

# NATION-STATE LEVEL OF ANALYSIS OF NORTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY ON NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

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## Abstract

*North Korea became a nuclear weapon state in 2006 and has vehemently pursued and advanced its nuclear weapons program against the desires of the international community with claims that its policy on nuclear deterrence is to deter enemy states from attacking. Hence, the issue has been a source of debate in recent years. The study therefore conducted an analysis of North Korea's foreign policy on nuclear deterrence using the nation state level of foreign policy analysis to better understand the foreign policy decision. The study found that states peculiarities such as the type of government, bureaucracy, military capacity, identity and ideology, national interest, location and national resources, population, public opinion, and economic capacity among others, can influence a state's foreign policy decision-making. The study concludes that despite the authoritarian leadership in North Korea, all these other elements and characteristics within the state actively shape North Korea's foreign policy on nuclear deterrence.*

**Keywords:** Nuclear deterrence, disarmament, nuclear weapons, nuclear proliferation, sanctions, foreign policy.

## Introduction

In 2003, North Korea also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and began working full-scale towards becoming a nuclear power. This was achieved in 2006 when the state tested its first nuclear weapon. In 1985, it became a signatory to the NPT and by 1992, it agreed to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards (Geburu, 2015). Nuclear energy has other uses apart from the building of nuclear weapons and certain special elements such as plutonium and uranium are required to successfully build nuclear weapons (IAEA, 2017). Therefore, non-nuclear weapon states that are parties to the NPT are allowed to have nuclear energy plants so long as they are not for the building of nuclear weapons and under the

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safeguard of the IAEA. However, not long after North Korea agreed to the IAEA safeguards and inspections began, the IAEA found that the quantity of plutonium and nuclear waste solution declared by North Korea did not match their own findings (Carrel-Billiard & Wing, 2010). For further investigation, the IAEA team requested that they be allowed access to two of North Korea's nuclear sites that appeared to be used for the storage of nuclear wastes, but the state leadership refused. By 1993, North Korea announced its plan to withdraw from the NPT in the next three months following the Article X (1) of the treaty but eventually, these plans were halted after being temporarily talked out of it by the United States (Carrel-Billiard & Wing, 2010).

According to Carrel-Billiard and Wing (2010), North Korea made its first move toward starting a civilian nuclear program in the 1950s and by the 1960s, the construction of the Yongbyon nuclear research complex started. The transition to becoming a nuclear weapon state would have come sooner had the 1994 Yongbyon nuclear installation program not been stopped under the United States – North Korea Agreement Framework. The framework led to the freezing of all nuclear activities in the state in exchange for the building of two light water reactors for the DPRK by the United States (with the support of the Republic of Korea (ROK), also known as South Korea and Japan) and other added benefits. However, this agreement suffered a bad fate as it was problematic from the start. Eventually, in 2003, North Korea withdrew from the NPT and despite all efforts at the Six-Party Talks which was an attempt by the United States, Republic of Korea, Russia, China, and Japan to reach an agreement with the state to end its nuclear program, North Korea became a nuclear weapon state in 2006 (Buszynski, 2013).

The nation-state level of analysis is the second foreign policy level of analysis identified by Kenneth Waltz in his 1959 book “Man the State and War”. Waltz (1959) referred to this level of analysis as the second of three images. For Snider (1961), the nation-state is the primary actor in international relations. Although relatively new school of thoughts such as constructivism will beg to differ, traditional theories of International Relations such as realism and liberalism both agree that the state is the primary actor on the international arena. The nation-state is a level of analysis that is considered by most analysts when examining a foreign policy decision/objective of a state. It engages the institutions of the state, its bureaucracy, and its characteristics to explain foreign policy decisions because the “domestic dynamics specific to each country shape the country's ambitions” (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p. 30).

## Type of Government

The type of government or regime type of a state is a very important feature that must be considered when conducting a nation-state level of foreign policy analysis. A state with a democratic authority will be more subject to checks and balances from other arms of government than a state that is run by a dictator who controls all affairs of government. North Korea has an authoritarian government which means that there is little to no checks and balances on the individual decision-maker, and he controls every single aspect of government including foreign policy. Despite this, North Korea still has three arms of government, the executive (the Central Peoples Committee (CPC) and the State Administration Council (SAC)), the legislative (the Supreme People's Assembly) and the judiciary like almost every other country within the international system but all three branches are subject to the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea (Zook, 2012). These arms of government are not independent of each other, and this makes the concept of checking and balancing each other out extremely difficult. Although every decision must align with the desires and mandate of the supreme leader, there are still other bodies (not arms) of government that can make minor independent decisions that are in line with the principles of Kim Jong Un without him actually calling the shots. An example of such body is the Office 101 described by Jan Jin-Sung in his 2014 book "Dear Leader".

