ABSTRACT: The United States has long called for the “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization” (CVID) of the North Korea. But is this a realistic policy option? To address this question, a broader question needs to be answered: what are the primary drivers of North Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons? Most answers to this question take one of two basic positions. Doves, on the one hand, see North Korea developing nuclear weapons because of the threatening foreign policies of the U.S. and South Korea. Hawks, on the other hand, see North Korean nuclear development as driven by factors internal to the North Korean regime, inherent in its personality. I examine these two arguments against the evidence and find them both wanting. In contrast, I put forth an alternative argument focused on the power of the global hegemon, the United States, and its position on the Korean Peninsula. This power and positional alternative is shown to be better reflected in the evidence presented.


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Key words: East Asia; North Korea; Nuclear Proliferation; U.S. Foreign Policy
On the morning of September 9th, 2016, North Korea conducted its fifth nuclear test. The subsequent events followed a familiar, even predictable routine. Then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (2016) called the test “a grave threat to… international peace and security… as destabilizing as it is unlawful.” The Japanese government lodged a “serious protest” against North Korea, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (2016) calling the test “totally unacceptable.” The South Koreans held emergency meetings, with the government calling on the North “to immediately abandon its nuclear weapons and missile programs” (Cheong Wa Dae 2016). Commentators, for their part, argued for the need to get China to “put pressure” on its unruly neighbour (Klingner 2016), while the Chinese registered their usual, mild displeasure at the test (Hua 2016). But most importantly, the U.S.’s fundamental position on the North Korean nuclear program—what is known as “CVID,” or the demand for Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearization—remained unchanged. As Then-U.S. President Barack Obama (2016) put it, “the United States does not, and never will, accept North Korea as a nuclear state.” But given the incentives facing North Korea and all other parties to the conflict, is CVID a realistic policy option? Will the right combination of incentives and threats encourage North Korea to abandon its nuclear program? To answer these narrower policy questions, a broader question first needs addressing: what are the primary drivers of North Korea’s continued interest in nuclear weapons?

The majority of the literature answers this broader question from one of two basic positions. On one side are the “doves,” who argue that North Korea clings to its nuclear weapons because it is threatened militarily, isolated politically, and ailing economically. In short, they see the problem as one of policy, particularly U.S. or South Korean foreign policy. On the other side are the “hawks,” who argue that the North’s nuclear program is driven by psychological proclivities, domestic political incentives, extortionary motives, and revisionist intentions. They, in contrast, see the problem as one of personality, that of the North Korean regime and its leaders. In this article, I put
these two arguments to the test and find them both inadequate. In contrast, I will argue that the problem is not fundamentally one of personality, nor is it one of policy—the primary problem is of power and position. It is the well-known but often-overlooked fact that North Korea shares its peninsula with the most powerful state in modern history—the United States—that explains its nuclear behaviour. However, it is not the threatening nature of U.S. foreign policy, as the doves might suggest, but the raw fact of the U.S.’s tremendous power and its proximity that motivates the North’s nuclear intentions. In short, the problem is structural. Thus, so long as the U.S. is allied with South Korea and forward-deployed on the peninsula, North Korea will be exceedingly unlikely to abandon its nuclear program, regardless of any combination of threats and incentives that are presented to it. And if this is true, then CVID is a policy that simply has little chance of meeting with success.

This article contributes to the debate over North Korea’s nuclear motivations and the likelihood of its disarmament in at least two ways. First, while the argument that “power matters” in North Korea’s nuclear calculations is clearly not new, the way the debate has evolved has led the centrality of U.S. power to periodically recede from view. Although most contenders in the debate acknowledge—to a greater or lesser extent—the role of U.S. power, it is rarely front-and-centre in their explanations. The arguments that follow are an attempt to “bring power back in” to debates over North Korea’s nuclear program. Second, since many of the arguments surrounding North Korea’s nuclear ambitions were made in the years leading up to, or only shortly after, its nuclear acquisition, they have not yet had their observable implications drawn out and systematically tested against the evidence. With the benefit of over a decade of hindsight, the pages that follow are a first step in such an effort.

I will pursue this line of argumentation in the following six steps. First, I will broadly outline the contours of the debate on the North Korean nuclear program. Second, I will examine some of the
observable implications of each position, finding them both at odds with much of the evidence. Third, I will present my power- and position-based alternative, showing how many of North Korea’s behaviours are rendered sensible in light of this more structural logic. Fourth, I will discuss a number of likely counterarguments to the claim that CVID is a lost cause, finding them ultimately unpersuasive. And finally, I will conclude with some implications of these arguments for both U.S. foreign policy and international relations (IR) theory.

The North Korean Nuclear Issue

The North Korean nuclear problem has long been framed in terms of “optimists” and “pessimists,” or “doves” and “hawks.” (Kang 2011/12, 143-144; see also: Cha and Kang 2003). The doves’ basic arguments are that North Korea pursues nuclear weapons because it is threatened militarily (Kang in Cha and Kang 2004, 237-245; Sigal 2008; K. Park 2010), isolated politically (Barry 2007; Carlin and Lewis 2007; Cumings 2010; Han 2009; Michishita 2006, 2009a), and ailing economically (Huntley 2007; Michishita 2009b). Therefore, these scholars suggest, if the international community can ameliorate North Korea’s security concerns, engage it politically, and aid it in its economic development, the rationale for the nuclear program would disappear and the North would likely abandon it. To these scholars, the North’s program is best thought of as a “bombshell that is actually an olive branch” (Sigal 2002).

