

NORTH KOREAN STRATEGIES IN THE ASYMMETRIC NUCLEAR CONFLICT WITH THE UNITED STATES

Kyung-Ae Park

The traditional structural-power approach falls short of accounting for North Korea's nuclear strategies. Contrary to conventional wisdom, North Korea has been engaged in balancing acts against the United States, employing internal balancing, soft balancing, and omnibalancing strategies, while deviating from bandwagoning, the dominant strategy of small states. The present analysis of the North Korean case also demonstrates that a state's behavior is not merely a response to the international structure of power distribution, but also a reaction to a state's domestic situation. In addition to changes in the international power structure and perceived security threats, North Korea's flagging economy, guiding ideology, competition with the South, and regime legitimacy have all compensated for the asymmetry of power between North Korea and the United States.

Key words: North Korea-U.S. relations, nuclear weapons, East Asian security

Introduction: Small States in International Politics

Although the term "small state" is quite vague as an analytical concept, it is generally agreed that all states are more or less

“small” as compared with the United States. Small states, despite their size, have often been behind international tensions and conflicts and, with the end of the cold war, conflicts involving small states have become more visible. A large number of studies have analyzed the interactions between great powers and small states. However, most of them have analyzed the interactions primarily from the perspective of a great power’s interest and concern, while small states have often been regarded merely as pawns whose existence is completely dependent on the great powers. Although relatively little has been written from the point of view of the influence and power of small states, some studies have argued that small states can play a more prominent role in the international system than is often assumed.¹ They point to a paradoxical phenomenon of the “power of the weak,” suggesting that small states are able to exercise substantial influence in the international system, defend their interests even against great powers, and manipulate and lead a great power against its will.

In line with this view, this article will examine the nuclear controversy between the United States and North Korea, regarding the latter as a small state vis-à-vis the former. The article will first examine nuclear challenges and controversies in the asymmetric U.S.-North Korea relations. It will then assess the strategies North Korea has pursued in its nuclear negotiations with the United States, by examining Pyongyang’s involvement in various balancing acts with Washington. Finally, the article will probe both the systemic and domestic levels of imperatives that have motivated North Korea to advance such strategies.

1. For example, Robert Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 2 (Spring, 1971), pp. 161-82; Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968); David Vital, *The Inequality of States: A Study of the Small Power in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); and Annette Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

Nuclear Challenges in the Asymmetric U.S.-North Korea Relationship

Tug of War

Over the years, U.S.-North Korea relations have been characterized by a tug of war, with the United States making every effort to contain the potential threat posed by Pyongyang to the security of East Asia, and North Korea vigorously resisting such attempts. The U.S. efforts to force North Korea to engage in decisions the latter otherwise would not make have not proven to be effective, however, in spite of Washington's occasional threat to use force. A major thorn in the bilateral relations is the longstanding nuclear standoff. Since the eruption of the nuclear disputes in 2002, several rounds of multilateral talks have been held; however, a breakthrough has yet to occur. The pattern of broken impasse followed by setbacks has continued to date.

The fourth round of the Six Party Talks (6PT) in September 2005 indeed made big progress in nuclear negotiations. Unfortunately, virtually every aspect of the agreements was subjected to interpretation and second-guessing. In the Joint Statement adopted at that time, all participants agreed "to discuss, at an appropriate time, the subject of the provision of light water reactor" to North Korea. Nevertheless, Washington's interpretation of the "appropriate time" clause, referring to the period following Pyongyang's verifiable dismantlement of all its nuclear programs, was not consonant with that of North Korea. Pyongyang laid out a step-by-step process toward dismantlement, with compensation following each step of the way. As a result, both parties continued to demand, respectively, a "freeze of nuclear programs for compensation" and "dismantlement for compensation."

Another contention was that North Korea's alleged nuclear program utilized highly enriched uranium. Although, in the Joint Statement, North Korea pledged to abandon all nuclear weapons and programs, it continued to deny the very existence of such a program, while the United States argued that North Korea had acknowledged its existence to the visiting U.S. envoy

in October 2002. Acting in retaliation, the United States suspended KEDO's (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) supply of fuel oil to North Korea, contending that the uranium-based nuclear program was in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework.

At the end of 2005, with both the United States and North Korea showing that they could only agree on disagreeing, all possible diplomatic progress stalled. In addition, the United States suspended all transactions of its financial institutions with Banco Delta Asia (BDA) in Macau, accusing the bank of helping North Korea launder money and distribute counterfeit U.S. dollars printed in Pyongyang for more than two decades. The bank's assets were frozen and the BDA later terminated its business links with all North Korean firms. However, North Korea denied any wrongdoing and the 6PT became deadlocked, with Pyongyang refusing to return to the negotiating table until the United States lifted its financial sanctions. In the midst of this impasse, North Korea raised the stakes in 2006 by testing its missiles in July and a nuclear device in October. As anticipated by Pyongyang, this move was soon followed by bilateral negotiations on the BDA issue and the resumption of the 6PT in February 2007. The talks made substantial headway on February 13, when North Korea agreed to shut down the Yongbyon nuclear facilities, allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to return (and eventually disable all existing nuclear facilities), and provide a complete declaration of all nuclear programs. In return, the other parties agreed to provide economic and energy assistance, and the United States and Japan agreed to move toward normalization with the DPRK.

Encouraged by all the parties' willingness to comply with the February agreement, nuclear diplomacy moved forward, producing a second-phase agreement on October 3 for the implementation of the 2005 Joint Statement. In fulfillment of its commitments under the October agreement, North Korea submitted a declaration of its nuclear programs in June 2008. The declaration included information about its plutonium program and addressed its uranium enrichment and proliferation activi-

ties. In return, the United States terminated the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act and delisted North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism in October. The delisting of North Korea, however, came only after another round of bitter struggle between the United States and North Korea. The contentious issue was a verification protocol for the nuclear declaration submitted by the North. When the United States pressed North Korea to accept a robust verification regime, North Korea vehemently resisted, arguing that there was no agreement reached on a verification protocol as a condition of delisting. Pyongyang threatened to suspend the disablement of its nuclear facilities and to start restoring its reactor in Yongbyon. After intense bilateral negotiations, the two agreed on verification measures and the United States rescinded Pyongyang's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism in exchange for the North's acceptance of a verification protocol.

However, this modest step forward encountered a severe blow again, setting a stage for another impasse. The agreed verification measures were to be finalized by confirming all details and to be adopted by the December 2008 meeting of the six parties. However, to nobody's surprise, the talks concluded without bearing any fruit. At the core of this latest impasse are some big loopholes in the agreement. For instance, the agreement reached on "inspection" virtually guaranteed future conflicts. The parties agreed on inspectors' access to declared sites, but for undeclared sites, they only settled on access under "mutual consent." This qualifying phrase allows North Korea to deny full access to a site or facility that the United States suspects is relevant to the nuclear program. This can also apply to the verification of uranium enrichment and proliferation activities. In addition, the parties agreed on the use of scientific procedures, including sampling and forensic activities, when verifying Pyongyang's past nuclear activities. However, North Korea refused to guarantee the sampling in writing, thus suggesting that outside inspectors would not be allowed to take soil and nuclear waste samples from the Yongbyon nuclear facility for analysis at foreign laboratories. It runs counter to the U.S. claim that the two sides had a

common understanding on the sampling issue.

