

Great-Power Rivalry and the Nuclear Development of Weak States: *The Cases of the Two Koreas*

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Summary

This article analyzes the two Koreas' nuclear development from the perspective of great-power rivalry. Based on structural realism, this article argues that nuclear proliferation is meaningfully correlated with the strength of competition between rival great powers. As a comparative case, South Korea's failed nuclear development in the 1970s can be explained by a weakening of great-power rivalry resulting not only from détente between the United States and the Soviet Union but also from the reconciliation between the United States and China. By contrast, an emerging rivalry between the United States and China since the end of the Cold War has structurally permitted North Korea to develop a nuclear weapon. Fundamental resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue will therefore scarcely be possible without structural relief of the ongoing competition between the United States and China.

Keywords: nuclear proliferation, great-power rivalry, US-China relations, nuclear development of the two Koreas, China's North Korean strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

Donald Gregg, the former station Chief of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in South Korea and former Ambassador to Seoul, has argued that North Korea's current nuclear development effort is similar in many ways to South Korea's nuclear development activity in the 1970s. At that time, South Korea had a highly authoritarian political system and attempted to develop nuclear weapons as a self-help effort amid concern over weakening of the security guarantee of its bigger ally (in that case, the United States), which also has been the case more recently for North Korea (*Hankyoreh* 2011). Nevertheless, the outcomes of the two cases are starkly different: while South Korea failed to acquire nuclear weapons, North Korea has (almost) succeeded in achieving nuclear capability, as its fifth nuclear test in September 2016 demonstrated.

This article analyzes reasons that caused such different results of the nuclear development efforts between the two Koreas within the context of great power rivalry, particularly, a competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China. The comparative analysis of the two Koreas' nuclear development is methodologically advantageous since unit-level variables such as intention of nuclear development and domestic politics can be controlled without great difficulty. As stated, both Koreas had a highly authoritarian political system and attempted to develop nuclear weapons as a self-help effort amid concerns over weakening of the security guarantee of their bigger allies. Despite these similarities in the unit-level, the different results between the two Koreas imply that dissimilar structural factors might have caused such differences.

The large literature on nuclear proliferation, as Sagan (1996/1997) properly summarizes, has clarified various causes of nuclear development, such as external security, bureaucratic interests within domestic politics, normative achievements, or global status. However, whatever the causes, a weak state such as two Koreas that harbors a nuclear ambition must have actual abilities to accomplish such an objective. In other words, states that have their willingness to develop nuclear weapons should possess economic capacity and latent nuclear weapons production capability, or benefit from the diffusion of nuclear technologies (Jo and Gartzke 2007, 176). The failure of

nuclear development by Egypt, Libya, and Iraq clearly shows that capability is a necessary condition for a weak state to become a nuclear power. This implies that a supply-side analysis of nuclear development must not be overlooked (Kroenig 2010; Fuhrmann 2009; Fuhrmann 2011). Paraphrased in Waltz's terms, this problem can be rewritten as discovering a permissive cause for a weak state's nuclear development (Waltz 2001, 232).

In this article, we argue that the different outcomes of nuclear development in the two Koreas (in different time periods) were caused by dissimilar strategic relations among great powers surrounding the two Koreas. First, using the framework of structural realism, we explain how nuclear powers' rivalry leads to weak states' power of the weak, both in general and for nuclear development in particular. Then, we empirically examine the US-China competition as a permissive cause of the two Koreas' nuclear (non) development. We first focus on the South Korean case of the 1970s, within the context of *détente* between the United States and the Soviet Union and reconciliation between the United States and China. Then, we analyze the current North Korean case. We explain how the emerging US-China rivalry has permitted North Korea to wield its power of the weak and enable it to acquire nuclear weapons. Finally, we conclude our paper with a summary of our main argument along with some policy implications.