The hawks disagree. Their basic position is that there are very few conditions under which the current regime in Pyongyang would abandon its nuclear weapons program (Cha in Cha and Kang 2004, 245-254; Cha 2009; Habib and O’Neil 2009; Ramberg 2009). They argue that the North Korean regime clings to its nuclear weapons due to the psychological proclivities of its leaders (Hymans 2008), its desire and ability to “extort” aid from the international community (Eberstadt 2004; Lankov 2013, 146-149), its deep-seated revisionist intentions (Cha 2002a, 221-227), and its domestic political constraints and incentives (Byman and Lind 2010, 63). In the view of many
hawks, reducing military pressure on the North will likely only whet its appetite, economic aid will only feed its nuclear program, and political engagement (while welcomed by some [Cha 2002b]) is ultimately unlikely to be decisive in dealing with the North’s nuclear program. For the hawks, the problem is not U.S. or South Korean foreign policy—“The problem is North Korea” (Cha in Cha and Kang 2004, 249).

It may help clarify the distinction between these two camps—and between them both and my own arguments—to understand them in terms of existing IR theory. For the doves, their arguments are rooted in the literature on threat perceptions (Walt 1987), but more importantly, in liberal IR theory (Doyle 1986; Moravcsik 1997), particularly the literature on the pacifying effects economic exchange and political engagement (Russett and Oneal 2000, ch. 4-5). For the hawks, their arguments can be found in the literature on leaders (Byman and Pollack 2001) and their psychology (Jervis 1976), on organizational theory and bureaucratic politics (Allison and Zelikow 1999), and perhaps most centrally, on the importance of status-quo versus revisionist intentions (Wolfers 1962, ch. 6; Schweller 1994; Glaser 2010). While they clearly differ a great deal, what the dove and hawk arguments share in common is a commitment to the unit level—focusing on the intentions, regime types, internal characteristics, and short-run foreign policy behaviours of the states in question.²

However, what I am arguing here is that both sides of the debate have it partly right and partly wrong. The doves are correct in pointing out that the North Korean nuclear program is largely intended to ensure their external security. Yet what they get wrong is the claim that negative security assurances from the United States are the answer to the North’s security concerns. What I will suggest is that it is the simple fact of U.S. power and its position on the peninsula through the U.S.-ROK alliance, rather than the purportedly threatening intentions of U.S. policy, that drive North Korean nuclear decisions. The hawks, for their part, are correct that North Korea is unlikely to abandon its nuclear weapons program. However, what they miss is that the primary incentives for
the North to hang on to its program are external—consisting of the global hegemon being allied with their rival and forward-deployed on their southern border—rather than internal—consisting of the North’s inherently belligerent personality. In terms of existing IR theory, my own arguments are more clearly rooted in structural realist thought, particularly the literature on the balance of power (Waltz 2010) and the importance of geography (Levy and Thompson 2010; Mearsheimer 2014).

These arguments differ from those of the doves and hawks in a variety of ways, but the most important distinction, for my purposes, is their focus on the systemic level—on the distribution of capabilities and geographic characteristics—rather than the unit level. But before presenting my own arguments, let us first examine the existing alternatives in greater depth.

**Is it Policy or Personality?**

The debate between doves and hawks on North Korea—or the question of whether it is U.S. foreign policy or North Korean personality driving its nuclear decision-making—has largely stagnated for two primary reasons. The first reason is that the majority of the arguments made by both sides point in the same direction: the regime is militarily threatened, politically isolated, poor, paranoid, domestically constrained, able to extort aid, or has deeply revisionist intentions. In short, they all predict the pursuit and retention of nuclear weapons. This makes it difficult to separate one cause from another. The second reason the dove-hawk debate has been so difficult to resolve is that there has been little meaningful variation in the dependent variable of interest: North Korea’s nuclear development. While the North initiated its program in the late 1960s, it seriously committed to the pursuit of weaponization in the early 1980s and steadily progressed from then until its first nuclear test in 2006. Since then, North Korea has progressed substantially in terms of the size and technical sophistication of its program and its delivery means.

Some may argue that there has been important variation in North Korean nuclear behaviour, and that particularly during the “Agreed Framework” years in the 1990s, progress slowed considerably,
as its program was effectively frozen. However, it is important to remember that the North Korean nuclear program consists of three primary components: a plutonium program, a highly-enriched uranium program, and a ballistic missile program. When all three are considered together, it is clear that North Korea has never stopped progressing toward and beyond nuclear acquisition.