In as much as the Kim dynasty would like to portray themselves as "eternal leaders" of North Korea, higher and above every other citizen in North Korea, they still do not know everything neither can they do everything for themselves; just as they have eyes, ears, and mouth on their human body, they also have other eyes, ears, and mouths in the form of humans who advise, inform and act on their behalf. In terms of foreign policy decision-making in the state, although advise and relevant information can be gotten from different bodies and institutions within the government, the final decision must be that of the supreme leader (Kang, 2011). However, it is also important to note that such bodies can play major roles in delaying or steering foreign policy decisions in their favor because they hold all necessary information (Miller, 2005). Unlike it is obtainable in democratic states like Nigeria for example, where certain and most foreign policy decisions made by the executive arm of government would be subject to scrutiny by the constitution and the legislature, foreign policy decisions are simply subject to North Korea's supreme leader despite the country possessing a constitution of its own and an additional Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System. Clearly, for every

authoritarian government, the individual leader is not only above the law but is himself, the law. The state's foreign policy on nuclear deterrence has not been an exemption to any of these; the type of regime in the country has made it very easy to pursue and further nuclear deterrence in the state because of the absence of checks and balances. The totalitarian nature of the regime makes it easy for one person to advance a major foreign policy decision without questions.

## **Bureaucracy**

The bureaucracy is made up of tenured civil servants and state officials who are subordinate to the elected representatives, that is, the executives (Halperin, Clapp, & Kanter, 2006). It encompasses almost all institutions of government, and it is expected to be politically neutral (Morin & Paquin, 2018). Because the bureaucracy is tenured, most of the civil servants unlike the elected representatives spend long terms in service and are often present at the beginning and end of most elected regimes. This group plays an active role in both domestic and foreign policy decision-making most especially in modern democracies. Usually if a decision is not favored by the bureaucracy, it may experience delay or might even be completely resisted (Kang, 2011). However, it is important to note that, in the events leading up to a foreign policy decision-making, politics can come to play in the bureaucracy depending on its institutional design. According to Morin and Paquin (2018, p. 101), "the more agencies are institutionally independent from the government's executives, the more they are likely to pursue their own preferences, to seek greater autonomy and to make executive foreign policy objectives difficult to meet".

In the case of North Korea, institutions of government that make up the bureaucracy are not independent of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) which is the leading institution and ruling party in North Korea (Zook, 2012). As a result of this, less politics come to play as opposed to what is obtainable in most modern democracies. However, despite the peculiar circumstances surrounding the DPRK, just like every other state, the bureaucracy still plays a major role in foreign policy decision-making within the state. The most indispensable resource of every bureaucracy is their expertise; these bureaucrats sometimes spend up to 35 years in service and they get to witness several regime changes. Although, the situation in North Korea is a bit different since regime changes do not occur very often, the bureaucracy in the state still has an indispensable resource - their expertise. They hold all necessary information as it pertains to their area of service and intelligibly organize it to advise the individual decision-

maker (Kang, 2011). It is also important to note that, what information is presented and how it is presented is what would shape the decisions of the leader. Even though institutions of government may not exactly have the final say above that of the supreme leader, they can delay information or manipulate policy decisions in their own favour (Miller, 2005). An example of such an institution is the Korean People's Army.

## Military Capacity

The military capacity of a state is a very important criterion for understanding a state's foreign policy objective. A state without a high military capacity might encounter difficulties in pursuing certain foreign policy objectives within the international system, most especially the aggressive policies; both the size of the military and its strength play a major role. North Korea possesses one of the world's largest militaries with military personnel of over 1.4million (World Bank, 2019). One of the biggest institutions of North Korea is the Korean People's Army, the Korean People's Army is the official army of North Korea comprising of the Naval Force, Ground Force, Air and Anti-Air Force among others (Minnich, 2005). North Korea also operates "military first" doctrine known as the Songun.

