

North Korea's Withdrawal from the NPT: Neorealism and Selectorate Theory

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The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is an international disarmament treaty that aims to prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons. Nearly all countries had ratified the NPT after its creation in 1967 because countries became increasingly aware that nuclear weapons could produce indiscriminate annihilation (Debs and Monteiro 2017: 334). North Korea joined the NPT in 1985 as a non-nuclear-weapon state; however, it withdrew from the Treaty in 2003 and began developing nuclear weapons. It is puzzling why North Korea's policy towards the NPT shifted from compliance to defiance during this period. Understanding the main reasons behind North Korea's 2003 NPT policy shift could perhaps provide insights into why North Korea wants nuclear weapons today, and thereby inform policymakers about ways of re-engaging North Korea to the denuclearization agenda.

This essay seeks to understand why North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 from the theoretical perspectives of neorealism and the selectorate theory. The neorealist explanation presumes that the external power balance changed, so North Korea wanted nuclear weapons to deter security threats. The selectorate theory presumes that domestic politics changed, so the regime leader was incentivized to pursue nuclear programs for domestic support. After analyzing North Korea's relations with surrounding countries, and changes in the composition of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's winning coalition, this essay argues that neorealism explains why North Korea withdrew from the NPT better than the selectorate theory because there is a stronger correlation between U.S. military presence in East Asia and North Korea's demand for nuclear weapons.

Historical Background

During the Cold War, North Korea faced security threats from American nuclear arsenals and troops in South Korea and Japan (Anderson 2017: 634). The NPT provided an opportunity for North Korea to resolve its security threats because all the surrounding powers – United States (US), South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia – ratified the NPT with the promise to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. North Korea joined the NPT with the expectation to normalize relations with the US and South Korea (Pollack 2010: 116).

By joining the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state in 1985, North Korea agreed to stop developing nuclear weapons and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to routinely inspect its nuclear facilities (Choe 2006: 38). When the IAEA requested a special inspection on plutonium waste in 1993, Pyongyang threatened to withdraw from the NPT by claiming that the inspection violated North Korea's sovereignty and national interests (Pollack 2010: 109). Nevertheless, Pyongyang backed down from this withdrawal demand after signing an Agreed Framework with Washington in 1994, under which North Korea ceased its nuclear program in exchange for economic and technical support. In 1995, the US, South Korea, and Japan established the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to oversee the Agreed Framework's implementation (CRS-1 2006: 20).

North Korea remained quite compliant with the NPT until 1996. However, Pyongyang resumed its plutonium facilities and opened a highly enriched uranium program in 1997 (CRS-2 2006: 13). The KEDO countries reacted by implementing an oil embargo on North Korea in 1998. Although Pyongyang and Washington engaged in negotiations in 1999, no agreement was reached this time because Pyongyang would not accept further IAEA inspections in

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exchange for sanction relief (Kim 2014: 111). Pyongyang expelled the IAEA team in 2001 and officially withdrew from the NPT in 2003 (ibid). Pyongyang's different response to the 1993 and 2003 nuclear crisis may have been prompted by changes in the international or domestic context, which could be explained through neorealism and the selectorate theory.

Theories

Neorealism

Neorealism suggests that individual states function as identical units in an anarchic world. States are in a self-help situation because there is no formal central authority to ensure their national security (Waltz 2008: 104). Realists are primarily concerned about hard power and suggest that states seek to maintain a balance of power. One states' power increase incentivizes surrounding states to accumulate more power or create alliances to balance against the more powerful state because states do not know each other's intentions (Levy 2013: 584). Realists argue that the destructive power of nuclear weapons urges one state to deter the security threat from a nuclear state by acquiring nuclear weapons itself or by joining alliances with other nuclear states (Sagon 1996-1997: 57). Hypothesis 1 illustrates how neorealism explains why North Korea withdrew from the NPT:

H1: North Korea withdrew from the NPT because North Korea wanted to acquire nuclear weapons to protect its national security against surrounding nuclear states.

The following evidence would support H1: 1) an increase in surrounding states' power increases North Korea's demand for nuclear weapons (defiance with the NPT); a decrease in surrounding states' power decreases North Korea's demand for nuclear weapons (compliance with the NPT); 2) Deteriorating relationships with allies increases North Korea's demand for nuclear weapons; 3) North Korea responds more to hard power (i.e. military) threats.

