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Outer Space Security: Past and Ongoing Multilateral Efforts and Challenges

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Abstract

This article reviews what is at stake in outer space security by contextualizing the growing dependency of civilian and military operations on outer space systems against the limits of the current international legal and governance framework. It provides an overview of existing and emerging threats to space systems and briefly examines the entanglement of space security with adjacent security domains, notably nuclear and cyber. The article discusses corresponding historical and contemporary multilateral efforts to secure space, notably the 1967 Outer Space Treaty and ongoing discussions at the UN General Assembly, the Conference on Disarmament, and the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Reducing Space Threats through Rules, Norms, and Principles of Responsible Behaviours. The article also provides a brief overview of some of the East Asian dynamics related to space security, before concluding with future outlooks on the issues of space security.

Key Words: space, space security, UN, counterspace capabilities, international law, international norms, space OEWG

As outer space is increasingly critical to modern life on Earth, there is growing concern that the space environment could become a theatre for conflict. Official military doctrines and strategies are gradually recognizing space as an operational domain of strategic importance, and in extreme cases even denote space as a war-fighting domain. Yet, despite the growing advancements in space technology and reliance on space systems for many militaries and civilians uses, the international legal and governance framework regulating outer space activities remains thin and appears increasingly insufficient to address specific security concerns.

This article highlights the importance of expanding and advancing space security governance. It contextualizes this need by underlining what is at stake when space systems are threatened and discussing the links between other related security issues, like nuclear and cyber. It provides a historical background of multilateral efforts to secure space and continues into contemporary efforts, including processes held under the auspices of the UN, notably the Open-Ended Working Group on Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules, and Principles of Responsible Behaviours and processes outside the UN, like the working group on space security within the Seoul Defense Dialogue. The article imparts specific attention to space security in the geography of East Asia before concluding with short- and medium-term foresight and outlooks.

The Increasing Strategic Importance of Outer Space

While outer space refers to the environment beyond air space, frequently understood to be the Karman Line (that defines the boundary beginning 100 kilometers above sea level),¹ there is no global consensus

1 "Where Is Space?" (US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, last modified February 22, 2016), <https://www.nesdis.noaa.gov/news/where-space#:~:text=A%20common%20definition%20of%20space,conventional%20aircraft%20to%20maintain%20flight>.

on the physical delineation of where outer space exactly begins. The contribution of the outer space domain to growth and prosperity has been clear, dating back to the dawn of the space age and the first scientific achievements in space exploration. The potential of further contribution is yet immeasurable, but space technologies have an exponentially increasing societal, strategic, and financial value. The global space economy in 2021 reached \$469 billion, a 70% expansion since 2010.² While space potential is being capitalized by industry, military bodies continue to recognize the strategic importance of outer space and its significance is increasingly recognized in official military doctrines, policies, and strategies. Examples of this strategic recognition can be seen through the recent increase in creation of outer space military bodies and the labelling of outer space as an operational military domain within national military strategies and international military alliances.³ The following paragraphs offer a brief non exhaustive survey of current space technologies and their importance to civilian and military functions, followed by a short section on counter space development and capabilities.

SPACE SERVICES AND TECHNOLOGIES

Satellite communications are crucial to increasing global connectivity especially beyond-line-of-sight communications, like voice and television

2 “The Space Report 2022” (Space Foundation, July 27), <https://www.spacefoundation.org/2022/07/27/the-space-report-2022-q2/>.

3 Examples of military space organs include but are not limited to:

The Australian Defense Space Command: <https://www.airforce.gov.au/about-us/defence-space-command>

The French Air and Space Force: https://air.defense.gouv.fr/dossier/Missions_armee_Air_et_Espace

The Japan Space Operations Group: <https://www.mod.go.jp/asdf/ssa/index.html>

The Russian Aerospace Forces: https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12047166@egNews

The United Kingdom Space Command: <https://www.raf.mod.uk/what-we-do/uk-space-command/>

The United States Space Force: <https://www.spaceforce.mil/About-Us/SPD-4/>

An example of a military alliance adopting space as an operational domain can be seen in NATO’s 2019 Space Policy where space was officially marked as its fifth operational domain; https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_171028.htm

services. Satcom systems enable internet and communications connectivity to reach more remote areas, enabling improved communications infrastructure, accessibility to internet resources, and increase potential for economic growth through development of internet-supported small and mid-sized business. Satellite communications also support military structures and operations as they allow greater mobility over larger distances by removing the dependency to ground-based communication infrastructure.⁴

Positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) services transmit timing signals to a variety of technologies and applications. Just to give a few examples: PNT services are critical to civilian transportation, precision farming applications, time synchronization for banking transactions and for electrical power grids in the energy sector, as well as emerging capabilities such as autonomous vehicle guidance.⁵ PNT services also support civilian emergency response and police services and the navigation services across ground, air, and ocean cargo operations. For the militaries, PNT services are key support to air, land, sea, and space navigation.⁶ They are also crucial for precision weapons guidance as well as asset and target tracking.⁷

Satellite remote sensing supports critical civilian functions such as disaster response sites and operations, precision farming, and weather monitoring. Space-based remote-sensing is also critical to intelligence and military activities in that it provides key data on observation, tracking, and monitoring of military forces.⁸

4 Louis Tillier, "Telecommunications for Defense," in *Handbook of Space Security Policies, Applications and Programs* (New York: Springer, 2015), 588.

5 Jean-Christophe Martin and Frederic Bastide, "Positioning, Navigation, and Timing for Security and Defense," in *Handbook of Space Security Policies, Applications and Programs* (New York: Springer, 2015), 610.

6 Martin and Bastide, "Positioning, Navigation, and Timing for Security and Defense," 624.

7 Almudena Azcárate Ortega, "Dual-use and Dual-purpose Objects" (paper presented at the second session of the Open-ended Working Group on Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behaviours, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, September, 2022), <https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/OEWG-dual-use-presentation-FINAL.pdf>.

8 Dmitry Stefanovich and Daniel Porras, "Space as a Competition Domain: Threats and Opportunities," *Journal of International Analytics* (2022): 100, <https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2022-13-2-95-106>.

Outer space is not an isolated domain, and the applications from space technology are critical in other fields of security, such as in nuclear security. The entanglement of the nuclear and outer space domains increases overall crisis instability and risk, be it inadvertent or deliberate.⁹ Outer space houses crucial command, control, and communications infrastructure such as over-the-horizon radars, ballistic missile early-warning radars, early-warning satellites and dual-use delivery systems.¹⁰ A perceived threat against such critical defense infrastructure can serve as an escalatory pathway to conflict.

An interruption or denial of space services today would severely disrupt the daily life, economic activities and the security of a country. With the increasing reliance and even dependency of both military and civilian infrastructure, activities and operations on space technologies, outer space has become a strategic area. Moreover, there has been an increased military counterspace development and testing, that further threatens the security of such services.

COUNTERSPACE CAPABILITIES

Counterspace capabilities can be conducted through different mediums including but not limited to electronic warfare, cyber interference, directed energy capabilities, orbital threats, physical kinetic, and non-kinetic physical attacks. Such attacks could also be aimed at a range of components of space systems, including the component of the space system located physically in orbit, the ground stations, and the data link connection between the ground and space segments.¹¹ Moreover, counterspace capabilities exist on a continuum capable of having reversible to

⁹ James M. Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement: How the Vulnerability of Command-and-Control Systems Raises the Risks of an Inadvertent Nuclear War," *International Security*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2018): 56-99, doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00320.

¹⁰ Acton, "Escalation through Entanglement": 60.

¹¹ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Space Dossier 3 - Electronic and Cyber Warfare in Outer Space" (UNIDIR, 2019), <https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdfs/electronic-and-cyber-warfare-in-outer-space-en-784.pdf>.

irreversible effects on space systems. For example, cyber interference with a satellite can have reversible effects if a ground station's network is temporarily disabled. Cyber interference can have irreversible effects if the data link is hijacked with information to terminate and sever the connection permanently. It can even receive instruction to affect physical aspects of the in-space component of the space asset.¹²

A related issue which has gained increased attention recently concerns space debris, especially debris caused by destructive physical kinetic antisatellite (ASAT) attacks or testing. Space debris exponentially increase the risk of collision or destruction of space assets and negatively affects their lifespan because of additional emergency maneuvering procedures needed to avoid debris.¹³

Thus, as militaries increasingly utilize space systems more actively, to support and control systems involved in terrestrial conflict, beyond the more "passive" reconnaissance and information gathering functions, the continued development of peaceful technologies or defensive technologies may continue to raise suspicion and increase mistrust.¹⁴

The further reliance and increasing dependence on space systems, coupled with increased threats from emerging technology and counterspace capabilities, all heighten competition among States and also the risk of outer space becoming an arena of conflict.

The next section presents the multilateral efforts, past and ongoing, which have sought to establish legal, normative and governance regimes to preserve the peaceful use of outer space and address its nuanced security environment.

12 "Threats to the Security of Space Activities and Systems," United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Working Paper A/AC.294/2022/WP.16, https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/20220817_A_AC294_2022_WP16_E_UNIDIR.pdf.

13 "Threats to the Security of Space Activities and Systems."

14 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Increasing Challenges to Outer Space" (Observer Research Foundation, January 15, 2022), <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/increasing-challenges-to-outer-space/>.

Multilateral Governance Efforts on Space Security

Today there exists five international treaties on outer space governance: The Outer Space Treaty, The Rescue Agreement, The Liability Convention, The Registration Convention, and The Moon Agreement. The Rescue Agreement contains obligations for States to undertake all possible steps to rescue and assist astronauts in distress and return them to their launching State.¹⁵ The Liability Convention states that the launching State shall be absolutely liable to pay compensation for damage caused by its space objects on the surface of the Earth and liable for damage due to its faults in space.¹⁶ The Registration Convention builds up the United Nations Register of Objects Launched into Outer Space and provides a framework for registration requirements.¹⁷ The Moon Agreement reaffirms that the Moon and other celestial bodies are to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes but notably calls for an establishment of an international regime to govern the exploitation of resources from the Moon or other celestial bodies if such exploitation becomes feasible.¹⁸

The backbone of outer space law and international outer space governance is the Outer Space Treaty, or The Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies.¹⁹ The Outer Space Treaty was mostly based on the earlier resolution Declaration of Legal Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, which had been adopted by the General Assembly and was

¹⁵ “International Space Law: United Nations Instruments” (United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs), <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/nationalspacelaw/bi-multi-lateral-agreements.html>.

¹⁶ “International Space Law,” 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies Res 2222 (XXI). The status of the treaty, as well as other international agreements relating to activities in outer space compiled is available online at: <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/status/index.html>.

opened for signature by its three depository states, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States in 1967.²⁰ Article I of the Outer Space Treaty outlines that exploration and use of outer space will be conducted in accordance with international law and on a basis of equality. Its Article IV commits its States Parties not to place, install, or station into orbit neither objects carrying nuclear weapons nor any other form of weapon of mass destruction. Article IV declares the use of the Moon and other celestial bodies for exclusive peaceful uses, forbidding the installation or testing of any weapons type, the establishment of military bases, and any military maneuvering conduct.

While the Outer Space Treaty is an important framework, it remains limited in its ability to ensure that space remain a domain for exclusively peaceful purposes. Article IV may outline specific prohibitions for nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction in outer space and extend specific conditions to the moon and other celestial bodies. However, these conditions do not preclude other types of weapons from being placed, installed, or stationed into outer space. Furthermore, there is no definitive definition as to what peaceful activities in outer space are nor does the treaty offer a definition as to what is a space weapon. As much has changed since the treaty's adoption in 1967, there is a continued need to develop advanced governance mechanisms with a specific consideration for space security.

CONFERENCE ON DISARMAMENT

The efforts to address the weaponization of space is not a recent phenomenon and co-existed with the development of the Conference on Disarmament. In 1978, the Tenth Special Session on Disarmament of the United Nations General Assembly concluded that in order to prevent an arms race in outer space measures should be taken in

²⁰ United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, "International Space Law: United Nations Instruments," <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/nationalspacelaw/bi-multi-lateral-agreements.html>.

proper international negotiations in accordance with the ethos of the OST.²¹ The UN General Assembly would in 1981 request the Conference on Disarmament to consider verifiable agreements to prevent an arms race in outer space, to prohibit antisatellite systems and for the adoption of an international treaty to prevent the proliferation of arms into outer space through resolutions “Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space”²² and “Conclusion of a treaty on the prohibition of the stationing of weapons of any kind in outer space.”²³

In 2008, the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China submitted to the Conference on Disarmament a proposal for a draft treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects (PPWT).²⁴ A revised draft was submitted by Russia and China in 2014.²⁵ Through the PPWT, States would legally commit not to place any kinds of weapons in orbit around the Earth and not to resort to the use or threat of use of force against space objects. The draft treaty defines weapon as: “any device placed in outer space, based on any physical principle, which has been specially produced or converted to destroy, damage or disrupt the normal functioning of objects in outer space, on the Earth or in the Earth’s atmosphere, or to eliminate a population or components of the biosphere which are important to human existence or inflict damage on them.”²⁶

21 UN General Assembly Resolution S-10/2, 10th Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on Disarmament: Final Document, Para. 80, United Nations Document A/RES/S-10/2, Para. 80 (Feb. 5, 1980).

22 UN General Assembly Resolution 36/97 C, 36th Session, on the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space (Dec. 9, 1981).

23 UN General Assembly Resolution. 36/99, 36th Session, on the Conclusion of a Treaty on the Prohibition of the Stationing of Weapons of Any Kind in Outer Space (Dec. 9, 1981).

24 Letter Dated 12 February 2008 from the Permanent Representative of The Russian Federation and the Permanent Representative of China to the Conference on Disarmament. Addressed to the Secretary-General of the Conference Transmitting the Russian and Chinese Texts of the Draft, “Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects (PPWT).” Introduced by the Russian Federation and China, Art. I (c)(d), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/633470?ln=ru>.

25 Draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force against Outer Space Objects, <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/cd/2014/ documents/PPWT2014.pdf>.

26 *Ibid.*

The draft defines threat or use of force as “any hostile actions against outer space objects including, inter alia, actions aimed at destroying them, damaging them, temporarily or permanently disrupting their normal functioning or deliberately changing their orbit parameters, or the threat of such actions.”²⁷ Some States consider that the draft treaty focuses too narrowly on orbiting space assets and threats emanating from space-space or space-Earth threat vectors. Critiques of the draft treaty have called for Earth-space type threats including those from direct-ascent kinetic ASATs to be included. The draft also fails to clarify whether the destruction of a state’s own satellite or space asset constitutes a hostile act. Finally, there has also been criticism over the requirements for ratification by permanent Security Council members, when instead it has been argued that ratification should be required by all major space faring nations.

UN RESOLUTIONS AND GROUPS OF GOVERNMENTAL EXPERTS

In addition to the work in the Conference on Disarmament, the UN General Assembly also commonly adopts annual resolutions pertaining to space security as part of its First Committee work. These annual resolutions include the following: “Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space,” the “No First Placement of Weapons in Outer Space,” “Further Practical Measures for the Prevention of an Arms Race in Outer Space,” and “Transparency and Confidence Building Measures in Outer Space Activities.”

In 2012, a Group of Governmental Experts was convened by UNGA resolution 65/68, which mandated it to conduct a study on outer space transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs). In 2013, this Group adopted a report by consensus, giving concrete recommendations for TCBMs in outer space such as information exchange on space

²⁷ Ibid.

policies. It outlined successful criteria for TCBMs as being clear, practical, proven, able to be confirmed in its application by other parties, and able to reduce the causes of mistrust, miscalculation, and misunderstandings.²⁸

Subsequently, in 2018, Russia and China put forth UNGA resolution 72/250 calling for a Group of Governmental Experts to recommend substantial elements of an international legally binding instrument on the prevention of an arms race in outer space, inter alia, on the prevention of the placement of weapons in outer space. Whilst this Group could not agree on a consensual final document, its chair provided his factual summary on the group's work.²⁹ This summary notes that a commonly shared belief among the Experts is that, although voluntary measures are important and can be effective TCBMS, they do not replace legally binding mechanisms. The summary also reveals that several States were concerned over further development of ASAT capabilities.

Most recently, the UNGA 77th First Committee, on 1st November 2022, adopted two new resolutions. The “Destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing”³⁰ resolution was proposed by the U.S. as a multilateral measure building on its unilateral political commitment to not conduct destructive direct-ascent antisatellite missiles.³¹ The “Further practical measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space”³² resolution was put forward by Russia with a new proposal to convene a Group of Governmental Experts on further practical measures on PAROS.

²⁸ UN General Assembly Resolution A/68/189 (Group of Governmental Experts on Transparency and Confidence-Building Measures in Outer Space Activities, 2013), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/755155?ln=en>.

²⁹ Ambassador Guilherme Patriota, “Chair’s Summary of the Open-ended intersessional informal consultative meeting on the work of the Group of Governmental Experts on further practical measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space,” <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/paros-gge-open-ended-informal-consultative-meeting-chair-summary-final.pdf>.

³⁰ UN General Assembly Resolution A/C.1/77/L.62.

³¹ “FACT SHEET: Vice President Harris Advances National Security Norms in Space” (The White House, April 18, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/18/fact-sheet-vice-presidentharris-advances-national-security-norms-in-space>.

³² UN General Assembly Resolution A/C.1/77/L.70.

OTHER PROCESSES OUTSIDE THE UN

In parallel to these efforts undertaken under UN auspices, there have been other initiatives taken to address issues of space security.

Some initiatives have coalesced from industry such as the Space Safety Coalition and the Consortium for Execution of Rendezvous and Servicing Operations. These instruments enable the collection of best practices and standards on space functions which led to security concerns like on-orbit servicing and rendezvous and proximity operations.

Government led initiatives related to space security are found in the form of bilateral agreements on space policy development,³³ nationally led security forums and defense dialogues,³⁴ and regional groupings and security forums.³⁵ The following subsection focuses on an international process which took place outside of the UN and a contemporary unilaterally born initiative.

In 2012, the European Union initiated an International Code of Conduct (ICoC), seeking to create a voluntary non-legally binding international instrument that would build norms of responsible behaviour in outer space activities. This initiative was criticized for lacking transparency and inclusiveness and for not being held under the auspices of the UN auspices. Furthermore, there was specific concern over paragraph 51 of the draft text stating that “The Subscribing States resolve, in conducting outer space activities, to: refrain from any action which brings about, directly or indirectly, damage, or destruction, of space objects unless such action is justified: by imperative safety considerations, in particular if human life or health is at risk; or in order to reduce the creation of space debris; or by the Charter of the United Nations, including the inherent right of individual or collective self-

33 An example of this can be seen in the recent U.S.-RoK joint agreement on defense space strategy; <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220426000882>.

34 Examples of this include the Seoul Defense Dialogue, <http://sdd2022delegate.com/or> the Abu Dhabi Space Debate, <https://www.abudhabispacedebate.com/agenda-overview>.

35 An example of this is the Asia-Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum <https://www.aprsaf.org/>.

defence (...)”³⁶ Some States expressed concern that including the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence could still allow for an arms race and escalatory behaviour in outer space.

Another current initiative is the self-imposed destructive direct-ascent ASAT testing moratorium, which began as a unilateral political commitment by the United States,³⁷ and has since gained international traction with additional commitments made from Canada,³⁸ New Zealand,³⁹ Japan,⁴⁰ Germany,⁴¹ the United Kingdom,⁴² the Republic of Korea,⁴³ Australia,⁴⁴ and Switzerland.⁴⁵ As indicated supra, this initiative has also led to the recent adoption by the UN General Assembly of a new resolution “Destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing.”

36 “EU Proposal for an International Space Code of Conduct Draft” (European External Action Service, last modified March 31, 2014), Para. 51, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/14715_en.

37 “FACT SHEET” (2022).

38 Canadian Statement to the first session of the Open-ended working group on reducing space threats through Norms, Rules and Principles, Geneva, May 9th-13th 2022, <https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Canada-General-Statement-for-Translators-OEWG-Space-Threats-Session-bilingual.pdf>.

39 Hon Nanaia Mahuta, “Otago Foreign Policy School, Opening address” (The Official Website of the New Zealand Government, last modified July 1, 2022), <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/otago-foreign-policy-school-opening-address>.

40 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Decision Not to Conduct Destructive, Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Missile Testing, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000451.html.

41 “Germany Commits in Geneva Not to Conduct Anti-satellite Direct-ascent Missile Tests” (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, last modified September 13, 2022), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/anti-satellite-missile-tests/2551852>.

42 “Responsible Space Behaviours: The UK Commits Not to Destructively Test Direct Ascent Anti-satellite Missiles” (Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and UK Space Agency, last modified October 3, 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/responsible-space-behaviours-the-uk-commits-not-to-destructively-test-direct-ascent-anti-satellite-missiles>.

43 Joonkook Hwang, South Korea’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, UN Web TV at 01:09:15, https://media.un.org/en/asset/k11/k11cb8lhd?fbclid=IwAR2GAA-Y5G_v1VqIC5vesqLco4j8tbZWQhFidGZTFJ-KjO-jloz0mlRI5hw.

44 “Australia Advances Responsible Action in Space” (Defense Ministers Government of Australia, last modified October 27, 2022), <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2022-10-27/australia-advances-responsible-action-space>.

45 Statement Delivered by Switzerland to the 77th Session of the General Assembly First Committee Thematic Debate on Outer space, New York, October 26, 2022, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com22/statements/26Oct_Switzerland.pdf.

THE OPEN-ENDED WORKING GROUP ON REDUCING SPACE THREATS THROUGH NORMS, RULES, AND PRINCIPLES OF RESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOURS

Considering now current multilateral efforts under the auspices of the UN, the most prominent is the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules, and Principles of Responsible Behaviours. Established by UNGA resolution 76/231, put forward by the United Kingdom, this OEWG follows the efforts made under UNGA resolution 75/36, which had called on States to submit to the Secretary-General their perspectives about activities they believed could constitute as responsible, irresponsible, or threatening. The resulting report of the Secretary-General listed concerns from States such as, “deliberate acts intended to interfere with, deny, disrupt, degrade, damage or destroy space systems,” “increasing debris poses a collision risk to space objects,” “threats emanating from national laws and policies,” and “the possible development of various anti-satellite weapons, either deployed on orbit or launched from systems deployed on the ground, in the air or at sea.”⁴⁶ The report noted the importance to consider criteria of what would constitute responsible behaviours such as prior and timely communication to avoid causing misunderstanding, interference or damage to others.