North Korea’s plutonium program began in the late 1970s with the construction of its 5-Megawatt (MW) reactor in Yongbyon, but was effectively frozen by the Agreed Framework in June of 1994. The plutonium program remained frozen until the breakdown of the Agreed Framework in late 2002, and, with the exception of a brief freeze between July 2007 and September 2008, remains active to this day. While there is a lot of mystery surrounding the origins of the highly-enriched uranium program, it is believed that North Korean officials started traveling to Pakistan in 1993 or 1994, initiating a missile-for-uranium enrichment technology transfer relationship that would last until the A.Q. Khan network was broken up in the early 2000s (Albright and Brannan 2010, 6-10; Squassoni 2006). The highly-enriched uranium program has never been monitored, controlled, or frozen in any way since its initiation. Finally, North Korea’s ballistic missile program began in the late-1970s when it obtained short-range Scud missiles from Egypt for the purpose of reverse-engineering (Nuclear Threat Initiative 2015). While the North did put a moratorium on long-range missile testing between September 1999 to January 2003, research, development, and exports have continued unabated since the program began. Figure 1 displays a timeline of North Korea’s nuclear program from 1980 to the present.3

With all arguments pointing to the same outcome, and with an outcome that shows little important variation, it is incredibly difficult to separate out the distinct effects of different causes. Thus, doves can always point to one “hawkish” U.S. or South Korean policy or another to explain North Korea’s nuclear policies. Similarly, hawks can always claim that the North is a “bad faith
actor” and never had any intentions to abandon its nuclear pursuit anyhow. In this way, the debate can go on-and-on, without anyone being proven definitively right or definitively wrong.

However, we are not entirely without hope. For one, many of the independent variables—the alternative explanations for North Korean nuclear behaviour—do see variation. These purported causes are not nearly as constant as has been the North’s nuclear program, which can help us adjudicate between them to some extent. Furthermore, each of the arguments has multiple observable implications, which are more fine-grained than the simple nuclear weapons development-nondevelopment dichotomy allows. Outlining a number of these implications, and holding them up against the evidence, will also help us evaluate these alternative arguments for North Korean nuclear behaviour. It is to this task that we will now turn.

The “Policy” Argument

As noted above, a number of scholars—who I have termed “doves”—see North Korea’s nuclear ambitions as being the result of U.S. or South Korean foreign policy. They argue that military threats, political isolation, and economic underdevelopment explain its nuclear behaviour. When it comes to the plausibility of CVID, these scholars are optimistic, seeing a reduced threats, political engagement, and economic exchange as ameliorating the problems that led to the North’s nuclear pursuit in the first place. To assess the validity of these claims, they need to be taken one-by-one and evaluated alongside the available historical and quantitative evidence.
First, if North Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons is due to the threatening military policies emanating from South Korea and the U.S. (Kang in Cha and Kang 2003, 237-245; Sigal 2008; K. Park 2010), we might expect expressions of goodwill or non-hostile intent to ameliorate its concerns and lead it to slow or abandon its nuclear ambitions. To put this first dove argument in the form of a hypothesis:

H1: Negative security assurances and expressions of non-threatening intent from the U.S. and South Korea will lead North Korea to slow or abandon its nuclear program.

However, the historical record shows that such “negative security assurances” have been made, and on a great number of occasions. When it comes to the U.S., Victor Cha (2012, 307-314) has documented these, finding that between 1989 and 2011 U.S. Presidents offered such security assurances at least 33 times—about two assurances every three years, and evidently without much effect. Furthermore, major annual U.S.-ROK “Team Spirit” military exercises—often deemed “highly provocative” by North Korea—were halted in the interest of better relations in 1992, and then again in 1994 and thereafter. Yet the North continued to search for and eventually to obtain uranium enrichment technology and to progress in its missile technology during these years.

Quantitative evidence has also cast doubt on how provocative these exercises are more broadly (D’Orazio 2012). Finally, it is not clear that the occupants of the Blue House or the White House make an important difference in North Korea’s nuclear progress. North Korea has pursued nuclear weapons with “hawks” in the Blue House, such as Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993), Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013), and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017), and with “doves,” such as Kim Young-sam (1993-1998), Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003), and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008).

Similarly, the North has continued its nuclear program with more containment-oriented U.S. presidents, such as Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), George H.W. Bush (1989-1993), and George W. Bush’s first term (2001-2005), and with more engagement-oriented U.S. presidents, such as Bill
Clinton (1993-2001), Bush’s second term (2005-2009), and Barack Obama (2009-2017). In sum, there is very little evidence that reducing military threats or expressing goodwill or non-hostile intentions have an important effect on the North’s nuclear policy.

Second, if North Korea develops its nuclear program due to its political isolation by the U.S., South Korea, and other members of the international community (Barry 2007; Carlin and Lewis 2007; Cumings 2010; Han 2009; Michishita 2006, 2009a; Sigal 2002), we might expect sustained political engagement to dampen or halt North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. This second dove argument can also be expressed in the form of the following hypothesis:

H2: Increased political engagement from South Korea and the United States will lead North Korea to slow or abandon its nuclear program.

However, the evidence does not point to this sort of relationship. As Figure 2 (below) indicates, there has been a great deal of variation in the amount of inter-Korean dialogue, but far less in the North’s nuclear policy. Overall, the average number of inter-Korean talks is roughly 15 per year, whereas when its plutonium program was frozen—between 1994 and 2002—the average was 11.5 talks per year, indicating, if anything, a negative relationship. Similarly, engagement efforts such as the Agreed Framework under Clinton between 1994 and 2001, and the Six-Party talks under Bush between 2003 and 2009 may have had some effect in potentially slowing the plutonium program,
but little impact on the North’s highly-enriched uranium and missile programs. Thus, the evidence that diplomatic isolation drives the North’s nuclear behaviour is similarly weak.

Finally, if it is economic underdevelopment that explains the North’s nuclear ambitions (Huntley 2007; Michishita 2009b), we should expect economic development opportunities to satiate its nuclear appetite. To put this in the form of a testable hypothesis:

H3: Economic development opportunities will lead North Korea to slow or abandon its nuclear program.