Selectorate Theory

The selectorate theory suggests that a regime contains a winning coalition (support the leader), a selectorate (can choose the leader), and the disenfranchised (cannot choose the leader). The leader needs to satisfy the winning coalition in order to maintain power. A small winning coalition incentivizes the leader to maintain loyalty by providing private benefits to the few; this likely prompts territorial expansion (Weeks 2012: 327). A larger winning coalition incentivizes the leader to provide public goods like social welfare which benefits more people. As an autocracy, North Korea's rulers had small winning coalitions (Mesquita 2013: 228). Hypothesis 2 illustrates how the selectorate explains why North Korea withdrew from the NPT:

H2: North Korea withdrew from the NPT because the regime leader is incentivized to maintain nuclear programs to provide private benefits to his winning coalition.

The following evidence would support H2: 1) North Korea's leader has a small winning coalition with private interests to maintain nuclear programs; 2) a winning coalition with more private interests in nuclear programs incentivizes more NPT defiance; a winning coalition with less private interests in nuclear programs triggers less NPT defiance; 3) the leader garners domestic support by appealing to private benefits rather than public benefits.

Empirical Analysis

This section traces North Korea's NPT policy from 1985 to 2003 and examines if policy shifts correlated more with changes in external power balance (H1) or domestic politics (H2).

Evaluating Hypothesis 1 (Neorealism):

Primarily, North Korea's defiance with the NPT correlated with deteriorated relations with its nuclear allies – the Soviet Union and China. After the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, Moscow and Beijing established diplomatic

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relations with South Korea in 1992 and stopped providing nuclear support to North Korea (Pollack 2010: 103). These events may have induced North Korea to threaten an NPT withdrawal in 1993 because losing the nuclear alliance prompted Pyongyang to build its own nuclear deterrence. Furthermore, Boris Yeltsin pursued pro-west policies while China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001, which may indicate that neither country would protect North Korea in case it was invaded by the US and South Korea (Kim 2014: 105). As a result, Pyongyang felt the necessity to achieve self-defense by developing its own nuclear weapons in 2003, defying the NPT. Nevertheless, North Korea's relation with China and Russia cannot explain why North Korea backed down from the 1993 NPT withdrawal demand yet actually withdrew from the NPT in 2003. This difference is better illustrated by changes in American military presence in East Asia.

North Korea's demand for nuclear weapons more strongly correlated with US military presence in East Asia. From 1992-1996, the US withdrew all nuclear arsenals from East Asia and decreased the number of military personnel in South Korea from over 41,000 between 1985-1991 to around 35,000 between 1992-1996 (Kane 2004: 4). During this period, North Korea largely complied with the NPT by allowing the IAEA to inspect seven nuclear sites and ninety grams of plutonium (Arms Control 2020). Although North Korea in 1993 threatened to leave the NPT, Pyongyang backed down from this withdrawal demand and signed the 1994 Agreed Framework with Washington, under which North Korea actually shut down its plutonium reactors and removed 8000 fuel rods that could produce 4-6 nuclear weapons (CRS-2 2006: 8).

In contrast, American military presence in East Asia increased from 1997-2003. The number of American soldiers in South Korea increased annually and exceeded 40,000 by 2003 (U.S. Census 2004: 332). Additionally, the US and South Korea continued to conduct joint military exercises with Kitty-Hawk-class aircraft carrier, the USS Vincennes Aegis missile cruiser, and amphibian ships (Kim 2014: 102). These military capabilities enabled the US and South Korea to attack North Korea if they wanted. Pyongyang perceived direct security threats when Washington labelled North Korea as an enemy in the "axis of evil" (ibid). As expected by neorealists, North Korea defied the NPT during this period. In 1997, Pyongyang restarted its plutonium facility and opened a uranium program that could produce two atomic bombs annually (CRS-2 2006: 13). Pyongyang declined further agreements with the US and assertively withdrew from the NPT in 2003 (ibid.). A security dilemma developed: North Korea developed nuclear weapons to counter American military threats, and the US deployed more troops in East Asia to check North Korea. Therefore, observable implications support the neorealist explanation that North Korea defied the NPT in 2003 because North Korea wanted nuclear weapons to deter American military threats.

Arguably, diplomatic breakthroughs and humanitarian aid could have decreased North Korea's security threats. South Korea's Sunshine Policy in 2000 helped reconcile North-South relations, and both Koreas entered the Sydney Olympics together (Anderson 2017: 626). Moreover, the US provided food aid to North Korea from 1997-1999 (Pollack 2010: 119). However, these activities did not alleviate Pyongyang's perceived military threats, so North Korea still restarted its nuclear programs and withdrew from the NPT. This observation supports the realist assumption that states primarily react to hard power (i.e. military) changes and question if international agreements or aids would guarantee national security under anarchy.

