰

Indeed, China understands the balancing incentive that weighs upon the DPRK. In early 2002, relations with Beijing started to worsen as Pyongyang was firing across the board to make new partners.⁷¹ The Chinese preemptively reinforced their military capabilities near the North Korean border during the 2010s and built bunkers to shield themselves from nuclear and chemical weapons. As competition with the United States intensified in the late 2010s, China logically multiplied its openings towards the North. After DPRK-U.S. relations improved in 2018, the Chinese engineered a flurry of diplomatic contacts with the North Koreans, fearing they would switch sides.⁷² As a Chinese insider remarked, “Pyongyang is trying everything possible to make up with Washington at our expense.”⁷³

If indeed the DPRK feels the urge to balance, we should observe an interest in relations with the United States and worries or concerns about Chinese power. Specifically, North Korea has long berated the United States: as Chinese power grows, we should see this aggressive language receding. North Korea depends significantly on China for its economic survival. We should thus witness a N. Korean willingness to diminish this dependency. In isolation, reducing one’s economic dependency is always sound policy; it is not sufficient proof of balancing. However, combined with other clues, it is a sign of an underlying balancing tendency.

70 Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis, “What North Korea Really Wants” (Nautilus Institute, February 2, 2007), <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/what-north-korea-really-wants/>.

71 Pardo, *North Korea-US Relations*, 46-7.

72 Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 56; Lily Kuo, “Kim Jong-un Meets Xi Jinping for Third Time,” *Guardian* (June 18, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/19/kim-jong-un-meets-xi-jinping-for-third-time>; and Khang Vu, “Why China and North Korea Decided to Renew a 60-Year-Old Treaty” (Lowy Institute, July 30, 2021), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-china-and-north-korea-decided-renew-60-year-old-treaty>.

73 Quoted in Fei-Ling Wang, “Looking East: China’s Policy toward the Korean Peninsula,” in *Engagement with North Korea: A Viable Alternative*, ed. Sung Chull Kim and David C. Kang (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 56.

What Do the North Koreans Think about China?

Lee, Lee, and Moon compiled a list of remarks about China made by N. Korean leaders from 2000 to 2020; they did not spare any criticism towards Beijing. Kim Jong-il once asked his ambassador in Beijing, visibly too sympathetic towards China, “are you seriously trusting the Chinese?” (March 2007) and later reaffirmed that “China cannot be trusted” (May 2009). The then Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Kye-gwan stated that “we do not trust China, China has no influence upon us” while a former colleague of his was even more emphatic: “the country that North Korea wants to be close with is the United States, the country it dislikes is China” (2007).⁷⁴ In October 2007, North and South Koreans were preparing a joint declaration where Seoul wanted to encourage the “four parties” - the two Koreas, the United States, and China - to work for peace together. However, the North Koreans disliked the wording and changed the text to “the three or four parties directly concerned,” thus potentially excluding China. The Chinese were displeased by the move.⁷⁵ The April 2018 Panmunjom Declaration’s wording was similar, describing Chinese involvement as optional.⁷⁶

Beyond the speeches of high-level officials, lower-level echelons show similar tendencies. Officials reportedly started to call China “the sworn enemy,” a nicety that was prior reserved for the United States. In March 2014, the officer training school in Pyongyang came up with the slogan “China is our traitor and enemy” and this was not the first time.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, regional officials hold meetings where China is referred to as

⁷⁴ Sang-Man Lee, Sang-Sook Lee and Dae-Keun Moon, *Bukjung Gwanggye: 1945–2020* [North Korea-China Relations: 1945–2020] (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, 2021), 242-3.

⁷⁵ Wang, “Looking East,” 56.