Building on this report, the current OEWG has a two-year mandate to:⁴⁷

- a) Take stock of the existing international legal and other normative frameworks concerning threats arising from State behaviours with respect to outer space;
- b) Consider current and future threats by States to space systems,

⁴⁶ UNGA, “Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behaviours,” *Report of the Secretary-General* (2021), <https://www.un.org/disarmament/topics/outerspace-sg-report-outer-space-2021/pp.5/105-6/105>.

⁴⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution 76/231. “Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behaviours” (2021), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3952870?ln=en>.

and actions, activities and omissions that could be considered irresponsible;

- c) Make recommendations on possible norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviours relating to threats by States to space systems, including, as appropriate, how they would contribute to the negotiation of legally binding instruments, including on the prevention of an arms race in outer space;
- d) Submit a report to the General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session.

The OEWG is open to all UN Member States and Intergovernmental organizations and other entities having received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the work of the General Assembly. Additionally, other international organizations, commercial actors and civil society are invited to attend the public plenary meetings of the group as observers.⁴⁸ The OEWG is currently chaired by Mr. Hellmut Lagos, a Chilean diplomat.

The first session of the OEWG, in May 2022, was dedicated to the first agenda point, namely taking stock of the existing international legal and other normative frameworks concerning threats arising from State behaviours with respect to outer space. Member States discussed topics such as: existing international treaties, principles and resolutions passed by the UN General Assembly, other international instruments affecting the outer space domain, general international law, laws on the use of force, international security and international humanitarian law, air law, law of the sea, the Antarctic Treaty, and comparison to other international legal frameworks.⁴⁹

Drawing inspiration from adjacent fields, the discussions during this

⁴⁸ Open-Ended Working Group on Reducing Space Threats, UNODA, <https://meetings.unoda.org/open-ended-working-group-reducing-space-threats-2022>.

⁴⁹ For a more comprehensive understanding of each of these categories in the context of space security see “Existing Legal and Regulatory Frameworks concerning Threats Arising from State Behaviours with respect to Outer Space,” Working Paper A/AC.294/2022/WP.1 (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2022), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/248/57/PDF/G2224857.pdf?OpenElement>.

first session of the OEWG considered whether parallels from other mechanisms such as the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea could be made to outer space issues, such as close proximity maneuvers and rendezvous encounters. Several States put forward ideas on how to strengthen and implement existing principles, such as the principle of due regard contained in the Outer Space Treaty. They also exchanged on the practical application of the right to consultations outlined in Article IX of the Outer Space Treaty. Some States also spoke to multilingualism and how concepts were more difficult to distinguish from each other across different languages, for example the concept of space safety versus space security. Many States expressed the need for and importance of pursuing transparency and confidence building measures.

There was a robust debate on the applicability of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to outer space. A large number of States underlined that IHL applies to outer space, some of them highlighting specific principles such as the principles of proportionality and of distinction, and how they should regulate activities in and towards outer space. An example of this discussion concerns how an attack targeting space systems would violate the principle of proportionality, first, because the complex space environment makes it nearly impossible to scientifically quantify and predetermine the consequences of targeting a space system, and second, because of the integrated nature of space systems into critical civilian infrastructure. Other States opted in the EOWG that applying IHL to outer space was premature. They argued that considering the applicability of IHL to outer space implies the possibility that outer space is a potential domain in which conflict can take place and war can be fought, which, in turn, undermines the peaceful uses of outer space principle.

The second substantive session of the OEWG, in September 2022, was dedicated to the second point of its mandate: to consider future and current threats by States to space systems, and actions, activities and omissions that could be considered irresponsible. This session was organized according to different threat vectors: Earth-Space, Space-Earth, Space-Space, and Earth-Earth. Regarding threats to space systems, States

discussed the spectrum of reversibility to irreversibility of threats, technical parameters of space threats, the intentional creation of space debris, the concept of harmful interference, the distinction of dual-use and dual-purpose objects, reverberating effects, and the lack of common, understanding, transparency, and communication.⁵⁰ Many States shared concerns over kinetic physical attacks, namely anti-satellite capabilities. Direct-ascent ASATs and the consequential intentional debris creation were prominently discussed by States as one of the most threatening actions facing space systems.

States expressed concern over co-orbital ASAT capabilities, and more broadly over threats arising from additional co-orbital behaviour, like unannounced rendezvous and proximity operations. In addition, States expressed concerns over non-kinetic counter space capabilities, or threats emanating from electronic, cyber, or non-kinetic physical means like high-powered microwaves and electromagnetic pulses. States were particularly concerned over the difficulty of attributing such attacks, the growing frequency at which such activity was being utilized and tested, and the possibility of unintended consequences of such attacks on civilian infrastructure.

Some States mentioned other perceived threats, that they felt were not addressed in the session agenda, namely the threat from escalatory and aggressive national policies and strategies. There was concern over the fact that some prominent spacefaring States have adopted space defense strategies in which outer space has been designated as a war fighting domain. Ultimately, the session gathered a variety of perceived threats while also fostering a constructive debate which introduced nuanced threat considerations.

The remaining two substantive sessions of the OEWG are scheduled to take place in January and August 2023. The January session will be

⁵⁰ For a more in-depth explanation refer to “Threats to the Security of Space Activities and Systems,” Working Paper A/AC.294/2022/WP.16 (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2022), https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/20220817_A_AC294_2022_WP16_E_UNIDIR.pdf.

dedicated to the third agenda item: to make recommendations on possible norms, rules, and principles of responsible behaviours and how they would contribute to the negotiation of legally binding instruments. The August session will be dedicated to the drafting and adoption of a report to be submitted to the UN General Assembly. The outcome of these sessions will depend notably on whether States agree on the perception of norms, especially in relation to legally-binding mechanisms.

Space Security Dynamics in East Asia

Turning to East Asia, it has several prominent stakeholders in outer space exploration, innovation, and international space governance developments. Not only does the region house stakeholders with a longstanding historical role in outer space exploration, but there is a growing number of States in the region and its periphery with fast developing space programs. Likewise, space resources are increasingly more integral to the economies, civil infrastructure, military strategies, disaster and risk management programs, and numerous other sectors in the East and Southeast Asian regions. This section briefly lists some considerations pertaining to three States in the region and their periphery (China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea) presented in alphabetical order.

CHINA

On 24 April 1970, China was the fifth State to launch a satellite into orbit - the Dongfanghong-1.⁵¹ China's space technology development and indigenous launching capability were in large part tied to national defense missile and rocket research development. This may explain why a dedicated Chinese Space Agency was established relatively late when

⁵¹ "Cradle of China's First Artificial Satellite" (National Space Science Center), <https://english.nssc.cas.cn/au/history/>.

compared to its spacefaring counterparts. Today, the Chinese space programme is one of the globally most sophisticated, in terms of scientific outputs and capabilities, underling the importance of outer space to Chinese national posture, military strategy, and symbolic status. The Chinese space programme supports the second largest fleet of operational satellites (second to the U.S.A), PNT and ISR capabilities, advanced field communication satellites, Lunar and Martian exploration, and developing human spaceflight capabilities.⁵² Additionally, China is contributing to innovative leaps forward with its space quantum communication testing and explorative missions to the far side of the Moon.⁵³

China's stated mission for outer space activity is driven by the principle of peaceful uses of outer space. In its interpretation of peaceful uses, China includes national security as underscored in the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China white paper, *China's Space Program: A 2021 Perspective* which states that China aims to strengthen its space presence to defend national security.⁵⁴ Furthermore, under the Strategic Guideline of Active Defense from the Information Office of the State Council's white paper on China's military strategy, outer space is recognized as a new security domain.⁵⁵ The Chinese military structure underwent reform in 2015, resulting in the establishment of both the Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force, which coordinates the People's Liberation Army's space, cyber, and electronic warfare capabilities.⁵⁶ China has

52 "Major Tasks" (National Space Science Center), <https://www.cnsa.gov.cn/n6758824/n6759009/index.html>.

53 Tai Ming Cheung, *Comparing Defense Innovation Around the World* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2022), 56.

54 "China's Space Program: A 2021 Perspective" (The Information Office of the State Council of China, last modified January 28, 2022), Para. 2, <https://www.cnsa.gov.cn/english/n6465645/n6465648/c6813088/content.html>.

55 "China's Military Strategy" (The Information Office of the State Council of China, The State Council of the People's Republic of China, last modified May 27, 2015), Art 1, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm.

56 "习近平向中国人民解放军陆军火箭军战略支援部队授予军旗并致训词" [Xi Jinping awarded the military flag and delivered a speech to the strategic support force of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Rocket Force] (Chinese Communist Party News Network, last modified January 2, 2016), <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/01/02/c64094-28003839.html>.

significant counterspace capabilities and dual-purpose space assets, and has historically exhibited destructive counterspace actions in its testing of an anti-satellite capability. In 2007, China launched a ballistic missile from the Xichang Space Launch Center, with a kinetic kill vehicle payload that collided with the non-operational Chinese weather satellite, the Fengyun-1C.⁵⁷

Recently, the People's Republic of China appear to be cultivating bilateral and regional relationships in the areas of space security, as its statement on information notification system on rocket launches and on procedures for the retrieval and return of space debris issued jointly with the Philippines indicate.⁵⁸

JAPAN

In the late 50's, Japan experimented its indigenous "pencil" rocket as part of the International Geophysical Year activities and established what has evolved to be its current national space agency.⁵⁹ On 11 February 1970, Japan launched its indigenous satellite, Ohsumi, from the Kagoshima Space Center (currently known as the Uchinoura Space Center), making it the fourth nation to have a successful satellite launch after the Soviet Union, United States of America, and France.⁶⁰ Japan's space capabilities currently include remote-sensing, satellite communications, PNT services, space launch vehicles, lunar exploration, and crewed expeditions to the ISS.

In the last couple of decades, Japanese space directive has evolved

57 Brian Weeden, "2007 Chinese Anti-Satellite Test Fact Sheet" (The Secure World Foundation, November 23, 2010), https://swfound.org/media/9550/chinese_asat_fact_sheet_updated_2012.pdf.

58 "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, last modified January 5, 2023), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202301/t20230105_11001064.html.

59 "History of Japanese Space Research" (JAXA), https://www.isas.jaxa.jp/e/japan_s_history/brief.shtml.

60 "Ohsumi, Japan's First Satellite" (The University of Tokyo), accessed December 1, 2022, https://www.u-tokyo.ac.jp/en/whyutokyo/hongo_hi_009.html.

from being primarily about scientific research and development to serving a broader interest. Japan's first national space legislation, the Basic Space Law of 2008, reconstructed national considerations for outer space activity including a specific regard for national security.⁶¹ In 2020, it formed its Space Operations Squadron under the Air-Self Defense Force. In the following year, the 2021 Defense of Japan Annual White Paper emphasized the need to continue expanding offensive and defensive capabilities involving the space domain.⁶² This focus has continued in the most recent Defense of Japan 2022 White Paper, which includes a focal point for studying satellite constellations in the use for missile defense.⁶³ Most recently, Japan has made the political commitment not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing.⁶⁴

REPUBLIC OF KOREA

While the Republic of Korea's space program may be younger than its neighbours, its space presence and capabilities appear to be fast expanding. The Korea Aerospace Research Institute was established in 1989.⁶⁵ In its first decades of work, the agency focused largely on aerospace and satellite development. The Republic of Korea, due to the missile guidelines agreement with the United States, had not been able to develop indigenous launch capabilities. Following the revised bilateral missile guidelines between the U.S.-ROK in 2020, South Korea was able to use its solid rocket motors without restriction and develop space launch

⁶¹ "Basic Plan for Space Policy: Wisdom of Japan Moves Space," *Strategic Headquarters for Space Policy* (June 2, 2009), Art. 5, https://www8.cao.go.jp/space/pdl/basic_plan.pdf.

⁶² "Defense of Japan 2021 [white paper]" (Japanese Department of Defense), https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_Digest_EN.pdf.

⁶³ "Defense of Japan 2022 [white paper]" (Japanese Department of Defense), https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/index.html.

⁶⁴ "Decision not to conduct Destructive, Direct-Ascent Anti-Satellite Missile Testing" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan), https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000451.html#:~:text=The%20Government%20of%20Japan%20decided,responsible%20behavior%20in%20outer%20space.

⁶⁵ "History" (Korea Aerospace Research Institute), https://www.kari.re.kr/eng/sub01_04.do.

vehicles.⁶⁶ Since then, South Korea has developed indigenous launch capabilities with the successful launch of its Nuri Rocket from the Naro Space Center on 21 June 2022. In addition to its launching capabilities, the South Korea space programme supports remote-sensing, satellite communications, PNT services, and has begun lunar exploration projects.

South Korea's space policy is structured on the release of short, middle, and long-term national development basic plans. These national development basic plans are primarily concerned with the scientific development and expansion of the space programme. However, the Republic of Korea's 2020 Defense White Paper has made the important connection between outer space and security section five, "Development of Defense Space Power."⁶⁷ Military space development includes goals such as, the "establishment of a policy framework, development of an operating system, buildup of space capabilities, and expansion of internal and external cooperation."⁶⁸ Examples of the plans implementation include the establishment of the first ROK space unit, the ROK Air Force Satellite Surveillance Control Unit and the launch of its indigenous military communications satellite. South Korea has also been advancing international policy dialogue on the issues of space security through national initiatives such as its Seoul Defense Dialogue and through partnership events.⁶⁹ Additionally, the Republic of Korea has taken important unilateral steps such as its commitment not to conduct destructive direct-ascent anti-satellite missile testing.⁷⁰

66 Ankit Panda, "Solid Ambitions: The U.S.-South Korea Missile Guidelines and Space Launchers" (August 25, 2020), <https://carnegeendowment.org/2020/08/25/solid-ambitions-u.s.-south-korea-missile-guidelines-and-space-launchers-pub-82557>.

67 "2020 Defense White Paper" (Ministry of National Defense of Republic of Korea), https://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mnd/upload/pblict/PBLICTNEBOOK_202106300300426680.pdf.

68 "2020 Defense White Paper."

69 For instance, in May 2022 it conducted, in partnership with the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, an online webinar with States from the ASEAN region on advancing space security through norms, rules and principles of responsible behaviour. Sarah Erickson and Vivienne Zhang, "Advancing Space Security through Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behaviour?" *Webinar Summary Report* (UNIDIR, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/22/Space02>.

70 Joonkook Hwang, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations, First Committee of the 77th Session of the General Assembly, General Debate, New York, October 4, 2022, https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Disarmament-fora/1com/1com22/statements/4Oct_ROK.pdf.

THE PERIPHERY OF EAST ASIA

In the wider region surrounding East Asia, space is also increasingly vital to civilian infrastructure and the larger strategic debate, especially among changing socio-economic and climate related factors. There are several intergovernmental organizations dedicated to facilitating the development of space science, technology, policy and applications acquisition among nascent space programmes. The Asia-Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum (APRSAF) is a prominent example of such organizations.⁷¹ Established in 1993, APRSAF currently has representation from space agencies, governmental bodies, international organizations, private companies, universities, and research institutes across 52 different nations and regions.⁷² The Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization is another example of such organizations, initiated in 2008 and headquartered in Beijing.

States within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have increasingly been investing into space-based capabilities. The association itself has also facilitated partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs to expand the use of space-based capabilities in areas such as disaster and risk management. Currently, seven out of the ten member States of ASEAN own or have owned at least one satellite, which is key to enabling communications within archipelago type geographies. With this growing investment, ASEAN has recognized the importance of space security and taken an active role in its discussion, for example, in the on-going OEWG on reducing space threats through norms, rules, and principles of responsible behaviours, ASEAN has consistently shared statements outlining that access to outer space is an inalienable right of all States and that the use of outer space should exclusively be for

⁷¹ Asia-Pacific Regional Forum, <https://www.aprsaf.org/>.

⁷² "Participants," The Asia-Pacific Regional Space Agency Forum, <https://www.aprsaf.org/participants/>.

peaceful purposes only.⁷³ Additionally, working papers submitted by the Philippines in the first session, and by the Philippines and Germany in the second session, have inspired the debates, making lasting impact through concrete proposals.⁷⁴

Future Steps and Outlook

As this article shows, the outer space domain remains today sparsely regulated. The five treaties devoted to it leave many critical issues open to interpretation. Recent and ongoing multilateral discussions and negotiations undertaken notably under UN auspices have been seeking to advance the normative and governance framework of outer space. But these have been slow because the States active in them have been traditionally divided into two groups. One group considers the existing legal framework sufficient and seeks to fill any space security-related gaps with non-binding regulations. The other group considers the existing legal framework insufficient to address space security concerns and therefore proposes that new legally binding mechanisms be developed. This has often led to an impasse. Current processes like the above-mentioned OEWG on reducing space threats through norms, rules, and principles of responsible behaviours, are seeking to bring these two groups of States together, as well as other States and stakeholders, with a mandate that include both approaches, considering that norms help shape international treaties through the development of international customary law, and serve

73 Written Submission by the Member States of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to the Open-ended Working Group on Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behaviors, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G22/343/11/PDF/G2234311.pdf?OpenElement>.

74 “The Duty of ‘Due Regard’ as a Foundational Principle of Responsible Behavior in space (advanced unedited version),” Republic of the Philippines, *A/AC.294/2022/WP.*, <https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Philippines-Due-Regard-Paper.pdf>; “Security Risks, Threats, and Irresponsible Behaviors Undermining Stability in Outer Space,” Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of the Philippines, *A/AC.294/2022/WP.17*, https://documents.unoda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/A_AC294_2022_WP17_E_Philippines.pdf.

to interpret those treaties when adopted.

A gap seems to be growing between, on the one hand, slow international security and disarmament negotiations among States, and, on the other, fast-developing technological innovations resulting in growing exploration and use of outer space for a variety of purposes, driven by financial or geostrategic gain, some with potentially huge security implications.

This gap is magnified by two important trends: the increasing commercial value of outer space activities, and the related expansion of the number of States involved in and concerned with outer space, both driven by the decreasing costs of launching (with commercial launches to low Earth orbit reducing by a factor of 20) and projections of continued decreasing costs.⁷⁵

The increased commercial use of outer space by private companies spans satellite launches and asteroid mining and could extend to “space tourism.” As a result, today, 80% of space assets are privately owned.⁷⁶ Privately owned companies remain obviously dependent on States, at least in terms of their obligations to comply with all the laws and regulations of their place of incorporation and physical operations on earth, and also because many of them benefit from States’ funding if not technology transfers. However, they are changing the outer space environment, and have an important stake in the preservation of its peaceful and sustainable use.

In parallel, the number of States involved in and concerned with outer space has grown exponentially and can be expected to continue increasing. Initial space exploration in the 1950’s and 1960’s was marked by fierce competition between only two powers. Today, there are many more space-faring States and, in any case, every State has a vital interest in outer space,

⁷⁵ Harry W. Jones, “The Recent Large Reduction in Space Launch Cost,” 48th International Conference on Environmental Systems, July 2018, https://ttu-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2346/74082/ICES_2018_81.pdf.

⁷⁶ Almudena Azcarate Ortega and James Revill, “Space Industry Workshop Report” (UNIDIR, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.37559/WMD/21/Space/01>.

if only to secure communication and other vital services. Securing outer space has become a truly global concern. These two trends underscore the importance for diverse participation in the multilateral negotiating fora concerned with outer space, to adequately reflect the diversity of perspectives and views and contribute to creating effective space security governance structures.

As space becomes ever more important both in economic and geostrategic terms, competition is increasing and so are the risks that space becomes a conflict area. The war in Ukraine illustrates how space assets can and do contribute to the conduct of terrestrial warfare. It underscores the importance and urgency of securing and preventing conflicts in outer space while, concomitantly challenging and slowing down the capacity of the multinational negotiating environment to generate agreements.

It is vital that States come together to build transparency and confidence building measures to help restore pathways for communication and enhance a common understanding for the evolving and growing challenges to outer space security.⁷⁷ This may take the form of States continuing the cross regional initiatives that have been forming in the OEWG,⁷⁸ and transposing them to other fora addressing space security like the UN First Committee, Conference on Disarmament, and the recently established Group of Governmental Experts on further effective measures for the prevention of an arms race in outer space. Maintaining and cultivating initiatives is needed more than ever to help preserve peace in space and on earth.

77 An example of an existing transparency and confidence building measures is the UNOOSA Register of Objects Launched into Space; <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/spaceobjectregister/index.html>. Examples of developing transparency and confidence building measures include efforts from UNIDIR such as the Space Security Lexicon <https://unidir.org/projects/space-security-lexicon>; and the Space Security Portal <https://unidir.org/projects/space-security-portal>.

78 An example of cross regional collaboration and thought leadership can be seen in the third session of the OEWG through the working paper submitted by the Philippines and Germany and co-sponsored by Nigeria titled, "Recommendations on Possible Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behaviors relating to Threats by States to Space Systems," [https://docs-library.unoda.org/Open-Ended_Working_Group_on_Reducing_Space_Threats_\(2022\)/A_AC294_2023_WP1_GermanyPhilippines.pdf](https://docs-library.unoda.org/Open-Ended_Working_Group_on_Reducing_Space_Threats_(2022)/A_AC294_2023_WP1_GermanyPhilippines.pdf).

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Russia, China, and Information War against Ukraine

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Abstract

This article aims to explain some of the sources of China's informational support for Russia in Moscow's current war against Ukraine. This support despite the limited amount of economic and military support given to Russia, is considerable and displays alliance behavior. Therefore, this behavior also raises substantial questions concerning the nature of the relationship which is discussed here. Given limitations of space, this article, then, is intended as the first in a series on Russo-Chinese relationship. This article then goes on to underscore the striking ideological affinity between Moscow and Beijing that underlies their strategic collaboration, particularly in information. This affinity arguably provides the enduring basis for ideological and informational cooperation, e.g. in this war. This component of bilateral relations should therefore not be overlooked as is too often the case.