The issue of interview access to North Korean nuclear experts poses further ambiguities. The stalemate on a verification plan invited the suspension of fuel aid by the United States at the end of 2008, and Pyongyang responded by threatening to slow disablement of its nuclear facilities. It seems obvious that North Korea is likely to protest any intrusion not specifically agreed upon.

Raising the Ante

With the 6PT ending in a deadlock, North Korea raised the ante again with the new Barack Obama administration. Despite repeated warnings from Washington, North Korea launched a rocket on April 5, 2009, arguing that a satellite launch was within the rights of any sovereign country. It claimed that the rocket successfully put a satellite into orbit—a claim refuted later by the United States—and emphasized that it was part of its space program, not a test for long-range missile technology as suspected by the international community. Although Western analysts agree on North Korea's failure to send a satellite into orbit, the launch demonstrated the longest-range rocket that North Korea has ever developed.

After the United States tried unsuccessfully to win a tough resolution in the UN in response to the launch, the Security Council, in a nonbinding presidential statement, condemned Pyongyang's action as a contravention of a UN resolution banning North Korea from any missile activity. It demanded tightening and enforcement of existing sanctions against Pyongyang, although the international community remained doubtful of the effect such measures would have. Angered by this rebuke, Pyongyang vowed to withdraw from any future 6PT meetings and to restart its nuclear program. Denouncing the tightened UN sanctions as an "unbearable insult" to the North Korean people, Pyongyang expelled all international inspectors from its nuclear facilities. It went even further by declaring that it would "never again" take part in six-party negotiations, nor would it

be bound by any agreements reached in previous negotiations.

Amidst the escalating tensions, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that Washington would not give in to North Korea's "unpredictable behavior." However, North Korea countered again by threatening that it would start reprocessing spent fuel rods in order to extract more plutonium, test a second nuclear bomb and an intercontinental ballistic missile, and push for a uranium enrichment program all at once. Pyongyang's nuclear test on May 25, 2009, and numerous missile launches thereafter, demonstrated that its warnings were not idle threats. Pyongyang continued to ratchet up tensions despite the strong condemnation from the international community, including China and Russia. The Choson Sinbo, a pro-North Korea newspaper, reported that Pyongyang would keep raising the stakes no matter how harshly it was punished by the international community, unless the United States discarded its hostile policy and began to pursue bilateral talks.²

North Korea's recent string of moves indicates that it could go even further in challenging the United States. Rather than accept its denuclearization, Pyongyang may seek recognition of its status as a nuclear-weapon state in order to negotiate an arms control agreement with the United States as an equal partner. Although North Korea initiated a peace offensive toward the United States most recently, Pyongyang's ever-strong threats demonstrate that the nuclear talks face a bumpy road ahead.

Despite the asymmetric power relations with the United States, North Korea has challenged Washington over the years, without bending to the demands of the latter. This often precipitated tensions between the two as shown in the discussion above. What balancing acts has North Korea advanced in countering the more powerful United States? The following section will investigate North Korea's strategies toward the United States.

2. "Pro-N. Korea Newspaper Urges U.S. to Open Two-way Talks," *Yonhap News*, May 27, 2009.

North Korea's Balancing Strategies Toward the United States

In the tradition of the neorealist approach that focuses on the structural, systemic level of analysis, scholarly consensus finds that small states engage in strategies to bandwagon, rather than balance, for survival. Small states are viewed as weak, bullied, and disadvantaged actors whose survival is precarious among power maximizers, and who thus suffer from an acute security dilemma. Stephen Walt, who refined Kenneth Waltz's balance-of-power framework with a balance-of-threat theory, contends that small states are "more likely to bandwagon than strong ones with a threatening power—for two reasons: they are more vulnerable to [external] pressure, and they can do little to determine their own fates."³ He defines bandwagoning as an act involving "unequal exchange" and a situation in which a "vulnerable state makes asymmetrical concessions to the dominant power and accepts a subordinate role."⁴ According to Walt, it is an "accommodation to pressure (either latent or manifest)" and a "willingness to support or tolerate illegitimate actions by the dominant ally."⁵ This definition of "giving in to threats" is widely shared by other scholars as well.⁶ Jack Levy also states: "Great powers balance against potential hegemon, whereas

3. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 173.

4. Stephen M. Walt, "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia," *International Organization*, vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring, 1988), p. 55.

5. *Ibid.*

6. See, for example, Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and Robert Kaufman, "To Balance or to Bandwagon? Alignment Decisions in 1930s Europe," *Security Studies*, vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pp. 417-47. However, Randall Schweller challenges this conventional usage of the term and adopts a different definition. For his argument that bandwagoning is often done voluntarily to gain profit, see "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer, 1994), pp. 72-107.

weaker states in the proximity of stronger states do what is necessary to survive, which often involves bandwagoning with the strong instead of balancing against them."⁷

Although bandwagoning is often discussed in the small-states literature as one of the most likely strategic options that weak powers may employ,⁸ several studies on asymmetric conflicts show that weaker powers have engaged in balancing acts such as war and brinkmanship crises against stronger states.⁹ More tellingly, according to the Correlates of War data set, weak states have won nearly thirty percent of all asymmetric wars during the last 200 years.¹⁰ The case of North Korea's nuclear disputes with the United States demonstrates that Pyongyang has been balancing against the United States by posing asymmetrical challenges and threats, while deviating from bandwagoning, the dominant strategy of small states. The following section will examine Pyongyang's various balancing strategies: internal balancing, soft-balancing, and omnibalancing.

Internal Balancing

The effort to counter threats through marshalling one's own resources is the most preferable balancing act for any state, as it

7. Jack Levy, "The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence," in Philip E. Tetlock et. al., eds., *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 231.

8. See Fox, *The Power of Small States*; Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1990); and Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*. Eric J. Labs, however, contends that balancing by small states is far more common. See his "Do Weak States Bandwagon?" *Security Studies*, vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1992), pp. 383-416.

9. See, for example, Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics*, vol. 27, No. 2 (January, 1975), pp. 175-200; T. V. Paul, *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer, 2001), pp. 93-128.

10. Samuel Kim, "North Korea and Northeast Asia in World Politics," in Samuel Kim and Tai Hwan Lee, eds., *North Korea and Northeast Asia* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), p. 12.

minimizes the state's reliance on outside forces. States engage in internal balancing by rearmament and military buildup through economic development. However, for small states that suffer from resource constraints, this would be an impractical strategy. Therefore, to accomplish internal balancing, small states need to rely on more cost-effective alternatives, such as nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons have been the most attractive strategic option for small states as they can alter the conventional power disparity and enhance self-reliant balancing against stronger powers. As Avery Goldstein contends, "[m]odern technology affects balancing behavior in the contemporary period . . . because it enables the weak to coerce the strong by threatening to inflict great pain on a militarily superior adversary."¹¹ These weapons have decisive strategic effects, especially in today's unipolar system, since without weapons of mass destruction (WMD) unipolarity would render any attempts to balance the overwhelming U.S. material superiority pointless; the weak would truly be condemned to "suffer what they must."¹² Nuclear weapons can also be excellent bargaining chips and can enhance national prestige, because the value of nuclear status receives international recognition. In short, nuclear weapons have been regarded as the single most efficient means for addressing security needs and resource constraints of small states.