II. GREAT-POWER RIVALRY AND WEAK STATES' NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT

It is an irony that, despite their official opposition to nuclear proliferation, most great powers have been somehow involved in weak states' nuclear development (Fuhrmann 2011, 83). It is well known that France assisted Israel's nuclear development from the late 1950s, and the Soviet Union also helped China's nuclear program until the late 1950s when their relations began to become strained. In a similar vein, China supported Pakistan's nuclear development from the late 1970s, and the United States transferred nuclear technologies to South Africa in the 1950s, although that was carried out for civil purposes (Reed and Stillman 2010). This implies that nuclear prolifera-

tion to a weak state is scarcely possible without a great power's assistance or tacit approval. In short, as Monteiro and Debs (2014, 17) explain, whenever a powerful ally fails to take away its weak ally's willingness to nuclearize, the protégé may have the opportunity to acquire nuclear weapons. Why do great powers show such contradictory behaviors? When do they export nuclear bombs? Under what conditions do they restrain themselves from spreading nuclear weapons?

To these queries, Matthew Kroenig (2010, 36-40) suggests three hypothetical answers. Nuclear weapons states, he argues, tend to provide more sensitive nuclear assistance to nonnuclear states when they are not power-projecting states, they share a common enemy with the recipient state, and they are less dependent on a superpower. In short, the reason for exporting the nuclear bomb is a strategic one. Matthew Fuhrmann (2011, 87-93) attempts to extend Kroenig's argument into civilian nuclear cooperation between states. According to Fuhrmann, Nuclear states are more likely for strategic reasons to offer assistance with civilian nuclear technologies to their allies, to an enemy's enemy (particularly enemies of the most powerful state), and to democratic states if the suppliers are also democracies.

Yet, these arguments contain a causal framework too comprehensive to be disproved. According to Kroenig's main hypothesis, the Soviet Union, a power-projecting state, should not have aided China's nuclear development, but Moscow did so. Kroenig (2010, 119-128) defends this anomaly by claiming that Moscow's strategic concerns about the US threat at the time outweighed their reluctance to provide nuclear assistance. However, merely adding auxiliary factors such as a common enemy to save the power-projecting hypothesis in effect weakens the whole argument, as Kroenig (2010, 40) acknowledges, admitting that his explanation is probabilistic and additive.

Moreover, if nuclear assistance can be explained with the logic of balance of power, there would be no need to introduce independent variables such as a power-projecting capability that are harder to define empirically. For example, change of the US stance toward Pakistan's nuclear development clearly supports the logic of balance of power. Notwithstanding that Washington had long opposed Islamabad's nuclear development, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 eventually led Washington to tacitly accept the

Pakistani nuclear development. From Washington's perspective, the necessity of balancing the Soviet threat outweighed that of nonproliferation (Burr 2013; Monteiro and Debs 2014, 36). The United States' tacit acceptance of Israel's nuclear weapons can also be simply explained by the security factor. After the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, out of concern that there might be growing asymmetrical power relations between the US ally Israel and Arab states sponsored by the Soviet Union, in favor of the latter, Washington eventually decided to accept Israeli nuclear development (Fisher 2013).

Moscow's acceptance of India's nuclear program in the 1970s is another case for the logic of balance of power model. By bolstering relations with India, Moscow tried to deter growing threats from China, with whom the Soviets had military conflicts in 1969 (Szalontai 2011). From the nuclear deal between the United States and India in 2005, we can also infer Washington's intention to capitalize on nuclear cooperation as a strategy to balance China in the South Asian region (Bajoria and Esther Pan 2010). Considering the fact that India is not a member of the NPT, such a move is obviously incompatible with Washington's long-standing stance against nuclear proliferation.

Furthermore, a balance-of-power model can explain why great powers have retreated from their nuclear assistance to nonnuclear states. That is, great powers withdraw nuclear assistance to their weak partners whenever relations between great powers change in a positive direction. Moscow's decision in the late 1950's to withdraw its nuclear assistance from China is one of those cases. Immediately after taking power following Stalin's death, Khrushchev abandoned Stalin's theory of *inevitability of war* and eventually came to a consensus with his American counterpart, Eisenhower, on *peaceful coexistence* between the two countries. As a result, from Moscow's perspective, the early strategic reasons to balance the United States by nuclearizing China disappeared (Dittmer 1981, 493). The US stance toward South Africa's nuclear development was not much different. With the 1978 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Act, the Carter administration prohibited South Africa from shipping already-purchased enriched uranium out of the United States (Preez and Maettig 2010, 311). From Washington's point of view, unless there was a tangible danger of losing all of southern Africa to Moscow, risking military conflict with the Soviet Union only to save a racist country

was irrational (Adams 2001).