Key Words: Russia, China, ideology, information warfare, cyber, Ukraine

For some time now, China has openly supported Russia's war against Ukraine. As Fiona Hill, the former National Security Director for Russia and Europe, has said, "China is actively engaged in Russian propaganda and disinformation."¹ Similarly, CIA Director, William Burns, called China "a silent partner" in Putin's aggression.² In this context China's public support for Russia has been largely economic and informational. Indeed, by mid-March, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called Western sanctions on Russia "increasingly outrageous."³ One area where China has particularly strongly expressed this support is in disseminating Russia's narratives about this war in its media, i.e. supporting Russia's information war against Ukraine and the West. In addition, (as described below) it may have conducted large-scale cyber-attacks on critical Ukrainian infrastructure on behalf of Russia in the runup to the invasion. Certainly, China's actions in regard to information warfare exemplify alliance behavior with Russia and display an actual, existing alliance relationship despite their bilateral protestations that they are not allies. This support for Russia's information warfare obviously raises many interesting questions about the bilateral Sino-Russian relationship. So, once again, we need to clarify the nature of this relationship. Second, we need to assess more fully the informational dimension of this war. That entails demonstrating China's informational support for Russia. Third, we need to understand why China supports Russia informationally while its military-economic support has been much more limited. Fourth, does the provision of this support tell us that one or both sides are sharing experiences, tactics, and techniques to the degree that learning if not emulation is occurring with respect to information and/or cyber warfare? And if so, who is learning what from whom or emulating that other government's practice? Finally, is one or both militaries or governments modifying their thinking and/or practice

1 "Fiona Hill: Putin's Running Out of Time" (July 14, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/14/putin-russia-war-fiona-hill-future-west-nato/>.

2 "Director Burns' Remarks at Georgia Tech" (April 14, 2022), <https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/director-burns-georgia-tech-remarks-2022/>.

3 "Chinese Official Calls Sanctions on Russia Increasingly 'Outrageous'" (March 20, 2022), <https://www.euractiv.com>.

about information warfare in the light of their intimate and now long-standing mutual intimacy?

Given the scope of these questions it is unlikely that one paper alone can fully or adequately answer them. Therefore, this paper is intended to be the first in a series of papers that addresses these questions. For those reasons this paper, after considering the alliance issues raised by this Chinese support for Russia's war, proceeds to analyze the ways in which China is supporting Russia's war effort in the informational domain and why.

The Alliance Question

The question of alliance continues to perplex foreign observers if not policymakers. Evidently the Russo-Chinese alliance evidently remains a quandary for liberalism and its various theories of international relations if not for its observers and scholars trying to refine and develop these theories.⁴ Indeed, one recent commentary noted that this relationship contradicts theories and paradigms of international relations.⁵ Similarly, Andrej Krickovic and Zhang Chang openly state that, "existing theories are unable to explain why Russia has been more aggressive and confrontational in its status-seeking than China."⁶ Although they advance their own theory to explain this dilemma, if the facts contradict the theory, the theory is invalidated. A 2021 article by Elizabeth Wishnick about Sino-Russian collaboration in Afghanistan highlighted this partnership or alliance's extent. "Beijing and Moscow, once bitter adversaries, now cooperate on

4 Brandon K. Yoder, "The US Factor in China's Successful Reassurance of Russia," in *The United States and Contemporary China-Russia Relations: Theoretical Insights and Implications*, ed. Brandon K. Yoder (Switzerland: Springer, Cham, 2022), 185.

5 Yoder, "The US Factor in China's Successful Reassurance of Russia," 185.

6 Andrej Krickovic and Zhang Chang, "Fears of Falling Short Versus Anxieties of Decline: Explaining Russia and China's Approach to Status-Seeking," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2020): 219, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341822094_Fears_of_Falling_Short_versus_Anxieties_of_Decline_Explaining_Russia_and_China's_Approach_to_Status-Seeking#fullTextFileContent.

military issues, cyber security, high technology, and in outer space, among other areas. While it falls short of an alliance, the deepening Sino-Russian partnership confounds U.S. strategists.”⁷ But does it really fall short of an alliance?

Indeed, the debate on the issue of alliance underscores how much U.S. and foreign analysts are confounded. Assessments of this relationship run the gamut from statements that this relationship is an alliance, albeit an idiosyncratic one, to outright denials that there is even a genuine strategic partnership.⁸ Alexandr’ Lukin, who is well connected to Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even contends that it has passed its peak.⁹ Another recent analysis calls this partnership “an axis of collusion” and calls it fragile, while many other assessments still utilize Bobo Lo’s description of 2008 of this relationship as an “Axis of Convenience.”¹⁰

But while most writers eschew the term alliance, that does not mean that, substantively and factually speaking, this is not an alliance. Beijing’s behavior and loyalty to Russia in the light of the war against Ukraine suggests as much. An international conference of experts in Berlin in 2020 concluded that we face an emerging alliance in form if not in name.¹¹ Since that conference, accelerating and uninterrupted closeness in military

7 Elizabeth Wishnick, “Prospects for Sino-Russian Coordination in Afghanistan” (War on the Rocks, November 8, 2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/prospects-for-sino-russian-coordination-in-afghanistan/>.

8 Stephen Blank, “The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance,” *Defense & Security Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 3 (Summer 2020): 1-26, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14751798.2020.1790805?needAccess=true>; Marc Galeotti, “There is No Russia-China Axis” (October 20, 2021), <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/a-russia-china-axis-doesn-t-exist-but-the-west-could-make-it>.

9 Alexander Lukin, “Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 155-73, https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/1/2181/files/2019/03/Lukin_TWQ_44-3.pdf.

10 Harley Balzer, “Axis of Collusion: The Fragile Putin-Xi Partnership” (December 21, 2021), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/axis-of-collusion-the-fragile-putin-xi-partnership/>; Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

11 Rainer Meyer zum Felde, “What a Military Alliance between Russia and China Would Mean for NATO,” in *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* ed. Sarah Kirchberger, Svermja Sinjen and Nils Woermer (Switzerland: Springer, Cham, 2022), 345.

affairs has occurred.¹² Even though bilateral military cooperation, especially Chinese assistance to counter Western sanctions has not been seen, a certain amount of military cooperation is taking place.

China and Russia held their first joint military exercise since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine on May 24, with both countries sending out nuclear-capable bombers while President Joe Biden visited the region. In July, People's Liberation Army troops, tanks, and vehicles set out for Russia to participate in the so-called "War Olympics." China has also indirectly supported the Russian war machine by exporting off-road vehicles for transporting command personnel, as well as drone components and naval engines.¹³

Neither has any of the oft-cited differences between Russian and Chinese policy orientations slowed the development of ever closer relations. Not even this war, which imposes serious economic and political costs on China, has led Beijing to reconsider its support for Russia and Putin.¹⁴ Moreover, some Western writers like this author, Kevin Ruud, Graham Allison, and Andrea Kendall-Taylor believe it to be a de facto alliance.¹⁵ Allison observed that,

What has emerged is what a former senior Russian national security official described to me as a "functional military alliance." Russian and Chinese General Staffs now have candid, detailed discussions about the threat U.S. nuclear modernization and missile

¹² Sarah Kirchberger, Svemnja Sinjen and Nils Woermer, ed., *Russia-China Relations: Emerging Alliance or Eternal Rivals?* (Switzerland: Springer, Cham, 2022).

¹³ Thomas Low and Peter W. Singer, "How Putin's Ukraine War Has Only Made Russia More Reliant on China" (August 11, 2022), <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2022/08/how-putins-ukraine-war-has-only-made-russia-more-reliant-china/375714/>.

¹⁴ Balzer, "Axis of Collusion"; Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience; Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Graham Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making" (December 14, 2018), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>; Blank, "The Russo-Chinese Alliance"; Blank, "The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance": 1-27.

defenses pose to each of their strategic deterrents. It therefore stands to reason that these militaries also conduct equally probing discussions concerning conventional warfare and Korean issues. Indeed, ... an extensive infrastructure of bilateral consultation and exchange has developed over the last generation.¹⁶

Similarly, Vasily Kashin, Senior Research Fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of the Far East, calls this relationship “an undeclared alliance.” Kashin also observes that Moscow has advocated this outcome since 2014 and the Crimean invasion. Indeed, in 2017, it initiated a bilateral three-year road map for bilateral military cooperation with China. A new agreement was signed in 2021.¹⁷ Writing about this 2021 accord, The South China Morning Post invoked the term alliance and delineated its geographical dimensions.

China and Russia are edging closer to a de facto military alliance to counter growing pressure from the United States, with the Russian defence chief telling his Chinese counterpart that US aircraft activity near the country’s borders had increased.

In a video call on Tuesday, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chinese Defence Minister General Wei Fenghe agreed to expand cooperation through strategic exercises and joint patrols in the Asia-Pacific, including the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, according to Russia’s defence ministry.¹⁸

According to Kashin, China may be reluctant to call this an alliance because it wants to preserve the idea that it does not have allies, conducts an independent policy, and that its ties with Russia, although they involve mutual interests, are primarily for China’s benefit. Lastly, Kashin observes

¹⁶ Allison, “China and Russia.”

¹⁷ Laura Zhou, “China and Russia Move Closer to De Facto Military Alliance amid US Pressure” (November 24, 2021), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3157225/china-and-russia-move-closer-de-facto-military-alliance-amid-us>.

¹⁸ Zhou, “China and Russia Move Closer to De Facto Military Alliance amid US Pressure.”

that the declaration of an alliance is connected with full-fledged nuclear cooperation to help China create a strategic launch detection system.¹⁹ Bearing all these factors in mind, it seems quite possible, if not likely, that, barring fundamental changes in these states' leadership or governance, that this dimension of alliance-like behavior, i.e. more military collaboration and cooperation, including information-warfare related activities, will grow.

Indeed, Moscow has at least twice overtly solicited an alliance.²⁰ At the same time, there is abundant evidence that this is an evolving alliance, particularly in the military sphere, even if it remains a de facto rather than a de jure alliance.²¹ Putin further stated in 2019 that bilateral relations resembled “an alliance relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted relationship.”²² Even more telling, both Putin and Xi Jinping have recently observed that this relationship surpasses an alliance.

Xi said that although China and Russia are not officially allied, “Their effectiveness even exceeds this level,” Kremlin foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov told Bloomberg. “Such a figurative expression very accurately reflects the essence of what is happening now in relations between our two countries.”²³

This finding had already been prefigured in remarks by Russian Ambassador, to China, Andrei Denisov and in the findings by a bilateral team of experts in 2017-18. According to Denisov,

19 Vasily Kashin, *The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2018); Vasily Kashin, “More Than Partnership: Political Expert Vasily Kashin on the Development of the Political and Economic Relations of Russia and China” (Vedomosti, August 18, 2016).

20 Blank, “The Russo-Chinese Alliance?”; Blank, “The Un-Holy Russo-Chinese Alliance”: 1-27.

21 Ibidem.

22 Andrea Kendall-Taylor, David Shullman and Dan McCormick, “Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation” (War on the Rocks, August 5, 2020), <https://www.warontherocks.com>.

23 Carl Simon, “Xi Tells Putin That Russia, China Are Better Than Allies, Kremlin Says” (December 16, 2021), https://www.yahoo.com/news/xi-tells-putin-russia-china-012945212.html?fr=sycsrp_catchall.

“We do not have relations of any special type with China enshrined in the form of agreements. We are independent players, but we do have, as we say, relations of comprehensive cooperation and strategic cooperation,”... In his view, some new words are required to describe the nature of bilateral relations. “We have no allied commitments to each other, because there are no allied relations as such. I would say, however, that relations based on comradely partnership in a number of areas are commensurable in terms of their quality with a much higher level compared to what is reflected in our political statements,” ...²⁴

Similarly, the 2017-18 bilateral findings of Sino-Russian experts reported the exact same conclusion and argued that the parties have attained a level of interaction exceeding a strategic partnership and surpassing an alliance. Both sides retain full freedom in relations with third countries “except in circumstances where such relations might violate certain obligations of the existing partnership.” Meanwhile in the bilateral relationship’s intensiveness, level of trust, depth, and effectiveness Sino-Russian ties supposedly are superior to an alliance.²⁵ In addition, this partnership allegedly has more potential to act “as an independent geopolitical power and deter political adversaries.” Thus, both parties have successfully adapted their cooperation “to resolve any global or regional task” while preserving their swift decision-making, tactical flexibility, and strategic stability.²⁶ Therefore this evolving relationship, whatever its true nature, aims to preserve both sides’ flexibility of maneuver while conferring upon them the benefits of a genuine alliance. Consequently, manifestations of that flexibility do not

²⁴ “Ambassador Hails Russian-Chinese Cooperation” (TASS, February 9, 2018), <https://tass.com/politics/989236>.

²⁵ Russian International Affairs Council, Fudan University and Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, *Russian-Chinese Dialogue: The 2018 Model* (Moscow: RIAC, 2018), 20.

²⁶ Russian International Affairs Council, Fudan University and Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, *Russian-Chinese Dialogue*, 21.

negate the reality of an alliance. Neither is it the case that a bilateral military alliance would be a nonsensical proposition.²⁷ Already by 2020, bilateral ties were strongly pointing to an alliance and possibly past the threshold by which an alliance could be fairly categorized as such.²⁸

Today this is a political alignment on a trajectory to become an entente, though not a formal alliance, or a military alliance in the classical sense. The current state of relations is de facto a non-aggression pact, which Russia hopes to translate into a partnership premised on mutual economic and technical assistance. As an alignment it passes the first test, Russia and China stay away from contesting each other's core interests or supporting adversaries in key contests.²⁹

Subsequently this military relationship has steadily deepened.³⁰ Moreover, the two governments also share very great ambitions for this relationship to effectuate a major restructuring of global politics as revealed in the bilateral declaration of February 4, 2022.³¹

Finally, the war has accelerated and intensified Putin's desire to reorient Russians' thinking about their "civilizational choice" from a European axis to a pro-Chinese one. As Simon Saradzhyan has written,

To Vladimir Putin, the war in Ukraine is obviously not an end in itself. Rather, it is one of multiple means by which he'd like to attain multiple aims. Of these, one appears to be somewhat overlooked and undeservedly so, in my view: It is to accelerate what Putin would like to be Russian elites' clean break from a "morally bankrupt" and "declining" West, so that Russia can blossom as a separate civilization

27 Michael Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente" (November 29, 2019), <https://ridl.io/towards-a-sino-russian-entente/>.

28 Kirchberger, Sinjen and Woermer, ed., *Russia-China Relations*.

29 Kofman, "Towards a Sino-Russian Entente."

30 Kirchberger, Sinjen and Woermer, ed., *Russia-China Relations*.

31 That document can be found in Alice Ekman, "China and the Battle of Coalitions: The 'Circle of Friends' Versus the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Chaillot Papers*, no. 174 (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2022), 48-57.

in alignment with the “great civilization” of a “rising” China. This is being sold both to Russia’s elites and to its general public as Putin’s grand vision of a once-in-a-century-or-more change of Russia’s “civilizational choice.” However, I argue in this research brief that, in reality, it is an exercise in realpolitik meant to position Russia in the emerging global order in a way that its rulers believe will be most beneficial to their country’s vital interests and for them personally.³²

Therefore, even if China is not offering large-scale economic and military support lest it run afoul of U.S. sanctions or trigger a wider war; its adoption of Russia’s narratives about this war display alliance-like behavior. We need not demand full Chinese support for Russia as definitive proof of an alliance here as the examples of somewhat fractured relations among American allies during the Vietnam, Iraq, and Suez wars show that despite Russia and China arguably being de facto allies, China need not fully support Russia’s war to validate this alliance’s de facto existence. Moreover, as China is incontestably the dominant ally here it does not need Russian support nearly as much as Russia now increasingly depends upon its support.³³

The Informational Dimension of the War

Nevertheless, we still need to understand why China chose this particular form of support for Russia. Here an inquiry into the informational dimension of this war yields interesting and valuable insights into the ideological foundations of this alliance that have been under-appreciated

32 Simon Saradzhyan, “War with Ukraine as Other Means to Speed Up Reversal of Russia’s ‘Civilizational Choice’” (August 12, 2022), <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/war-ukraine-other-means-speed-reversal-russias-civilizational-choice>.

33 Ishan Tharoor, “Russia Becomes China’s Junior Partner,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/12/china-russia-power-imbalance-putin-xi-junior-partner/>; Alexander Gabuev, “China’s New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing’s Junior Partner” (August 9, 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-new-vassal>.

as motive forces for it. Doing so also helps resolve the puzzle of why this alliance persists and even expands although it supposedly represents, at least analytically, a repudiation of current schools of thought in international relations. One could argue that displaying informational support represents a low-cost and low-risk way of signaling overall political support and that would be true. But the point we wish to make here is that this support goes beyond that kind of ritualistic display of support to connote a much deeper “elective affinity” between Moscow and Beijing. In other words, China’s continuing informational support for Russia reflects something more than a desire to show Moscow that it supports Russia’s war even though it is not offering large-scale economic or military support. Arguably it reflects a genuine and deepening convergence if not identity of threat assessments, in particular, of ideological as well as geopolitical threats.

Information warfare and operations are well-known as critical elements of Moscow’s overall military strategy. For example, a 2021 account of Russia’s overall military programs discusses, “Russia’s overall strategic intent to effect as great a cost on a potential adversary. In the information domain in the initial period of war as well as to contest it during peacetime.”³⁴ Likewise, General Vitaly Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff, stated in 2016 that the current technological and psychological-informational environment offered the possibility of ensuring “the destruction of military forces and key state assets in several hours.”³⁵ And this is hardly an isolated observation on his part.³⁶ Moreover, it has been a key idea among Russian military thinkers for over a decade. Already in 2011 Col. Sergey Chekinov (RET) and LtG. Sergey Bogdanov stated that a new generation war will be dominated by

³⁴ Richard Connolly, “Russian Defense Industry Analysis,” vol. 10, no. 4 (April 2021): 42.

³⁵ General Vitaly Gerasimov, “Po Opytu Syrii,” *Voyenno-Promyshlennyyi Kur’er* (March 9, 2016), quoted in James Sherr, “The Baltic States in Russian Military Strategy,” *Security in the Baltic Sea Region: Realities and Prospects*, ed. Andris Spruds and Maris Andzans (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2016), 161.

³⁶ V. Gerasimov and Vektory Razvitiya VoЕННОi Strategii, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (March 4, 2019), <https://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/>.

information and psychological warfare to depress enemy morale (civilian and military) while also achieving superiority in troop and weapons controls. Thus, information and psychological warfare will “largely lay the groundwork for victory.”³⁷ Moreover, in the period preceding the war, months before the start of a new-generation war, large-scale measures in all types of warfare - information, moral, psychological, ideological, diplomatic, economic, and so on - may be designed and followed under a joint plan to create a favorable military, political, and economic setting for the operations of the allies’ armed forces.³⁸ But these writers were themselves only building upon almost twenty years of sustained thinking about the nature of contemporary warfare in the light of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, by then the mantra that Russia was in a state of war with the West that for the moment was largely informational and cyber but also included the fomenting of “color revolutions” had penetrated Russian elite thinking.³⁹

Certainly, Moscow attempted to effectuate this kind of outcome in Ukraine.⁴⁰ Although Russia’s informational and cyber strikes on Ukraine leading up to and since February, 24, 2022 when hostilities began were and are abundant, there appears to be a Western consensus that they have not been very effective.⁴¹ Nevertheless there is no doubt that Russia in-

37 Chekinov and Bogdanov are quoted in Scott Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operation: Coding the Boundaries of Conflict* (Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Press, 2020), 60.

38 Jasper, *Russian Cyber Operation*, 60.

39 Andrew Foxall, “Changing Character of Russia’s Understanding of War: Policy Implications for the UK and Its Allies,” *Changing Character of War* (Oxford Centre, 2021), <https://www.cw.ox.ac.uk/blog/2021/5/25/changing-character-of-russias-understanding-of-war-by-dr-andrew-foxall>.

40 Mitchell Orenstein, “Russia’s Use of Cyberattacks: Lessons from the Second Ukrainian War” (June 7, 2022), <https://www.fpri.org>.

41 Colin Demarest, “US Seeking to Understand Russia’s Failure to Project Cyber Power in Ukraine” (July 21, 2022), [50](https://news.yahoo.com/us-seeking-understand-russian-failures-164220421.html?fr=sycsrp_catchall&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9zZW-FyY2guYW9sLmNvbS9jbGlljay9feWx0PUEyS0xmUnZKSU90aaVlIUUF6d2xwQ1dWSDtfeWxi1PVkyOXNid05pWmpFRWNHOXpBekVFZG5ScFpBTUVjMIZqQTN0eS9SvJ0L1JFPTE2NTk0MDg3MTRMvUk89MTAvUIU9aHR0cHMIM2ElMmYlMmZuZXZdlzNlhaG9vLmNvb-SUyZnVzLXNlZWtpbmdtdW5kZXJzdGFuZC1ydXNzaWFuLWZhaWx1cmVzLTE2NDJyMDQyMS5odG1sJTNmZnllM2RzeWNzcnBfY2F0Y2hhbGwvUks9MCM9SUz1UWEExoaVJJWDNodDFrT3lYRkhiQWFOmNlib28t&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAIsn_L5nGIF-rFPKq-n-qZjb-SOVSB64InoW37wRSUKYvX2wbR47X3mh9her6pvREFwjkoeY4WvS3QEiEkPueevPEg4bWmTcXNRPlYr2GjskQJc3cifix2lyPeYxXhSpzjv1hSDxzendYCh_eZbT8F8i2Xa7ba_GALFnTLHrs94Eb.</p>
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formational and cyberattacks have been extensive. And as the quote above suggests, they have been correlated, as Gerasimov advocated, with kinetic air, land, and sea operations to generate multiple threats against Ukraine.⁴² These would also include psychological operations to demoralize Ukraine and undermine its political will and ability to continue fighting, e.g. large-scale strikes at critical infrastructure.⁴³ Thus the IW and cyber components of Russian strategy have hardly been absent even if they have been relatively ineffective until now. Indeed, Russia has blocked or removed 138,000 websites in Russia and subjected another 5300 websites and links to military censorship apart from its global and specifically Ukrainian cyber operations.⁴⁴ Likewise, Moscow has moved promptly to take over the internet in the areas captured by it during this war. “The first thing that an occupier does when they come to Ukrainian territory is cut off the networks,” said Stas Prybytko, who leads mobile broadband development in Ukraine’s Ministry of Digital Transformation.⁴⁵ The scope and alacrity of these operations demonstrates the seriousness with which Moscow approaches the issue of monopolizing “correct” information among its subjects and with waging what amounts to information warfare against its own citizens.

Clearly Moscow’s information warfare is not only targeted globally and against Ukraine, but also encompasses large-scale information warfare at home. And this fact is a telltale clue to both Russian and Chinese information and cyber warfare and operations that pervade many if not all aspects of these governments’ overall security policies.