⁷⁶ Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula (April 27, 2018),” accessed September 11, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1&titleNm=

⁷⁷ Zhu, “Comrades in Broken Arms,” 578-9.

the “thousand-year-old enemy.”⁷⁸

Nuclear weapons were, of course, developed with an eye on South Korea and the United States; however, “one reason [North Korea] built the bomb is its apprehension that [...] China would be too overbearing and influential in Pyongyang as Kim Jong Un undoubtedly perceived after coming to power in 2011.”⁷⁹ Nuclear brinkmanship is not reserved for the Americans; the first North Korean nuclear test (2006) happened during a China-Japan summit, the third (February 2013) happened a few weeks before Xi Jinping became Chinese president, and the fifth (2016) occurred right after the G20 summit hosted in Hangzhou. In May 2017, the DPRK fired a ballistic missile the day Xi Jinping inaugurated the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. A few days later, on 21 May 2017, it fired a medium-range ballistic missile - unable to strike the United States - towards the Sea of Japan, to its east. However, the small camera installed on the missile pointed westward. Hence, the footage that appeared the next day on state television showed for a long time Chinese territory, a clear message that N. Korean missiles could as well aim at China.⁸⁰ Indeed, the North Koreans declared that “the recent successfully developed new rocket Hwasong-12 is a nuclear transportation vehicle that can conduct attacks on the whole of China.”⁸¹ Finally, in September of that year, Pyongyang celebrated the opening of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit in Xiamen by a nuclear detonation. The Chinese

78 Jieun Kim, “North Korea Stokes Anti-China Sentiment in Response to Tougher Sanctions,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/north-korea-stokes-anti-china-sentiment-in-response-to-tougher-sanctions-01042018161757.html>.

79 Blank, “Is the Northern Alliance,” 224; also, Min-hyung Kim, “Why Nuclear? Explaining North Korea’s Strategic Choice of Going Nuclear and Its Implications for East Asian Security,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 56, no. 7 (2021): 1488-502; and Dong Sun Lee, Iordanka Alexandrova and Yihei Zhao, “The Chinese Failure to Disarm North Korea: Geographical Proximity, U.S. Unipolarity and Alliance Restraint,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2020): 593-4.

80 Katsuji Nakazawa, “Pyongyang Missile Footage Is a Dagger to Xi’s Throat,” *Nikkei Asia* (August 21, 2017), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pyongyang-missile-footage-is-a-dagger-to-Xi-s-throat2>.

81 Quoted in Charles Parton Obe and James Byrne, “China’s Only Ally,” *RUSI Newsbrief* (July 2, 2021), <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/chinas-only-ally>.

government felt so humiliated that it censored discussions about that test.⁸²

Although North Korea is infamous for its military provocations towards South Korea and the United States, provocations towards China, less known and mediatized, are no less aggressive. North Korean soldiers regularly shoot Chinese traders across the border and torment Chinese fishermen. For example, in 2012, after the North Koreans seized a fishing boat, “they abused the Chinese crew, smashed the boat and desecrated the Chinese national flag.”⁸³ According to an observer, “frequent incursions into China by North Korean soldiers who steal food and other things, and occasionally murder Chinese citizens in the border area have become a source of anger and contempt toward the North Korean regime.”⁸⁴

The North Koreans are wary of Chinese economic penetration. North Korean internal documents show no sympathy towards China and have been encouraging state officials to reduce their economic dependence on the Chinese and work instead with the Russians and the Europeans since 2000.⁸⁵ The North Koreans often sign investment contracts with Chinese entities only to cancel them and walk away with the money.⁸⁶ In August 2012, China’s Xiyang Group complained that North Korean authorities were giving a hard time to Chinese companies working there, which suffered from expropriations. Jang Song-thaek, uncle-by-marriage of Kim Jong-un and one of the top North Korean hierarchs during the late Kim Jong-il and early Kim Jong-un eras, was known as the man of the Chinese in Pyongyang. Kim Jong-un put him in front of a firing squad in December

⁸² Kerry Allen, “China Censors Discussion of North Korea’s Bomb Test,” *BBC*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41152784>.

⁸³ John Garnaut, “China, North Korea - Close as Lips and Teeth,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 13, 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/china-north-korea--close-as-lips-and-teeth-20130213-2ebzl.html>.

⁸⁴ Zhu, “Comrades,” 582-3.

⁸⁵ Zachary Keck, “North Korea Slams Xi Jinping and the Chinese Dream,” *Diplomat* (June 17, 2014), <https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/north-korea-slams-xi-jinping-and-the-chinese-dream/>.

⁸⁶ Garnaut, “China, North Korea.”

2013. The official statement explaining his execution implies that Jang's role in promoting Chinese investments in the Rason Special Economic Zone contributed to his demise.⁸⁷ The high-profile assassination in 2017 of Kim Jong-nam, brother of Kim Jong-un and known supporter of China, emphasizes that the regime highly dislikes pro-Chinese elements.