Evaluating Hypothesis II (Selectorate Theory)

North Korea's domestic politics satisfies the condition of a small winning coalition with affiliated interests in nuclear programs. North Korea is an autocracy ruled by Kim's familial succession. According to North Korea's Leadership Watch (2021), the ruling Kim likely has an extremely small winning coalition of ~25-30 people from the Korean Worker's Party (KWP), the Korean People's Army (KPA), and the Kim family. The KPA affiliates may have private interests in domestic nuclear programs because the Bureau of the Ministry of People's Armed Forces directly managed nuclear developments (Habib 2010: 2832). North Korea may defy the NPT if the regime leader wanted to please his winning coalition through maintaining domestic nuclear programs.

North Korea's NPT policy correlated with changes in the composition of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's winning coalition. Kim Il-sung ruled North Korea until 1994 by practicing *Sondang* (Party-first) politics, which made the KPA under the Party's rule (Woo 2018: 231). It is therefore rational to expect that Kim Il-sung's winning coalition contained

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more Party influence. Because the KWP had fewer private interests to pursue nuclear programs, Kim Il-sung could comply with the NPT by freezing plutonium facilities in 1994. In contrast, Kim Jong-il's succession in 1997 depended on the KPA's support. He practiced *Songun* (Military-first) politics by raising the KPA's power and prioritizing resources to defense-related sectors (Pollack 2010: 101). Kim Jong-il switched the Army's top commander to the National Defence Commission headed by Kim Jong-il himself and allowed the Nuclear-Chemical Defence Bureau to directly report to him (Woo 2018: 230). It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that Kim Jong-il's winning coalition contained more KPA members affiliated with the nuclear program. For this reason, he pleased his winning coalition by opening the plutonium and uranium facilities and withdrawing from the NPT in 2003.

In fact, Kim Jong-il provided private interests to the nuclear sector at the expense of public benefits. During the 1995-1998 Great Famine, Kim Jong-il's regime underwent immense domestic instability as over one million people died (Lee 2018: 474). However, rather than providing social welfare to the wider population, Kim Jong-il gave resource priorities to the nuclear sector. For instance, Kim Jong-il unfroze the plutonium facilities and opened the uranium program in 1997, exactly during the Great Famine's worst point (Kim 2014: 100). This evidence suggests that during internal instability, Kim Jong-il garnered domestic support by providing private benefits to his small winning coalition rather than providing public goods for the larger population.

However, the selectorate theory has limitations in explaining North Korea's NPT policy change. First, although Kim Jong-il raised the KPA's status, the KPA's power never exceeded the Party's (Weeks 2012: 330). Moreover, Kim Jong-il's winning coalition still contained members from the KWP and the Kim family who had less interest in nuclear programs. Therefore, it is questionable that the KPA influence was sufficient enough to trigger a complete change in North Korea's NPT policy. Furthermore, empirical evidence does not support the selectorate theory's expectation that autocratic leaders use war and territorial expansion to provide private goods for the winning coalition (Weeks 2012: 327). While North Korea's nuclear policy appeared belligerent from 1997-2003, it never engaged in open conflicts against the US or its East Asian allies. This evidence suggests that providing private benefits does not always need war. Therefore, observable implications only partially support the selectorate theory.

Discussion

The empirical analysis suggests that neorealism better explains why North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 because North Korea's NPT policy more strongly correlated with American military presence in East Asia. This answer engages in the wider literature of why states want nuclear weapons by supporting Schelling's (1966) argument that nuclear weapons are primarily useful for deterrence and brinkmanship purposes.

The conclusion contains limitations. First, the neorealist analysis undertakes a regional approach by assuming that troops and arsenals near the Korean peninsula produce military threats; it neglects how long-distance missiles elsewhere may produce equal threats on North Korea. Additionally, the neorealist analysis assumes that American military presence in East Asia threatened North Korea alone, while the America's actual intention may be checking China and Russia. Moreover, because North Korea remains an autocracy, a lack of transparency prevents foreign scholars from exactly knowing who are in the ruling Kim's winning coalition and their associated interests. Therefore, the analysis of Kim's winning coalition is based on reasonable inferences from available information. Lastly, all primary and secondary sources are in English, so there may be a western-bias reflecting western scholars' perceptions of what North Korea hoped to gain from the NPT.

Conclusion

This essay suggests that neorealism is better than the selectorate theory in explaining why North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003. Observable implications demonstrate that Pyongyang's policy toward the NPT correlated more with American troop's presence in East Asia, which means that North Korea withdrew from the NPT because North Korea wanted to acquire nuclear weapons to deter American military threats from 1997 to 2003. While the changes in the composition of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's winning coalition also partially correlated with North Korea's policy shift regarding the NPT, there is a weaker evidence support for the selectorate theory explanation. An implication for this conclusion is that future denuclearization attempts on the Korean peninsula need to overcome the

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mutual fear between North Korea and the US. Perhaps, facilitating multilateral negotiations might open the state's black box and promote international cooperation in denuclearization.

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