Indeed, the U.S. analyst and former defense official Seth Cropsey observes that,

⁴² Gerasimov, quoted in Sherr, “The Baltic States in Russian Military Strategy,” 162.

⁴³ Tetyana Malyarenko and Boris Kormych, “Russia’s Cyberwar against Ukraine: A Demodernized Regime against a Networked Society,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 787 (July 22, 2022).

⁴⁴ Attorney General: Russia Has Blocked 138,000 Websites amid War against Ukraine” (August 8, 2022), <https://www.meduza.io/en>.

⁴⁵ Adam Satariano, “How Russia Took Over Ukraine’s Internet in Occupied Territories,” *New York Times*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

The entirety of Russia's strategy has had an informational bent. Its attempt to overwhelm Ukraine early in the war, striking targets across the country and invading along six distinct axes, was meant to signal to the West that Russia would march into Kiev within days, driving the ever-perfidious homosexual-drug-addicted-Jewish-Nazi Zelensky into exile.⁴⁶

Cropsey also contends that,

Russia's missile strikes throughout Ukraine, nuclear threats and hypersonic weapons tests are still meant to showcase Russian technical-material superiority and resolve. The Donbas campaign displays Russia's true strength - its ability to pulverize cities brick by brick. Russia cannot win conventionally. It must win informationally.⁴⁷

Cropsey's assessment tallies with this author's own insights into the nuclear dimension of this war.

Intimidating nuclear exercises and rhetoric can be useful tools to deter and manipulate foreign strategic behavior. Since intimidation relies on a psychological relationship between the parties involved, the prominent display of nuclear weapons conveys a powerful informational [and] psychological effect that fully comports with Russian strategic thinking. These threats aim to intimidate NATO into not intervening and to impede efforts to enhance NATO cohesion, inhibit weapons supplies, and thus isolate Ukraine so Russia retains the strategic initiative and escalation dominance. These are basic objectives of Russian military strategy and have a deep-rooted basis in Soviet practice. Consequently, invocation of seemingly credible, Russian, nuclear threats represents Russia's understanding that nuclear

⁴⁶ Seth Cropsey, "Why US-NATO Can't Let Russia Win," *Asia Times*, June 28, 2022, <https://asiatimes.com/2022/06/why-us-nato-cant-let-russia-win/>.

⁴⁷ Cropsey, "Why US-NATO Can't Let Russia Win."

weapons are potent information weapons that can manipulate enemies' psychology and decision-making.⁴⁸

Similarly, Dmitri Minic argues that the large buildup of approximately 175,000 - 200,000 conventional forces on Ukraine's borders in 2021-22 may have been intended as much to simulate an invasion as to actually launch one. As he points out, the mere deployment and demonstration of force is both an integral element of Russia's concept of strategic deterrence and an act of information warfare to convey threats that could to the optimal outcome, namely the achievement of Russia's objectives without actual fighting.⁴⁹ Thus, the information-cyber component of this war remains crucial to victory not only over Ukraine, but also over the West. Furthermore, complete control over all information pertaining to this war is no less crucial to Putin's domestic project, hence the steadily increasing and pervasive domestic pressure and repression we now see in Russia. The use of information controls and what amounts to domestic warfare against the population to ensure domestic conformity is, of course, a hallmark of both the Russian and Chinese governments. Therefore, China's adaptation of Moscow's narrative represents more than just a formal gesture of support. It is an action that both displays the similar ideological-political world views of both states but also signals China's commitment to the reinforcement of that ideological-political congruence into the future.

Indeed, indicating the murkiness of just what China knew in advance of the impending war, there are reports that China may have helped Russia covertly by a massive cyber-attack on Ukraine and financial manipulations before the war began.⁵⁰ Specifically, *The Times*, claims to have obtained

48 Stephen Blank, "Russian Nuclear Strategy in the Ukraine War: An Interim Report" (June 15, 2022), <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/IS-525.pdf>.

49 Dimitri Miinic, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: A Political-Strategic Break?" Notes De L'IFRI, Russie.Nei. *Visions*, no. 126 (2022), <https://www.ifri.org>.

50 "China Accused of Cyber-Attacks On. Ukraine before Russian Invasion" (April 1, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/apr/01/china-accused-of-launching-cyber-attacks-on-ukraine-before-russian-invasion>; "Russia Stashed Away Billions Before Invading Ukraine. China May Have Helped Hide It" (March 25, 2022), <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/25/1088879117/russia-stashed-away-billions-before-invading-ukraine-china-may-have-helped-hide-it>.

Ukrainian intelligence memos stating that Chinese hackers allegedly compromised up to 600 websites in the runup to the war. U.S. intelligence agencies also apparently confirmed the accuracy of this information.⁵¹ The targets included the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, the Border Guard Service, the national bank, nuclear facilities, railway authorities, the State Nuclear Regulatory Inspectorate, the Ukrainian Investigation website focused on hazardous waste, and other key military sites, and culminated on February 23, the day before the invasion.⁵² The Ukrainian memo depicts these hacks as computer network exploitation attacks conducted on an almost daily basis, with Computer Network Exploitation (CNE) operations being typically used for reconnaissance and espionage.⁵³ Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute at the University of London commented that the techniques involved pointed to China and that the implications of this attack and surveillance intelligence strongly suggest that Beijing is working with Moscow, a fact that renders China potentially subject to sanctions.⁵⁴ Likewise, Sam Cranny-Evans, an intelligence and surveillance expert at RUSI, commented that this episode showed the normally capable Russians involving the Chinese in their operations. Moreover,

The attacks suggest a certain level of collusion between Russia and China, which may prompt revised assessments of the nature of the relations between Russia and China and the willingness of the two nations to support each other in military operations... It may also raise questions about what other support Beijing will provide Russia's operation in Ukraine and the potential for this to prolong the conflict.⁵⁵

51 Elizabeth Stauffer, "Ukraine Identifies 600 Sites Quietly Compromised by China Just Days before the Invasion" (April 3, 2022), <https://www.westernjournal.com/ukraine-identifies-600-sites-quietly-compromised-china-just-days-invasion/>.

52 Stauffer, "Ukraine Identifies 600 Sites Quietly Compromised by China Just Days before the Invasion."

53 *Ibid.*

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

Moreover, this mutual support is continuing on issues unrelated to Ukraine, e.g. Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi's, visit to Taiwan in early August. Thus,

While Chinese disinformation and propaganda campaigns are meant to target a domestic audience and Taiwan itself in hopes of paving the way for reunification between Beijing and Taipei, Russia has been targeting a different audience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Kremlin ... which is engaged in a deepening partnership with Beijing and is increasingly reliant on it after its invasion of Ukraine ... has been outspoken against the visit, with Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova calling it a "provocation" aimed at pressuring Beijing and expressing full solidarity with China. Russian media, meanwhile, have copied these Chinese narratives, with state TV's Yevgeny Popov saying that Pelosi intended to use the visit to "turn the planet into dust." ...While Ukraine war coverage is still the big-ticket item for Russian propaganda, the Taiwan visit highlights how state-run outlets in both countries are increasingly laundering each other's talking points.⁵⁶

Consequently, the adoption by China of Russian talking points on Ukraine has now been reciprocated by Russia in another clear example of alliance behavior. These examples of alliance behavior are clearly based on what scholars call a normative consensus or rapprochement with Russia.⁵⁷ We must also understand that this anti-American and/or anti-liberal normative rapprochement or consensus dates back to the inception of the Sino-Russian rapprochement of the 1990s. That process emerged on the one hand from China's reaction to the collapse of the Soviet Union,

⁵⁶ Reid Standish, "China in Eurasia Briefing: Pelosi's Taiwan Visit Meets Russian and Chinese Propaganda" (August 3, 2022), <https://www.rferl.org/a/china-eurasia-briefing-standish-pelosi-taiwan-russia-propaganda/31971642.html>.

⁵⁷ Alice Ekman, "China and the Battle of Coalitions: The 'Circle of Friends' Versus the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Chaillot Papers*, no. 174 (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2022): 41.

the First Gulf War of 1990-91, and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and massacre.⁵⁸ Meanwhile in post-Soviet Russia this consensus and rapprochement began with the domestic struggle between conservatives and reformers over the priority relationships in Russia's Asian policy under Boris Yeltsin.⁵⁹ Analysts who underestimate or dismiss this normative consensus and ideological consensus in this bilateral relationship fundamentally misread the nature and foundations of this evolving strategic relationship that arguably has now become an alliance. And this ideological congruence, as well as the strong congruence in geopolitical and strategic interests is not only fundamental to this alliance, but is also very visible in China's adoption of Russia's narratives pertaining to this war. To be sure, there are those observers who see the congruence displayed below in Russo-Chinese informational messaging as not representing a manifestation of alliance behavior or direct cooperation but rather as shared Sino-Russian strategic objectives and a mutual borrowing followed by amplification of each other's messages.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, they also acknowledge that ties between both states' militaries, governments, and presumably media have grown in the recent past.⁶¹

Chinese and Russian Support for Each Other's Narratives

This bilateral cooperation is not a bolt from the blue. It builds on considerable interaction in and about cyberspace. For example, both states

⁵⁸ Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁵⁹ Stephen Blank, "Diplomacy at an Impasse: Russia and Japan in a New Asia," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 5, issue 1 (1993): 141-64. <https://kida.re.kr/images/skin/doc.html?fn=c3959918f9df402859a0d8f9f4b1a717&rs=/images/convert>; Stephen Blank, "We Can Live without You: Rivalry and Dialogue in Russo-Japanese Relations," *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1993): 173-98, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01495939308402917>.

⁶⁰ Reid Standish, "China's Censorship, Propaganda Push Russian Version of the War in Ukraine," *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty* (March 9, 2022), <https://www.rferl.org>.

⁶¹ Standish, "China's Censorship, Propaganda Push Russian Version of the War in Ukraine."

share a virtual obsession about ensuring their computer or cyber sovereignty, i.e. that they enjoy virtually unrestricted and unlimited control all aspects of what comes in or departs from their country's cyberspace. Thus, on cyber issues ranging from questions of domestic governance to the character of contemporary war and apparently military operations as well, we arguably see not only congruence, cooperation, if not sharing, and learning or even possibly emulation.

China's wholesale adaptation of Russian tropes therefore suggests at least parallel if not identical or conjoined purposes. These purposes are not confined to external projection of power and influence. In other words, the Sino-Russian alliance or whatever one chooses to call it, is not held together only by "a mutual determination to challenge the United States" unless we add the ideological and domestic threat perception of U.S. values imbricated with U.S. power.⁶³ Those purposes of challenging Washington therefore also entail the unrelenting domestic consolidation of power around two post-Leninist imperial autocracies whose leaders, as shown below, see themselves as being constantly under threat from the U.S. and from the specter of color revolutions, thereby attesting to their own **self-perception of being rulers with a dubious and fragile legitimacy**. As one recent assessment of this alliance observed, "They are taking steps and aligning efforts in the cyber and digital realms to solidify control over their populations internally and use their cyber and digital tools to project their influence outward."⁶⁴ The growing institutionalization and deepening of their mutual cooperation in the cyber and information domains reflects not only geostrategic alignment but is also a major weapon to control what they obviously perceive as a highly insecure and vulnerable domestic environment. And this saturation of their home fronts with systematic

⁶² Amirudin Bin Abdul Wahab, "New Domains of Crossover and Concern in Cyberspace," in *China-Russia Relations and Regional Dynamics: From Pivots to Peripheral Diplomacy*, ed. Lora Saalman (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2017), 57.

⁶³ Kathrin Hille et al., "US Urged to Exploit Cracks in Russia-China Relationship" (August 2, 2020), <https://www.ft.com>.

⁶⁴ Andrea-Kendall Taylor and David Shulman, "Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership" (Center for a New American Security, 2021), 14, <https://www.cnas.org>.

large-scale disinformation is clearly linked with rulers' obsession about the possibility of being unseated in a future "color revolution."⁶⁵

The preexisting close ties between these two states' media obviously facilitates the rapid diffusion of such propaganda and disinformation. On his first trip to Moscow in 2013, Xi Jinping pledged to deepen bilateral media cooperation and subsequently agreements to this end have proliferated. Sputnik alone has signed 17 agreements with the Chinese media so by 2021 its articles were shared over 2500 times by Chinese media.⁶⁶

China's dissemination of pro-Russian or even Russian sponsored media has been found to occur across domestic language media, Chinese-language Russian media, and in Chinese language accounts found in Western social media platforms that targeted the broader Chinese diaspora and people in Taiwan.⁶⁷

By mid-March Chinese sources were about amplifying both Russian disinformation about Ukraine and linking Ukrainian "Nazism" to the forces in Hong Kong protesting Chinese policies there to solidify solidarity among both peoples against "foreign forces interfering in internal affairs."⁶⁸ Among the Russian narratives amplified by China since 2021, i.e. before the war is the Russian-funded conspiracy theory about US-funded bioweapons labs in Ukraine and Georgia which it has expanded to involve claims about Hunter Biden, George Soros, the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Covid-19.⁶⁹ Chinese sources have also reported that

⁶⁵ Stephen Blank, "Russian Information Warfare as Domestic Counterinsurgency," *American Foreign Policy Interests*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2013): 31-44, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10803920.2013.757946?journalCode=uafp20>; Chris Buckley and Steven Lee Myers, "Xi Builds Security Fortress for China and Himself," *New York Times*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/06/world/asia/xi-jinping-china-security.html>.

⁶⁶ Paul Mozur, Steven Lee Myers and John Liu, "China's Echoes of Russia's Alternate Reality Intensify around the World," *New York Times*, August 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

⁶⁷ Helen Davidson "Close Ties Allow Russian Propaganda to Spread Swiftly Through China, Report Says" (March 31, 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com>.

⁶⁸ Davidson, "Close Ties Allow Russian Propaganda to Spread Swiftly through China, Report Says."

⁶⁹ Ibid; Standish, "China's Censorship, Propaganda Push Russian Version of the War in Ukraine."

Ukrainian neo-Nazis rather than Russian troops bombed a children's hospital, emphasized Neo-Nazi characterizations of Ukraine and its forces, featured pro-Russian spokesmen and repeatedly and widely claimed that Washington rather than Moscow is to blame for this war, provoked Russia and is prolonging the war for its own selfish interests.⁷⁰ Those sources have also reported at various points that Ukrainian soldiers had surrendered on the first day of the invasion, that Ukrainian President Zelensky had surrendered or fled and refuses to call Russia's operation an invasion.⁷¹ Chinese sources have also emulated the Russian habit of citing so called foreign authorities, e.g., Tucker Carlson of Fox News and a right-wing "influencer," Benjamin Norton, to disseminate anti-American, anti-Ukrainian, and pro-Russian disinformation to international media, e.g. the denial of the massacre at Bucha.⁷²

Here we must remember that not only is this large-scale pro-Russian media campaign it is global as it is disseminated throughout China's global media networks, it also is part of a parallel and simultaneous massive domestic campaign. For example, Chinese officials are currently organizing special classes in universities along with their saturation of the domestic media to give academics, students and the general public a "correct understanding" of the war, namely that Putin attacked in self-defense. Concurrently an indoctrination campaign sponsored by the Communist Party for elite audiences is taking place on the lessons of the Soviet collapse which Xi Jinping evidently attributes, at least in part, to "historical nihilism," i.e. allowing ideological enemies to dwell on the dark episodes of Soviet history.⁷³ A documentary film made to educate cadres in this spirit lionizes Stalin and his policies like collectivization and the planned economy, denounces critics of the regime and implicitly celebrates

70 Elisabeth Dvoskin, "China Is Russia's Most Powerful Weapon for Information Warfare," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>; James Palmer, "China Brief: Shanghai Enters Full Lockdown" (March 30, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/30/china-shanghai-covid-lockdown/>.

71 Standish, "China's Censorship, Propaganda Push Russian Version of the War in Ukraine."

72 Mozur, Myers and Liu, "China's Echoes of Russia's Alternate Reality Intensify around the World."

73 Chaguan, "The History Boys," *The Economist* (April 9, 2022), 32.

Maoist extravaganzas like the mass political purges and famines that recall collectivization. Thus, as *The Economist* observes, “Chinese ideologues see benefits in identifying Mr. Xi’s brand of nationalism with Mr. Putin’s.”⁷⁴ Indeed, the narrator of this film cites a Russian scholar who claims, “The most powerful weapon possessed by the West is, aside from nuclear weapons, the methods they use in ideological struggle.”⁷⁵ It is clear that Xi Jinping is quite obsessed by the narrative that the West is waging a profound ideological campaign to destroy the Party’s and his right to rule China.

Indeed, he apparently is so obsessed about this supposed threat as to invoke classic and infamous Stalinist ideological formulations. Thus, he said in 2018,

As long as we adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system, the plans of hostile forces to westernize and divide us will not change. The closer we get to the goal of national renaissance and to the center of the world stage, the more hostile forces will seek ways to attack and discredit China’s ways, theories, institutions, and culture, strengthen the ideological penetration and penetration of their values, and intensify efforts to plan a color revolution.⁷⁶

This statement, of course, is merely a globalization of Stalin’s infamous 1936 formula that the closer we come to Socialism the more furiously imperialism will attack the Soviet system and seek to recruit adherents to its side. And clearly Xi Jinping’s formulation reflects his own, if not his elites’ obsessive fear of “ideological [and thus informational]

⁷⁴ Chaguan, “The History Boys,” 32.

⁷⁵ Chris Buckley, “Bristling against the West, China Rallies Domestic Sympathy for Russia,” *New York Times*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com>.

⁷⁶ “Thirty Lectures on Xi Jinping’s Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era,” Quoted in Wang Chensheng and Jiang Hongei, “Thoughts on How China and Russia Can Work Together to Prevent ‘Color Revolutions,’” *Far Eastern Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2021): 23.

penetration.” The ensuing Chinese campaign of ideological “rectification” is reflected in the development of the Chinese surveillance state that depends on mountains of information about Chinese citizens, and Xi’s unrelenting campaign to achieve Mao’s status of dictator for life.⁷⁷ Thus he has carried out not only a genocide among the Uighurs but an unceasing expansion of the security state and information warfare at home as well as abroad. These programs are clearly integral to the prosecution of these campaigns and to his power.⁷⁸ But this obsession is also deeply integrated into both the Russian and foreign policy processes. Thus, two Chinese authors, writing in the Russian journal **Far Eastern Affairs** in 2021, 2021 not only quoted Xi’s aforementioned remarks, they went on to add that, “*An arc of Revolution has been formed on the periphery of China and Russia.*”⁷⁹ They also expected the Biden Administration to carry on this policy, especially as color revolutions have what they call “domino effects.”⁸⁰ Moreover, they advocate that Russia learn from China by setting up Citizen Appeals Reporting Units, i.e. organized mass informer structures, and, with China, “take the initiative together and participate actively in the battle for international public opinion.”⁸¹ In order to execute this policy program the authors also called on both governments to take a series of actions, modelled on China’s repression of Hong Kong, systematic and Orwellian indoctrination programs in education to ensure ideological and presumably informational conformity not only at home but also throughout Central Asia.⁸² The fact that such programs and even more draconian ones in education and political-ideological repression are underway in both Russia and China suggests that these writers either were directed to write such an advocacy article in anticipation of such policies

77 Chaguan, “The History Boys; Buckley and Myers, “Xi Builds Security Fortress for China and Himself.”

78 Ibidem; Tom Mitchell, “Xi Tightens Grip with Internal Security Pick,” *Financial Times*, August 10, 2022, 3, <https://www.ft.com>.

79 “Thirty Lectures on Xi Jinping’s Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era,” quoted in Chensheng and Hongei, “Thoughts on How China and Russia Can Work Together to Prevent ‘Color Revolutions’”: 23.

80 Ibid., 24-6.

81 Ibid., 32-3.

82 Ibid., 33-5.

in both countries that preceded the Ukraine war but have expanded since then, or else from were sending a pointed message from Beijing to Moscow that Moscow has evidently heard and taken to heart.

This conclusion emerges from the rhetoric of Russian leaders concerning the stance they wish the Russian population to take regarding the war.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has deliberately broadened the watershed between supporters and opponents of his regime, turning the contradictions between them into existential issues. In Putin's own words, all those who oppose the war are "traitors of the nation" with a slave-like mind, the "fifth column," "scum" and "gnats in the mouth" that the Russian people will "spit out on the panel." Former President Medvedev said that criticism of the Russian authorities during the war in Ukraine was a "betrayal." Duma Speaker Volodin suggested that Russians who criticize the war should be stripped of their citizenship.⁸³

Therefore, the multiple vectors of state control and an obsession with security, particularly ideological security, pervade the entirety of both Chinese and Russian domestic policies and provide a possible answer as to why China has so strongly supported Moscow's narratives and information warfare regarding the aggression against Ukraine. As Deborah Ball wrote in 2017, "It would be difficult to overestimate the centrality and ubiquity of information warfare in the current conduct of Russian statecraft."⁸⁴ This similar and shared obsession about information and ideological control provides a strong factor of attraction for both governments and arguably has always been a critical element in their evolving rapprochement that has now led to an alliance. We seriously

⁸³ Mikhail Turchenko, "Cold Civil War" (June 30, 2022), <https://ridl.io/cold-civil-war/>.

⁸⁴ Deborah Yarsike Ball, "Protecting Falsehoods with a Bodyguard of Lies: Putin's Use of Information Warfare," *Research Paper*, no. 136 (Nato Defense College, 2017), 16, <https://www.nato.ndc.int>.

misread these governments if we continue to overlook the importance of the shared and deeply felt ideological obsessions that help drive both states' policies. Neither should we think this is not an obsession, maybe even in the clinical sense. Xi Jinping's 2018 statement above reveals a delusional, paranoid, and obsessive motive for ever more stringent ideological and informational repression. The same evidently holds true for Vladimir Putin. Writing about the Ukrainian attack on Saki airfield in Crimea and Russian denials, Peter Dickinson of the Atlantic Council of the U.S. observes that,

At the same time, there is something obsessive about Vladimir Putin's apparent readiness to embrace even the most damaging of disinformation rather than admit Ukrainian victories. The Russian dictator has repeatedly preferred to portray his own troops as incompetent and has invited ridicule over nonsense tales of voluntary withdrawals rather than acknowledge the humiliating truth of defeat at the hands of a country he insists does not exist.⁸⁵

So, without exaggerating, it might be the case that in this case, and particularly in the realms of ideology and information that we are dealing with a form of shared, mutual, self-induced, and self-replicating political hysteria. Even if their actions are parallel rather than coordinated in the information domain, it is clear that emulation or amplification of each other's policies are occurring and reinforce the underlying shared obsession about ideological and informational warfare.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Peter Dickinson, "Putin Is Running Out of Excuses as Ukraine Expands the War to Crimea" (August 10, 2022), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-is-running-out-of-excuses-as-ukraine-expands-the-war-to-crimea/?mkt_tok=NjU5LVdaWC0wNzUAAAG-GLeUTx9SJ-ReLi2r08_K7kgBaa5J3OTVw453ssQj3nxTTuVpWh-phYEFUonUEgQ9NmNvyVOMxbye0jZp46lTjvYBp3XLhVhJKoKXDEA.