The logic of balance of power also convincingly explains the cases of the nuclear assistance given by other relatively weak great powers such as France and China. France's nuclear cooperation with Israel from the late 1950s was closely linked to the rise of the nationalist Nasser government in Egypt, which threatened French interests by nationalizing the Suez Canal in 1956. From the perspective of Paris, it was reasonable to cooperate with Egypt's other key adversary, Israel, to check the Egyptian threat (Reed and Stillman 2010, 74-75). Within the same context, Pakistan's nuclear test immediately after India's nuclear test in 1998 would scarcely have been possible without China's assistance. Beijing had enough motivation to capitalize on Islamabad's nuclear ambition in tackling New Delhi's nuclear development (Paul 2005, 175-188).

In sum, great powers assist or tacitly accept their weak partners' nuclear development because of their own security concerns. Realist security logic is likely to prevail over normative factors in the arena of nuclear proliferation. To recapitulate, great powers' intention to actively support or tacitly permit nuclear development of their allies is proportional to the intensity of the rivalry between great powers; the stronger the rivalry between great powers is, the more they are tempted to permit nuclear development of their weaker allies insofar as it will not lead to direct confrontation between the great powers. If nuclear assistance might increase the possibility of conflict between great powers, a great power would certainly withdraw such cooperation.

III. US-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT AND SOUTH KOREA'S FAILED NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT

Etel Solingen (1994, 142-145) emphasizes the importance of domestic factors in explaining why South Korea failed to develop its nuclear weapons. Liberalizing coalitions with export-oriented development strategies, she claims, prevailed over nuclear development. However, such analysis overlooks the fact that South Korea in the 1970s had a highly authoritarian political system that reigned over Korean society. In October 1972, the Park Chung-

hee government dissolved the national assembly and introduced the Yushin Constitution, which dramatically increased the power of the state vis-à-vis society (Im 2011). On the pretext of the threat to national security posed by North Korea, the Park government had an adequate capability to neutralize domestic opposition to the nuclear development.

Oh Won-cheol, Park's economic advisor in charge of developing nuclear weapons, confirmed later that Seoul had almost succeeded in constructing nuclear weapons in the last days of the Park government. According to him, the end of South Korea's nuclear development effort was the result of an accidental collapse of the Park Chung-hee government in 1979. The critical reason that the succeeding Chun Doo-hwan regime discarded the nuclear program was, he claims, pressure from the United States rather than domestic opposition (Kim 2010; Snyder 2010, 162).

From a balance-of-power perspective, it seems clear that Seoul started its nuclear weapons development in order to relieve its own security concerns under the emerging détente among great powers in East Asia in the early 1970s.¹ Seoul considered the US-China reconciliation as a signal of the weakening of the US security commitment to South Korea. The Nixon government's decision to withdraw US forces from Vietnam portended such a scenario. Indeed, the announcement of withdrawal of the 7th Infantry Division from Korea in April 1971 was a shock to the Park government, since Washington's decision on evacuation had been made without consultation with Seoul. Given that South Korea was participating in the Vietnam War as an ally of the United States, there is no doubt that Seoul's sense of betrayal was strong. Recently declassified CIA documents reveal that Seoul was seriously worried about the reduction of US troops from 63,000 to 42,000 based on the Nixon Doctrine. Seoul also kept a close eye on the possibility that Washington would forge a political compromise with Beijing on the issue of the Korean Peninsula. This security concern in turn stimulated Seoul's nuclear development attempt in 1974 (CIANFAC 1978, 1-2; Park 2006, 309-311).

The mutual approach between the United States and China was an

1. Seoul's nuclear development efforts were further motivated by strong nationalist feeling as well as its hope of utilizing the efforts as a bargaining chip in securing the US security commitment (Siler 1998, 46-48).

outcome of rational consideration of balance of power among great powers that had little to do with South Korea. Washington's approach to Beijing was initially elaborated within the context of the overall global strategy of the US. As Robert Gilpin (1981, 192-193) succinctly points out, one strategy for a declining hegemonic power to maintain its global position is to reduce overstretched foreign policy commitments. Likewise, the Nixon administration tried to pass the buck to China in dealing with the Indochina problem as they decided on a staged withdrawal from the Vietnam War. Beijing took advantage of the rapprochement with the United States as a security guarantee against the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split. In Mao Zedong's view, improving relations with the United States was not an epochal change of China's external strategy: the reconciliation with the United States was nothing but China's traditional strategic consideration: *putting the barbarians against each other and enlisting faraway enemies against those nearby* (Kissinger 2011, 202).