The DPRK used the Covid pandemic to deal a blow to Chinese economic influence by curbing both legal trade and smuggling into the country. With the North Korean government "recently launching a sweeping inspection of trading institutions and strengthening control of the border with a concrete wall and high voltage wires, many of the remaining Chinese residents abandoned hope of renewed trade and decided to return to China."⁸⁸ Although the wall and fences are certainly part of a genuine effort to block the spread of the virus, it seems likely that they will stay in place even after the pandemic recedes. As put by a North Korea expert, "any North Korean counter-intelligence officer would tell you that China is their biggest domestic security threat because of its potential to disrupt from the inside."⁸⁹

North Korean Discourse about the United States

At the turn of the twenty-first century, North Korea had improved its relations with the United States and was on track to reduce its dependence on Beijing by building relations with Western countries and reviving the Russian connection. But the 9/11 attacks followed by the January 2002

⁸⁷ Fingar and Straub, "Geography," 179; Wertz, *China-North Korea*, 11; and Martyn Williams, "Full Text of KCNA Announcement on Execution of Jang" (North Korea Tech, December 13, 2013), www.northkoreatech.org/2013/12/13/full-text-of-kcna-announcement-on-execution-of-jang/. The story goes that Jang asked the then Chinese premier Hu Jintao to back a coup for ousting Kim Jong-un and installing Kim Jong-nam instead. While Hu was weighing his options, Kim Jong-un heard of the plot and neutralized Jang. Nakazawa, "Pyongyang Missile Footage."

⁸⁸ Seulkee Jang, "Group of Chinese Residents Asked to Return to China as Border Remains Closed to Trade," *Daily NK*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/group-chinese-residents-asked-return-china-border-remains-closed-trade/>.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Christian Davies, "North Korea Looks across the Border for Its Biggest Threat," *Financial Times*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/4f468514-4336-4273-aaf-c427e920412c>.

“axis of evil” moment jettisoned this process. During a private conversation between Bill Clinton and Kim Jong-il in 2009, “Kim added his personal view that if the Democrats had won in 2000 the situation in bilateral relations would not have reached such a point. Rather [...] the United States would have had a new friend in Northeast Asia in a complex world.”⁹⁰ From then on, despite ups and downs, relations remained haunted by the nuclear issue and sanction politics.

Despite this reciprocal hostility, Kim Jong-il noticed that “after North Korea-U.S. relations improve, we will become close partners of America” (October 2006).⁹¹ North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye-Gwan proposed to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 2007 to help the United States contain China.⁹² Kim Jong-il expressed his views about America’s role in balancing China during Clinton’s 2009 visit. Kim explained to Clinton that the North Koreans build up their military capabilities due to constant threats from the powerful states neighboring the Korean Peninsula. He hoped that the United States would rethink its approach towards North Korea because, in a barely veiled reference to China, “global power relationships were changing.” He then hinted that better relations with Washington would logically be followed by better North-South and Japan-North Korea relations: “if the bilateral U.S.-DPRK relationship developed, it would lead to many better relationships in Northeast Asia.”⁹³

Kim Jong-un seems to share this outlook: “after denuclearization, we hope to gain the help of the United States to develop our economy and become a normal state” (March 2018).⁹⁴ Kim bluntly told the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “that he needed the Americans in South Korea to protect him from the CCP, and that the CCP needs the Americans

⁹⁰ “Memorandum of Conversation: President Clinton and Chairman Kim Jong Il” (August 4, 2009), retrieved in Hayes Brown, “That One Time Kim Jong Il Invited Bill Clinton to Vacation in North Korea,” *BuzzFeed*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hayesbrown/this-memo-shows-what-bill-clinton-and-kim-jong-il-talked-abo>.

⁹¹ Lee, Lee and Moon, *Bukjung Gwanggye*, 243.

⁹² Barannikova, *United States-DPRK Relations*, 18.

⁹³ “Memorandum of Conversation.”