There are at least two ways of testing this third dove argument. One way is to examine inter-Korean trade, an important source of potential development for the North. However, as Figure 3 (below) indicates, it is precisely when North Korea made its greatest progress in its nuclear program—after the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2003—that North-South trade begins to take off.6

A second option is to look to the availability of international aid. Perhaps receiving substantial amounts of international food aid tends to dampen the North’s nuclear behaviour. Figure 4 (below) presents World Food Program (WFP) food aid deliveries to the North from 1995 to 2012.7

Here, again, we see a fair amount of variation in the amount of food aid delivered to the North, but it is unclear how this tracks with its nuclear policy. The average over the entire period is roughly 710,000 metric tons per year, making 1997 to 2005 “above average” years for food aid to the North.
However, during these years North Korea made great strides in its uranium enrichment program, its missile technology, and shortly thereafter, tested its first plutonium nuclear device. Increased food aid does not seem to draw the North away from its nuclear ambitions either.

In sum, arguments made by the “doves” do not appear to square with the evidence. Military threats (H1), political isolation (H2), and economic underdevelopment (H3) do not seem to be clearly related to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. U.S. and South Korean policy do not appear to be the problem. Perhaps, then, we should examine the “hawks” arguments, to see whether the problem lies more clearly within North Korea

**The “Personality” Argument**

A second set of scholars—who are referred to as “hawks”—argue that the problem is not U.S. or South Korean foreign policy, the problem is clearly North Korea. These scholars claim that North Korea’s nuclear ambitions are explained by the psychological proclivities of its leaders, its domestic political incentives, its desire to extort aid from the international community, and its revisionist intentions. Regarding the likelihood of CVID, these scholars are more pessimistic, understanding the problem as being rooted within North Korea itself. This is a harder set of arguments to test, as we have far less reliable information on political developments within North Korea than we do of its
neighbours. However, there are a number of observable implications of these arguments which we can examine with some confidence.

First, if the psychological proclivities of North Korea’s leaders are driving its nuclear behaviour (Hymans 2008), we might expect to see some variation in its nuclear policies in the transition from Kim Il-sung (1948-1994) to Kim Jong-il (1994-2011), or from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un (2011-present). To put this first hawk argument in the form of a hypothesis:

H4: The psychology of different North Korean leaders will lead to variation in its nuclear policy.

With this hypothesis in mind, it might be argued that the death of Kim Il-sung and the transition to Kim Jong-il in the summer of 1994 is well-timed with the freezing of the North’s plutonium program. However, two factors militate against this interpretation. First, the Agreed Framework was initially agreed upon under Kim Il-sung, and there is evidence that he was more open to this new era of engagement than was his son, Kim Jong-il (Cha 2012, 89-91). Second, Kim Il-sung’s rule is well-known to be associated with the primacy of the Korean Worker’s Party, whereas Kim Jong-il’s leadership saw the rise of the military in his “military-first politics” (Songun), of which nuclear acquisition was a central component (H. Park 2010). It is also unclear whether there has been meaningful change in North Korea’s nuclear activities in the transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un. For instance, under Kim Jong-il, the North conducted two nuclear tests (2006, 2009) and three long-range missile tests (1998, 2006, 2009). Thus far, under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests (2013, two in 2016) and four long-range missile tests (two in 2012, two in 2016). The increase in nuclear program-related activity under Kim Jong-un may better reflect an increase in technological sophistication than a fundamental change in policy. Between these leaders, then, what we have seen is continuity rather than change, calling the psychological argument into question.
Second, if the North’s nuclear ambitions are driven by its desire to use this capability as an extortion tool for international aid (Eberstadt 2004; Lankov 2013, 146-149), we might expect there to be some relationship between its nuclear status and its receipt of international food aid. If its primary purpose is to extort international aid, we should expect it to either receive more aid after it acquired its nuclear program, or to abandon its nuclear efforts altogether if aid is not forthcoming. Putting this second hawk argument in hypothesis form:

H5: North Korean nuclear acquisition will lead to an increase in international food aid.

A return to Figure 4 (above), however, indicates that if this is the North’s goal, it is not seeing much success. The basic trajectory of food aid to North Korea is a steady increase between 1995 and 2001, and then a steady decline from 2002 onward. This pattern is far more consistent with North Korean need, during the famine of the 1990s, than with its ability to use its nuclear sabre-rattling as an extortion tool. And of course, declining food aid seems to have done little to discourage North Korea in its nuclear ambitions more broadly.

Third, if revisionist intentions and a desire to use the nuclear arsenal as a shield to engage in aggressive behaviour are driving the North’s nuclear ambitions (Cha 2002a, 221-227), we should expect it to act more aggressively after its acquisition. In short:

H6: North Korean nuclear acquisition will lead it to engage in more aggressive foreign policy behaviour.

However, a look at the data shows that this is not obviously the case. Figure 5 (below) tracks North Korea’s militarized provocations using new data from 1995 to 2016. As is clear, there is no obvious uptick in its militarized provocations after its initial acquisition in 2006, nor even a general trend upwards. Between 1995 and 2005, North Korea’s overall military provocations (lighter line in Figure 5) averaged approximately 6.2 per year. Between 2006 and 2016, the annual average is 6.6.