Thus, it is no surprise that the US-China rapprochement led the two powers to share a strong imperative to prevent contingencies that could entrap either side into an unexpected mutual confrontation. Any type of military conflict in the Korean Peninsula like the Korean War would be a worst-case scenario for both sides, as President Nixon assured Premier Zhou in their meeting in February 1972 (US Department of State 2015). In order to meet this mutual objective, Washington and Beijing agreed to internalize the Korean issue lest it develop into a flashpoint for Sino-US conflict. For instance, directing the two Koreas to promote contact through the Red Cross and the other political negotiations was an available option for Washington and Beijing. The July 4 joint communiqué in 1972 between the two Koreas was made possible within such a structural context (Hong 2012, 178-188).

South Korea's attempted nuclear development was thus unacceptable to the United States, since the move was likely to provoke North Korea and heighten regional tension between the two Koreas. Within this context, Washington began to criticize South Korea's nuclear contracts regarding reprocessing technologies with other countries, such as France, beginning in late 1974. Washington's stance was clear and simple. First, if South Korea kept working toward nuclear development despite US opposition, the United

States would cut off economic and military assistance to Seoul. Second, the United States would guarantee to firmly defend South Korea against any security threats from North Korea only when Seoul scrapped its nuclear program. Under this US pressure, South Korea's nuclear contract with France was canceled in January 1976, and the nuclear weapons program dubbed "Project 890" was eventually suspended in December that year (Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center 1978, 13; *Hankyoreh* 2011; Snyder 2010, 161-162; Sim 2013, 50-74).

The suspension of the nuclear program did not mean that Seoul totally discarded the nuclear option. The CIA still suspected that the Park government was willing to restart nuclear development as soon as they felt the reliability of the US security commitment was compromised. When the newly inaugurated Carter administration announced its plan for withdrawal of US forces from Korea in 1977, Seoul's suspended nuclear development was revitalized (Snyder 2010, 162). The reason for the planned troop withdrawal was clear: the United States did not want to fall into a trap over the Korean problem, and the US forces functioned as a trip wire, which could lead to another Vietnam for the US, namely, an unending war against guerrilla forces. The Carter administration justified the planned withdrawal on the basis that South Korea had enough defensive capability thanks to economic development. Moreover, increasingly negative public opinion on South Korea due to Seoul's involvement in a bribery scandal known as Koreagate further justified Washington's plan for troop withdrawal from Korea (Hoffman 2002).

Seoul responded to the Carter administration's withdrawal plan by clandestinely restarting nuclear weapon development efforts. Park's secretary of state affairs testified later that, even after the Park government's suspension of nuclear development in 1976, Seoul secretly continued its nuclear and related missile development programs to be completed by 1982. For missile development, South Korea had already succeeded in testing its surface-to-surface missile in September 1978 (Sim 2013, 245-264; Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 59). This testimony is fully compatible with Oh Won-cheol's statement, as stated, that South Korea's nuclear development had been almost completed in the last days of Park's administration. Thus, it is clear that Washington

regarded Park's provocative nuclear development as a direct challenge to US interests.

In fact, a summit meeting between Park and Carter from June 30 to July 1, 1979 was considered to end the discord surrounding issues such as the withdrawal of US troops and the lack of human rights in South Korea. At the summit, Carter officially confirmed that the evacuation of US forces from South Korea would be postponed or abandoned. Seoul welcomed the Carter administration's decision by releasing their political prisoners immediately after the summit. Nevertheless, the US-South Korea relations dramatically deteriorated in late 1979, as the political turmoil in South Korea worsened, which resulted from the Park government's brutal suppression of anti-government protests. Infuriated by the worsening political condition, US ambassador to Japan Michael Mansfield even provoked Seoul by implying that South Korea lies outside the American defense perimeter (Park 2006, 326-327).