⁸⁶ Brian G. Carlson, "China-Russia Relations and Transatlantic Security," in *Strategic Trends*, 2021: Key Developments in Global Affairs, ed. Brian G. Carlson and Oliver Thraenert (Zurich: Center for Security Studies, 2021), 12.

Conclusions

We have shown that China is not only rendering limited economic and military assistance to Russia but has also apparently colluded with it on a large-scale cyber-strike against Ukraine in advance of the war.⁸⁷ This would appear to negate charges that Russia did not inform China of its intentions. If so, the war also represents a serious intelligence, if not policy, failure for China since China claims not to have known what Putin had planned. Yet concurrently China also entertained the idea of rendering military assistance to Russia before deciding otherwise.⁸⁸ However, Beijing then reversed that decision allowing defense firms to more than double their exports of microchips and other electronics to Russia.⁸⁹

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that at least some Western observers have contended that,

Moscow also counted rightly on China's political support. Beijing, initially unwilling to openly take sides, has gradually moved towards the Kremlin's rhetoric, blaming the West for provoking the conflict and even opposing NATO's open-door policy in Europe. It cannot be excluded that it was China that emboldened Russia to take military action against Ukraine, assuming - as Putin and his small circle of plotters did - that the conflict would be quickly won, and would administer a serious blow to the US and the entire West.⁹⁰

Beyond these facts we also see Chinese and Russian adoption of both

⁸⁷ "Imperfect Spies" (June 4, 2022), 37-8, <https://www.theeconomist.com>.

⁸⁸ Jennifer Hansler, "China Has Expressed Some Openness to Providing Military and Financial Aid to Russia, US Cable Suggests," *CNN*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com>.

⁸⁹ Brian Spegele, "Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine" (July 15, 2022), https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-firms-are-selling-russia-goods-its-military-needs-to-keep-fighting-in-ukraine-11657877403?mod=Searchresults_pos18&page=1.

⁹⁰ Kalev Stoiescu, "The Kremlin's Aims and Aspirations: Russia's War in Ukraine," Series, no. 1 (May 2022), <https://icds.ee/en/russias-war-in-ukraine-the-kremlins-aims-and-assumptions/>.

Russian narratives about the war but also a similar threat assessment regarding ideological and therefore informational threats emanating from the West. This threat assessment has led both governments to invoke Stalinist tropes. In China we see the development of a truly Orwellian surveillance state founded on the state's total information dominance over its citizens while in Russia the regime has now undertaken not just a massive increase in repression and ideological-informational control to undertake a massive revision and reorientation to an identification with China that repudiates three hundred thirty years of Russian history since Peter the Great. All these trends also manifest what observers call Russia's vassalage to China.⁹¹

The Russo-Chinese relationship that began after the fall of the Soviet Union has always been a dynamic, evolving one and that is still the case. The war has accelerated and deepened trends like this alliance and China's superiority over Russia while triggering new developments in Europe and elsewhere across the world. One of the telltale signs of the deepening Sino-Russian alliance is the ideological congruence that underlies both powers' approach to information issues at home and abroad. To the extent that we overlook or neglect this ideological "elective affinity" and the fact that it is both self-induced and mutually reinforcing, we will continue to misread this alliance's global resonance. Then we will have deceived ourselves. Paradoxically that is a key goal of these states' information warfare. But it cannot be part or all of our response to their alliance and its domestic and global ramifications.

⁹¹ Gabuev, "China's New Vassal: How the War in Ukraine Turned Moscow into Beijing's Junior Partner."

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A Russian Bear in Trouble, What Comes Next? Consequences and Lessons from Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Russia is losing its war in Ukraine as of January 2023. Then, what would happen in the world when a Russian bear in trouble? What would be consequences of the apparent failure of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Russia is likely to lose its semi-great power status out of its defeat and fall to be China's junior partner in great power politics. China's position will improve because Beijing will come to secure energy supply from Russia and access to Moscow's military technologies, not to mention to China's access to Russian market. The United States, in contrast, will be faced with two great power rivals and find it difficult to stay focused in strategic competition. North Korea is likely to be controlled rather than emboldened by China, but Beijing will take advantage of Pyongyang as its strategic pawn in its strategic design against Taipei and Washington in East Asia.

Key Words: Ukraine War, Russia, China, the United States, strategic competition, Thucydides Trap

Introduction

Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and the world anticipated another easy victory of the Kremlin. However, the war became an unexpected quagmire for Putin and his geopolitical ambition. It might be premature to announce that Russia has lost the war, but it seems to be safe to say that Moscow failed to accomplish its political objective in the invasion. With supplies and supports from NATO and the United States, Ukraine sustained itself against Russia; Moscow has paid serious costs in terms of manpower, equipment, and resources; and Washington aims to undermine Moscow's capabilities, as the U.S. Secretary of Defense "wants to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kind of things that it has done in invading Ukraine."¹

Russia is losing the war. Out of strategic desperation, some at Moscow argue for nuclear attacks and Putin did not restrain himself in nuclear saber-rattling. He committed to using "all available means" to defend Russian territory – including the four regions – and said that the nuclear weapons that the United States had used against Japan in August 1945 "created a precedent." He also added, "I am not bluffing." Meanwhile, the Americans are concerned about a possible nuclear attack and President Biden raised an issue of an "Armageddon," but many former decision-makers advised not to back down out of Russian threat. Leon Panetta – the director of the Central Intelligence and the Secretary of Defense in the Obama administration – argued for U.S. responses with "direct military force against Russian troops waging the war in Ukraine, ensuring Putin's defeat there."²

It is clear that a Russian bear in trouble – a serious trouble. Then, what comes next? What would be consequences of the apparent failure of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? What lessons do we have from Russia's strategic,

1 Missy Ryan and Annabelle Timsit, "U.S. Wants Russian Military 'Weakened' from Ukraine Invasion, Austin Says," *The Washington Post*, April 25, 2022.

2 Leon E. Panetta, "If Putin Uses Nukes in Ukraine, the U.S. Must Respond with Military Force," *The Politico* (October 12, 2022).

political, military, and tactical losses? These are the issues that I address in this paper. What comes next is an important puzzle in the following ways. First, Russia is a semi-great power that is expected to shape international relations. Though seriously damaged in its capabilities, Russia has been, is, and will be playing important roles in the world. Changes in Russia's power will make a difference in international relations.

Second, Russia's war in Ukraine will make a difference in America's grand strategy. In a recent National Security Strategy of the United States, the Biden administration defines China as the "only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it" and characterizes Russia as an "immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability."³ Washington is faced with two rivals, just as the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 80s had confronted with the United States and China at the same time.

Last, not the least, Russia has been threatening to use nuclear weapons. It is highly unlikely for Moscow to begin a full-scale nuclear war against NATO and the United States, but Russia's nuclear threats provide a rare glimpse into nuclear dynamics of authoritarian regimes. Given that North Korea is sprinting toward deploying tactical nuclear weapons, it is imperative to understand strategic dynamics behind their possible use.

In the following, I will review Russia's military performance on the battlefield and provide a short analysis into Moscow's disastrous war. Then, I address each importance of Russia's war in Ukraine. First, I will explore an issue of Russia's place in great power politics; Russia's possible fall from a fellow great power to Beijing's junior partner. A question is simple; what outcomes do we expect from the war in terms of great power politics in decades to come? A second issue is Russia's war and America's strategic priority. Russia is likely to get its blood drained seriously, but frontline countries will be exposed to Russian threats; under the circumstances,

³ The White House, "National Security Strategy" (October 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

the Europeans are not likely to invest substantial resources into their defenses in the middle of economic crises and inflation. What would be the consequences and what would the United States be expected to do under the circumstances?

The third is about nuclear dynamics and deterrence. Russia has threatened to use nuclear weapons, but the United States and NATO have not been deterred out of supplying weapons to Ukraine. Moscow is toying its tactical nuclear swords, but Kyiv has not deterred from recapturing the lost territories. What are the dynamics in the Ukraine war? Given that North Korea has been building tactical nuclear weapons, what would be implications for the Korean Peninsula?

Russia Is in Ukrainian Trouble: A Short Analysis

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a simple failure. Moscow excels Ukraine in every aspect of power: the Russian economy (GDP \$3.87 trillion in real term) is 7.5 times larger than the Ukrainian economy (GDP \$516 billion in real term); Russia's population of 142 million is three times bigger than Ukraine's 43.5 million; Russia (\$104 billion) exceeds Ukraine (\$9.7 billion) 10 times in military spending of 2019; and in the number of soldiers, Russia had 850,000 active duty and Ukraine had 200,000 in February 2022, which is 470% numerical advantage of Moscow over Kyiv.⁴ Based upon such power imbalance, many anticipated Russia's easy victory and Ukraine's instant collapse.

Russia had an audacious and plausible plan to take over its weaker neighbor. Putin ordered some of his best troops to march down to Kyiv from the North and the Spetsnaz units to storm the capital and to remove Zelensky. Russia aimed to finish the operation in three to four days and expected Ukraine to surrender with a sheer show of military might. However, the Russian troops failed to scare off the Ukrainian government

4 Data are from <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>.

and things went from bad to worse when Ukraine's infantry began to knock down Russia's armors with the American anti-tank missiles; in the first three weeks, Russia was estimated to lose 8 to 10% of its tanks and armored vehicles.⁵

In April, Russia switched its strategy into piecemeal occupation of territories in the east and the south. It bombarded the Ukrainian positions with heavy artillery and inflicted a series of destructions over Ukraine's cities; civilians were killed as a part of Russian strategy. However, Moscow could not get over its initial failures. Some cities fell, but its march in the heartland was blocked for logistics problems and ruthless bombardments consumed so many supplies, making logistics difficulties worse.⁶ In June, the Russians barely progressed 500 to 1,000 m per day, while the Ukrainians built up their defenses with American and the European assistance. In July, the frontline was stabilized, and Kyiv began to demonstrate its attack capabilities; Russia's supplies depots had been blown up by Ukraine's rockets and by America's intelligence.

In August, tide began to change and to favor the Ukrainians. Some important junctures and major cities in the south and the east returned to the hands of Ukraine; Kherson – a major city in the South – was captured by the Russians in March, but the Ukrainian troops attacked in late August and caught the Russians in surprise. Moscow redeployed its troops out of the eastern front in piecemeal patterns and weakened its position, which led to Kyiv's advances there rather than Kherson area. The Russian troops around Kharkiv were so diverted to Kherson the Ukrainian counteroffensive in Kharkiv became a great success; the defenders failed to stop Kyiv's steamroller and Moscow was desperate enough to buy Pyongyang's artillery shells and rockets, according to the U.S. intelligence.⁷

Over the winter of 2022/23, Russia and Ukraine fought over Bakhmut-

5 David Hambling, "How Many Tanks Does Russia Have in Ukraine and How Many Has It Lost So Far," *The Forbes* (March 15, 2022).

6 Bonnie Berkowitz and Artur Galocha, "Why the Russian Military Is Bugged Down by Logistics in Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2022.

7 Julian E. Barnes, "Russia Is Buying North Korean Artillery, according to U.S. Intelligence," *The New York Time*, September 5, 2022.

Soledar in eastern Ukraine for strategic advantage and political symbol in the war. Moscow mobilized prisoners, while Kyiv poured weapons and soldiers to secure the town. The bloody battle went on with increasing number of casualties on both sides, while trenches have prevented neither sides of scoring breakthroughs. It is not easy to predict a final shape of the war, but it is not likely for Moscow to achieve its original objective of the war – getting Ukraine into its orbit and Kyiv as a vassal state – in any time soon.

Russia's Fall in Great Power Politics

Russia invaded Ukraine for two causes – NATO expansion and Nazification of Ukraine – but Finland and Sweden joined the Atlantic Alliance in July 2022, while Ukraine – though never nazi at any point – came to be America's "close partner" and Russia's archenemy. Then, what would Russia become in aftermath of political catastrophe, strategic disaster, military failure, and tactical defeat? In an era of geopolitical rivalry, would Russia be able to keep its questionable great power status in the future, given that Moscow revealed its shortcomings, incompetence, and weaknesses? What consequences do we expect from Russia's failed invasion of Ukraine in terms of great power politics in the future?

Though seriously neglected, one of the most shocking power transitions in history arose between Russia and China. In 1992 when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian economy (\$460 billion) was a little larger than that of China (\$427 billion) in current US dollars; Russia's constant 2017 USD purchasing power parity GDP was \$2.58 trillion in 1992 and grew to be \$4.1 trillion in 2021, while China's share was \$2 trillion constant 2017 USD PPP GDP in 1992 and skyrocketed to \$25 trillion in 2021.⁸ For the last three decades, Russia had grown four times in current USD and 1.6 times in constant USD, but China boosted 42 times in the current terms

⁸ Data are from <https://data.worldbank.org>.

and 12.5 times in constant terms. It is a huge Thucydides trap which went unnoticed and happened without bloody fightings.

Furthermore, Russia has lost its technological edges over the world as well as China. It used to be the leader in weapons and space technologies and keeps the scientific superiorities in the related fields; the Soviet Union was the first nation to launch satellite (Sputnik in October 1957) and to put a human to journey into outer space (Yuri Gagarin in April 1961) during the Cold War. However, Moscow fails in information technology and computer science, which are the building bloc of future technologies. Russia is a Saudi Arabia with nuclear weapons and geopolitical ambition, whose economy is dependent upon oil and gas exports rather than manufacturing sectors, while China advanced to be the “world’s factory” and is responsible for 29 % of global manufacturing output in 2019, not to mention iPhones and Tesla Electronic Automobiles assembled in China.⁹

The military spending has shown similar trends. Moscow’s defense budget in 1994 was \$13.5 billion and increased to \$66 billion in 2021, while China’s military expenditure in 1994 was \$10 billion and grew to \$293 billion in 2021.¹⁰ Population provides a starker picture. Russia has been stagnant in population growth in two decades; in 2000 to 2020, Russia’s population did not increase but stayed at 147 million. But China’s population grew from 1.264 to 1.425 billion by adding another Russia and more (161 million) into Beijing’s population.¹¹

In every component of national power, Russia has been in decline and China has been in a fast rise. The war in Ukraine would aggravate the balance, which is already bad for Moscow into worse and seriously undermines Russia’s relative position vis-à-vis China. Cut off from the world supply-chains, Russia has no alternative but to depend upon made-in-China products and its energy exports will be directed exclusively

⁹ <https://www.statista.com/chart/20858/top-10-countries-by-share-of-global-manufacturing-output/>.

¹⁰ Numbers are from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Past_military_expenditure_by_country.

¹¹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com>.

to China as a sole market even at discounted prices. Its weapon technology proves to be faulty and less than satisfactory from battlefield experiences in Ukraine; Beijing would take advantage of its leverage and cherry-pick Moscow's advanced technologies; and Russia will be a junior partner to China and survive as an energy supplier and provider of advanced weapons.

Then, what would happen to the world of the future in which Russia is a China's vassal? First, China will achieve energy autonomy. Getting energy supplies from Russia under control, Beijing will have huge advantages that it has been denied until recently.¹² In February 2022, China and Russia signed a 30-year deal for gas supplies; they upgraded the contract in September and chose to use their currencies (roubles and yuan) rather than US dollars, rendering future energy transaction safe from possible American sanctions.¹³

Second, Russia's weapons and space technologies would be available for the Chinese military buildup. For example, Beijing has been in difficulties for its fighter planes and their jet engines, limiting capabilities of the Chinese Air Force. When the Russians sell their jet engines to the Chinese in exchange of cash payments, Beijing's air power would make substantial improvements.¹⁴ Economic sanctions will put a lot of pressures on Russian companies and some of Russia's military technologies would be on sale, rendering them available for the Chinese. Russian engineers and scientists will lose their jobs to find new positions in China. In the early 1990s, the United States provided financial benefits to former Soviet nuclear engineers and let them out of nuclear enterprises on various corners of the world, but it is highly unlikely that the Americans would provide money and make Russian weapons engineers out of China's

12 Llewelyn Hughes and Austin Long, "Is There an Oil Weapon?: Security Implications of Changes in the Structure of the International Oil Market," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2015): 152–89, doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00188.

13 Muyu Xu, "Russia's Gazprom, CNPC Agree to Use Rouble, Yuan for Gas Payments – Gazprom," *The Reuters*, September 7, 2022.

14 Ashish Dangwal, "China's Engine Problems: Despite New Tech for J-20 Fighters, Beijing Remains Heavily Reliant on Russia," *The Eurasian Times*, May 22, 2022.

military factories.

Third, Russia will be China's export market. Deprived of consumer's goods from domestic as well as foreign manufacturers, the Russians will see made-in-China products filling their markets. The deal will be an exchange of Russian energies and Chinese products, which clearly benefits for both and provides extra fuels for Chinese industries. Given that most of foreign companies already left Russia, Beijing's companies will find no commercial competitors in Russian market and Russia's industries will accept Chinese capitals and investments.

All factors will contribute to China's further rise, which makes the U.S. strategy toward China more complicated. With more capabilities, Beijing will be in charge. Revisionist coalition of China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia will coordinate their behaviors and challenge to the established orders in more choreographic ways than before. Led by Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, and Teheran would have to restrain themselves out of uncalled provocations and wait for Chinese signals. If they rebel and choose to challenge to the established order, China might punish the renegade and keep challenges into localized episodes.

It was what happened during the Cold War days; the communist bloc was controlled by the Soviet Union and stability was mostly kept with Moscow's permission. North Korea, for instance, had conducted a series of provocations against the United States and South Korea; but the Soviet Union approved no large-scale aggression by Pyongyang. Great Britain and France conducted one of the last imperialistic wars over the Suez Canal in 1956, but Washington blocked London out of its IMF emergency loans and persuaded it out of adventure in Egypt. The bipolarity of the Cold War was more successful in controlling the world than the multipolarity of the pre-1945 world. In contrast, Russia could not control its Serbian partners and Germany failed to dissuade Austria-Hungary; the assassination crisis in July 1914 was escalated into the Great War.

It stabilized the world in the past. But will it stabilize the world in the future, too? A well-orchestrated coalition of revisionist states would stabilize the world, but its leader might choose to go forward in limited

conditions. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was in most cases status-quo enough to restrain its junior partners out of adventurism; in decades to come, would China remain status-quo enough to contribute to stability?

Uncle Sam's Strategic Priority, between Beijing and Moscow

One of the unexpected outcomes out of Russia's unsuccessful invasion of Ukraine is that the United States will be faced with two nuclear-armed rivals in decades to come. During the Cold War, Washington had to deal with Moscow rather than a powerful coalition of Moscow and Beijing; until the mid-1970s, Beijing had been in turmoil of the Great Leap Movement and the Cultural Revolution, which damaged China's potential in such a serious way, and Beijing switched the side and behaved as an American partner after Nixon's historic visit to China and his handshake with Mao. Though Beijing did not present a serious threat to Moscow, the Chinese collaboration with the Americans made the Soviets distracted out of strategic competition with their capitalist archenemy.

What is fascinating is that the United States will find itself in the Soviet position – distracted by two potential enemies – in decades to come. Washington will, “for the first time in its history, face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries,” says a Pentagon report.¹⁵ In its ill-fated invasion of Ukraine, Russia is getting its blood sucked seriously and not presenting a fatal threat to Europe. Though frontline countries in Eastern Europe will be exposed to Russian threats, therefore, the Europeans are not likely to invest substantial resources into their defenses in the middle of the worst economic difficulties in decades. For instance, Germany committed to increasing its military budget by three

¹⁵ Michael R. Gordon, “China Has More ICBM Launchers Than U.S., American Military Reports,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2023.

times and spending \$100 billion in March 2022, but Germany does not have enough weapons and ammunitions and is short of basic supplies. It will take years to “make the Germany Army, with 184,000 soldiers, an effective deterrent to Russia.”¹⁶

Until the Europeans are ready for their own defense, it will be the Americans who will have to fill the gap in Europe’s security against the Russians and their nuclear threats.¹⁷ Washington will need to deploy more soldiers, airplanes, and tanks in Europe along with additional air and missile defenses; even when the Europeans are fully ready, America’s military presence will be required to guarantee regional security in decades to come; just like the Cold War years, the United States is expected to stay in Europe. The difference lies at that Washington is already faced with another rival in the major arena: it is China in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

In a new *National Security Strategy*, the United States defines China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.” At the same time, Russia is an “immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability” and Moscow has chosen to pursue an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order.¹⁸ It is clear that Washington set strategic priority with China as the primary rival; with multiple sources of threats and several theaters to cover, however, it is not easy to keep an initial strategic priority intact and to keep its strategic focus not distracted. Each additional U.S. combat unit in Europe is one less U.S. combat unit for East Asia, which will lessen potential burden that China will have to bear in the region.

It is troublesome in two ways. First, the Americans have been

¹⁶ Melissa Eddy and Jack Ewing, “Germany’s Military Industry Gears Up to Restock Its Own Forces,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 2022.

¹⁷ Stephen M. Walt, “Finally Wean Europe Off Washington,” *Foreign Policy* (September 2, 2022).

¹⁸ The White House, “National Security Strategy,” 23-6.

unsuccessful in staying focused. In the last two decades of China's peaceful rise, the American had fought a war on terror in the Middle East and the Central Asia, allowing the Chinese to rise. In October 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan and destroyed the Taliban regime. In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and deposed Saddam Hussein out of power at Baghdad. In the initial combats, the Americans scored amazing destructions, but failed to stabilize the situations in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan. Over twenty years, Washington spent trillions of dollars and thousands of GI's lives in the Middle East and in the Central Asia; in August 2021, however, the United States had to give up Afghanistan and acceded its defeat. The Americans keep their position in Iraq, but Washington had to neglect Beijing's rise over the decades.