North Korean nuclear weapons development reflects efforts to increase internal balancing, which illustrates how well Pyongyang recognizes the distinctive role of this strategy in empowering the weak. Internal balancing through conventional military preparations did not prove a viable balancing option for Pyongyang, given its severe economic and military disadvantages as compared with the United States and in light of the post-cold war loss of military support from its former allies, Russia and China. In the past, North Korea had been able to sustain internal balancing only by maintaining an ambiguous

11. Avery Goldstein, "Balance-of-Power Politics: Consequences for Asian Security Order," in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 178.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

nuclear capability, following the “neither confirm nor deny (NCND)” strategy, which once represented the U.S. stance on its nuclear status in South Korea. For North Korea, avoiding transparency in nuclear issues was a desperate need, as it could contribute to building a militarily powerful state or, at least, to being perceived as such.

As the 1994 Agreed Framework began to unravel in 2002, however, after the United States declared that North Korea had acknowledged its covert uranium-enrichment nuclear program in violation of that agreement, Pyongyang swiftly departed from its strategy of maintaining a calculated ambiguity. In 2003, following a statement at the UN by then Vice Foreign Minister Choe Su Hon, that Pyongyang had “no choice but to be in possession of a nuclear deterrent,” North Korea announced that it had finished reprocessing 8,000 spent plutonium fuel rods, enough to make six nuclear weapons. At the same time, in order to counter the U.S. response that it lacked any evidence to confirm Pyongyang’s statement, North Korea expressed an intention to display the “nuclear deterrent as a physical force” at “an appropriate time,” thus ending any doubts about Pyongyang’s possession of nuclear weapons. In its continuing efforts to convince the United States of its internal balancing power, North Korea in January 2004 showed an unofficial delegation of U.S. nuclear experts its Yongbyon nuclear facility that had been off-limits to outsiders since Pyongyang ousted UN inspectors at the end of 2002. What North Korea hoped to achieve by this move was to gain the upper hand in the nuclear tug of war with the United States by displaying its nuclear capability and convincing its visitors that the reprocessing of 8,000 spent plutonium fuel rods had been completed.

Pyongyang’s efforts culminated in February 2005 when it formally declared the existence of its nuclear programs. Its foreign ministry announced that the country had manufactured nuclear weapons for “self-defense” to cope with the Bush administration’s intention to “antagonize, isolate, and stifle” North Korea “at any cost.”¹³ Pyongyang used the nuclear test in the

13. Yonhap News, *North Korea This Week*, No. 332 (February 17, 2005).

following year, and again in May 2009, to back that declaration and further demonstrated its intention to improve a delivery system for a nuclear warhead when it launched a rocket in July 2006 and April 2009. The second nuclear test affirmed that Pyongyang already regarded itself as a nuclear-weapon state that has to keep refining and improving nuclear technology through multiple tests. Since the eruption of the current nuclear disputes in 2003, North Korea has been able to quadruple its nuclear capacities, increasing the possible number of nuclear warheads from between one and five to between five and twenty.¹⁴ Without doubt, Pyongyang has chosen to pursue the most reliable counter—nuclear weapons—against perceived threats from the United States, and has used these weapons as a strategic equalizer in order to overcome Washington's conventional superiority.

Soft Balancing

In today's unipolar system, seeking military balance through traditional hard balancing is not a viable option for any state, since no single state is powerful enough to balance the only superpower, the United States. Nevertheless, according to Pape, states engage in soft balancing against the United States to make its military forces more difficult to use, without directly challenging its military preponderance: They use nonmilitary measures such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements to delay, frustrate, and undermine the aggressive, unilateral security strategy of Washington.¹⁵ The preventive-war strategy of the Bush administration, Pape argues, has indeed marked a departure from traditional U.S. security policy and contributed to the emergence of soft balancing against the United States.¹⁶

For North Korea, which did not fail to conceive that just like

14. Cheon Seongwhun, "The Question President Bush Needs to Answer," *NAPSNET Policy Forum Online*, October 23, 2008.

15. Robert Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," *International Security*, vol. 30, No. 1 (2005), pp. 7-45.

16. *Ibid.*

Iraq, it could also become a possible target for Washington's preventive war strategy, soft balancing was a relatively rational option in an effort to solicit Beijing's and Seoul's support in settling the nuclear issue on its own terms. Near the end of the Bill Clinton administration, Pyongyang made conciliatory overtures to the outside world, and its diplomacy since then has been nothing short of unprecedented. In 2000, Kim Jong Il made his first-ever unofficial state visit to Beijing and began to renormalize the bilateral relations that had cooled down after Beijing's diplomatic normalization with Seoul in 1992. In the same year, Kim also caught the world by surprise by agreeing to the landmark inter-Korean summit and a summit meeting with then Russian President Vladimir Putin that marked the first visit to North Korea by a Russian head of state. Whether this significant reorientation was in part motivated by Pyongyang's anticipation of a leadership change in Washington to a more hard-line Bush administration remains uncertain. But it did help lay the groundwork for soft-balancing efforts that would enlist support from Beijing and Seoul.

In fact, China and South Korea's last two liberal governments led by Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun started to elevate their voices in the 6PT, urging the United States and Japan to take a softer stance toward North Korea, thus making it more difficult for the United States to force Pyongyang to accept its demands. Although these countries do share broadly consistent interests on the Korean peninsula, including North Korea's denuclearization, many of their priorities differ, which puts pressure on the United States and constrains its policy toward North Korea. Differences of opinion among the states, for instance, led one former KEDO official to proclaim, "It is at least as hard getting consensus among KEDO participants on nonproliferation strategy as it is getting agreement with the DPRK."¹⁷

Beijing's and Seoul's concerns arose partly out of their unease with a possible arms race in the region, which North Korea's nuclear armament could easily spark. Another major concern of Pyongyang's neighbors was a possible inflow of North Korean

17. *NAPSNET Daily Report*, January 12, 1999.

refugees should the Kim Jong Il regime ever fall. Pyongyang's collapse either through implosion or explosion is a potential time bomb for both China and South Korea, which thus attach much greater importance than the United States to ensuring the survival of Kim's regime. In soliciting support from these two neighbors, Pyongyang is playing the card of threatening them with a collapse of its regime.

Just before the second 6PT in February 2004, Pyongyang began its diplomatic maneuvering by dispatching a delegation to China in a move to solicit its support, and later officially reported that the Chinese had "admitted the reasonability" of North Korea's nuclear proposal.¹⁸ During Kim Jong Il's visit to China in 2004, two months before the third round of talks took place, Beijing reaffirmed that Pyongyang's demands for a security guarantee should be taken into account. Kim's visit to Beijing in January 2006, the fourth one since 2000, and one that was held amidst the financial sanctions imposed by the United States, reflected his willingness yet again to make use of strong bilateral ties. After Kim's visit, China's foreign ministry declared that the U.S. financial sanctions against North Korea had had a negative impact on the six-party negotiations.¹⁹

After Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests in 2006, China joined other members of the UN Security Council in adopting Resolutions 1695 and 1718 that banned any missile or nuclear activity by Pyongyang and prohibited member states from trading in weapons or luxury goods with it. Beijing's action signaled that North Korea's decision to go ahead with a nuclear test in spite of its earlier warning brought China embarrassment. Its ambassador to the UN, Wang Guangya, earlier emphasized that "no country is going to protect North Korea if it conducted a nuclear test."²⁰ Nevertheless, China made efforts to water down

18. *Josun Joongang Tongshin* (Korean Central News Agency), February 10, 2004.