The striking corrosion of bilateral relations between Seoul and Washington after the widely hailed summit only a few months before may have been the result of South Korea's unabated nuclear development efforts (Sim 2013, 319). The Carter administration's unhesitating acceptance of the succeeding government of Chun Doo-hwan, who forswore the existing nuclear development program, can also be explained by the easing of Washington's apprehension regarding Seoul's nuclear efforts. Chun took power after a military coup in December 1979 and consolidated it through a brutal crackdown on prodemocracy protesters in the "Kwangju Massacre." In the process, Washington allowed the junta to mobilize the Korean army, which was legally under the operational control of the US commander in Korea, John Wickham, for the purpose of what the US Administration claimed was "the restoration of order in Kwangju" (Park 2006, 328-331; Katsiaficas 2014; Stueck 2002, 155-158). Considering that the Carter administration tried to exert its influence over Park by capitalizing on human rights diplomacy, its quick acceptance of the Chun regime seemed a surprising policy change. This indicates that the issue of human rights between Seoul and Washington during Park's presidency was not such a critical problem after all. From Washington's strategic perspective, there was no reason to refuse South

Korea's new leadership once they dismantled the nuclear program that might have altered the balance of power over the Korean Peninsula.

Moreover, in the emerging atmosphere of the renewed Cold War after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the United States re-estimated the strategic value of South Korea as it reevaluated the geopolitical significance of Pakistan. In this respect, South Korea's nuclear development efforts and its failure can be compared with the Pakistani case. In the 1970's, the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government attempted to develop nuclear weapons despite opposition from the United States. In July 1977, however, the Bhutto government's nuclear development ended in failure due to a military junta led by General Zia, whom Washington unhesitatingly accepted as a new Pakistani leader ("Victims of Conspiracy" 2015).

The South Korean case is not similar to the Pakistani case in that the United States continued to watch with vigilance the possibility of Seoul's revitalization of nuclear development even after the Soviet's invasion of Afghanistan, whereas it tacitly permitted Islamabad's nuclear development. The dissimilar strategic environments that Washington faced at each case brought about such different responses. While Washington as well as Beijing regarded Pakistan's nuclear armament as a counter-action against Soviet expansion, South Korea's nuclear development was feared to be a destabilizing factor for the balance of power over the Korean Peninsula and in US-China relations.

IV. EMERGING US-CHINA RIVALRY AND NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT

North Korea's nuclear program started as early as the 1950s in the context of balance-of-power politics among great powers. In 1959 Moscow signed nuclear pacts with Pyongyang for joint development of nuclear science and energy. Moscow's nuclear assistance to Pyongyang was a balancing strategy against the United States' moves to share its nuclear weapons with NATO member states and the "Atoms for Peace" program that provided nuclear assistance to its weak allies such as Israel, Taiwan, South Korea, Iran, Iraq,

and South Africa (Pollack 2011, 50-52; Szalontai and Radchenko 2006, 2-3 and 29-30).

Yet at the same time, the logic of balance of power also led the great powers to tighten their grip on North Korea's nuclear development lest it impair the fundamentals of power equilibrium among them. In the *détente* period of the 1970s, as Washington pressed Seoul to abandon nuclear development, Moscow refused to transfer any of the nuclear technologies Pyongyang desperately demanded. From Moscow's perspective, a nuclear-armed North Korea, already a too provocative actor, would be unacceptable (Pollack 2011, 80-81; Szalontai and Radchenko 2006, 13).

Particularly, unprecedented improvement of US-Soviet relations with Gorbachev's New Thinking policy led Moscow to take a cooperative stance with Washington in dealing with North Korea's nuclear issue. North Korea's participation in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985 was a clear example. Moscow accepted Washington's demand that it would pressure North Korea to join the NPT when Washington was alarmed by North Korea's possible conversion of its Yongbyon nuclear facilities to a nuclear weapons program (Oberdorfer 2014, 198). Moscow also began to urge North Korea to sign the IAEA safeguard agreement and halted its export of nuclear equipment and fuel to North Korea in 1990. It warned in April 1991 that the Soviet supplies for the Yongbyon nuclear facilities would be cut off if North Korea refused IAEA inspection. Moreover, the Soviet Union supported the suggestion of IAEA's Director General Hans Blix for aggressive nuclear inspection of non-IAEA members, including North Korea (Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2015).