The United States discussed its "Pivot to Asia" and "Rebalancing" in the 2010s, but most of its attention were paid to the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Resources were spent for rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq rather than for great power competition with China. It is a strategic blunder. There have been a series of discussions over China's rise and threat, but all led to no substantial decisions in the middle of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington failed to balance between its state-building missions in the Middle East and the Central Asia on the one hand and its potential competition with peer great power – China. Russia's war in Ukraine will distract the Americans in more serious ways and erode Washington's strategic focus further.

Second, with more powerful China, the Americans cannot handle the situation with the limited amount of military power. Since it is faced with two threats in geographically distant theaters – though the one is much weaker but more imminent than the other, Washington will have to build more military muscles to deal with multiple threats under different strategic conditions. The size of the U.S. armed forces is too small; the size was determined when revisionist coalition was not yet fully orchestrated by China, but things will change with Russia's trouble in Ukraine. Without some boosts in military muscles, Washington might find itself at risk and its allies overwhelmed in well synchronized

aggressions. It is undeniable that the Americans are and will be faced with a revisionist coalition led by the Chinese and that Beijing will do its best to coordinate aggressive actions by its partners such as Moscow, Pyongyang, and Teheran.

Concepts of strategic flexibility in the early to mid-2000s and of dynamic force deployments in these days are smart but cannot be a serious alternative. They used to be a smart fix-up, but they are strategic band-aid under the new strategic conditions. Only with active-duty soldiers of 1.3 million and reserve personnel of 1 million, the United States will be required to put things under control in East Asia as well as in East Europe. This is such a tough challenge since China alone has 2.2 million personnel in active-duty uniform and 1.2 million in reserve, not to mention 660,000 paramilitary forces.¹⁹ Characteristics such as unpredictability, agility, and proactive deployments are of great significance, as General Dunford emphasized in 2018, but what matters with multiple threats in multiple theaters is sheer size and mass, even in the age of robots and AI. This is what the United States lacks.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the United Kingdom was in a similar situation. London was faced with two threats – the one was more immediate threat from Berlin and the other was more structural risk from Washington – and had to make serious choices. Given that its resources were limited, and its strategic dangers multiplied, the empire on which the sun never sets chose to settle the difference through negotiations with the United States and Germany. London's diplomacy finally earned friendship from Washington, but its contacts failed to secure partnership from Berlin. Against this backdrop, the United Kingdom made two decisions. First, it chose to redeploy its naval powers and to put them closer to its mainland against Germany's naval buildup. Second, it conducted a naval race and initiated

¹⁹ U.S. number is from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/232330/us-military-force-numbers-by-service-branch-and-reserve-component/> and China's military size is from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_number_of_military_and_paramilitary_personnel.

the Dreadnought Revolution. With technological innovations, London successfully reset previous naval balances and built new fleets on its own terms.²⁰ It was a great success, enabling the United Kingdom to keep its naval superiority in the First World War.

In this respect, what is worrisome most is possible consequences of America's conventional insufficiency. In these days, Washington aims to do more with less, but it is a dangerous strategy that might undermine U.S. credibility among America's allies, that would encourage rivals to challenge against existing orders, and that might lead to more reliance upon nuclear weapons by the allies as well as the United States. This is the situation where Putin finds himself; Russia's military power – conventional military capabilities, in particular – is seriously insufficient and deeply flawed; and Moscow must invoke a fear of nuclear weapons to defend its “national interests and territories.” When things go wrong with conventional dimension, states are likely to go over to nuclear dimension and make the world a more dangerous place.

A Desperate Russian Bear with Nukes

From the beginning of the invasion, Russia implied that it might use nuclear weapons. On the 27th of February when the invasion looked good for Moscow, Putin chose to put Russia's nuclear forces into “special combat readiness” and Biden decided to keep his nuclear status unchanged and not to escalate the situation.²¹ At that time, Russia's move was perceived as a simple bluff and Moscow had no reason to use nuclear weapons because situation on the ground seemed fine. There was no panic. Things began to change when the Russians were stuck and when the Ukrainians began to reclaim the lost territories.

²⁰ Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991).

²¹ David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “Putin Declares a Nuclear Alert, and Biden Seeks De-Escalate,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2022.

In the summer of 2022, it was likely that Russia was losing the war. Some began to be concerned about possible Russia's resort to nuclear weapons. John J. Mearsheimer wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, "Washington and its allies are being much too cavalier" and "what lies further up the rungs could be something truly catastrophic: a level of death and destruction exceeding that of World War II."²² He warned that Russia whose military situation was desperate might push nuclear button; and, Mearsheimer was correct. Russia began to flex its nuclear muscle. On the 21st of September, Russia chose to announce a partial mobilization and Putin declared that he "will use all the means at our disposal" to defend the territory. And, he added: "it is not a bluff."²³ Moscow looked desperate – but not desperate enough to use nuclear weapons immediately. Until this point, Russia has not resorted to nuclear options, but bluffed on several occasions.

What is interesting is that the war in Ukraine tells a lot about nuclear dynamics – nuclear deterrence and more. First, nukes are useful in many ways. Russia was not so interested in using nuclear weapons at the beginning when the "war went well" but it is now toying nukes because it is losing the war. Moscow, in other words, might use nuclear weapons not so much a weapon to win a war as a weapon not to lose the war. It was technically possible for Putin to conduct nuclear strikes at the beginning of the invasion, which must have been quite effective for the Russians; but Moscow chose not to use nukes when it believed that it might defeat Kyiv only with conventional weapons; when things began to go bad, Moscow must consider a series of issues because it makes a final decision over nukes. Nuclear weapons are too destructive to use at any time when the owners want to sue. They are useful only as a weapon of last resort to stop a war and to avert a final defeat.

Second, nuclear deterrence works very well in both ways. Nuclear

²² John J. Mearsheimer, "Playing with Fire in Ukraine: The Underappreciated Risks of Catastrophic Escalation," *Foreign Affairs* (August 17, 2022), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/playing-fire-ukraine>.

²³ Ishaan Tharoor, "Russia Pushes the Panic Button and Raises Risk of Nuclear War," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 2022.

taboo might have prevented Putin from using preemptive nuclear strikes, but deterrence must have worked too. Russia had every reason to use tactical nuclear weapons. A Russian nuke must have intimidated Ukraine, broken its will to resist, and outgunned the Atlantic Alliance. However, Putin did not order nuclear launch. Russia did not launch tactical nuclear warheads and blow-up Ukraine's defenders at the end of February because a nuclear attack might have prompted direct military interventions by the Atlantic Alliance.

Also, deterrence has been working for the Russians. Moscow has been deterring Washington in a limited way. The United States has been out of direct combats by Russia's nuclear muscles; there is no American soldiers on the ground, though supplying weapons the Ukrainians and feeding intelligences to Kyiv. If Putin uses tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine, the United States will probably enter the war in a conventional way. Washington would not retaliate against Moscow with nuclear weapons, but it would aim to eliminate substantial part of Russia's military powers. The United States will "take out every Russian conventional force," David H. Petraeus – a former director of the Central Intelligence – said in his interview. "It cannot go unanswered. You have to show that this cannot be accepted in any way."²⁴

Third, nuclear deterrence is a blunt tool; it is never a surgical scalpel for pinpoint strikes. Tactical nuclear weapons are too destructive in political sense for frontline commanders to wield on their choices; with nuclear weapons, in contrast, states can deter rivals from doing something that they don't like, but micromanagement in deterrence is highly difficult – if not impossible. Russia have been deterring the United States from deploying combat troops in Ukraine but failed to stop Washington's sending weapons and intelligence to Kyiv. The United States succeeded in deterring Russia out of using nuclear weapons at the beginning of the

²⁴ Gabe Ferris, "Putin Faces 'Irreversible' Reality in Ukraine Invasion Despite Latest Moves: Petraeus," *ABC News*, October 2, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/putin-faces-irreversible-reality-ukraine-invasion-latest-moves/ story?id=90824658>.

invasion, but it failed to deter the invasion itself.

Therefore, conventional superiority is essential in deterrence. Combination of conventional inferiority and nuclear weapons is a recipe for instability; since inferior in conventional balance, states are likely to depend upon nuclear threats just as Russia is doing in recent days and make situation more dangerous. Subtlety is not for deterrence; states need to build a full package of nuclear as well as conventional forces. This is such an important lesson when Pyongyang aims to build and deploy tactical nuclear weapons despite its conventional inferiority.

Korean Peninsula in the World after the War in Ukraine

Russia has invaded its neighbors on several occasions, but its invasion of Ukraine is defining the future in Europe and the world. The war will put Russia on China's orbit and downgrade Moscow's status into Beijing's junior partner. Just like the Jupiter in the solar system, Russia will be the largest planet in China-centered system. It is huge, but not huge enough to be a star by and for itself. The invasion failed and sucked too much resource out of Russia. Then, what impact will this war have in the Korean Peninsula?

First, since China oversees revisionist coalition, North Korea – a much weaker and smaller than Russia, like the Mercury – will be an inferior partner in the system. Pyongyang will survive, protected by Beijing's and Moscow's vetoes in the UN Security Council and fed by China's economic assistance. In exchange, its senior partners will dictate North Korea's behaviors in the future more than they have in the past; with Beijing controlling Moscow's resources, power gap between China and North Korea will be wider and the Chinese will be more able to dictate the North Koreans.

Under the circumstances, Pyongyang will have to learn how to survive as a Chinese pawn rather than be emboldened by Chinese sponsor.

For example, North Korea might provoke South Korea to distract Washington's strategic focus out of Taiwan; some are concerned that North Korea will initiate an attack upon South Korea when China provokes a conflict with Taiwan and the United States is already occupied with a Strait crisis. It is not a plausible scenario because Beijing will coordinate Pyongyang to go first with provocation and then wait for a chance over Taiwan. China will not embolden North Korea, but take advantage of its power supremacy and push Pyongyang's aggression as a way to distract the American strategic focus.

Second, the ROK's military capabilities are critical for the United States in East Asia. Given that North Korea would go first as a Chinese pawn, Seoul's stonewall defense capabilities will enable Washington to focus upon Beijing and Taipei problem rather than get distracted in the Korean Peninsula. With more power to defend itself and even without power to cover Taiwan, the ROK can make substantial contributions to America's grand strategy in East Asia. While Seoul's participation in defending Taipei is desirable for Washington, the ROK's defending North Korea and deterring Pyongyang's provocations will be another form of contribution. It is Germany and France who will defend Europe from another aggression by China's European pawn; it is the ROK's job to contain China's junior pawn in the Korean Peninsula.

Third, the ROK will be an arsenal of European defense. Seoul already signed a deal (\$5.8 billion) with Warsaw to supply tanks, artillery, and airplanes; they are talking about another deal for rocket-launchers. Given that Germany is occupied to arm itself and that Japan is restricted in exporting weapons, the ROK is a wonderful candidate to supply weapons for the Atlantic Alliance. In a recent visit, NATO Secretary General – Jens Stoltenberg – demanded Seoul should provide more weapons for Ukraine and other European countries in defense against further Russian aggressions.²⁵ This is another contribution that Seoul can

25 NATO, "Remarks: NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the CHEY Institute During His Visit to the Republic of Korea" (January 30, 2023), https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_211296.htm.

make to Washington's grand strategy.

Fourth, nuclear deterrence has been effective, is effective, and will be effective. Though blunt, deterrence can provide a rough shield for Seoul as well as Pyongyang. On the one hand, North Korea cannot lose a war with nuclear weapons. It might threaten to use nukes just like Russia and terminate a war before things go worse. In this sense, Pyongyang will get a blank check over a war. On the other hand, the ROK can depend upon America's nuclear extended deterrence over North Korea. Some are concerned that Pyongyang's long-range missiles might deter Washington out of a possible war in the Korean Peninsula, but deterrence is a blunt and clumsy tool that defies delicate micromanagement.

Fifth, given that the United States is faced with a great power competition with China, Washington will behave tough and honor its security guarantees to the allies and partners in East Asia. The Ukraine war will make China much stronger and enable Beijing to control resources which used to be beyond China's area. Washington will pay attention to what Beijing thinks and provide no clue of weakness such as backing down from a threat; if the Americans fail to honor the decades-old commitment to defend the ROK out of a possible nuclear attack by the North Koreans, Beijing will pick up the signal and jump to an invasion of Taiwan. Faced with a great power rivalry with China, the United States should behave tough first against Beijing's vassals.

Sixth, the Korean Peninsula will be exposed a series of minor provocations rather than a full-scale attack as a part of China's strategy against Taiwan. With Beijing in charge, Pyongyang would be restricted rather than emboldened in conducting a large-scale aggression which will attract Washington's attention and undermine Beijing's interest. China will unleash its armed forces against Taiwan, whenever needed; it China does not want to get dragged into a war with the United States over North Korea's careless and uncoordinated provocations. Beijing, only when it sees needed, will allow Pyongyang to initiate small-scale provocations and distract Washington's interests into the Korean Peninsula as an orchestrated plan against Taiwan. The sequence is simple: Pyongyang first,

Beijing sees and goes against Taipei, not the other way around.

Seventh, North Korea will do its best to attract America's attentions through provocation. There will be a series of crises, which requires skillful management. The ROK has two missions to keep crises under control. First, Seoul needs to build enough military power and deter Pyongyang in less dangerous ways. The ROK's strategic triad of Kill Chain, KAMD, and KMPR is not a good package in that its Kill Chain is a preemptive option and destabilizing. Second, the ROK should figure out exit options. Under political pressures, Seoul is expected to prevail over Pyongyang, which might inadvertently escalate into a full-scale war. In July 1914, the European powers aimed to prevail over their respective rivals and inadvertently escalated the situation without any exit strategy but a victory. The result was a real catastrophe – the First World War.

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On Containing China: A Realist Case for American Engagement with North Korea

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Abstract

The rise of China fundamentally altered the balance of power in East Asia against the United States. Although North Korea-U.S. relations have been poisonous for decades, this paper makes the case that the United States can and should engage with North Korea to correct that degrading balance of power. First, I explain the rationale for working with the North Koreans and argue that North Korea is a formidable asset for great power competition with China. Second, I show that current policies toward North Korea are utter failures and should be abandoned. Third, I demonstrate by using the declarations of leaders and other N. Korean materials that Pyongyang, too, is deeply worried by Chinese power and would welcome U.S. and allied overtures to form a balancing coalition against Beijing. Finally, I propose a few policies both realistic and riskless to kick-start the process of rapprochement.

Key Words: balancing, China-North Korea relations, engagement, North Korea-U.S. relations, realism

Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) is probably the most enduring adversary the United States ever had. Bilateral relations have been poor since the inception of North Korea in 1948, and the two states do not even maintain diplomatic relations; in fact, they have been officially at war since 1950. The rise of North Korean nuclear ambitions in the 1980s led to recurrent crises and war scares. However, the changing balance of power in Asia and the emergence of China as a peer competitor make it impossible to approach North Korean-U.S. relations in a purely bilateral setting anymore. Now that China is officially the number one foreign threat for America,¹ the North Korean problem can only be tackled through the lens of the intense security competition between Beijing and Washington. But, oddly enough, the United States' North Korea policy does not match this new reality. While North Korea is a weak power compared to China and Russia, Washington remains committed to isolate and contain Pyongyang.

Through this paper, I argue that the situation is ripe for a "Nixon moment." Washington has a unique opportunity to break the stalemate with North Korea and turn Pyongyang from an enemy to an ally to counter China because the North Koreans also fear the rise of China. To show that, I notably analyze North Korean leaders' declarations and the *Rodong Sinmun*, an official newspaper. Consequently, I conclude that the United States can find in the DPRK a formidable trump card to play against China.

Arguments that North Korea and China distrust each other are nothing new.² Observers of Sino-N. Korean relations generally claim that North Korea's aggressivity and recurrent provocations embarrass China because

1 U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of The United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; U.S. Government, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; and U.S. Government, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

they may disrupt regional trade and thus Chinese economic development. Conversely, they believe North Korea wary of Chinese influence but in dire need of Chinese economic support. Nevertheless, these studies often remain mostly historical in nature and pay little attention to the changing balance of power in Asia.

Points resembling mine have been made elsewhere. For Blank, “fostering North Korean independence to the greatest possible degree by taking into account North Korea’s need for security offers the United States the tangible possibility of reshaping regional dynamics to its advantage.”³ Minnich proposes that “as China and Russia actively contest U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific, Washington should seize the opportunity to draw Pyongyang into its security architecture with Seoul and Tokyo” to “reshape Northeast Asia for the next century as Washington shores up its military alliances and shifts a unified security focus from a North Korean threat to strategic security challenges that emanate from Beijing and Moscow.”⁴ That said, an examination combining international relations theory and

2 For example, Jae Ho Chung and Myung-hae Choi, “Uncertain Allies or Uncomfortable Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949-2010,” *Pacific Review*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2013): 243-64; Thomas Fingar and David Straub, “Geography and Destiny: DPRK Concerns and Objectives with Respect to China,” in *Uneasy Partnerships: China’s Engagement with Japan, the Koreas, and Russia in the Era of Reform*, ed. Thomas Fingar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 169-88; Sukhee Han, “Alliance Fatigue amid Asymmetrical Interdependence: Sino-North Korean Relations in Flux,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2004): 155-79; You Ji, “China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 10, no. 28 (2001): 387-98; and Min-hyung Kim, “Cracks in the Blood-Shared Alliance? Explaining Strained PRC-DPRK Relations in the Post-Cold War World,” *Pacific Focus*, vol. 32, no. 1 (April 2017): 109-28.

3 Stephen Blank, “Is the Northern Alliance Making a Comeback? Do Russia, China and North Korea Constitute an Alliance?” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 31, no. 2 (June 2019): 224.

4 James M. Minnich, “Denuclearization through Peace: A Policy Approach to Change North Korea from Foe to Friend,” *Military Review*, vol. 100, no. 6 (November/December 2020): 22. Also, Anastasia Barannikova, *United States-DPRK Relations: Is Normalization Possible?* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019); Vincent Brooks and Ho Young Leem, “A Grand Bargain with North Korea: Pyongyang’s Economic Distress Offers a Chance for Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 29, 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-29/grand-bargain-north-korea>; William R. McKinney, “Korea at a Crossroads: Time for a US-ROK-DPRK Strategic Realignment” (38 North, September 17, 2018), <https://www.38north.org/2018/09/wmckinney091718/>; and Dylan Motin, “Stir Up the Hornet’s Nest: How to Exploit the Friction between China and North Korea,” in *The Future of the Korean Peninsula and Beyond: Next Generation Perspectives on Korean Peninsula Security*, ed. National Committee on American Foreign Policy (New York: NCAFP, 2022), 148-58.

policy is lacking. No study has systematically investigated North Korean views of America and China in a realist setting.

I explore the North Korean issue from the standpoint of realism, an approach of international relations that aims at explaining the behavior of states that live in an anarchic system. Deprived of a superior authority to protect them, states have to rely on their own devices to survive. In such a world, states' primordial goal is security. Military power is the best guarantee to deter, fend off, or coerce other states and safeguard one's interests.⁵ Choosing a realist approach has the merit of bypassing the insoluble debate concerning North Korean intentions. Pundits are generally divided between those who believe that N. Korean goals are minimalist and limited to the survival of the regime, and those who see the DPRK as revisionist in nature, aiming at least to reunify Korea under its rule.⁶ Realists see the issue of intentions as relatively unimportant because rational actors behave in predictable ways and North Korea appears to be a rational actor, since "the regime is capable of acting pragmatically in furtherance of its own self-interests."⁷ States are revisionist when they can and status quoist when they must.⁸ Intentions are an outcome of capabilities.⁹ If the North Koreans had an easy opportunity to reunify Korea under their control, they would. As long as they cannot, they should be content to guarantee their survival.

This paper also has scholarly implications. I demonstrate that the

5 Oft-cited major realist works are Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations* [Peace and War among Nations] (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2004); Edward H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919 - 1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1964); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, updated ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014); Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th ed. (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1985); and Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

6 For example, David C. Kang, "International Relations Theory and the Second Korean War," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2003): 301-24; and Robert E. Kelly, "Does North Korea Want to Absorb South Korea or Just Leach Off of It?" *National Interest* (September 23, 2021), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/does-north-korea-want-absorb-south-korea-or-%C2%A0just-%C2%A0leach-it-194241>.

7 Jacques L. Fuqua, *Nuclear Endgame: The Need for Engagement with North Korea* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), xix.

8 Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 1-49.

9 Sebastian Rosato, "The Inscrutable Intentions of Great Powers," *International Security*, vol. 39, no. 3 (Winter 2014/15): 48-88.

DPRK has incentives to form a coalition with the United States to balance against China. Realist thinkers usually argue that states balance against stronger powers regardless of ideological or cultural concerns. We would have a strong confirmation of the explanatory power of realism if even North Korea, often seen as an ideological and traditional ally of China, fears the rise of Chinese power and wants to balance against it.

I develop my argument in four parts. First, the paper presents why Washington should engage with North Korea to out-compete China (and secondarily Russia). I notably explain that allying with Pyongyang is a costless fix to counterbalance China's growing military capabilities. Second, I argue that the three strategies pursued by the United States towards N. Korea - denuclearization through sanctions, multilateral diplomacy, and human rights promotion through sanctions - are failures and should be abandoned in favor of engagement. Third, I show that North Korea also has a deep-seated interest in allying with the United States. Primary and secondary sources demonstrate that the North Koreans fear Chinese power and understand the potential for a balancing coalition with America. Fourth, I propose a few realistic steps to start improving relations between Pyongyang and Washington.

The Rationale for Engagement: China, Russia, and China

In this first part, I demonstrate that N. Korea would be invaluable to correct the balance of power in East Asia and promote U.S. interests regarding China and Russia. First, I establish that North Korea is not a major threat, unlike China and Russia.

Is North Korea Likely to Attack the United States?

To wage war against the United States is a rational choice only for a small club of states. A would-be aggressor must possess the capabilities to

conquer or annihilate the United States or its allies and have a reasonable chance to survive a war with the United States or an important U.S. ally relatively unscathed. A state which cannot defeat the United States or its allies and to get away with it has no rational incentive to attack in the first place. A decision pathology could still push that state to take its chance; but because it has little hope to decisively win, it does not belong on the list of the most likely aggressors.