19. Foreign Ministry representative Liu Jianchao at a briefing on February 14, 2006. *Interfax*, "Beijing: U.S. Sanctions Hamper Six-Nation North Korea Talks," cited in *NAPSNET Daily Report*, February 14, 2006.

20. Zhu Zhiqun, "Going Nuclear: Why Now and Now What?" *NAPSNET*

the resolution to make its implementation voluntary. It refrained from faithfully observing the resolutions by declining to publish a list of embargoed goods. It continued to export luxury products to the North, and its exports actually appeared to have increased in volume after the nuclear test.²¹ Despite the adoption of the resolutions, the bilateral trade between North Korea and China hit a record high of \$2.79 billion in 2008, growing 41 percent over 2007, and Beijing's exports accounted for about \$2 billion.²²

The latest rocket launch has sparked another debate in the Security Council on how to punish Pyongyang. The United States and Japan were harsh on North Korea, pushing for sanctions under a new resolution that denounced the launching. However, they failed as China along with Russia successfully blocked their rebuke, downgrading it from a resolution to a chairman's statement. The ongoing differences among member states provide grounds for North Korea's soft-balancing strategy against the United States. Arguing that sanctions and pressure do not help resolve the issue, China's UN ambassador, Zhang Yesui, called for calm and restraint: "Our position is that all countries concerned should show restraint and refrain from taking actions that might lead to increased tensions."²³ Its foreign ministry spokeswoman, Jiang Yu, went further to stress that "China and the DPRK are friendly neighbors. We will continue the friendly and cooperative relationship with the DPRK."²⁴

Nevertheless, China announced unprecedentedly tough sanctions on Pyongyang after the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1874 in June 2009 over North Korea's second nuclear test, thus expanding existing economic sanctions and tightening their enforcement. Since then, Beijing has been regulating

Policy Forum Online, December 7, 2006.

21. Marcus Noland, "North Korean Missile Test: Remedial Action," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 33 (April 6, 2009).

22. *NAPSNET Daily Report*, April 21, 2009.

23. "Obama Seizes on Missile Launch in Seeking Nuclear Cuts," *New York Times*, April 6, 2009.

24. *NAPSNET Daily Report*, April 15, 2009.

exports to North Korea of metals and materials that could be diverted for military use and even of food shipments. China indeed holds the key to the success of the economic sanctions as it supplies more than 90 percent of Pyongyang's fuel demand and 80 and 45 percent of consumer goods and food, respectively. China also accounts for more than 70 percent of North Korea's international trade. China's move, however, does not necessarily represent a basic reorientation of its policy toward North Korea. A recent survey of China's top foreign policy makers found a deep split between them in their opinion regarding the tough sanctions of Pyongyang.²⁵ As discussed above, if Beijing is forced to choose between a nuclear North Korea or a collapsing North Korea, the lesser evil would be the former. Thus, it is unlikely that China will cut Pyongyang completely adrift. In fact, even in the wake of the sanctions, China's foreign minister urged the international community to employ peaceful diplomatic means in resolving the nuclear issue.²⁶ Over the years, Pyongyang, in its pursuit of soft balancing against the United States, has successfully exploited China's need to prevent any instability in the region and a sudden collapse of North Korea.

During the decade-long rule of South Korea's liberal governments prior to 2008, Seoul had, on numerous occasions, formed a united front with China in negotiations concerning North Korea's nuclear issues. During the second round of the 6PT, Seoul had proposed energy assistance to North Korea in the initial "freeze" stage of nuclear dismantlement. Russia and China supported the idea, but Japan and the United States did not. However, a few days before the talks, Japan was reportedly persuaded to join the other parties, deviating from Washington's position. As one writer observed, ironically, the United States became diplomatically isolated, although the purpose of the nuclear talks was to isolate Pyongyang, not Washington.²⁷

25. Barbara Demic, "China Debates its Bond with North Korea," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 2009.

26. Jonathan Lynn, "China Urges Diplomacy in Iran, North Korea Nuke Rows," *Reuters*, August 12, 2009.

27. Donald Gross, "Strains in the Alliance, and the U.S. Offers a Nuclear

Ultimately, yielding to pressure from its allies, Washington presented a detailed and phased proposal during the third 6PT based on an earlier South Korean plan, under which South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan would jointly offer North Korea not only some energy aid, but also a security guarantee and talks to ease its economic and political isolation.

Former South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun publicly stated that friction between Seoul and Washington would be inevitable if the latter tried to further pressure Pyongyang in hopes that its regime would collapse.²⁸ In addition, South Korea's public attitude toward the North must have encouraged Pyongyang in its attempts to pursue soft balancing against the United States. A public poll showed that nearly 48 percent of young South Koreans wanted to see Seoul act on Pyongyang's behalf if the United States attacked North Korean nuclear facilities; only 11.6 percent said that South Korea should act in concert with the United States.²⁹ Another survey revealed that only 25.7 percent of South Koreans viewed North Korea as an enemy.³⁰ North Korea understood that the South, in an attempt to prevent the undermining of its sunshine policy, was inclined to resist Washington's hard-line policy. Thus, despite the stalemate in the 6PT, Pyongyang made steady progress in inter-Korean relations, especially in the economic arena. Inter-Korean trade topped \$1 billion for the first time in 2005, an increase of over 57 percent from the previous year, thanks to exports from the Kaesong Industrial Zone.³¹

However, the decade-long engagement policy of South Korea, which had provided opportunities for Pyongyang's soft-balancing strategy, came to a halt when the new conservative Lee Myung Bak government was inaugurated in February 2008.

Deal," *Comparative Connections*, Second Quarter (2004), p. 3.

28. *Chosun Ilbo*, "Roh Defiant in Korea-U.S. Tension," January 25, 2006.

29. "48% of Youth Would Support N. Korea in Case of U.S. Attack," *Korea Times*, February 21, 2006.

30. The survey was conducted in December 2005. Institute for Far Eastern Studies, *North Korea Brief*, No. 06-1-6-1 (January 6, 2006).

31. *Ibid.*

Lee's government linked the implementation of the previous two summit agreements to Pyongyang's resolution of the nuclear crisis and its commitment to economic reform. Pyongyang responded to the drastic changes in Seoul's attitude by launching highly confrontational policies toward the South, including a threat to tear up the 1953 Armistice Agreement.³² As demonstrated in Seoul's support for Washington's strong rebuke of North Korea's rocket launch and nuclear test, Pyongyang's soft-balancing strategy appears to have lost momentum with South Korea. The viability of this strategy is cast into doubt, at least until inter-Korean relations are restored to the level of cooperation of the previous years.

In sum, Pyongyang's efforts to form a united front with China and South Korea, when opportunities arrive with the latter, do not directly challenge U.S. military power, but constrain Washington's power to impose its will on Pyongyang. North Korea's soft-balancing behavior simply poses as a stumbling block for the United States.