North Korea seems to have been just as militarily provocative before it acquired its nuclear arsenal
as after. Separating North Korea’s missile tests from its other forms of militarized provocation casts even further doubt on this hawk argument. If the North’s nuclear and missile tests are seen as just that—tests to advance their technology and bolster deterrence—then it is worth examining its non-missile, conventional provocations alone with respect to its nuclear acquisition. A look at its non-missile provocations (darker line in Figure 5) indicates, if anything, a negative relationship between nuclear acquisition and militarized provocations. From 1995 to 2005, North Korea averaged 5.6 non-missile provocations per year. Yet after its nuclear acquisition, from 2006 to 2016, this number dropped to just 2.8. Thus, considering the North’s non-missile provocations alone, it is difficult to escape the strong possibility that North Korea’s nuclear acquisition has made it less militarily provocative, rather than more so.\textsuperscript{11} In short, revisionism does not seem to be a primary driver of its nuclear program.

![Figure 5: North Korea's Militarized Provocations, 1995-2016](image)

A final argument made by the “hawks” is that the North Korean leadership may use its nuclear program to appease domestic political supporters, such as the military (Byman and Lind 2010, 63). To put this last hawk argument in hypothesis form:

H7: An increase in the influence of the North Korean military will lead to an increase in focus on the nuclear program.
Unfortunately, because of the dearth of reliable information on the domestic politics of North Korea, it is difficult to evaluate this claim. However, as noted above, the role of the military in North Korean politics has waxed and waned over the years. During the Kim II-sung years, it was the Korean Worker’s Party that held the position of primacy in domestic politics. It is only with the rise of Kim Jong-il, after 1994, that we see the rise of the military as the most important interest group in North Korean domestic politics. With this in mind, two aspects of the domestic appeasement argument are somewhat puzzling. First, it is odd that the North’s nuclear program has been a constant, while the central role of the military has varied a great deal. Second, if we do choose to see the freezing of the North’s plutonium program (1994-2002) as an important change in its nuclear behaviour, it is puzzling that this is precisely when the military rose to its central position in North Korean politics. In short, the North Korean military’s stature in domestic politics does not appear to be related to broad patterns in its nuclear policy in any obvious way.

In sum, and like the arguments made by the “doves,” many of the “hawks” arguments are not entirely consistent with the evidence. Psychological proclivities (H4), extortionary motives (H5), revisionist intentions (H6), and domestic political constraints (H7) do not appear to be as important in explaining North Korean nuclear behaviour as is sometimes claimed. Thus, we are in need of an alternative to both the arguments made by the doves and those made by the hawks (which are summarized in Table 1, below). I will argue in the pages that follow that the problem of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions is explained not by U.S. or South Korean foreign policy, nor by North Korea’s belligerent personality, but by the overwhelming power of the United States, its alliance with South Korea, and its position of forward-deployment on the Korean Peninsula.

However, before I do, it is important to clarify that I am not arguing that these dove (policy) and hawk (personality) arguments are “wrong.” Clearly, they both, in ways big and small, account for some of North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. The goal has been not to show that these existing
arguments are entirely incorrect, but that there are aspects of the problem they leave unexplained. And the hope is that my power and positional alternative will help account for those aspects of the North’s behaviour which remain puzzling from the policy and personality perspectives.

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<th>Table 1: Summary of Hypotheses</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dove Hypotheses</strong></td>
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<td>H5: North Korean nuclear acquisition will lead to an increase in international food aid.</td>
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<td>H6: North Korean nuclear acquisition will lead it to engage in more aggressive foreign policy behaviour.</td>
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<tr>
<td>H7: An increase in the influence of the North Korean military will lead to an increase in focus on the nuclear program.</td>
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**A Power and Positional Alternative**

Rather than viewing North Korean nuclear ambitions as a problem of policy or one of personality, I will argue that it is one of power and position. This necessitates approaching the issue structurally.

There are at least three reasons why a structural approach to this problem is warranted. First, purely structural approaches to the North Korean nuclear issue are rarely, if ever, taken. Perhaps the extreme nature of its authoritarianism, its abhorrent human rights record, and the oddities of the Kim regime have led to a reluctance among scholars to treat it like any other state in the system—a “like unit.” However, the argument here is that doing just this will reveal sources of constraint and opportunity that have been obscured by the dominance of unit-level approaches to North Korean nuclear policy. Second, as Kenneth Waltz reminds us, since “the variety of actors and the variations in their actions are not matched by the variety of outcomes, we know that systemic causes are in play” (2010, 69). The persistence of North Korea’s nuclear development, despite the wide variety of agents and strategies, seems to hint at the presence of structural forces. And third, this structural
approach may shed new light on important issues for U.S. foreign policy, on the Korean Peninsula and beyond. However, it is also important to recognize the limitations of structural theory. Structural arguments are significantly better at analyzing situations once they are in place than telling us how they got that way; more readily able to account for continuity than change (Ruggie 1983). In the current context, China and North Korea, and the U.S. and South Korea, are allies for contingent, historical reasons, which a structural theory cannot easily account for. Yet given this arrangement of alignment and antagonism on the peninsula, I am arguing that a structural explanation is, in many ways, a more powerful approach than the primary existing alternatives.