Can North Korea defeat the United States? A conventional attack against the United States would fail to do much harm. North Korea lacks the naval and air power to sustain an attack against U.S. territory. Its conventional-tipped missiles are unlikely to debilitate U.S. armed forces. North Korea also possesses nuclear weapons. An out-of-the-blue nuclear attack would become reasonable in two situations: if North Korea believed it was under an immediate threat of U.S. attack or if it believed it had a “splendid first strike capacity” to debilitate U.S. reprisal capabilities. But North Korean nuclear-tipped missiles lack both the numbers and the precision to destroy the American nuclear weaponry.

The North Korean threat is, however, mostly discussed with regard to U.S. allies in Northeast Asia: Japan and South Korea. Similar to the U.S. case, North Korean conventional forces have few means to decisively defeat or conquer Japan. It is unclear what Pyongyang could hope to achieve by a first nuclear strike on Japan, a treaty ally of the United States. The DPRK would likely attack Japan only if it believed a U.S. attack was imminent and that bombing Japan would offer a military advantage in the conflict.

North Korean forces are better positioned to threaten South Korea and could cross the border on short notice. Although North Korean troops are more numerous, South Korea’s army is more modern, better funded, and trained. Furthermore, Seoul is a treaty ally of Washington, and American ground and air forces are deployed on South Korean territory. If war breaks out, North Korea will thus need to both defeat the South Koreans and throw the Americans into the sea. Most analysts believe that South Korea and the United States can push back a North Korean

invasion.¹⁰ Also, in this case too, it is hard to imagine the DPRK destroying South Korea with nuclear weapons without enduring devastating reprisals.

A Chinese or a Russian planner may conclude that it can win a war with the United States or its allies. It is far less likely that a North Korean planner would come to the same conclusion. An overambitious or irrational one still could, but this is true of almost any other state on the planet. Thus, the United States appears driven to confront North Korea more due to historical legacy and ideological differences than to an imminent military threat. This does not mean that North Korea is no threat at all. Any nuclear-armed state can do terrible harm to the United States and its interests. However, this is true for others like Britain, France, India, Israel, and Pakistan, which obviously are not treated as imminent threats by U.S. policymakers.

On the contrary, Russia and especially China are formidable powers in their own right and already require an extensive U.S. political-military effort to defend Europe and Asia. But the quasi-alliance of Beijing and Moscow forces the United States into a gigantic effort of dual containment. China and Russia coordinate their policies to reduce U.S. influence and maximize their chances of reaching regional hegemony in at least the Western Pacific and Eastern Europe.¹¹ To prevail in that two-front competition, America needs to leverage the geography and capabilities of its old allies while also making new friends.

Although the United States has been “great-power competing” with

¹⁰ Dylan Motin, “Conventional Balance and Deterrence on the Korean Peninsula” (Jeunes IHEDN, 2020), <https://jeunes-ihedn.org/conventional-balance-and-deterrence-on-the-korean-peninsula/>; Michael O’Hanlon, “Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea Is Easier Than the Pentagon Thinks,” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 135-70; and Jae-Jung Suh, “Blitzkrieg or Sitzkrieg? Assessing a Second Korean War,” *Pacific Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (June 1999): 151-76.

¹¹ Tongfi Kim and Luis Simón, “Greater Security Cooperation: US Allies in Europe and East Asia,” *Parameters*, vol. 51, no. 2 (2021): 61-71; and Ionut Popescu, “American Grand Strategy and the Rise of Offensive Realism,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 134, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 382-94. Also, Charles A. Richard, quoted in David Vergun, “Collaboration between China, Russia Compounds Threat, Stratcom Commander Says,” *DoD News*, August 27, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2749664/collaboration-between-china-russia-compounds-threat-stratcom-commander-says/>.

China and Russia for a few years already, it has so far failed to articulate a North Korean policy coherent with this larger goal. There is a discrepancy between the traditional approach which treats North Korea as a major threat for the United States and the growing focus on out-competing China. This discrepancy is all the more surprising due to the importance of North Korea for Beijing: “Korea is more salient to China than are most countries because the two share an 880-mile land border adjacent to one of the most populous and prosperous regions of China, and because North Korea is only a few hundred miles from Beijing.”¹² How does North Korea fit within the U.S. overarching goal of containing Chinese power?

The Conventional Military Balance with China

The current stalemate on the Korean Peninsula skews the balance of military capabilities in favor of China and against pro-U.S. forces in Asia. Bad relations between the United States and its allies on one side and North Korea on the other force North and South Koreans alike to devote almost all of their attention to defend against each other. Their two massive militaries and their latent power are unavailable for balancing against China, which is thus free to focus its energy on other theaters.¹³ South Korea maintains a modern military of nearly 600,000 and is an economic powerhouse. The North Korean military, although of dubious quality, counts more or less one million troops.¹⁴ In addition, the United States and Japan earmark forces to deter the DPRK that could be put at better use elsewhere.

12 Thomas Fingar, “China and Korea: Proximity, Priorities, and Policy Evolution,” in *Uneasy Partnerships: China’s Engagement with Japan, the Koreans, and Russia in the Era of Reform*, ed. Thomas Fingar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 127-8.

13 A discussion of Chinese military capabilities with regard to Korea is Jina Kim, “China and Regional Security Dynamics on the Korean Peninsula,” in *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, ed. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 55-66.

14 For the North Korean military, see Min-seok Kim, “The State of the North Korean Military,” in *Korea Net Assessment: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities*, ed. Chung Min Lee and Kathryn Botto (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), 19-30.

A U.S.-aligned DPRK would be a game changer in Northeast Asia. South Korea would have more strategic leeway to balance against China and even to participate in a Taiwanese contingency.¹⁵ The North Korean military, although outdated, remains a formidable mattress that could cushion South Korean and U.S. forces from Chinese power. North Korea could become a blotter for sucking Beijing’s attention away from regional hegemony and force the Chinese to commit considerable forces to garrison their northeastern border. That would allay Chinese pressure on like-minded states such as Taiwan, Vietnam, or India, thus stabilizing Asian politics. To show that point, consider China’s force posture along its borders (*Table 1*). Although available Chinese ground forces represent around one million troops, China’s armies are already stretched thin and a hostile N. Korea would force Beijing into painful trade-offs.

Table 1. Chinese brigades and regiments, 2020

Brigade type	Southern Theater Command	Western Theater Command	Eastern Theater Command	Central Theater Command	Northern Theater Command	All commands
inf	4	7	5	7	6	29
mech inf, mech, mot	2	12	3	13	5	35
armd	5	7	6	8	7	33
arty	2	7	3	5	3	20
marines, spec ops, amph, air aslt*	8	4	9	4	5	30
Actual total	21	37	26	37	26	147
<i>Korean contingency</i>	10	35	5	10	87	147

SOURCE: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), chap. 6.

* inf: infantry, mech: mechanized, mot: motor, armd: armored, arty: artillery, spec ops: special operations, amph: amphibious, air aslt: air assault

¹⁵ Oriana Skylar Mastro and Sungmin Cho, “How South Korea Can Contribute to the Defense of Taiwan,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 109-29.

The Southern Theater Command is arguably the weakest one. Its most likely and threatening rival is Vietnam with its over 400,000-strong army. Also, although relations with Thailand are cordial, Bangkok remains a treaty ally of the United States. Among non-conventional threats are instability in Myanmar and a Hong-Kong contingency. We may assume that Beijing will want to keep at least ten brigades there.

The Western Theater Command is one of the two most capable. The main adversary is India, which possesses a large and seasoned military and is the strongest rival of China on mainland Asia. The Chinese also need to guard against non-conventional threats such as potential Uighur and Tibetan uprisings, while preventing Islamist infiltration from Central Asia. Beijing is currently reinforcing the area and may thus want to maintain its current posture there - around 35 brigades.

The Eastern Command faces no land threat: although Beijing may prefer to keep some units to monitor Taiwan and prevent eventual popular uprisings, we assume that it keeps only five brigades there. The Central Theater Command faces no land threat either but oversees the political

Table 2. Brigades and regiments of neighbors and China, 2020

Brigade type	India	North Korea	South Korea	United States	China	Northern Theater Command
inf	93	95	57	0	29	-
mech inf, mech, mot	14	12	9	0	35	-
armd	23	18	14	1	33	-
arty	31	33	22	1	20	-
marines, spec ops, amph, air aslt*	4	33	22	0	30	-
Total	165	191	124	2	147	87
Conservative total	65	64	124	2	147	87

SOURCE : International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), chap. 6.

* inf: infantry, mech: mechanized, mot: motor, armd: armored, arty: artillery, spec ops: special operations, amph: amphibious, air aslt: air assault

heart of China. It also serves as a strategic reserve for contingencies in border areas. To safeguard the rule of the Party, the capital area, and keep some reserves, we can imagine that Chinese leaders would prefer to maintain at least ten brigades there. As a consequence, if we assume that China needs to keep at least 60 brigades in other theaters, it would have 87 brigades available to reinforce the Northern Theater (see *Table 2*).

North Korean brigades are likely weaker and less competent than Chinese units; for the sake of conservatism, we could assume that N. Korean forces are three times weaker than their Chinese peers. Even in that scenario, North, South Korean, and U.S. forces still represent the equivalent of 190 brigades against 87 Chinese brigades. The Indians have to deter Pakistan; a large part of their army cannot be arrayed against China. Even if they have only 65 brigades earmarked for a Chinese contingency, U.S.-friendly forces on mainland Asia would still represent 255 brigades against overall 147 Chinese ones and this does not even account for Vietnam and other partners.

On the sea, a friendly North Korea would help bottle up China's North Sea Fleet. Although the Chinese would rapidly get rid of the DPRK's navy, they may incur some losses to the North Korean large fleet of submarines.¹⁶ Thus, the main benefit of rapprochement with North Korea is to create a strong buffer between China and U.S. forces and allies in Northeast Asia and seriously complicate any willingness the Zhongnanhai may have to reshape the region by force.

Pressuring Russia

To a lesser extent, North Korea can also promote U.S. interests concerning Russia. With the end of the Cold War and the Sino-Russian warming, Moscow largely demilitarized its southeastern borders and has

¹⁶ Around twenty combat-worthy boats (and two frigates). IISS, *Military Balance*, 275. Also, Sukjoon Yoon, "Expanding the ROKN's Capabilities to Deal with the SLBM Threat from North Korea," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 70, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 49-74.

been free to focus on Europe. The Eastern Military District overseeing the long border with China and Korea has combat forces corresponding to around only eight divisions supported by surface-to-surface missile units.¹⁷ Better relations with the DPRK could have a ripple effect on Europe and oblige Russia to earmark more forces to defend Vladivostok, which is only around 150 kilometers away from North Korea, and allay pressure on European partners. Furthermore, by the same token, it complicates the life of the Russian Pacific Fleet based there.

In addition, an alliance with North Korea would maximize U.S. options during a bilateral war with Russia. During the 1980s, the U.S. Navy contemplated that in case of a Soviet attack in Germany, it could open a new front in the Russian Far East to pin down Soviet reserves in an area of secondary importance for NATO, away from Central Europe. It notably envisaged air and missile attacks and landings against naval facilities, air bases, and other military objects in Primorye, Sakhalin, and Khabarovsk regions as well as cutting the Trans-Siberian railway to isolate eastern Russia from its western core. Although this so-called “Lehman Doctrine” was unrealistic during the Cold War due to the inherent difficulty of an amphibious assault on the territory of another great power,¹⁸ an alliance with North Korea combined with the current skeletal force posture of the Russian army on its eastern flank would create a major headache for Moscow.¹⁹

The Nuclear Balance

Another benefit of friendly relations with the DPRK is to alleviate nuclear threats hovering over the United States. North Korean nuclear

¹⁷ IISS, *Military Balance*, 203.

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, “A Strategic Miscalculation: The Maritime Strategy and Deterrence in Europe,” *International Security*, vol. 11, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 3-57; and Narushige Michishita, Peter M. Swartz and David F. Winkler, *Lessons of the Cold War in the Pacific: U.S. Maritime Strategy, Crisis Prevention, and Japan’s Role* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2016).

¹⁹ Michael Fitzsimmons, “Horizontal Escalation: An Asymmetric Approach to Russian Aggression?” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 114-7.

ambitions took root during the mid-1950s and gained momentum during the 1980s, ultimately leading to the detonation of a nuclear weapon in 2006.²⁰ North Korea is generally considered in the public debate through the sole prism of the nuclear danger it poses to the United States and Washington has no reliable way to prevent a North Korean nuclear strike.²¹ Normal diplomatic relations would decrease the risk of an unwanted nuclear exchange by multiplying the channels of communications between Pyongyang and Washington.²²

Going further, North Korean nuclear weapons can become an asset. Now that North Korea is capable of launching nuclear-tipped missiles on any of its neighbors and even on the continental United States and that N. Korean nuclear weapons are an inescapable fact of life, do American policymakers prefer North Korean missiles to point towards Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington or toward Beijing?

Indeed, a benefit of engagement is to complicate Chinese nuclear planning. When contemplating a nuclear attack against the United States, China will fear that a U.S.-aligned DPRK will choose to side with Washington and the whole range of North Korea's nuclear arsenal is capable of striking China. Hence, Beijing will be forced to earmark nuclear weapons for North Korea or even bomb it preemptively, thus diminishing the number of weapons available for waging war on the United States.

To sum up, at a time where U.S. forces are spread thin, adding one million soldiers and their nuclear weapons is an easy fix to correct the balance of power in America's favor. Therefore, Pyongyang's military power could turn from a threat to a formidable asset. Engagement with

20 Walter C. Clemens Jr., "North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence," *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (January/April 2010): 127-54.

21 Jaganath Sankaran and Steve Fetter, "Defending the United States: Revisiting National Missile Defense against North Korea," *International Security*, vol. 46, no. 3 (Winter 2021/22): 51-86.

22 Chung-in Moon and Seung-Chan Boo, "Hotlines between Two Koreas: Status, Limitations, and Future Tasks," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2021): 192-200; and Bennett Ramberg, "North Korea's Ongoing Nuclear Missile Tests Prove It's Time to Normalize Relations," *Think* (October 22, 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/north-korea-s-ongoing-nuclear-missile-tests-prove-it-s-ncna1282118>.

North Korea could fundamentally alter the balance of power for little cost.

Economic Benefit and Regional Cooperation

Parallel to balancing against China (and Russia), engagement offers economic opportunities to the United States and promotes peace on the Korean Peninsula.

U.S. companies would gain from relations with N. Korea. Eventually, Pyongyang will open its economy more largely to the outside world. “Iran’s and North Korea’s infrastructures are in disrepair, their natural resource sectors are underdeveloped, and their populations are largely cut off from Western economies,” noticed Lawrence, “but absent sanctions, Western firms could pursue untapped opportunities in such sectors as oil and mineral extraction, transportation, and port infrastructure, many of which would involve industrial equipment that U.S. workers could build at home.”²³ However, if the current stalemate persists, China and Russia will have a first-mover advantage and monopolize a big part of North Korea’s market. Even if North Korea is and will remain a small market, the United States and like-minded states should preempt this by positioning themselves as economic partners for Pyongyang.

U.S. engagement with the DPRK to counterbalance China is also likely to fundamentally improve relations between Pyongyang and Seoul. European integration after World War II started because of the overwhelming threat from the Soviet Union.²⁴ More recently, Russia’s resurgence kick-started integration efforts in Central Europe, like the Three Seas Initiative. The rise of China forced Indo-Pacific states to work together

²³ Christopher Lawrence, “Making Peace with Iran and North Korea Could Be Good for U.S. Workers,” *Foreign Policy* (March 25, 2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/25/iran-north-korea-united-states-middle-east-trump-biden-diplomacy/>.

²⁴ Sebastian Rosato, *Europe United: Power Politics and the Making of the European Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Norrin M. Ripsman, “Two Stages of Transition from a Region of War to a Region of Peace: Realist Transition and Liberal Endurance,” *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 4 (December 2005): 669-93.

through the Quad, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and other initiatives.²⁵ The threat of seeing the Peninsula dominated by Beijing could do more to promote peace and integration between the two Koreas than everything tried up to now. South Korean openings towards the North throughout recent decades rested on the liberal and constructivist logic of “more interactions, more peace” and led nowhere.²⁶ But a North-South-U.S. understanding based on a shared sound strategic interest - containing a common threat - would bring stability in inter-Korean relations.

Some may fear that U.S. engagement with North Korea could harm U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea but such fears are unwarranted. Japan is worried by North Korea’s nuclear program and still resents Pyongyang’s kidnapping of Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s.²⁷ Nevertheless, Japanese leaders made clear that the main threat to Tokyo’s security is China and its growing navy.²⁸ As long as this remains true, there is no reason to believe that engaging North Korea would break the Japan-U.S. alliance. Seoul has generally been more eager than Washington to engage with North Korea since the era of the W. Bush administration. South Korea would thus welcome a U.S. effort to settle relations with Pyongyang. In addition, a large majority of South Koreans see China as a major threat.²⁹ Therefore, U.S. engagement with the DPRK is unlikely to risk the alliance with South Korea either.³⁰ Instead, South Korea would have greater leeway to focus on the Chinese threat. After all, both the Japan-U.S. and South Korea-U.S. alliances survived the Mao-Nixon rapprochement of the early 1970s, which

25 Mark Beeson and Troy Lee-Brown, “Regionalism for Realists? The Evolution of the Indo-Pacific,” *Chinese Political Science Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2021): 167-86.

26 Inhan Kim, “No More Sunshine: The Limits of Engagement with North Korea,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter 2018): 165-81.

27 Takahiro Yamamoto, “Abduction: Japan’s Blunders in Negotiations with North Korea,” *North Korean Review*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 34-42.

28 Tim Kelly, “Japan Lists China as Bigger Threat than Nuclear-Armed North Korea,” *Reuters*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-idUSKBN1WC051>.

29 “7 out of 10 S. Koreans See China as Biggest Threat: Poll,” *Yonhap*, December 29, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211229004900325>.

30 A case can be made that U.S. intransigence towards North Korea is actually weakening the alliance with South Korea. Robert S. Ross, “China Looks at the Korean Peninsula: The ‘Two Transitions’,” *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2021): 129-58.

was an order of magnitude more unsettling than a possible North Korea-U.S. one.³¹

The Current Approach Is Counterproductive

The Futility of Sanctions

Policymakers and pundits usually claim that the current stalemate will eventually denuclearize North Korea and force the regime to liberalize and respect human rights. They make the case that economic sanctions incentivize North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons while the United States coordinates with regional powers, said to all have a deep-seated interest in stopping the North Korean nuclear program. If sanctions are thoroughly enforced while U.S. policymakers reach out to the Chinese, the Russians, and others, then the North Korean arsenal will eventually fade away.³² In parallel, sanctions will make the Pyongyang regime realize it must respect the rights of its people and adopt a more liberal model.

The failure of the sanctions to denuclearize the DPRK is obvious and requires little development.³³ However, the assumption that the United States should partner with China and Russia against North Korea is more

31 Midori Yoshii, "The Creation of the 'Shock Myth': Japan's Reactions to American Rap-prochement with China, 1971-1972," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2008): 131-46.

32 Patrick M. Cronin, "Maximum Pressure: A Clarifying Signal in the Noise of North Korea Policy," *Texas National Security Review* (2018), <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-good-choices-comes-north-korea/>; Ruediger Frank, "The Political Economy of Sanctions against North Korea," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2006): 8-12; Sung-han Kim and Scott A. Snyder, "Denuclearizing North Korea: Time for Plan B," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 75-90; Dianne E. Rennack, *North Korea: Economic Sanctions* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2006); and U.S. Department of State, "Press Availability with Secretary Gates, Korean Foreign Minister Yu, and Korean Defense Minister Kim" (July 21, 2010), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2010/07/145014.htm>. An overview of the debate is Patrick McEachern, "Marching Toward a U.S.-North Korea Summit: The Historical Case for Optimism, Pessimism, and Caution," *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 1, no. 3 (May 2018): 118-29.

33 Christopher J. Watterson, "What Next for Sanctions against North Korea?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 75, no. 5 (2019): 247-51.

intriguing and is discussed at more length. Status quoists also believe that sanctions help to promote democracy and Western values.³⁴ In a second section, I show why such a thesis is untenable.

Washington's stated goal towards North Korea is its complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization (CVID). However, refusing to work with the DPRK because it does not comply with CVID sacrifices U.S. interests while it is unlikely to eventually denuclearize North Korea.³⁵ The DPRK endured decades of budget spending, sanctions, and suffering with the sole aim of building a working nuclear arsenal. It now possesses a fully functional nuclear arsenal offering a potent deterrent against foreign threats. North Korea estimates that it developed an effective strategic deterrent and is now investing in tactical nuclear capabilities.³⁶ Only an irrational North Korean leader would suddenly drop the ultimate survival guarantee and accept CVID. Even under overwhelming diplomatic and economic pressure, no one would expect China or Russia to give away their nuclear arsenal. Why would anyone expect North Korea to suddenly throw in the towel and give away its hard-won weaponry?

I do not make the case that sanctions are universally useless. They can impact the balance of power by harming the target's economy and military capabilities.³⁷ If one thinks counter-factually, sanctions probably limited the development of N. Korea's conventional capabilities by shattering its economic growth and reducing the DPRK's access to foreign weapons, technologies, and skills. However, sanctions are unlikely to ever roll back North Korea's nuclear weaponry, which is already a hard fact.

³⁴ Haeyoung Kim, "Stifled Growth and Added Suffering: Tensions Inherent in Sanctions Policies against North Korea," *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2014): 91-112.

³⁵ Mayumi Fukushima, "Time to Shelve Denuclearization and Negotiate a Halt to North Korea's ICBM Program" (War on the Rocks, April 14, 2022), <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/time-to-shelve-denuclearization-and-negotiate-a-halt-to-north-koreas-icbm-program/>. A presentation of N. Korean nuclear capabilities is Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "North Korean Nuclear Weapons, 2021," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 77, no. 4 (2021): 222-36.

³⁶ Ankit Panda, "A Call to Arms: Kim Jong Un and the Tactical Bomb," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 7-24.

³⁷ Daniel McCormack and Henry Pascoe, "Sanctions and Preventive War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 61, no. 8 (2017): 1711-39.