Omnibalancing

The concept of "omnibalancing," which was suggested by Steven David to explain Third World alignment, assumes that the dominant goal of Third World leaders is to stay in power, and that the interests of the leadership elite—survival and maintenance of their power—better explain Third World alignment.³³ Focusing on the leader of the state, rather than on the state itself, makes good sense in the case of the Third World, where leaders' legitimacy is often fragile and the survival of the leadership is frequently threatened. David contends that Third World leaders face multifaceted internal and external threats and thus must

32. In response to Seoul's announcement on May 26, 2009 of its full participation in the U.S.'s Proliferation Security Initiative, Pyongyang declared that the Armistice Agreement was invalid and that the Korean peninsula had reverted to a state of war.

33. Steven David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*, vol. 43, No. 2 (January, 1991), pp. 233-56.

appease lesser threats in order to address and defeat more pressing ones. As a result, rather than simply balancing against threats, state leaders will often choose to appease secondary adversaries in order to counter prime adversaries, which can often be the domestic threats they are facing. Therefore, Third World leaders must align with one threat to address the other.³⁴

North Korea is a typical Third World state in the sense that its leaders face many challenges from within and outside. Although omnibalancing assumes that more immediate and pressing threats for Third World leaders are often the domestic ones, for Pyongyang, the two most serious threats have come from the outside—from the United States and South Korea. After the Korean War, while North Korea considered both South Korea and the United States as immediate sources of threat, the U.S. threat appeared as a secondary one compared to the one coming from the South. Therefore, in spite of its antagonism to Washington, in the 1970s North Korea first attempted to pursue direct negotiations with the United States. The North Korean Supreme People's Assembly sent open letters to the U.S. Congress requesting bilateral talks to discuss withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and signing of a peace treaty.³⁵ Taking the proposal as a ploy to drive a wedge between itself and South Korea, Washington ignored it. However, with the eruption of the nuclear issue, changes in North Korea-U.S. relations became inevitable, and in January 1992, high-level bilateral talks took place in New York. After many turns and twists, these talks led in October 1994 to signing of the Agreed Framework on North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons program. Since then, in spite of many hurdles, North Korea-U.S. relations have witnessed progress in several issue areas, from outright hostility and containment to on-again, off-again cooperation and mutual engagement.

It should not be seen as a coincidence that North Korea approached the United States in the early 1990s, at a time when its former allies, Russia and China, normalized their relation-

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Pyongyang Times*, March 30, 1974.

ships with South Korea. With the Soviet collapse and “betrayal” of the state’s former allies, and in light of the threat posed by its southern neighbor’s economic, military, and diplomatic successes, North Korea came to see the United States as the major possible guarantor of its security. The demise of the former Soviet Union provided North Korea with more freedom of action in dealing with the United States, which could later be used in countering South Korea’s primary threats. In order to defeat the more immediate threats from South Korea, North Korea decided first to appease its lesser threat, the United States, an omnibalancing effort that bore some fruit in the form of the Agreed Framework.³⁶ The Agreed Framework was hailed by North Korea as a “flawless agreement,” but it evoked severe criticism in South Korea as a failure of nuclear diplomacy. South Korean President Kim Young Sam publicly lashed out at the United States for its lack of knowledge and for being too eager to make a deal.³⁷ Fearing that the United States had sacrificed its interests, South Korea expressed bitterness over being shut out of the process, which put the South Korea-U.S. alliance under strain.

The United States turned out to be helpful in North Korea’s efforts to counter challenges from the South. The U.S. ambassador to South Korea at that time, James Laney, explicitly affirmed that after five decades the United States was making a shift in its North Korea policy from one of deterrence to “positive inducements to cooperation.”³⁸ Furthermore, he called for a change in South Korea’s policy toward the North. Robert Gallucci, the U.S. chief negotiator with North Korea on the nuclear issue, made some rather positive comments about North Koreans based on his negotiating experience with them, to the effect that there was very little ideological nonsense. The North Koreans were a lot more ordinary than he had expected.³⁹ Finally, in

36. For further on omnibalancing see Kyung-Ae Park, “Explaining North Korea’s Negotiated Cooperation with the U.S.,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 37, No. 7 (July, 1997), pp. 623-36.

37. *New York Times*, October 8, 1994.

38. *Korea Newsreview*, May 18, 1996, p. 10.

39. *Korea Newsreview*, June 1, 1996, p. 8.

response to Kim Il Sung's death, President Clinton offered his official condolences, a gesture that stood in sharp contrast to Seoul's refusal to do so. Likewise, the U.S. position toward North Korea demonstrated that the North Korean leaders had succeeded in appeasing Washington, while working toward defeating their main threat. While the United States was not a direct threat to North Korea at that time, South Korea, on the other hand, posed the risk of sparking a possibly rapid collapse of the Pyongyang leadership.

The tide was about to turn when the Agreed Framework began to unravel when the new South Korean government led by Kim Dae Jung came into power. His so-called sunshine policy stood in sharp contrast with the hostile policy of the George W. Bush administration. North Korea, without any prospects of obtaining the light water reactors promised in the Agreed Framework, changed its perception of primary and secondary threats. Suddenly, North Korea began to perceive the United States as more threatening to its leadership than South Korea, and consequently decided to defect from its cooperation with Washington. The United States lost its use for North Korea as a means to counter threats from Seoul against Pyongyang. The once brisk Washington-Pyongyang bilateral relationship suffered a major reversal in the early 2000s.

Since then, and until the end of Roh Moo Hyun's government in February 2008, Pyongyang had been turning to Seoul to ensure its political survival while countering the United States. Following their historic summit meeting in 2000, the North and the South have worked on enhancing their bilateral cooperation in both the economic and military arenas. The Kaesong Industrial Complex, reunions of separated families, partial reconnections of cross-border railways and roads, the Mount Kumgang tourism project, and the second summit meeting in October 2007 are among several noteworthy inter-Korean developments. The establishment of an office in Kaesong in 2005 for fostering inter-Korean economic cooperation marked the first stationing of South Korean officials in the North. Also, when the two states jointly celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of Korea's Liberation

Day in 2005, the North Korean delegation paid its first visit to the nation's war dead, including those who died during the Korean War, at the National Cemetery in Seoul. Clearly, Pyongyang lengthened its stride in foraying to the South.

By employing the omnibalancing strategy, the North Korean leadership derived some success from turning to the secondary threat, at first to the United States and then to South Korea, in its efforts to seek balance against its principal adversary. Pyongyang's strategy contributed to the U.S.-South Korea dispute over nuclear diplomacy and further strained the fragile Washington-Seoul alliance, which one former U.S. official likened to the relationship between a king and queen who were tired of living separate lives but were still making public appearances together.⁴⁰

However, another turn of the tide became unavoidable when the new conservative South Korean government took power in early 2008. Its conditional engagement policies, contradicting the policy orientation of its predecessor, led North Korea to turn its back on Seoul. Upon Seoul's cutting off its aid to the North in 2008, major inter-Korean economic ventures were shut down and political relations rapidly deteriorated. In the midst of the worsening relations, North Korea's leadership, in a parliamentary meeting held in April 2009, even decided to remove an organization in charge of inter-Korean relations, the National Economic Cooperation Federation, from its cabinet. During this power restructuring, the military further bolstered its authority, as will be examined below, while the influence of the communist party began to erode. The power shift further curtailed the role of those party members who supported a more conciliatory policy toward the South rather than the policy favored by the military.⁴¹

40. Kurt Campbell's speech on February 27, 2006 at a seminar; see "Analyst Says U.S.-Korean Ties Troubling," *JoongAng Daily* (Seoul), March 1, 2006.