The primary motivator of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program is the presence of the global unipolar power, the United States, on the Korean Peninsula, and its alliance with the North’s rival to the south, the Republic of Korea. Thus, the doves are correct that it is external threats motivating the North Korean nuclear program, but they tend to downplay the importance of U.S. power, as opposed to its foreign policy, in generating these threats. Similarly, the hawks are correct that North Korea is unlikely to abandon its nuclear program, but they often overlook the centrality of the position of the U.S. on the peninsula in leading to this outcome. In short, being essentially bordered by the most powerful state in modern history is what drove the North to acquire its nuclear arsenal, and is what motivates it to retain and advance its nuclear program today. The specific foreign policies of United States and the intentions of the North Korean regime undoubtedly play important roles, but they are secondary to the asymmetric advantage in military capabilities possessed by the U.S. and its geographic position of forward-deployment on North Korea’s southern border.

However, here we run into similar problems as those faced by the arguments examined above. The United States has been stationed on the Korean Peninsula since the end of Second World War in September of 1945, and allied with the South since 1953. Furthermore, the U.S. has been the most powerful state in the international system since this time, and even more obviously so since the
fall of the Soviet Union in 1990. There have been some changes in troop levels over time, going from approximately 41,000 in 1990 to 28,500 today (Kane 2006). There have also been force posture changes over time, with the U.S. removing all of its deployed nuclear weapons in the South in 1991, and pulling back from the DMZ in 2003. Yet all in all, the presence of the U.S. has been a relative constant. Thus, what we have is an independent variable (U.S. power and position) that sees little important variation, combined with a dependent variable (North Korean nuclear development) that is similarly invariant, making it difficult to credibly establish causality.  

Despite this, what we can do is re-examine the evidence presented thus far to see if it is at least consistent with the power and positional interpretation. If the evidence presented above is consistent with the power and position argument, and, as I have already shown, it is not entirely consistent with the policy or personality arguments, this will weigh in favour of the power and positional approach.

There are a number of ways in which much of the evidence presented thus far is rendered sensible in light of the power and positional approach. First, consider the dependent variable—North Korean nuclear development (see Figure 1). The fact that the North’s nuclear program has been a relative constant, despite the many changes in a variety of other purported causes, is as puzzling from the dovish, policy perspective as it is from the hawkish, personality perspective. However, this constancy of nuclear development makes perfect sense if it is U.S. power and position that is motivating it. If it is the raw fact of U.S. power and its position on the Korean Peninsula that is driving the North Korean nuclear program, rather than U.S. or South Korean foreign policy or the revisionist intentions of the North Korean leadership, then we should expect the North to advance the program as long as the U.S. is present—hence, without variation. Of course, this is exactly what we see.
Second, consider the variety of independent variables presented by the dovish, policy arguments. It is puzzling from this policy perspective that the North has pursued and continued to develop nuclear weapons despite the periodic cancellation of annual U.S.-ROK military exercises (H1), repeated U.S. security assurances (H1), a variety of actors and strategies in both Seoul and Washington (H1-3), deep U.S. engagement under the Agreed Framework and the Six-Party Talks (H2), substantial variation inter-Korean dialogue (H2), and significant variation in inter-Korean trade and food aid to the North (H3). If North Korea’s fear is not power and position but U.S. and South Korean foreign policy, then we should expect to see some covariation between these causal variables and North Korean nuclear policy, but as seen above, we do not. However, if the North fears not the policies of its neighbours but the simple facts of their power and position, then we would expect these causal variables to make little difference, and its nuclear behaviour to remain constant, which—again—is precisely what we observe.

Third, consider the variety of independent variables presented by the more hawkish, personality arguments. From this perspective, it is difficult to explain the fact that the North has continued to develop nuclear weapons despite two leadership transitions (H4), its inability to successfully extort aid from the international community (H5), and the waxing and waning of the central role the military in North Korean domestic politics (H7). Furthermore, if revisionism is the primary driver of its nuclear ambitions, it is odd that it does not seem to engage in any more militarized provocations since it has gone nuclear than it did before it acquired its arsenal, and that its non-missile provocations have actually seen a sharp decline since its acquisition (H6). If the problem is not U.S. power, but is North Korea’s personality, then we should expect to see some relationship between these causal variables and North Korea’s nuclear policy, or between its nuclear status and its military behaviour. But again, we do not. Yet if the North’s primary motivator is U.S. power, and any
hawkish, revisionist intentions it may have are less central, then the outcomes we observe make a
great deal more sense.

Finally, there is also some (admittedly thin) evidence that the North Koreans themselves see the
presence of the U.S. on the Korean Peninsula as driving their nuclear policy. If the power and
position argument is correct, we would expect North Korean elites to be threatened by U.S. power
or to justify their nuclear program based on the presence of the U.S. in the South. There is very little
direct evidence of policy discussion within North Korea, but there are some instances that at least
hint at the arguments being made here. For instance, in the years before the nuclear program was
officially initiated, North Korean elites would point to the vast nuclear and conventional power
asymmetries on the Korean Peninsula with alarm. As North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Seong-
cheol told the Soviet Ambassador:

“The Americans hold on to Taiwan, to South Korea and South Vietnam, blackmail the people
with their nuclear weapons, and, with their help, rule on these continents and do not intend to
leave. Their possession of nuclear weapons, and the lack thereof in our hands, objectively helps
them, therefore, to eternalize their rule” (Woodrow Wilson Center 1962).