Moscow's efforts of restraining North Korea's nuclear development have some similarities with Washington's behavior to put South Korea's nuclear development under tight control as stated. Yet, there is an important difference between the two cases: the waning influence of the Soviet Union. This means that North Korea enjoyed far more autonomy from great powers than South Korea did in the 1970s. When notified about Moscow's decision to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul, Pyongyang even threatened to develop nuclear weapons as a self-defense measure (Pollack 2011, 101-103).

Pyongyang did not immediately capitalize on the nuclear threat, because

they still had strong expectations for normalization of relations with the United States. From Pyongyang's perspective, achieving the US-North Korea peace treaty, as Kim Il Sung had long emphasized, would be the best scenario for national security (Yaoqin 2003, 20). Within this context, Pyongyang made a further series of cooperative gestures on nuclear issues in 1992. With the agreement for a nuclear-free peninsula with Seoul, Pyongyang signed the IAEA safeguards agreement and accepted IAEA's inspections, which were carried out from May 1992 to February 1993 at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities.

However, Pyongyang's hope for rapid normalization of relations with Washington faced insurmountable obstacles not long after. IAEA inspections did not go as smoothly as hoped, due to deep-rooted mistrust and misunderstanding. Frustrated, Washington and Seoul warned they would resume the suspended annual Team Spirit military exercises if North Korea continued to refuse mutual inspections agreed on in December 1991. North Korea angrily responded to the mounting criticism by withdrawing from the NPT on March 12, 1993, initiating the First North Korean Nuclear Crisis. Pyongyang justified the decision as a countermeasure against the resumption of the Team Spirit military exercises and the IAEA's unreasonable pressure for special inspections of military sites not related to any nuclear activities (Center for Nonproliferation Studies 2015; *Hankyoreh* 1993).

Unlike the Soviet Union, China still had its strategic leverage over North Korea. However, the problem was not capability but intention. Due to highly strained relations with the United States since Tiananmen in June 1989, Beijing was not willing to deal with the North Korea nuclear issue as Washington expected; China refused to become a cat's paw of Washington on the problem of North Korea (Chen Yang 2005, 55). In addition to human rights issues and economic sanctions, the Bush administration's decision in September 1992 to sell 150 F-16 fighters to Taiwan and the newly inaugurated Clinton administration's linkage policy between human rights and most-favored-nation status also severely strained US-China relations (Harding 1992, 216-235). It was not surprising that China was suspicious that the US intended to capitalize on the North Korean issue to contain China (Piao 2013, 97).

Indeed, since North Korea's announcement of withdrawal from the NPT,

China has consistently opposed any imposition of sanctions on North Korea. China insisted that the North Korean issue was a bilateral problem between North Korea and the United States and therefore should be settled through direct dialogue between them (Sanger 1993; Jeong 1993). Most importantly, China went so far as to signal its willingness to protect North Korea on the brink of possible US military strikes on the North's nuclear sites. On June 7, 1994, in his meeting with a North Korean military delegation led by North Korean Army Chief of Staff Choi Kwang, Jiang Zemin reconfirmed the "lips and teeth" relations between China and North Korea (*Rodong Sinmun* 1994). China's own nuclear test in June 1994 also implicitly revealed that China was not as desperate about the North Korean nuclear issue as Washington was (Mann 1993; Tempest 1994).

Certainly, China's passive stance toward the North Korean nuclear issue does not mean that Beijing gave a green light to North Korea's nuclear development. Rather, China's passiveness provided, intentionally or not, a permissive cause for North Korea's nuclear development. In short, if China had really intended to apply its asymmetrical leverage over North Korea, the latter's nuclear development would not have been possible (Cha 2012). In fact, China had long emphasized the importance of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Immediately after North Korea's announcement of withdrawal from the NPT, China once again repeated this principle of denuclearization. Nevertheless, it is clear that China was more concerned about the collapse of North Korea than the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In the end, North Korea's nuclear development is a side effect of China's "No Collapse" North Korean policy (Buszynski 2013, 30). Some conservative Chinese scholars even claimed that a nuclear-armed North Korea is unavoidable because the stability of North Korea is highly important for China's national security (Shen 2014).