41. For example, it was reported that a former point man on South Korea, Choe Sung Chol, was executed in 2008, having been accused of advocating closer ties with Seoul and allowing people to develop a favorable image of South Korea. See Bomi Lim and Heejin Koo, "North Korea Executes Former Envoy for South Korea," *Bloomberg*, May 19, 2009.

Making things worse, after Pyongyang's second nuclear test, Seoul announced its decision to participate fully in the Americans' Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which aimed to stop trafficking of weapons of mass destruction. North Korea immediately gave a stern warning to South Korea that its full membership, which would allow Seoul to stop and search North Korean vessels in South Korean waters, would be tantamount to a "declaration of war." In fact, the North declared that it was no longer bound by the Armistice Agreement, suggesting a return to a state of war. The Agreement has provided a basis for the conclusion of a U.S.-South Korea security alliance, provision of the U.S. nuclear umbrella for Seoul, and the stationing of U.S. troops in South Korea. Although, according to Seoul, the PSI issue has nothing to do with North Korea, Pyongyang apparently perceives the South as a more pressing threat than the Obama-led United States. In response to the UN condemnation of its rocket launch, North Korea said it would "never" again participate in the 6PT. Nevertheless, its statement refrained from any direct criticism of Washington, possibly suggesting its hopes for revived bilateral negotiations with Washington.⁴²

North Korea's best hope, and Seoul's worst fear, would be the North's ability to appease Washington as a secondary threat through bilateral negotiations, while countering South Korea, its new primary threat. Bill Clinton's dramatic visit to Pyongyang in August 2009, which accomplished the release of two detained American journalists, might provide Pyongyang with an opportunity to seize to reinforce its omnibalancing strategy. Although Washington was keen to stress that this was a private humanitarian mission, the visit immediately led Pyongyang's vice foreign minister, Kim Yong Il, to state that its bilateral relations with the United States would soon witness a significant development.⁴³ In fact, the visit set the stage for a renewed bilateral contact and subsequently led to the visit in December of Presi-

42. "South Korea Will Not Overreact to North Korean Backlash: Official," *Yonhap News*, April 14, 2009.

43. "North Korea: North Korea Relations to See Big Development Soon," *KBS News*, August 13, 2009.

dent Obama's envoy, Stephen Bosworth, to North Korea, marking the first direct high-level contact of the Obama administration. Well aware of Obama's willingness to engage former "rogues," and encouraged by his efforts to open dialogue channels with Cuba and Iran, Pyongyang, in employing its omnibalancing strategy, is likely to step up its diplomatic efforts toward Washington after a cooling off period, while pursuing less compromising policies toward Seoul.

Why Balancing Strategies?

The dominant paradigm in explaining state behavior has been neorealism. It stresses that the best way to account for foreign policy in an anarchic and self-help international system is by assessing the international distribution of power. Assuming that the foreign policies of states are rational responses to the structure of international systems, neorealism is relatively silent on domestic determinants, which led many studies to challenge the concept and address the importance of domestic constraints. These works contend that analysis of foreign policy should be attentive to domestic origins, as these often "outweigh international ones in the calculations of national leaders."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, these studies are primarily based on the experiences of great powers;⁴⁵ small states, which are faced with more external threats and preoccupied with survival, are less constrained by domestic factors in their foreign policy making.⁴⁶ Although

44. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 20.

45. Ibid. and James Rosenau, "Pre-theories and Theories of Foreign Policy," in R. Barry Farrell, ed., *Approaches to Comparative and International Politics* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966), pp. 27-92; Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, vol. 30, No. 2 (January, 1978), pp. 167-214. For a discussion of these works, see Miriam Fendius Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States; Challenging Neorealism in Its Own Backyard," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 25, No. 2 (April, 1995), pp. 176-77.

46. However, there are a few exceptions to this viewpoint. They include

structural variables are found to be the most relevant factors in explaining small-state behavior, systemic factors alone do not fully account for state behavior, especially the behavior of the state that is not yet integrated into the international interdependence web, such as North Korea. In such countries, domestic variables are of greater importance. The following section will focus on the external and domestic factors that have driven Pyongyang to display balancing behaviors toward the United States, rather than to bandwagon with it.

International Power Structure Change and Perceived External Threats

The drastic changes in global economic, political, and security environments since the late 1980s have had far-reaching effects on North Korea's status and influence within the international system. The breakup of the Soviet Union, the crumbling of Eastern Europe, and the absorption of socialist East Germany by the West were all frightening developments for North Korea, as the demise of socialism was widely viewed as a prelude to North Korea's collapse. The final blow for North Korea came when former allies Russia and China normalized their relationships with South Korea in 1990 and 1992, respectively. The rapidly changing security environment aroused Pyongyang's fear and sense of crisis. In response to this systemic level of changes, North Korea has launched several diplomatic offensives since early 2000, reaching out to the rest of the world and normalizing relations with a number of countries. These initiatives reflect North Korea's efforts to overcome the adverse struc-

Elman, "The Foreign Policies of Small States"; Steven David, "Explaining Third World Alignment"; David, *Choosing Sides: Alignment and Realignment in the Third World* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); Jack Levy and Michael Barnett, "Alliance Formation, Domestic Political Economy, and Third World Security," *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, vol. 14, No. 4 (December, 1992); Barnett and Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignment: The Case of Egypt, 1962-1973," *International Organization*, vol. 45, No. 3 (Summer, 1991).

tural changes in the international security environment.

North Korea's concern with security threats loomed large when George Bush took office in January 2001. Designating North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, as "regimes that sponsor terror," he vowed to deny them. For Pyongyang, the message was an alarming one, reinforcing its decades-long preoccupation with a possible U.S. attack. North Korea has always been suspicious of the United States and excessively concerned with the American military threat. Even though a U.S. attack is unlikely, as long as North Korea perceives the United States as a threat, Pyongyang will operate under that perception. Washington's vow for regime change in Iraq, followed by a large-scale military buildup and the subsequent military intervention, further reinforced North Korea's fear of being the next target. A comment in *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the Korean Workers' Party, read: "It is becoming certain that, in case the U.S. imperialists' invasion of Iraq is successful, they will wage a new war of aggression on the Korean Peninsula."⁴⁷ The long-held fear of a U.S. attack drove North Korea to come to the conclusion that the Iraq situation demanded acquisition of a strong military deterrent.

It remains to be seen if Pyongyang's threat perception will undergo any changes during the Obama administration, but, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton revealed in an interview, Washington's perception of North Korea has not changed. In spite of her acknowledgment that there was no evidence of active nuclear proliferation by North Korea, she proclaimed: "We consider North Korea to be a rogue regime . . ."⁴⁸ A 2009 poll, which reported that about 57 percent of American voters favored a military response to eradicate North Korea's missile capability,⁴⁹ backs Clinton's statement, thus adding to North Korea's sense of threat. The second nuclear test reflects Pyongyang's profound concern for its security and its intention to demonstrate the military preparedness of

47. *Rodong Sinmun*, March 28, 2003.

48. Interview with Fox News, *NAPSNET Daily Report*, April 28, 2009.

49. "Poll: Most Favor N. Korea Military Action," *United Press International*, April 6, 2009.