Songun is the "military first" policy of North Korea which was developed in the mid-1990s by Kim Jong Il (Hymans, 2008). Under this ideology, the military became the most important and dominant institution in the country and a means to "solve social, economic, and political problems" within the country (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021, p. 4). Although this ideology continues, the Workers Party as an institution of government is beginning to gain more strength under Kim Jong Un. This however does not mean that there is a change from the "military first" policy to a "party first" policy. Under the party charter, there is a reference to the "military first" policy which explains that the policy will be instituted as a political system of socialism by the party (Kim, 2015). North Korea has an exceptionally large military that is not proportionate to its population, and it is one of the most militarized countries in the world as it continues to maintain one of the largest conventional militaries' that directly threatens South-Korea (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2021). According to Roy (2015), 22% of the country's GDP is spent on the armed forces because of the policy and about 40% of its revenue is spent on manufacturing military weapons (Captivating History, 2020). In 2001, all North Korean citizens under forty years of age were conscripted for compulsory three-year military service by Kim Jong Il to further establish the "military first" mindset in the society. Everyone was included, from high school students,

all the way to central party cadres who had to leave their posts to serve in the military (Jang, 2014). Judging by the above explanation, North Korea understands just how important its military capacity is to its foreign policy and despite being an economically poor country, their military is one that cannot easily be brushed aside.

## **Identity and Ideology**

The identity, ideology, history, and culture of state goes a long way to explain its foreign policy decisions. A state that identifies as following a particular ideology may tend to make foreign policies that are offensive towards states with a different ideology but make foreign policy decisions that are of a more friendly nature with other states that share similar or the same ideology. How a state identifies itself within the international system plays a vital role in its foreign policy decision-making. Nigeria for example identifies itself as a big brother for other states in West Africa and Africa at large and this has greatly informed their policies especially in relations to states within the continent. The history of a state also significantly influences its foreign policy. For example, states with a colonial heritage might find themselves making foreign policy decisions that align with or does not affect that of their previous colonial masters because of the historical relationship between both states.

According to Jang (2014), the division between North and South Korea was not caused by a difference in language, religion, or ethnicity but by political ideology. When the United States and the Soviet Union divided and took over Korea, the ideological positions they held were transferred to each half of the Korean peninsula they occupied and the ideological battle in the form of the cold war that happened between them also took effect between the North and South Korea (Chang-II, 2010). Since the 1953 armistice that created a DMZ between North and South Korea, the ideological positions have remained the same: South Korea – liberal democracy, North Korea – Communism (or communism/socialism of some sort that revolves around a personality cult). This rooted ideology has greatly influenced its foreign policy; because the DPRK's ideology is similar to that of China and of course, its previous imperialist – Russia, the DPRK has been able to maintain a somewhat friendly relationship with these states. The role of this ideology in the foreign policy of nuclear deterrence can also not be downplayed; the ideology endorses the ultimate leadership and rulership of one leader with little to no checks and balances and that has made the pursuit, achievement and furthering of nuclear deterrence within the state possible.

North Korea's internally known official name is the Democratic People's Republic of Chosun (Korea) as it identifies the ROK as southern Chosun (Jang, 2014). For the constructivist school of thought, identity plays a very major role in a state's engagement with other states within the international system A.K.A. its foreign policy - "identities are representations of an actors understanding of who they are, which in turn signals their interests" (Theys, 2017, p. 37). The DPRK not only identifies itself as Korea but also defines the boundaries of Korea only from their own point of view (Jang, 2014). The DPRK also portrays southern Chosun (South Korea) has being led by the treasonous regime of a United States puppet. This understanding and identity that the DPRK adopted is one of the factors that influenced the DPRK's "military first" policy of the Songun that claims to have the ultimate goal of reunifying both halves of the Korean peninsula through the possession of superior military capabilities. This identity has also influenced the need to protect themselves from the United States and the treasonous puppet regime in South Korea by acquiring nuclear weapons to keep these two at bay.

## National Interest

Foreign policy and national interest are close concepts in international relations; the basis of a state's foreign policy is the national interest which in turn directs the course of the foreign policy (Adamu, Muda, & Ahmad, 2016). The central policy instrument in the conduct of foreign policy is always the campaign and pursuit of national interest. Thus, national interest refers to the totality or the aggregate of interest of individuals and groups within a given nation state (Carlsneas & Guzzini, 2011). Looking at it from its classical perspective, national interest encompasses the various strategies adopted in the international interactions of states to ensure the preservation of the stated goal of society (Ogwu, 1986). "No nation, no matter how lofty it's ideal and how genuine its desire to abide by them can base its foreign policy on any other than its own national interest" (Jackson & Sorenson, 2013). This suggests that majority of foreign policy analysts and political leaders attach considerable significance to the concept. Morgenthau (2006) is of the opinion that national interest is determined by the political tradition and the total cultural context within which a nation formulates its foreign policy. He maintains that the main requirement of a nation state is to protect their physical, political and cultural identity against encroachment by other nation States. Therefore, "in any political discourse, national interest serves two primary purposes- as an analytical tool and as an instrument of political action" (Adamu, Muda, & Ahmad, 2016). "National interests are evoked to justify virtually

every action of the state, from generosity to genocide” (Adamu, Muda, & Ahmad, 2016).