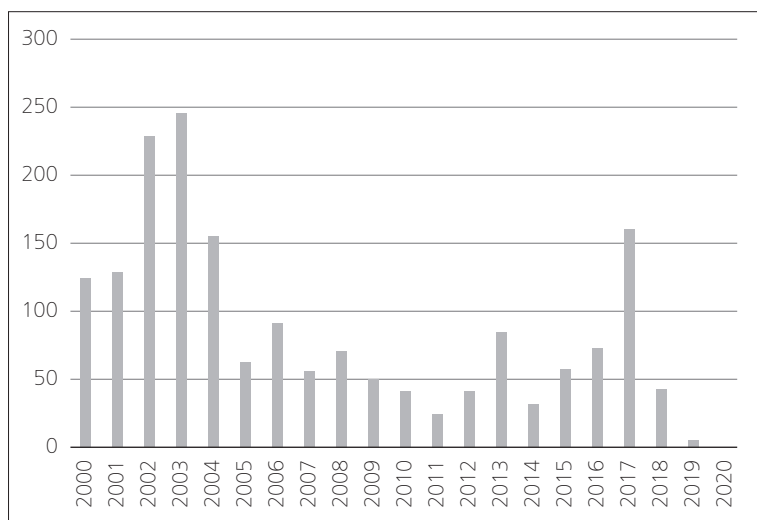
⁹⁴ Lee, Lee and Moon, *Bukjung Gwanggye*, 243.

out so they can treat the peninsula like Tibet and Xinjiang.”⁹⁵

The Institute for Far Eastern Studies of Kyungnam University (*Seoul*) maintains a database of the *Rodong Sinmun* [Workers’ Newspaper], the official mouthpiece of the Workers’ Party of Korea. *Rodong Sinmun* exists to deliver to the reader the views of the Party and publication is preceded by censorship to ensure that the official message comes out appropriately.⁹⁶ I checked the titles of the newspaper’s articles for occurrences of “U.S. imperialism” (*mije*) and “imperialism” (*jegugjuui*), common rhetorical attacks against the United States, from 2000 to 2020 (*Figure 1*).

Critics would counter-argue that North Korean materials cannot be trusted since they could be a tactical ploy to trick the United States into accommodation. I chose this low-visibility indicator because it is unlikely to be a North Korean trick. It stretches the imagination that the North Koreans seriously expect that decreasing the use of “imperialism” in their Korean-language outlets over several years will be picked up and acted

Figure 1. Mentions of “imperialism” and “U.S. imperialism,” 2000-2020



⁹⁵ Byun Duk-kun, “US Military Presence in S. Korea Does Not Bother N. Korea at All: Pompeo,” *Yonhap*, January 25, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230125000200325>.

⁹⁶ Zhan, “Analysis of Changes,” 202-3.

upon by high-level American officials. It could arguably still be part of a long-running and elaborated conspiracy, but it is less probable than with higher-profile clues.

Despite a peak during the 2017 war scare, occurrences of “imperialism” have become rarer overall since the early 2000s. “U.S. imperialism” appeared last in May 2018, right before the Singapore Summit. There is no more occurrence afterward. The word “imperialism” also rarefied from May 2018, with one occurrence in December of the same year, only four in 2019, and none in 2020.⁹⁷ One senses a change in the way the *Rodong Sinmun* reports U.S. foreign policies. A report on an Australian TV program illustrates that. It describes in a surprisingly neutral language free of references to U.S. imperialism and malevolence how Pacific island states and Quad powers balance against Chinese influence.⁹⁸

North Korea’s traditional emphasis on the withdrawal of American troops from the Peninsula could endanger the U.S. containment of China. However, Kim Jong-un watered his wine significantly. In 2018, he privately informed South Korean president Moon Jae-in that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea was no longer a precondition for diplomacy. Indeed, the joint DPRK-U.S. statement which came out of the June 2018 Singapore summit made no mention of U.S. forces in South Korea.⁹⁹ Kim Jong-un confessed to Pompeo that he indeed preferred U.S. troops to remain in Korea to prevent Chinese hegemony over the Peninsula.¹⁰⁰ Already in October 2000, Kim Jong-il told Madeleine

⁹⁷ Interestingly, North Korean media tended to paint Russia in a more friendly and positive light than China up to 2018. *Rodong Sinmun* mentioned China 30 times and Russia 431 times in 2015, China 71 times and Russia 176 times in 2016, China 86 times and Russia 311 times in 2017, China 492 times and Russia 473 times in 2018. Piao, “Changes in North Korea’s Cognition,” 120; and Zhan, “Analysis,” 199-221. Also, Keck, “North Korea Slams Xi Jinping.” It is tempting to think that the North Koreans leaned on Russia to reduce their dependence on China but needed Moscow less when Trump accepted to dialogue with them.