China's reluctance to take a decisive role with respect to the North Korean nuclear issue has not fundamentally changed so far. It persists because the structural rivalry in Northeast Asia has been consolidated to the point that a power shift between the United States and China has become a possibility. As a dominant state, the United States has not hidden its intention to check and balance the potential challenger China (US Department of Defense 2006,

29-30). Shortly after the Taiwan crisis in 1995-1996, Washington worked with Tokyo to produce a new guideline for defense cooperation in East Asia. In February 2005, both sides announced the Taiwan Strait as a common strategic objective, which clearly revealed the US intention to balance China by using Japan as a proxy (Johnson 2005). With the concept of strategic flexibility, the United States also extended the operational extent of the US forces in Korea in order to rapidly respond to possible military contingencies in the Taiwan Strait (Lee 2006).

The implication of this is that North Korea has not faced strong and substantial pressure against its nuclear development from its ally, China. From Beijing's perspective, nonproliferation is less important than preventing the collapse of North Korea, which might be capitalized on by Washington. Pyongyang may well be aware of China's position and thereby be securing its power of the weak, with which it can carry out nuclear brinkmanship against a far stronger adversary, the United States (Shen 2006, 26-27; Lin 2006, 36-38).

Undoubtedly, it is true that China has changed its role regarding the North Korean nuclear issue from a bystander to an active participant since the late 1990s. China has not only participated in the four-party talks since 1997 but has also actively hosted a series of Six-Party Talks since August 2003 (Chen 2005, 56). Given the fact that China had long accused multilateralism of being a cat's paw for great powers, China's acceptance of such multilateral talks was considered a big change in China's foreign policy. After the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995-1996, Beijing concluded that stable relations with the United States are indispensable for China's consistent economic development. China's proposal of "peaceful rising" (*heping jueqi*) in 2003 demonstrates a strategic reconsideration in its relations with the United States (Ye 2004; Goldstein 2005; Zheng 2005). Under the circumstances, China may have concluded that the Six-Party Talks are an effective instrument for preventing US military action against North Korea as well as assuring Washington that it shares the goal of denuclearizing North Korea (Buszynski 2013, 29).

The problem is, however, that China would not assume any actual responsibility in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue other than hosting the Six-Party Talks. As a great-power alliance partner of North Korea, China has not yet fully applied its leverage over North Korea to discourage their

nuclear program as the United States did toward South Korea in the 1970s. Some conservatives in the US and South Korea even accused China of intentionally proliferating nuclear weapons. They claim that China has long not only transferred nuclear technologies for military uses to its strategic partners such as Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran but also brokered a nuclear connection among them (Chang 2014).

China's response to North Korea's first nuclear test in October 2006 shows that China would not dare sever its fundamental relations with North Korea (Pritchard 2007, 91-93). Even though China unprecedentedly condemned the North's nuclear test as a "brazen (*hanran*) act" and also supported UN Security Council Resolution 1718, it was reluctant to implement the actual sanctions (Kahn 2006). China persistently emphasized its basic position that sanctions themselves would not be a goal but a process to reopen the suspended Six-Party Talks to achieve a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2006). The fact that, even after the nuclear test, North Korea's trade dependency on China deepened more than ever corroborates that practical bilateral relations were not fundamentally impaired (*Naeil Sinmun* 2007).

China's cautious approach also did not change after Pyongyang's second, third, and fourth nuclear tests in May 2009, February 2013, and January 2016. While China supported UN Security Council Resolutions 1874, 2094, and 2270 condemning the North's nuclear tests, it once again revealed that its top priority was not nonproliferation but the stability of North Korea. After the North's second nuclear test, China promised to North Korea a massive economic aid package as a reward for Pyongyang's return to the Six-Party Talks through high-level diplomacy such as Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Pyongyang in October 2009 (Choe 2009; *People's Daily Online* 2009).