North Korea. However, Pyongyang announced that “when the U.S. nuclear threat is removed and South Korea is cleared of its nuclear umbrella, we will also feel no need to keep our nuclear weapons.”⁵⁰

The structural changes in the international system and the ensuing concern of North Korea for its national security have led the country to perceive the nuclear issue as a struggle for its very existence. For North Korea, nuclear weapons are the ultimate equalizer and security guarantor. It does not appear to be the purpose of the North Korean nuclear program to engage in an offensive nuclear conflict through enhancement of its own first-strike capability. Since Pyongyang already holds South Korea as a hostage with its conventional artillery, it does not necessarily need nuclear weapons to strike it. Furthermore, North Korea’s dire economy makes any military strike improbable. The North Korean nuclear program is rather Pyongyang’s reaction to its long and deeply-held preoccupation with American threats that endanger its own survival. When the issues remain perceived as related to survival alone, North Korea will maintain a strong motivation to resist U.S. demands.

According to Alexander George, the relations between stronger and weaker states are often characterized by asymmetry of motivation.⁵¹ This motivational asymmetry can compensate for the inferiority of a weaker state when that state has stronger motivation. The weaker state is then often willing to commit more of its resources, bear more costs, and fight more vigorously to achieve its desired goals. North Korea’s perceived stakes in the nuclear issue are much higher than those of the United States, and this motivational power of North Korea to deal with the structural changes and external threats drives it to balance against the United States rather than bandwagon with it.

50. “DPRK Foreign Ministry’s Spokesman Dismisses U.S. Wrong Assertion,” *Korean Central News Agency*, January 13, 2009.

51. Alexander George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1993), p. 111.

Economic Survival

The structural redistribution of power in the international system posed an insurmountable challenge to Pyongyang not only in the security arena, but also on the economic side. Pyongyang's economy was in great danger after the collapse of the socialist market. The North Korean economy continued to decline during the 1990s, recording negative growth rates for nine consecutive years. It is not surprising that whenever nuclear issues were raised, North Korea demanded monetary compensation in exchange for an inspection of its alleged nuclear sites or cessation of its nuclear exports. North Korea's representatives acknowledged the value of weapons exports for foreign exchange by stating: "Starting with the food problem, we must solve our economic problems alone . . . by aggressively progressing in the global advanced technology market which includes commercial satellite launches."⁵² Therefore, the latest rocket launch is not unrelated to Pyongyang's efforts to resuscitate its economy and build a "strong and prosperous nation (*kangsong taeguk*)" by 2012, the centennial anniversary of the late Kim Il Sung's birth. As one pro-North Korea newspaper emphasized, rocket technology should be a mainstay for any strong and prosperous nation as it can produce several ripple effects through commercialization and export.⁵³ Although the satellite failed to reach orbit, a defense technology expert argued that it would not affect sales because "as a missile launch, the test was a success."⁵⁴ Pyongyang certainly hoped to show off its technology for export.

Pyongyang's nuclear program, however, might not serve as its cash crop, since the international community will not tolerate Pyongyang's export of nuclear materials. The United States has already engineered a global project, PSI, which is designed to impede illicit trade in weapons of mass destruction. However,

52. *NAPSNET Daily Report*, September 15, 1998.

53. "DPRK Launches Rocket to Improve the Economy," *IFES North Korea Brief*, April 8, 2009.

54. Kwang-Tae Kim, "North Korean Rocket Raises Proliferation Concerns," *Associated Press*, April 8, 2009.

the North Korean nuclear weapons program is still an important bargaining chip for economic gain in the six-party or bilateral negotiations. Given that nuclear weapons have a potential economic value and could be a great asset for the country's economic survival, North Korea has a compelling reason to resist Washington's demands that substantial economic assistance won't be provided until Pyongyang dismantles its nuclear weapons. For Pyongyang, to bandwagon with Washington by accepting its demands would not be a rational strategy unless it receives substantial economic compensation and thus increases its ability to survive in a situation of economic disarray. From the perspective of state survival, concessions in military areas require economic compensation. Otherwise, giving in to the U.S. demands and giving up whatever leverage North Korea might have in the nuclear issue would be driving not only military, but also economic, survival into severe danger.

Consolidation of Regime Legitimacy

Beyond striving for mere regime survival, Kim Jong Il needs to keep proving the strength of his leadership and consolidating the legitimacy of his regime in order to maintain his rule. At times of political and economic hardship, this is a difficult challenge indeed. The ideological basis for the legitimacy of Kim Jong Il's regime is anchored in Kim's status as the executor of the *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology. However, the performance basis for his legitimacy has yet to be satisfied with achievements in the diplomatic, economic, and other spheres. His leadership on the economy is severely constrained, since he is bound to isolate the North Korean system from the outside world so that he can protect its ideological purity. On the other hand, his effective performance in the economic area necessitates an opening of North Korea's door to the outside world. In this sense, the North Korean leader is in a system that has what Diamond calls "generic vulnerability" built into it.⁵⁵

55. Larry Diamond, "Beyond Authoritarianism and Totalitarianism: Strategies

The nuclear crisis with the United States provides an opportunity that Pyongyang can capitalize on to enhance the performance basis of Kim's legitimacy. Kim's achievements in the foreign-policy area could somewhat offset the constraints placed upon his economic performance. Success in the nuclear negotiations with the United States would have significant implications for the consolidation of his legitimacy, as he would be credited for making Washington comply with North Korea's demands and for extracting any concessions from the stronger state.

The recent rocket launch and nuclear test will help Kim Jong Il reinforce his political legitimacy and power that might have been weakened by his reported illness. The nuclear test of 2006 coincided with the ninth anniversary of Kim Jong Il's elevation to the leadership. Also, the April 2009 missile launch closely followed March elections to the 12th Supreme People's Assembly and preceded the Assembly's first session in April, during which Kim was reelected as chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC). For the leadership, the rocket launch was the best possible means of celebrating these political events, and undoubtedly it was also meant to boost people's morale and national pride. In fact, Pyongyang organized a mass rally where about 100,000 people gathered to celebrate the satellite launch under a banner reading, "We enthusiastically congratulate the successful launch."⁵⁶ Again, after the nuclear test, another mass rally was held, hailing the test as a self-defense measure against the hostile policy of the United States. The test has significant implications for the regime in reasserting a grip on power as well as inspiring and unifying the whole nation.

Further solidifying his leadership, Kim Jong Il expanded the power of the NDC at the parliamentary meeting in April 2009, increasing its membership from eight to thirteen and bringing in nonmilitary officials. Whereas military personnel had previously dominated the NDC, it now boasts a collective leadership that

for Democratization," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter, 1989), p. 150.

56. Jae-Soon Chang, "North Korea Holds Massive Pro-rocket Rally," *The Associated Press*, April 8, 2009.

includes representatives from both the military and the party, thus paving the way for the regime's further stabilization. The new primacy of the collective leadership is likely to be in tandem with the leadership succession that seems to be currently underway in Pyongyang. Recently, Kim's third son, Kim Jong Eun, has been reportedly assigned to a low-level instructor post at the NDC, possibly a sign of being groomed as the next leader. This move also indicates that the NDC might serve as a channel through which the succession will be carried out, much as the Workers' Party did for Kim Jong Il.