⁹⁸ “Australian Broadcast Reveals U.S. Attempts to Balance China,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 6, 2019, 6.

⁹⁹ “Trump Kim Summit: Full Text of the Signed Statement,” *BBC*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44453330>.

¹⁰⁰ Byun, “US Military Presence.”

Albright that North Korea was now seeing U.S. troops stationed on the Peninsula as a stabilizing force. He said the same to South Korean president Kim Dae-jung at the Inter-Korea Summit in June 2000.¹⁰¹ During the Cold War, Nixon and Kissinger convinced the reluctant Chinese that U.S. military presence in East Asia was necessary to safeguard China's interests not only against the Soviet threat but also against a possible resurgence of Japanese expansionism.¹⁰² Similarly, even if the North Koreans feel unease about U.S. presence in the region, they would likely be responsive to security guarantees from the United States.

It is not hard to explain N. Korea's newfound sympathy toward U.S. military presence. "North Korea's political relations with China are and have been toxic almost since Kim Jong Un came to power" and they degraded so much that "in September 2017 Pyongyang turned down a visit by China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, while senior North Korean officials were undaunted by the prospect of military clashes with Beijing."¹⁰³ Hence, engagement with North Korea is possible even without a troop withdrawal from South Korea. Because the China-U.S. competition is now the dominant feature in Asian politics, the North Koreans understand that their old objective of getting U.S. forces out of the Korean Peninsula is unrealistic since the main rationale for their presence is not the North Korean threat anymore.

Furthermore, during the October 2020 military parade which unveiled the Hwasong-16 intercontinental ballistic missile and later short-range and cruise missiles tests, the North Koreans forewent the ritual anti-American outbursts and maintained a relatively low profile.¹⁰⁴ Although Kim Yo-jong (Kim Jong-un's sister) criticized the joint exercises of March 2021, these criticisms were milder than before and she left doors open for

101 Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 591; and "Veiled Dialogues with Kim Jong Il Revealed [Book Review]," *Daily NK*, June 12, 2008, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/%5Bbook-review%5D-veiled-dialogues-wit/>.

102 Yukinori Komine, "The 'Japan Card' in the United States Rapprochement with China, 1969 - 1972," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2009): 494-514.

103 Glyn Ford, *Talking to North Korea: Ending the Nuclear Standoff* (London: Pluto, 2018), 16.

104 Brooks and Leem, "A Grand Bargain."

cooperation.¹⁰⁵ Coincidentally with the decrease of rhetorical attacks towards Washington, North Korean officials started in 2017 to drop their traditional emphasis on “deterrence” against the Americans and the South Koreans to talk instead of an abstract “balance” of military forces on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁰⁶

I do not argue here that the DPRK “fell in love” with America; the North Koreans remain deeply distrustful of the United States and its allies. However, Pyongyang signaled on many occasions in recent years its ability to make concessions and its openness to working with the United States. Meanwhile, the N. Korean government is worried by Chinese power and influence. Thus, if we consider that “the regime is capable of acting pragmatically in furtherance of its own self-interests” - and there is no reason not to - then Washington has a formidable trump card to play against China.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, well-crafted U.S. policies can entice North Korea into beneficial working relations.

Policy Recommendations

Although the door for a balancing coalition is open, sanctions and the official state of war between America and North Korea render open cooperation with the DPRK difficult in the short term. There is thus a need for low-level, discreet measures to build momentum and reduce N. Korean dependence on China. This part proposes a few of such low-hanging fruits.

105 “Kim Yo Jong Breaks the Silence, but What Does It Mean?” (38 North, March 16, 2021), https://www.38north.org/2021/03/kim-yo-jong-breaks-the-silence-but-what-does-it-mean/#_ftn1; and Yo-jong Kim, “It Will Be Hard to See Again Spring Days Three Years Ago,” *KCNA*, March 16, 2021, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_01_02&iMenuID=8.