It is clear that China's response to North Korea's third nuclear test was tougher than ever. Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned that "China would not allow troublemaking on China's doorstep," and President Xi Jinping also signaled to North Korea that no country "should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gain." Nevertheless, China still did not do anything other than preventing the situation from escalating to an uncontrolled crisis (Williams 2013). China again capitalized on its high-

level diplomacy in order to manage the North Korean nuclear brinkmanship, which seemed to pay off in the end. After Vice Marshal of the Korean People's Army Choe Ryong-hae's visit to China in May 2013, Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao visited Pyongyang and obtained assurances from the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that there would be "no more security threats" in the Northeast Asian region (Kang 2013; Kim 2013).

In response to North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January and long-range missile launch in February 2016, too, China showed its intention to manage the situation seemingly in favor of North Korea. Even though China emphasized full implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2270, Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed a parallel-track approach, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the replacement of the armistice with a peace treaty. Wang Yi made clear that a peace treaty is North Korea's reasonable concern and that denuclearization could therefore not be realized without a peace treaty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016).

China also displayed its intention not to isolate North Korea by capitalizing on its high-level diplomacy with the North. In his unexpected meeting on June 1 with North Korean envoy Ri Su-yong, vice-chairman of the Worker's Party, Chinese President Xi Jinping assured him that "China attached great importance to developing a friendly relationship with North Korea." The fact that it was the first time for Xi Jinping met a senior North Korean official since his meeting with Choe Ryong-hae in 2013 reveals Beijing's willingness to keep a stable relationship with North Korea despite the North's coercive diplomacy (Perlez 2016). Moreover, in response to the U.S. plan to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, China is likely to strengthen its alliance commitment to North Korea as countermeasures (*Korea Joongang Daily* July 18, 2016).

V. CONCLUSION

At first glance, North Korea's nuclear development can be regarded as an abnormal case of the realist perspective, since despite their stated opposition as great powers, the United States and China have been unable to stop the weak state's nuclear development. An analysis in depth, however, shows that the North Korean nuclear issue is explicable by balance-of-power theory; North Korea's nuclear development is a natural outcome of the rivalry between the United States and China. Of course, this does not mean that the US-China rivalry directly caused North Korea's nuclear development in that it is no more than a permissive cause. Put simply, the US-China competition is not a sufficient condition but a necessary one on which North Korea has capitalized for its nuclear development.

Compared with South Korea's failed attempts to possess nuclear weapons in the 1970s, when there was a substantial thaw between the great power relationships in the region, the North's nuclear development does not face nearly such strong structural restraints due to the deepening rivalry between the US and China. While the United States, a strong alliance partner of South Korea, played a critical role in obstructing Seoul's nuclear ambition, North Korea's closest ally, China, has not assumed a substantial role in discouraging Pyongyang's nuclear development. In this sense, it is not surprising that Washington has repeatedly called on Beijing to put stronger pressure on North Korea (*The Guardian* 2014). Washington went so far as to take advantage of its military options regarding North Korea in order to jolt Beijing into exerting leverage over North Korea (Buszynski 2013, 20). From Beijing's perspective, there is little reason to do so insofar as the United States will not abandon its balancing strategy against China.

This means that it will be almost impossible to fundamentally resolve the North Korean nuclear issue without a change in the current structure of competition between the United States and China. By the same token, the emerging rivalry between the United States and China may reinvigorate South Korea's nuclear ambitions. An in-depth analysis of the possible revival of South Korea's nuclear development is beyond the scope of this article, but the probability is low at this moment because Seoul does not have as strong

an incentive to go nuclear as Pyongyang does: the United States is firmly guaranteeing “extended nuclear deterrence” to South Korea, and China also has actively developed its “Strategic Cooperative Partnership” with the South (Monteiro and Debs 2014, 41-42; *Xinhuanet* 2014).

Accordingly, the critical questions for resolving North Korea’s nuclear conundrum may be how to moderate the rigid alliance system led by the United States in Northeast Asia. China has long characterized the US alliance system as a relic of the Cold War, which should be dismantled now that the Cold War is over. The current situation implies that the fundamental resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue will depend on how swiftly the two sides adjust the balance between the US-led alliance system and the China-advocated collective security system in Northeast Asia. Without such balanced coordination between them, the North Korean conundrum is likely to persist.

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