Similarly, once the nuclear program was underway in 1984, in conversation with East Germany’s
Erich Honecker, Kim Il-sung added to a litany of complaints:

“then there is the US army that is stationed in South Korea. And they even have nuclear weapons
there… South Korea is nothing more to the Americans than a colony and a military support
point. The Americans never intend to leave South Korea” (Woodrow Wilson Center 1984).

In more modern contexts, we see examples of the North justifying their nuclear program in the
name of their security. As one North Korean negotiator reportedly told a U.S. interlocutor during
Six-Party discussions, “You attacked Afghanistan because they do not have nukes. You attacked Iraq
because it did not have nukes. You will not attack us” (Cha 2012, 239-240). This position was also
made clear in the aftermath of the 2011 NATO military intervention in Libya. As a DPRK foreign ministry spokesperson noted,

“The present Libyan crisis teaches the international community a serious lesson… ‘Libya’s nuclear dismantlement’ much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former… to disarm itself and then swallowed it up by force… The DPRK was quite just when it took the path of Songun and the military capacity for self-defence built up in this course serves as a very valuable deterrent for averting a war and defending peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula” (KCNA 2011).

In sum, both the policy and the personality arguments have a difficult time accounting for North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. Much of the evidence presented above seems to be inconsistent with the expectations of these two perspectives. Because the North’s nuclear program has been a relative constant, but the factors included in the policy and personality arguments have tended to vary over time, it is difficult to see them as the primary motivators of this outcome. Instead, I have argued that it is the simple fact of U.S. power and its position on the Korean Peninsula that has motivated North Korea’s nuclear development. Re-examining the evidence in light of this power and positional perspective renders much of it far less puzzling than under the policy or personality interpretations.

Returning to the policy questions posed at the outset of this article: is CVID a realistic policy option? And is North Korea likely to abandon its nuclear program? If my positional argument is correct, then so long as the U.S. maintains a significant military presence on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea will be highly unlikely to abandon its nuclear program, regardless of the various combinations of threats and incentives that might be put forward. In calling for “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization,” while retaining the U.S.-ROK alliance and stationing tens-of-thousands of troops in the South, the U.S. seems to want to have its cake and to eat it too. It
is the power and the very presence of the United States that makes its own desired policy unworkable. And if this is the case, then CVID will be a non-starter.

Of course, none of this is to argue that if the U.S. departed from the Korean Peninsula and abrogated its alliance with the South, that the North Koreans would quickly abandon their nuclear program. The U.S. would remain the global hegemon and would retain its vast global power projection capabilities from Japan, Guam, Hawaii, even from the continental United States, still posing a potentially grave threat to the North Korean regime. Furthermore, the North’s motivations for acquiring the program initially and for clinging to it today are not identical, though they are related.\footnote{Having suffered through the decades of sanctions, isolation, and global moral opprobrium, the North would be hard-pressed to abandon its program easily. The point, rather, is that the odds of North Korea irreversibly abandoning its nuclear program—of CVID succeeding—would be markedly improved without a U.S. presence on the peninsula and an alliance with South Korea. And that in the current context, given the U.S.’s power and proximity to the North, the odds of North Korea giving up its nuclear program are essentially zero.}

What this implies is that the United States cannot have both a robust military presence on the Korean Peninsula and hope to denuclearize North Korea—it will have to choose. Furthermore, a withdrawal of U.S. troops may risk emboldening the North to attempt to reunify the peninsula by force.\footnote{Thus, if the United States plans to maintain its position on the Korean Peninsula and its alliance with the South, it will very likely have to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state (Lankov 2009).} Counterarguments

There are three counterargument critics will likely put forward to the claim that CVID is unlikely to meet with success. First, it may be argued that CVID is not hopeless, and that the key is to have China apply pressure on its neighbour and ally. Since China is the only state to have important
diplomatic, military, and especially economic ties with the North (Choo 2008; Manyin 2010), it is well positioned to apply the kind of pressure that could put North Korea on the path to nuclear reversal. In short, this counterargument reminds us that “the road to Pyongyang leads through Beijing” (Delury 2012). However, Beijing is highly unlikely to put the kind of pressure on Pyongyang that would be necessary for it to give up its nuclear program. This is also, in large part, because of the power and position of the U.S. in the region. Clearly the Chinese are frequently irritated by their recalcitrant neighbour, and would undoubtedly prefer a non-nuclear North Korea (Hua 2016). But there are two things from a Chinese perspective that are worse than the status quo. First, a catastrophic collapse of the North Korean regime, leading to massive refugee flows, loose nukes, and potential intervention by outside powers (Bennett and Lind 2011). And second, sharing a 1,420-km border with an eventually-unified, U.S.-allied, and possibly-nuclear “Greater Korea.” Therefore, from China’s perspective, so long as the U.S. is allied with South Korea and is stationing troops on its territory, a North Korean “buffer” will be preferable to any change in the status quo on the peninsula (Zhu and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015).