106 Robert Carlin, “North Korea: New Terminology Portends Ongoing Policy Shift” (38 North, October 5, 2021), <https://www.38north.org/2021/10/north-korea-new-terminology-portends-ongoing-policy-shift/>; and Soo-hyang Choi, “N.K. Leader Calls for Boosting Military Capabilities but Says Enemy Is ‘War Itself’,” *Yonhap*, October 12, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211012000953325>.

Before all, balancing against China can start without any formal alliance with Pyongyang; an informal entente suffices. During the Cold War, China and the United States never officially allied. Yet, the Soviets had to augment their forces guarding Chinese borders because they knew of the newfound closeness between Beijing and Washington. They were reluctant to redirect reinforcements away from Europe, their primary concern, and therefore had to raise numerous new units instead. This exhausted Soviet economy still more while costing the Americans nothing. The same occurred with Yugoslavia; after the Stalin-Tito split, Washington discreetly encouraged the Yugoslavians to resist Moscow's wrath. For a very small investment, Yugoslavia's 180 degree turn largely complicated Soviet planning in southern Europe and even allowed for the subsequent Albania-USSR split. Because the main Chinese aim is positive - dominating Asia - while the American aim is negative - containing China - any state willing to balance against China is already a win, even without a close alliance with the United States. Relations with Pyongyang do not have to become harmonious overnight; they just need to be palatable enough so the Chinese cannot consider their defense perimeter as extending to the inter-Korean border anymore and that they feel the urge to reinforce their Manchurian border.

China is fully aware of the risk of North Korea switching sides. When active contacts between Americans and North Koreans gained traction in 2018, the Chinese worried that Pyongyang would turn against Beijing, especially after the North Koreans dropped the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea as a precondition for diplomacy.¹⁰⁸ Thus, low-visibility, small-footprint policies will allow the delaying and softening of Chinese reprisals against North Korea. More trivially, it also limits the domestic political backlash from American foreign policy traditionalists.

¹⁰⁷ Fuqua, *Nuclear Endgame*, xix. Also, Andrei Lankov, "The Perspective from Pyongyang: Limits of Compromise," *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2021), 107-18.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Perlez, "China, Feeling Left Out, Has Plenty to Worry about in North Korea-U.S. Talks," *New York Times*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/world/asia/china-north-korea-nuclear-talks.html>.

Diplomatic and Military Exchanges

Balancing need not be at first high-profile defense cooperation and can start with small, low-visibility steps.¹⁰⁹ In their dealings and contacts with North Korea, the United States should emphasize the threat posed by China's increased power to the autonomy and the survival of the DPRK and lure the N. Koreans with the promise of support. Specifically, North Korea has launched its nuclear program to compensate for its backwardness in conventional forces. Washington and Seoul could tout North Korea future military aid to finance, train, and modernize its decrepit army. Military-to-military exchanges to gain insights into each other's strategies and needs could happen in a friendly third country such as Vietnam.

The United States can also boost N. Korean defensive capabilities by giving the North Koreans access to intelligence about China's force posture. The DPRK obviously lacks modern intelligence capabilities. When Chinese troops concentrate on the border, the North Koreans are reduced to using antiquated Il-28 bombers to keep an eye on their movements.¹¹⁰ The North Koreans are likely hungry for fresh and accurate intelligence about what the Chinese are doing. America could gain their respect, kick-start cooperation, and boost their capabilities by feeding them valuable intelligence - notably in terms of imagery, one of the main N. Korean weaknesses.

The next step is to prepare the North Korean military for competing with China. If direct training or financing of the North is still too contentious politically, a more acceptable course of action is to finance new military bases and barracks oriented toward the Chinese border and

¹⁰⁹ Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, "Engaging North Korea: The Warming-up Phase," *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2021): 119-25; and Hugo Meijer and Luis Simón, "Covert Balancing: Great Powers, Secondary States and US Balancing Strategies against China," *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 2 (2021): 463-81.

¹¹⁰ Ryan McMorrow, "China Adds Troops, Cameras, Radiation Detectors at North Korean Border," *Global News*, January 19, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3975147/china-north-korea-border-security/>.

relocate the DPRK's military away from Seoul. Although an open program of military relations is hard to put in place in the short term due to the sanction regime, such small steps would motivate North Korea into cooperative behaviors.