These national interests which can also be called selfish ambitions, play a key role in achieving North Korea’s foreign policy on nuclear deterrence. The DPRK considers deterring the United States as an interest of priority because it has always felt threatened by them (Park, 2000). Since the United States has its military forces stationed close to the DMZ and the Republic of Korea also enjoys extended nuclear deterrence from the same United States, it becomes necessary for the DPRK to ensure their survival at all costs in the case of an attack by the United States. To successfully deter the United States, the DPRK, following the realist school of thought, believes that it must carry out tests on its nuclear weapons and other ICBMs even if it means doing so at the expense of other states. The tests are conducted to indirectly inform the enemy states (the United States and ROK in particular) of their capabilities and the assurance of mutual destruction in the case of an attack to deter them from attacking at all. Fortunately for North Korea, the international system is anarchic and there is no single sovereign authority or international ‘police force’ to enforce international law or stop them from achieving their national interest; the most the international community can do is to impose sanctions which so far, have proved ineffective.

## **Location and Natural Resources**

The location and natural resources of states often plays a role in their foreign policy and in the case of North Korea, it plays a very important role in their nuclear deterrence policy. North Korea is located on the Korean Peninsula in the East of Asia, right beside its Southern counterpart although separated by a demilitarized zone (DMZ). It also shares borders with countries two major countries that have been known to be its strongest allies within the international system, China, and Russia. This special positioning of North Korea has had significant impact on its foreign policies, especially that of nuclear deterrence. Both North and South Korea used to belong to one Korea before the end of the Second World War when the Cold war states, United States and Russia decided to deepen their enmity by splitting up the country two ways (Chang-Il, 2010). The split had further damage on both North and South Korea by leading up to a major war between them, known as the Korean War (1950-1953).

There is a consensus however that this war was a proxy war between U.S. and Russia; after the war in Korea ended, the U.S. never removed its troops



from South Korea and subsequently mounted additional troops close to the DMZ (Cumings, Abrahamian, & Ma'oz, 2004). South Korea has since not only enjoyed the presence and protection of the United States military but also extended nuclear deterrence against North Korea from the United States. Unable to relocate itself, North Korea has constantly felt the need to protect itself from the United States who has military operations running so close to its borders (Rodger, 2008). For North Korea, the need to survive in the very “unsafe” location and situation that they found themselves in generated a great need to build a nuclear deterrent. This could be why some scholars such as Woo (2022) believe that North Korea’s desire for the bomb ages as far back as the establishment of the state itself.

As the other superpower that encroached on Korea before its split, Russia (who also shared border with North Korea) maintained its interest in the state and significantly backed it up until it no longer could after its fall as the Soviet Union in 1989. The foundations of North Korea’s monolithic ideology were laid in the Soviet Union’s communist ideology and this during the cold war years enriched the friendship between both parties and subsequently between Russia and North Korea (Isozaki, 2017). Unfortunately, after Russia’s loss in the cold war, it could no longer be of significant assistance to North Korea, but the state still had to survive against all odds because of the U.S. military operations going on in the South. Hence, the efforts towards achieving nuclear deterrence became intensified.

In terms of natural resources, the DPRK is rich in coal, copper, flourspar, gold, graphite, iron ore, lead, magnesite, pyrites, molybdenum, tungsten, and Zinc (Yoon, 2011). The state is also recorded to have a large uranium ore deposit which is constantly mined and refined to produce uranium; uranium is a radioactive chemical element required in the production of nuclear reactors (Kurbanbekov, Woo, & Chirayath, 2019). According to Berger (2014), the DPRK’s natural uranium deposit is the starting point of their nuclear weapons production. The international scene was aware of North Korea’s large uranium deposits long before its separation from the South and it was even recorded by Pollack (2011) that both Japan (who had earlier conquered Korea) and Russia made attempts to mine uranium in the Northern half of North Korea. The state’s nuclear cooperation agreement in 1959 with the then Soviet Union is believed to have led to the discovery of more uranium ore deposits (Berger, 2014). Going by this, it does become very easy for the DPRK to pursue a nuclear deterrent when it possesses a major required element in very large quantity.