In a possible attempt to ensure an orderly succession of power, Jang Song Taek, Kim Jong Il's brother-in-law, was also appointed, along with his own confidants, as an NDC member. He has recently emerged as a decisive player in the process of political succession, placing his allies in key leadership posts. These include Kim Young Choon, the new minister of the Peoples' Armed Forces, and Rhee Young Ho, the newly appointed chairman of the central staff of the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces. In addition, Kim Jong Il's longtime intimate, General Oh Keuk Ryul, has been promoted to the post of vice chairman of the NDC. The NDC might provide a support network for Kim's son with Jang and Oh working behind the scenes as caretakers. It is imperative for Pyongyang to assure regime stability and legitimacy, as well as to unite the nation in order to engineer a secure succession.

Under these circumstances, bandwagoning with the United States and giving in to Washington's pressure would be a difficult choice for Pyongyang, as it would damage both Kim Jong Il's performance and his ideological legitimacy. Kim's urgent need is to consolidate his legitimacy, further enhancing North Korea's engagement in balancing behaviors and its defiance of the United States.

Ideological Constraints and the Legitimacy Competition with the South

The *Juche* ideology in North Korea, a country built on the foundation of national self-determination and anti-imperialism,

is the central guideline for both domestic and foreign policies. It permeates every aspect of North Korean society. Thus, when countering a U.S. threat, *Juche* is a significant morale booster. For Pyongyang, which has extolled independence as a major tool in its foreign policy making, it would be difficult to jump on the bandwagon by giving in to any intervention and pressure from the "imperialists," whom it has denounced since the state's inception. Undoubtedly, there are other countries that maintain their ideology of self-reliance, sovereignty, and independence. However, no other country has adopted self-reliance as the ruling ideology. In North Korea, *Juche* is linked to politics, economics, social life, and even to the very existence of Kim Jong Il's leadership and his legitimacy.

Furthermore, North Korea's unbending attitude toward the United States, based on *Juche*, appeals to many South Koreans, especially the younger generations, and this presents the only comparative edge North Korea could possibly have over the South in its legitimacy competition with Seoul. Ever since the division of Korea, the two have engaged in a fierce competition to be recognized as the only legitimate state on the peninsula, a situation that has triggered a "legitimacy war" between the two. The reconciliatory moves by both Koreas that we have witnessed in the past decade did not result in a sudden end to the deep-rooted competition between their separate systems.⁵⁷ As noted earlier, Pyongyang, which by appeasing its secondary threat has been pursuing the omnibalancing strategy, is facing again an intensified legitimacy race after Seoul reverted back to pose as the North's primary threat under the Lee government. It will not be a stretch of an argument to say that the 2009 missile launch is part of Pyongyang's efforts to create a competitive

57. For the argument that the inter-Korean summit is not a prelude to the end of the legitimacy race but the very continuation of it, based on Pyongyang's rational calculation that the summit would enhance its position in the legitimacy competition, see Han S. Park, "The Nature and Evolution of the Inter-Korean Legitimacy War," in Kyung-Ae Park and Dalchoong Kim, eds., *Korean Security Dynamics in Transition* (New York: Palgrave St. Martin's Press, 2001), p. 14.

edge over South Korea, whose plan was to launch its own unit into space in August 2009.

Although North Korea has been at a disadvantage diplomatically, militarily, and economically in the race with the South, Pyongyang believes it has an edge on the South in one area: national sovereignty based on the *Juche* ideology. *Juche* promotes the belief that North Korea represents a sovereign polity embodying a national spirit, while South Korea, being a puppet in the hands of the “imperialist powers,” cannot claim political sovereignty and credibly appeal to people’s nationalist sentiment. South Koreans’ attraction to *Juche* has been clearly on the wane in recent years in the wake of Pyongyang’s provocative missile and nuclear tests. However, even today, if South Koreans were assured of no military conflict with North Korea and somehow led to believe that the North’s nuclear facilities were to be engaged only in the context of U.S.-North Korea relations, many South Koreans would not hesitate to support Pyongyang’s unbending attitude toward the United States. As noted earlier, several polls indicate that young South Koreans no longer view North Korea as an enemy.

In this light, it might be a particularly rational policy choice for Pyongyang to balance against the U.S. pressures. No matter how much pressure the United States may exert on North Korea, Pyongyang can never afford to bandwagon with it. Its submission would destroy the only comparative edge it possibly has over the South, and consequently would signify a complete defeat in the competition.

Furthermore, the consequences of bandwagoning would not be limited only to the nuclear issue.⁵⁸ Such behavior would have a far-reaching impact on North Korea’s united-front reunification strategy, aimed at mobilizing its sympathizers in the South. Clearly, a North Korean cave-in to the United States would disappoint all South Koreans who have been sympathetic to the North’s independent and nationalistic policies. Losing these

58. For further analysis on this point, see Kyung-Ae Park, “North Korea’s Defensive Power and the U.S.-North Korea Relations,” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 73, No. 4 (Winter, 2000-2001), pp. 535-53.

sympathizers, no matter how small they are in number, would mean that North Korea has lost strategic ground. In this sense, meekly bandwagoning with the United States would have multiple implications for North Korea beyond the nuclear issue. In light of its ideological conviction and rivalry with Seoul, there is every reason for Pyongyang to avoid bandwagoning and to continue exhibiting balancing behaviors.

Conclusion

Contrary to conventional wisdom, North Korea has been engaged in asymmetric balancing acts against the United States, employing internal balancing, soft-balancing, and omnibalancing strategies. Over the years, it has shown its capacity to withstand pressure, to pursue its course with tenacity, and to extract some critical concessions from the United States, thus proving that superiority of military or economic power cannot always guarantee the compliance of a small state with the interests of its bigger opponent. The traditional structural-power approach falls short of accounting for North Korea's balancing behaviors.

The present analysis of the North Korean case also demonstrates that a state's behavior is not merely a response to the international structure of power distribution, but also a reaction to a state's domestic situation. When analyzing a country that has not yet engaged itself in the web of international interdependence, such as North Korea, the salience of domestic factors becomes even more apparent. In addition to changes in the international power structure and the perceived security threat, North Korea's guiding ideology, *Juche*, its competition with the South, its flagging economy, and regime legitimacy have all compensated for the asymmetry of power between North Korea and the United States. They have helped Pyongyang increase its capacity to balance against the pressure from Washington.

As for the policy implications of this analysis, given the current international sanctions imposed on North Korea and the tough stance of the Washington and Seoul governments toward

Pyongyang, North Korea could lose much of its ground in carrying out both the soft-balancing and omnibalancing strategies. As North Korea loses its maneuverability, it could come to rely more on hard balancing in its efforts to derive negotiations with Washington, unless it decides to bandwagon with the United States. Although the best scenario for Washington would be to see Pyongyang opt for the bandwagoning strategy, this might not be possible without resorting to military action. In pursuit of a hard-balancing strategy, should North Korea decide to remain a nuclear-weapon state, the Obama administration would only have limited options for resolving the issue.

Given the long history of animosity in their bilateral relations and North Korea's necessity not to bandwagon with Washington, Pyongyang cannot be expected to budge from its current strategy of refusing any submission to the United States. Unless the sources of Pyongyang's balancing acts get addressed in the course of future international and domestic developments, Washington's policy goals vis-à-vis North Korea—that is, denuclearization, nonproliferation, termination of missile programs, and improvement of human rights conditions—will not only be impossible to achieve, but will further encourage North Korea's continuing defiance.

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