Second, some might argue that the policy of CVID is necessary, whether or not North Korea gives up its nuclear arsenal. The reason, they would continue, is that a reversal on CVID would be totally unacceptable to regional allies who rely on the U.S. for conventional support and its nuclear umbrella. States such as Japan and South Korea, it would be argued, may rethink their own nuclear policies (Girincione 2000; but see: Hughes 2007; Lee 2008), and even make moves towards alignment with China. However, it is important to remember that dropping CVID would simply entail a rhetorical shift; it would not change any facts on the ground. North Korea does and will continue to have nuclear weapons, whether the U.S. and other regional states accept it or not. And if the simple fact of North Korea’s nuclear possession has not prompted nuclear pursuit or defection in Japan and South Korea thus far, it is not clear why a change in U.S. rhetoric will.
Third, still others may claim that accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state would hurt the U.S.’s credibility elsewhere, damaging its reputation as steadfastly against nuclear proliferation. In the wake of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and other counterproliferation successes, they may argue, this is particularly threatening, promising to unravel the important progress made on non-proliferation worldwide. However, the research on the importance of reputation and credibility in international politics is mixed (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014), with some arguing that reputation has an important effect on interstate crises (Sartori 2002; Crescenzi 2007; Weisiger and Yarhi-Milo 2015), and others finding little or no evidence of this (Mercer 1996; Press 2005). While policymakers certainly think and act like their own reputations are on the line in security crises (Tang 2005), it is not clear that their adversaries see it this way, often acting based more on perceptions of power and interests than on reputational concerns. Thus, reputational concerns among policymakers can clearly act as self-fulfilling prophecies, but it is not obvious that other states perceive and act upon reputations in the way many assume. Therefore, the global “downstream” effects of a reversal of CVID may not be anywhere near as grave as many critics may claim.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the two basic positions on North Korean nuclear ambitions. The “doves” argument that the North develops nuclear weapons because it is threatened by U.S. and South Korean foreign policy was found to be unsatisfying in light of the evidence presented. The “hawks” claim that the primary problem is internal to the North Korean regime—rooted in its personality—was also found to be inconsistent with the data. The problem is that arguments from both of these camps should theoretically predict some variation in the North’s nuclear policy, but in practice it has been a constant. In contrast, I have put forth an argument based on the power and position of the United States on the Korean Peninsula, which seems to better account for the evidence than these alternatives. It is the simple fact of U.S. power and position, and not its policy
nor the North Korean’s revisionist personality, which explain North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. If this is true, CVID is a policy that is highly unlikely to meet with much success. Thus, if the United States hopes to retain its military position on the Korean Peninsula, it will have to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

These arguments have important implications for policy and theory. In terms of policy, if North Korea is as unlikely to abandon its program as I have argued, then perhaps it is time to drop CVID as a defining feature of U.S. foreign policy. In fact, doing so could possibly lead to improved bilateral relations and reduced tensions in the region. Setting CVID as a precondition for progress on a number of other important outstanding issues (as the U.S. long has) has acted as an impediment to even moderately better relations between the U.S. and the North. For one, the Korean War is technically not over, having ended in stalemate and with an armistice agreement in 1953. Second, the remains of hundreds of American POWs from the Korean War are still in the North, a festering subject of dispute between the two sides for decades. Third, the U.S. and North Korea have never normalized diplomatic relations, perpetuating mistrust between the sides and threatening grave miscommunication and misunderstanding in times of crisis. And finally, the abysmal human rights conditions in the North could always be a higher priority in bilateral relations. If the precondition of CVID were dropped, progress on these other areas—while certainly not guaranteed—would be far more likely than it is now.

The arguments made here also have important implications for IR theory. Most centrally, the arguments made above are a clear indication of the continuing relevance of structural theory in IR. While these approaches have largely fallen out of favour, being replaced by more tractable micro-level studies, the arguments and evidence presented above indicate the importance of at least being aware of the incentives and constraints posed by structural forces. Situations where there is persistent policy sclerosis—such as the one at hand—are a particular example of when structural arguments
can be of great value. As Waltz notes, “structure produces similarity in process and performance so long as a structure endures” (2010, 87). Structure certainly cannot explain everything, but it clearly has value in the analysis of regional or global security dynamics. Even, as we have seen, when dealing with the world’s most peculiar regimes.

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1 By “structural” I mean rooted in the distribution of relative material capabilities between states and their geographical or topographical surroundings, rather than their domestic regime type, intentions, or specific behaviors. See: Waltz (2010), 40, 79-101.

2 On levels of analysis in IR, see: Singer (1961); Waltz (2001).

3 The events upon which this figure is based can be found in Davenport (2017); FAS (ND); NTI (2012).

4 On the engagement efforts of various U.S. presidents, see: Cha (2012), 276-297.

5 Data from: Ministry of Unification (NDa); Ministry of Unification (NDb). Dashed line here and in all following figures indicates year of nuclear acquisition.

6 Inter-Korean trade data from: KITA (2016).

7 Aid data from: World Food Programme (2016).

8 Though it is worth noting that they do frequently argue for the use of coercive pressure to attempt to wean the North away from its nuclear ambitions, indicating that they aren’t entirely pessimistic.

9 For detailed data on all nuclear and missile tests, see CSIS (2017).

10 Data were collected by the author. The dataset includes 140 unique observations of North Korean militarized provocations between 1995 and 2016. Examples of militarized provocations included in the data are: territorial incursions on land, air, or sea; exchanges of fire across the DMZ or maritime boundaries; and missile tests. Nuclear tests are not included in Figure 5. Data are available in the supplementary material accompanying this article and on the author’s personal website.

11 This interpretation is in line with arguments realist scholars have long made about the effects of nuclear weapons. See: Waltz in Sagan and Waltz (2012).

12 As Paul Holland famously put it, there can be “no causation without manipulation.” See: Holland (1986), 959.

13 I thank Terence Roehrig for this point.