Oil

Because of the sanctions, the DPRK is short of petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) for both economic and military purposes. Pyongyang can legally purchase only 500,000 barrels of oil per year.¹¹¹ First, the oil embargo does nothing to roll back the nuclear weaponry of the North. Second, it is unlikely to do any good to human rights or to promote democracy and only harms the civilian economy and the people's capacity to sustain themselves. Third, it places Pyongyang at the mercy of Beijing because it has few choices other than to please the Chinese in exchange for oil smuggling.¹¹² Fourth, the shortage of POL not only does not diminish N. Korean capabilities to threaten S. Korea and the United States but harms North Korea's ability to defend itself against China.

Indeed, an offensive war against the South would see massive armies clashing over a small piece of land - the Munsan-Cheorwon corridor. The Korean People's Army would have a few days to break through Southern defenses before attrition immobilizes its offensive.¹¹³ Therefore, lack of POL is unlikely to bring the decision and change the outcome of a Second Korean War. Hayes and von Hippel report that:

111 United Nations Security Council, "Supply, Sale or Transfer of All Refined Petroleum Products to the DPRK" (2021), <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1718/supply-sale-or-transfer-of-all-refined-petroleum>.

112 Leo Byrne, "North Korean Oil Tanker Stops in Chinese Port in the First Recorded Visit since 2017," *Diplomat* (July 24, 2021), <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/north-korean-oil-tanker-stops-in-chinese-port-in-the-first-recorded-visit-since-2017/>; and Christoph Koettl, "How Illicit Oil Is Smuggled into North Korea with China's Help," *New York Times*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/world/asia/tankers-north-korea-china.html>.

113 Motin, "Conventional Balance"; O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion"; and Suh, "Blitzkrieg or Sitzkrieg?"

The DPRK could quickly cut its non-military use by about 40% of its annual oil use with a variety of end use reduction and substitution measures; There will be little or no immediate impact on the Korean Peoples' Army's (KPA's) nuclear or missile programs; There will be little or no immediate impact on the KPA's routine or wartime ability to fight due to energy scarcity, given its short war strategy and likely stockpiling; The DPRK has the ability to substitute coal and electricity for substantial fractions of its refined product use, as well as its heavy fuel oil use (the product of oil refining) for heat production; The immediate primary impacts of responses to oil and oil products cut-offs will be on welfare.¹¹⁴

Conversely, a defensive war against China would see lesser concentrations of forces over larger distances while North Korea would enjoy the inherent strength of the defense. A war with China would thus be a more protracted fight where the North Koreans will be hard-pressed to sustain their military apparatus for the long haul. In that configuration, shortages of POL may seriously diminish Northern efforts to stop a Chinese invasion.

A few easy (and quiet) fixes exist. Washington could turn a blind eye to ship-to-ship transfers of oil destined to North Korea and Russia trading POL with the DPRK. Although Washington has no official direct relations with Pyongyang, American non-governmental organizations do operate in North Korea. It could deliver POL through them under the pretext of humanitarian activities. This would not represent a novel policy for Washington, since the 1994 Agreed Framework already included the delivery of oil to the DPRK.

¹¹⁴ Peter Hayes and David von Hippel, "Sanctions on North Korean Oil Imports: Impacts and Efficacy" (Nautilus Institute, September 9, 2017), <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/sanctions-on-north-korean-oil-imports-impacts-and-efficacy/>.

Supporting North Korean Territorial Claims

A low-hanging fruit to sow dissent between Beijing and Pyongyang and build momentum is to support the North Korean claim over the Baekdu Mountain. Armed clashes over the mountain occurred between the two countries during the late 1960s.¹¹⁵ This move would cost nothing, requires no concession from either Seoul or Washington, and would likely be well-received by the South Korean public opinion, which also sees Baekdu as a historical Korean land and is highly distrustful of China.

In addition, China and North Korea never clearly delineated their exclusive economic zones and continental shelves in the resource-rich Yellow Sea.¹¹⁶ Another irritant in the Sino-DPRK relation is illegal Chinese fishing in North Korean waters. Washington could make gestures of support in these cases too to reassure the North Koreans and put the Chinese on their back foot.