## **Population**

According to the World Bank (2021), North Korea has a population of over 25 million people. However, it is not only the size of a population that is significant to the foreign policy of a state but also its composition and the functionality of the population. The DPRK has a functional population of over 17million (82%) which makes up the labour force running from age 15 to age 64 (World Bank, 2021). As a result of the authoritarian nature of government in the state, every citizen is within the reach of the state, the children are conscripted into the Korean People's Army as early as age 14 and are automatically launched into the world of civil service (Jang, 2014). Although the size of the population when compared to its southern counterpart with 51 million is small, the state possesses a highly functional population that have no choice but to do what is required of them when it is required; the constant human right violations within the state makes this very easy (Ulferts & Howard, 2017). With a labour force of over 80% that has no other choice but to be functional when it is required, the pursuit and sustenance of a nuclear weapons program became easier than it would have been if the state had to appeal to citizens for participation and assistance.

## **Public Opinion**

A nation-state analysis cannot be done without considering the public opinion in the state. Although it has been established that the state has a highly functional population, it has also been established that the authoritarian nature of government and constant human rights violation has made it very difficult for the public to have an opinion. In the DPRK, there is not a thing like "opinion"; citizens are told and taught what to think and what to believe (Ulferts & Howard, 2017). The personality cult surrounding the Kim dynasty, although not acknowledged has made North Korean's consider every of their leader from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un as great leaders that they cannot and must not go against (Lim, 2015). Due to the inability of having opinions and other life-threatening challenges in the DPRK, several citizens have defected from the state.

The absence of public opinion therefore eases the possibility of pursuing a foreign policy objective even if there are aggrieved sects of the population who do not support such policies. Achieving and furthering the foreign policy on nuclear deterrence has been a life-long dream of the Kim Dynasty which was finally brought to life by the Supreme leader, Kim

Jong Un, grandson of the states founding father, Kim Il Sung. There is a consensus that this dream was easier to accomplish because the citizens do not have the right to have opinions and only the wishes of the decision-maker matters.

## Economic Capacity

The economic capacity of a state is a great determinant of the kind of foreign policy objective such a state will pursue in its engagements with other states in the international system. This is because, increasing military capacity, weapons stockpile and technological strength, a buoyant-enough economy is required. North Korea's economy follows the Juche ideology which is the official ideology of the Workers Party of Korea (WPK). The ideology was founded by Kim Il Sung and it is based on the principle of nationalistic self-reliance (Lee G. , 2003). The Juche is also the basis of the North Korean economy; it promotes economic sustainability through heavy industry and agriculture within the state (Captivating History, 2020), thus, isolating North Korea from the rest of the world. Unfortunately, the state only has 17% arable land and most of the land there is mountainous. By the 1990s, the country was launched into a full economic crisis due to the fall of the Soviet Union – the state's major support, the death of the supreme leader, Kim Il Sung, and natural disasters that could not be managed; all which eventually led to the food crisis known as the Arduous March (Moon, 2009). The state barely managed to survive through international humanitarian aids. Although the North Korean economy has been on a steep decline for decades mostly because of these, the state in 2014 passed an act which allowed for some foreign trade and joint ventures with other states known as the Enterprise Act (Captivating History, 2020).

The DPRK runs a command economy, that is, the economy is centrally planned and determined by the DPRK government. However, the state also operates two separately divided economies: the People's economy and the Second economy (Jang, 2014). The second economy is all about the Songun "military first" policy; 22% of North Korea's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) goes into the military (Roy, 2015). For a country that barely has enough to spare where citizens are concerned, the DPRK happens to invest a huge sum of its GDP in the military. However, as earlier explained, achieving the deterrence is a core national interest for North Korea, even if it means doing so at the expense of its impoverished population. Therefore, the state, although not economically buoyant enough for the citizenry, relatively has the economic capacity to fund a nuclear program because that is where a large chunk of the GDP is invested.

## Conclusion

After conducting the nation-state level of analysis, the study found that the state's regime type which is authoritarian in nature and does not allow for checks and balances significantly influences its nuclear deterrence. The bureaucracy which although may not make final decisions, still could delay or steer policy options in their favor because they hold all information and advise the individual decision-maker based on their expertise. The study also found that the presence of a functional population that is not allowed to have opinions makes it easy for the state to pursue, achieve and advance its foreign policy on nuclear deterrence. Finally, the state's core interest is to deter the US from attacking and without the state's decision to pump almost 25% of its GDP into the military and every spare income to its nuclear program, the state would never have been able to achieve the foreign policy objective.

In conclusion, although North Korea possesses an authoritarian leader that makes all decisions, state peculiarities other than its type of government such as the bureaucracy, military capacity, identity and ideology, national interest, location and natural resources, population, public opinion, and economic capacity actively shape the states foreign policy on nuclear deterrence. However, this list is not exhaustive.

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