Economic Support

International sanctions are now so extensive that almost all of North Korea's foreign trade is illegal. Because of that, North Korea's licit and illicit trade is almost exclusively oriented towards China, which grew to over 90 percent of the total North Korean trade after the 2016 enhanced sanction regime.¹¹⁷ There are however a few low-visibility steps possible to make a dent in N. Korean dependency on China.

Washington should close its eyes to North Korean workers abroad, an important source of revenue for the country.¹¹⁸ Also, due to travel restrictions and sanctions, U.S. humanitarian organizations have a hard

115 Daniel Gomà Pinilla, "Border Disputes between China and North Korea," *China Perspectives*, vol. 52 (2004): 4.

116 Huaigao Qi, "Maritime Delimitation between China and North Korea in the North Yellow Sea," *Ocean Development & International Law*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2020): 358-85.

117 Minnich, "Denuclearization," 21.

118 Tae-jun Kang, "How North Korea Uses 'Students' and 'Trainees' Overseas to Bypass UN Sanctions," *Diplomat* (January 4, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/how-north-korea-uses-students-and-trainees-overseas-to-bypass-un-sanctions/>.

time operating in North Korea and American tourism is nonexistent.¹¹⁹ The North Koreans, especially under Kim Jong-un, emphasize attracting international tourists as an easy way to grow the economy.¹²⁰ Tourists from the United States, Japan, Europe, and other like-minded countries could be encouraged to visit the DPRK to provide North Korea with hard currency. The U.S. government could ease restrictions and use humanitarian organizations and tourists to bolster the DPRK's economic and social resilience. Also, helping North Korea to develop renewable energy sources (notably wind power) would bolster North Korean resilience without eliciting much hostility from both domestic and international audiences.¹²¹ These practical and low-visibility policies could create momentum to sign a peace treaty with North Korea, the first step before more substantive cooperation.

A Low-Risk, High-Return Investment

A fresh approach to the North Korean conundrum is urgent. The DPRK has been an enduring problem consuming Washington's attention and resources for over seven decades: it could now become a formidable thorn in the side of China and Russia. Continuing the status quo will only result in more of the same: a nuclear-armed North Korea increasingly aligned with China and Russia.¹²²

Sanctions aimed at stopping the nuclear program and improving human rights: North Korea is now a nuclear power and the state of human

¹¹⁹ Jasper, *Engaging North Korea*, 13-26.

¹²⁰ Dean J. Ouellette, "The Tourism of North Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era: Propaganda, Profitmaking, and Possibilities for Engagement," *Pacific Focus*, vol. 31, no. 3 (December 2016): 421-51; and Dean J. Ouellette, "Understanding the 'Socialist Tourism' of North Korea under Kim Jong Un: An Analysis of North Korean Discourse," *North Korean Review*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 55-81.

¹²¹ Troy Stangarone and Sean Blanco, "Renewable Power for North Korea" (National Interest, September 28, 2021), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/renewable-power-north-korea-194580>.

¹²² Blank, "Is the Northern Alliance," 211-31.

rights is as distressing as ever. Although this policy had good intentions, it is now unjustified both on moral and rational grounds. Meanwhile, North Korea's geography and military capabilities make it a valuable ally to reestablish a balance of power in Northeast Asia. Indeed, it is clear that the North Koreans deeply worry about China and would appreciate cooperation with the United States to protect themselves. This confirms realist insights about balancing incentives weighing on neighbors of formidable powers. Entrenched habits on both sides of the fence may derail U.S.-DPRK rapprochement. It would notably require sweeping the nuclear issue under the carpet - it is already halfway under. It may also require "bribing" North Korea by way of low-visibility cooperative policies. However, it is a low-cost bet with a potentially high reward: correcting the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and increasing regional stability.

Many of the points made in this paper also apply to the cases of Afghanistan, Iran, and Myanmar. It would be regrettable that ideological pursuits stand in the way of stability and shared interests. The Afghans, the Iranians, and the Burmese border Chinese and Russian powers and could support U.S. interests and great power competition efforts. North Korea and the United States have sound strategic reasons to work together; it is worth a shot. If China-North Korea relations are as "close as lips and teeth," it is maybe time for the teeth to bite the lip.

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