Who's Afraid of Big Bad Instability? Not China and Russia

Proponents of denuclearization also believe that if Washington engages with Beijing, at some point, China (and Russia) will turn against the North Korean nuclear program and stop it.³⁸ The argument goes that Chinese and Russian policies are driven by the fear of instability in Korea and that multilateral talks will lead to the disappearance of the N. Korean bomb. In the next section, I explain that China and Russia are unlikely to rein into North Korea because it would go against their interests and that the vaunted multilateral approach will remain fruitless.

In an ideal world, the Chinese and the Russians would likely prefer a non-nuclear North Korea. Both China and Russia openly expressed their displeasure towards the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons. No Chinese premier visited Pyongyang between 2005 and 2018 and relations between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un were at first particularly frosty. After Xi took power in 2013, North Korean media coverage of China grew far more negative than before.³⁹ The Chinese and the Russians similarly disliked the 2016 nuclear test.⁴⁰ However, Beijing and Moscow failed so far to seriously pressure Pyongyang because they fear antagonizing it.⁴¹ China overwhelmingly views North Korea as a buffer against foreign threats,

38 Duk-kun Byun, "N. Korea a Major Area of Cooperation between U.S., China: NSA Sullivan," *Yonhap*, November 17, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211117000200325>; Samuel S. Kim, "China's New Role in the Nuclear Confrontation," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2004): 147-84; and Xiaohui Wu, "China and the U.S. beyond the Korean Peninsula," *Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2006): 317-38.

39 Dongxun Piao, "Changes in North Korea's Cognition to China and Policy Adjustment during Kim Jong Un's Period - Based on the Analysis of China-related Reports in Rodong Simmun Newspaper (2009 - 2018)," *Unification Policy Studies*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2020): 115-40; and Debin Zhan, "Analysis of Changes in North Korea's Cognition of China through Its Media Coverage," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 28, no. 2 (June 2016): 199-221.

40 Niv Farago and John Merrill, "The North Korean Card in US-China Relations: How Should It Be Played?" *Asian Affairs*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2021): 564; Fingar and Straub, "Geography and Destiny," 178-9; Ramon Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea-US Relations: From Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 134, 142-3; and Daniel Wertz, *China-North Korea Relations* (Washington, D.C.: National Committee on North Korea, 2019), 13.

41 Farago and Merrill argue that China has little actual leverage on North Korea to start with. Farago and Merrill, "The North Korean Card."

primarily U.S. power.⁴² Russia is engaged in an intense security competition with NATO and North Korea's nukes are but a tertiary threat. To both, the DPRK is an ally and a buffer too valuable to be antagonized for the sake of denuclearization.

For many observers, China and Russia are desperate to stop the North Korean nuclear program because they fear "instability." As the argument goes, instability in Korea - whatever that means - could lead to hordes of refugees pouring through their borders and significantly harm their economies.⁴³ Many take as self-evident that China and Russia's main goal is to avoid instability and the supposed fear of Korean refugees and economic losses is orthodoxy among Korea watchers. However, this assumption is groundless and unlikely to inform the choices of the Kremlin or the Zhongnanhai.

First, the threat of millions of refugees pouring into China or Russia is fanciful and does not hold up against scrutiny. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, 6.6 million refugees have left the country (out of around 21 million inhabitants). Around 3.6 million resettled in Turkey, a country of 84 million people - the equivalent of less than five percent of the population.⁴⁴ North Korea is close to Syria with a little over 25 million people. If we imagine a disaster equal to Syria's, it means that eight million North Koreans would exit the country. Even if all these people were to flee into China, it would represent only 0.6 percent of the total population. A part of them may prefer to go to Russia; even an incredibly high number of five million North Koreans entering Russian territory would represent only 3.4 percent of the baseline population, far less than what Turkey

⁴² Hongseo Park, "A Neorealist Explanation of Chinese Military Intervention in the Korean Peninsula: Power Shifts, Threat Perceptions, and Rational Choice," *Korean Political Science Review*, vol. 40, no. 1 (March 2006): 181-200.

⁴³ For example, Gregory J. Moore, "How North Korea Threatens China's Interests: Understanding Chinese 'Duplicity' on the North Korean Nuclear Issue," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2008): 18-20; Wertz, *China-North Korea*, 1; and Zhiqun Zhu, "Comrades in Broken Arms: Shifting Chinese Policies toward North Korea," *Asian Politics & Policy*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2016): 586.

⁴⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Emergency" (March 15, 2021), <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>.

received. Although Chinese and Russian authorities may recoil at the thought of having to deal with refugees, these hardly represent an existential threat pushing the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai to preemptively turn against the DPRK.⁴⁵

If anything, a wave of refugees would offer a malleable workforce to re-dynamize Chinese and Russian regions suffering from economic stagnation. Because young Chinese tend to leave northeastern China to pursue a more comfortable life in coastal regions, cheap workers for the decaying heavy industries of Manchuria would be a gift more than a liability.⁴⁶ The same is true for Russia, which desperately needs lumberjacks, agricultural and construction workers, and hunters to develop Siberia and the Far East.⁴⁷ For example, instead of chasing them away, Moscow has been trying hard to attract Ukrainian refugees into Russia since 2014.⁴⁸ Even if both states ultimately decide that refugees are an unbearable burden, they could easily send a great number of them to South Korea, their final destination anyway. If refugees were a major worry for the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai, they had decades to build impregnable walls and close off their borders with North Korea, which, obviously, they did not. In a nutshell, China and Russia are formidable states that have little to fear from a few hundred thousand North Korean refugees.

45 Bridget L. Coggins, "Dramatic Change in North Korea: Instability and Human Flight Propensity," *North Korean Review*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2018): 49-70.

46 Sidney Leng, "China's Northeastern Rust Belt Struggling to Retain Population as Economic Slowdown Speeds up Exodus," *South China Morning Post*, May 8, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3009213/chinas-northeastern-rust-belt-struggling-retain-population?module=perpetual_scroll&pgtype=article&campaign=3009213; and Yin Yeping, "Apple Suppliers in China Face Labor Shortage, May Drive Up Prices," *Global Times*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1231869.shtml>.

47 Ivan Stupachenko, "Workforce Shortage Stalemates Progress for Russian Fisheries," *SeafoodSource* (July 18, 2019), <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/supply-trade/workforce-shortage-stalemates-russian-fisheries>; and Ivan Zuenko, "Russia's Far East Seeks Partners beyond China" (Carnegie Moscow Center, March 13, 2020), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81278>.

48 Irina Kuznetsova, "To Help 'Brotherly People'? Russian Policy Towards Ukrainian Refugees," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 72, no. 3 (April 2020): 505-27. Also, Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 110.

Second, are China and Russia likely to oppose the DPRK's nuclear program due to the fear of economic fallout? Chinese and Russian trade volumes towards North Korea are insignificant. Only trade with South Korea merits examination. In 2019, China's exports to South Korea represented \$108 billion while South Korea exported to China for \$136 billion. These exports correspond to only 0.8 percent of China's gross domestic product, while the trade relation is unbalanced in favor of South Korea. If anything, China should be happy to see a ferocious trade competitor and major strategic hurdle, South Korea, having trouble. Also, Russia's trade relations with South Korea are negligible.⁴⁹ Furthermore, if Beijing and Moscow valued economic partners so much, one wonders why they would ever pick quarrels with neighbors like Georgia, Ukraine, India, Australia, and others. To sum up, it is unlikely that economic gain drives China and Russia's North Korean policies.

The same question recurs: why did the Chinese and the Russians support North Korea at almost every corner for over seventy years if refugees and economic disruption were major concerns for Beijing and Moscow? China and Russia had over three decades to possibly rein in the DPRK's nuclear program but they were content to pay lip service to denuclearization and apply international sanctions selectively to put on a good showing.⁵⁰ Specifically, the Chinese may not like the North Korean nuclear weaponry, but they understand that antagonizing Pyongyang over the nuclear issue would push it into the arms of China's rivals.⁵¹ Expecting China to suddenly "see the light," realize that North Korea's nukes are a problem, and work with Washington to take them away is delusional. Pundits have been clinging for decades to the assumption that only multilateral negotiations can solve the North Korean conundrum.

⁴⁹ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "China / South Korea" (June 2021), <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/kor#Profile>; and OEC, "South Korea / Russia" (June 2021), <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/kor/partner/rus?redirect=true>.

⁵⁰ Stephen Blank, "Silence of the Dragon: What Role Is China Playing in Korea?" *Global Asia*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2021): 68-73.

⁵¹ Blank, "Is the Northern Alliance Making a Comeback?" 220. Leading Chinese Korea experts say so behind closed doors.

However, multilateralism in that case is more part of the problem than part of the solution.⁵²

To sum up, a short or mid-term denuclearization with or without multilateral intervention is quixotic. With no realistic option to impose denuclearization, the United States is left with only “two possible futures: the one wherein North Korea is a nuclearized enemy state and the other where it is an interim-nuclearized friendly state.”⁵³ Although the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations arguably all understood this, the U.S. government has yet to come to terms with the sole logical conclusion: postponing the issue indefinitely. That would not be a first, as Washington did this for the seven other states that acquired nuclear weapons. Over the longer run, U.S. policymakers will eventually realize that they can live with the North Korean bomb.

Human Rights, Democracy, and Magical Thinking

Liberals and neoconservatives often justify the North Korean status quo by human rights and democracy promotion motives. Therefore, although this study takes realism as a framework, it is hard to eschew discussing the predicament of the North Korean people.⁵⁴ But if the current policy of confrontation and sanctions genuinely aims at allaying the plea of the North Koreans and promoting human rights, then its track record is abysmal.

The DPRK has had negligible economic intercourse with the U.S.-led world since its inception and has been under extensive sanctions for decades. Yet, this isolation failed to improve human rights. Political

52 A discussion of multilateralism's failure is Leszek Buszynski, *Negotiating with North Korea: The Six Party Talks and the Nuclear Issue* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

53 Minnich, “Denuclearization through Peace,” 18. There is also the option of war with North Korea, but there is arguably no appetite in Washington for a large-scale conflict with a nuclear-armed secondary power.

54 For ethics in realism, see Duncan Bell, “Political Realism and the Limits of Ethics,” in *Ethics and World Politics*, ed. Duncan Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93-110; and Joseph S. Nye, “What Is a Moral Foreign Policy?” *Texas National Security Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 2019/20): 96-108.

opponents - real or supposed - are still sent to the gulag.⁵⁵ Also, the debility of the agricultural system left North Korea vulnerable to horrendous famines, and international sanctions only exacerbate food shortages.⁵⁶ Even before the 2021 food crisis, “60,000 children [were] at risk of starvation due to existing sanctions regulations. The situation is beginning to resemble that of the foreign policy dilemma lawmakers faced with Iraq during the 1990s.”⁵⁷

Proponents of the forever sanctions fear that U.S. openings towards North Korea “legitimize the regime.” First of all, according to this logic, the United States should break all relations with China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and the like to talk only with liberal democracies. U.S. democracy promotion efforts may even worsen the fate of North Korean democrats and harden the regime. Public criticism of the regime and sanctions give ammunition to hardliners who see U.S. schemes to subvert the DPRK everywhere.⁵⁸ Democratic reformists come to be seen as foreign agents and airdropped politicians working against the national interest. Scholarship indeed shows that sanctions and threats targeting human rights-violating regimes generally have the opposite effect of strengthening them.⁵⁹ Indeed, foreign interventions

55 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2020” (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>; and Kyung-ok Do et al., *2016 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2016).

56 Fuqua, *Nuclear Endgame*, chap. 7; Hazel Smith, “The Ethics of United Nations Sanctions on North Korea: Effectiveness, Necessity and Proportionality,” *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2020): 191-4; and Michael Whitty, Suk Kim and Trevor Crick, “The Effectiveness of Economic Sanctions: The Case of North Korea,” *North Korean Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2006): 57-62.

57 Daniel Jasper, *Engaging North Korea: A Toolkit for Protecting Humanitarian Channels amid “Maximum Pressure”* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 2018), 24.

58 Meredith Shaw, “The Abyss Gazes Back: How North Korean Propaganda Interprets Sanctions, Threats and Diplomacy,” *Pacific Review*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2022): 202-28.

59 Sebastian Hellmeier, “How Foreign Pressure Affects Mass Mobilization in Favor of Authoritarian Regimes,” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2021): 450-77; Robert A. Pape, “Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work,” *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 90-136; and Dursun Peksen, “Better or Worse? The Effect of Economic Sanctions on Human Rights,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 46, no. 1 (January 2009): 59-77.

tend to excite nationalism, the most powerful political ideology on the planet.⁶⁰

Second, the legitimize-the-regime argument implies that simply interacting with Americans somehow increases the lifespan of the regime.⁶¹ One wonders what causal mechanism explains this miracle. If American presidents' handshakes have such supernatural power, one ponders how the Iranian regime in 1979 or the Afghan regime in 2021 could ever collapse. The assumption that U.S. presidents and diplomats are global kingmakers is dubious at best. But, as Morgenthau noticed long ago, "superstition still holds sway over" students of international relations and the "demonological approach to foreign policy" remains an earmark of the American worldview; however, "natural catastrophes will not be prevented by burning witches; the threat of a powerful Germany to establish hegemony over Europe will not be averted by getting rid of a succession of German leaders."⁶²

Third, even if the current regime collapses, there is no guarantee that its successor will be a liberal democracy. The end of the Kim dynasty could be followed by a military coup or extremist ideologues seizing power. If the government falls into disarray, Beijing may impose a pro-Chinese regime that will probably not defend human rights far better than the current one. Even in the optimistic hypothesis of a liberal regime taking hold in Pyongyang, the fate of the NATO-installed regime in Afghanistan makes abundantly clear that political systems living off foreign support do not fare well.

Consequently, the most sensible option is to build up relations with Pyongyang to obtain bargaining power and leverage over the regime. Once

60 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); and Benjamin Miller, "How 'Making the World in Its Own Liberal Image' Made the West Less Liberal," *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 5 (September 2021): 1353-75.

61 For example, Sung-eun Lee, "Trump Failed to Fight for Human Rights: Defector," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 24, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3068297>; and "President Trump Holds News Conference," *CNN*, June 12, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1806/12/es.03.html>.

62 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 9.

Washington has overall cooperative relations with Pyongyang, efforts to promote more humane policies will be more efficient. It would become possible to ask for gradual improvements in exchange for economic rewards. For example, the United States successfully pushed the Egyptian government to be lenient with several political prisoners by leveraging its support.⁶³ As a senior U.S. State Department official advised, “in some contexts, it’s not helpful to publicly bash governments doing the wrong thing there but to raise things privately.”⁶⁴

The liberal mind abhors North Korea’s ruthless regime - and rightly so. But betting foreign policy on a putative regime change is cavalier; the regime may collapse next year as it may collapse next century.⁶⁵ Like Kofman noticed, “the U.S. policy community is deeply ideological and tends to value intangibles above interests. Abstract concepts like the liberal international order, political values, and normative belief structures are more important to many in Washington than empirical pursuits.”⁶⁶ Although denunciations of the Pyongyang regime stem from good intent, diplomatic engagement with North Korea to discreetly push for more democratic practices is not only more efficient, more humane, but also more beneficial to U.S. interests.

⁶³ Jennifer Holleis and Kersten Knipp, “Egypt: ‘Facebook Girl’ May Be Free, but Oppression Remains Rife,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 22, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/egypt-facebook-girl-may-be-free-but-oppression-remains-rife/a-58579742>.

⁶⁴ Simon Lewis and Humeyra Pamuk, “Biden Put Rights at Heart of U.S. Foreign Policy. Then He Pulled Punches,” *WKZO*, September 13, 2021, <https://wkzo.com/2021/09/13/biden-put-rights-at-heart-of-u-s-foreign-policy-then-he-pulled-punches/>.

⁶⁵ Daniel Byman and Jennifer Lind, “Pyongyang’s Survival Strategy: Tools of Authoritarian Control in North Korea,” *International Security*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 44-74.

⁶⁶ Michael Kofman, “Stranger Things in Helsinki” (War on the Rocks, July 23, 2018), <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/stranger-things-in-helsinki/>, quoted in Popescu, “American Grand Strategy,” 387. Also, Stephen D. Krasner, “Learning to Live with Despots: The Limits of Democracy Promotion,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 99, no. 2 (March/April 2020): 49-55; and Keith L. Shimko, “Realism, Neorealism, and American Liberalism,” *Review of Politics*, vol. 54, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 281-301.

North Korean Views of China and the United States

This part uses primary and secondary sources to understand the DPRK's approach towards China and the United States. First, I explain why Pyongyang should want to ally with Washington against Beijing. Then, I show that the North Koreans are worried by Chinese power and consider the United States as a desirable partner. This demonstrates that the Americans have an opportunity to turn North Korea away from China and make it an ally. I make a conscious effort to eschew historical-cultural arguments (e.g., "North Korea distrusts China because of the 1956 conspiracy of the pro-Chinese faction") because this kind of argument essentializes actors and attributes them an unchanging nature. In fact, alliances wax and wane depending on current circumstances more than on historical feelings or cultural proximity.

North Korea's Chinese Problem

As a general rule, international relations theorists expect states to balance against powerful neighbors. Indeed, the greatest threat to a state's survival comes from nearby formidable military forces able to cross one's borders on short notice.⁶⁷ Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, a small state like North Korea should fear the rise of a neighboring great power like China because if Beijing achieves regional hegemony, it will end up as a satellite of the Zhongnanhai and lose a big chunk of its sovereignty. Since states fear the emergence of a regional hegemon and are "willing to fight

67 Eric J. Labs, "Do Weak States Bandwagon?" *Security Studies*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 383-416; Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Hegemonic Threats and Great-Power Balancing in Europe, 1495-1999," *Security Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January/March 2005): 1-33; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy*, chaps. 2, 4-5; Dylan Motin, "South America Off Balance? Aggregate and Military Power in International Politics," *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2021): 31-54; Zachary Selden, "Balancing against or Balancing with? The Spectrum of Alignment and the Endurance of American Hegemony," *Security Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2 (April/June 2013): 330-64; and Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

for their independence and autonomy, efforts by a state like China to gain such ascendancy create deep tension and thus potential for conflict.”⁶⁸ We should thus see clues that Pyongyang feels unease about the rise of China and would like to balance against it.

China experienced an impressive rise in economic and military capabilities starting from the 1990s. Although it was still quite weak during that decade, the modernization of the People’s Liberation Army began to be felt during the 2000s. If realism serves as a guide, North Korea should have come to fear Chinese power around this time. This part is the most theoretically oriented of the paper. If even an ideological and traditional ally of China like North Korea is afraid of Beijing’s rise, then we will have shown that the incentive to balance predicted by realism is real and strong.

During the Cold War, North Korea usually played China and the Soviet Union against each other to prevent satellitization by one of the two and preserve its margin of maneuver. But due to China and Russia’s near alliance since the 2000s, North Korea cannot play one against the other as it used to. Nowadays, Russia focuses its limited resources on Europe and lacks the means to weigh in Asia, where Moscow has been relegated to China’s trailer. As put by two experts, “the problem is so endemic and the implications so consequential that DPRK officials devote much time and attention to anticipating, forestalling, and responding to what they perceive as harmful decisions by Beijing.”⁶⁹ Hence, North Korea has few choices other than to work with the United States to balance the rise of China.

According to Carlin and Lewis, the main goal of North Korean diplomacy is “a long-term, strategic relationship with the United States [and] has nothing to do with ideology or political philosophy.” This goal is “a cold, hard calculation” because the North Koreans understand “in their gut that they must buffer the heavy influence their neighbors already

⁶⁸ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 17.

⁶⁹ Fingar and Straub, “Geography,” 170-1.

have, or could soon gain, over their small, weak country.” Even “the Chinese know this and say so in private.”⁷⁰

Indeed, China understands the balancing incentive that weighs upon the DPRK. In early 2002, relations with Beijing started to worsen as Pyongyang was firing across the board to make new partners.⁷¹ The Chinese preemptively reinforced their military capabilities near the North Korean border during the 2010s and built bunkers to shield themselves from nuclear and chemical weapons. As competition with the United States intensified in the late 2010s, China logically multiplied its openings towards the North. After DPRK-U.S. relations improved in 2018, the Chinese engineered a flurry of diplomatic contacts with the North Koreans, fearing they would switch sides.⁷² As a Chinese insider remarked, “Pyongyang is trying everything possible to make up with Washington at our expense.”⁷³

If indeed the DPRK feels the urge to balance, we should observe an interest in relations with the United States and worries or concerns about Chinese power. Specifically, North Korea has long berated the United States: as Chinese power grows, we should see this aggressive language receding. North Korea depends significantly on China for its economic survival. We should thus witness a N. Korean willingness to diminish this dependency. In isolation, reducing one’s economic dependency is always sound policy; it is not sufficient proof of balancing. However, combined with other clues, it is a sign of an underlying balancing tendency.

70 Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis, “What North Korea Really Wants” (Nautilus Institute, February 2, 2007), <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/what-north-korea-really-wants/>.

71 Pardo, *North Korea-US Relations*, 46-7.

72 Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 56; Lily Kuo, “Kim Jong-un Meets Xi Jinping for Third Time,” *Guardian* (June 18, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/19/kim-jong-un-meets-xi-jinping-for-third-time>; and Khang Vu, “Why China and North Korea Decided to Renew a 60-Year-Old Treaty” (Lowy Institute, July 30, 2021), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-china-and-north-korea-decided-renew-60-year-old-treaty>.

73 Quoted in Fei-Ling Wang, “Looking East: China’s Policy toward the Korean Peninsula,” in *Engagement with North Korea: A Viable Alternative*, ed. Sung Chull Kim and David C. Kang (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 56.

What Do the North Koreans Think about China?

Lee, Lee, and Moon compiled a list of remarks about China made by N. Korean leaders from 2000 to 2020; they did not spare any criticism towards Beijing. Kim Jong-il once asked his ambassador in Beijing, visibly too sympathetic towards China, “are you seriously trusting the Chinese?” (March 2007) and later reaffirmed that “China cannot be trusted” (May 2009). The then Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Kye-gwan stated that “we do not trust China, China has no influence upon us” while a former colleague of his was even more emphatic: “the country that North Korea wants to be close with is the United States, the country it dislikes is China” (2007).⁷⁴ In October 2007, North and South Koreans were preparing a joint declaration where Seoul wanted to encourage the “four parties” - the two Koreas, the United States, and China - to work for peace together. However, the North Koreans disliked the wording and changed the text to “the three or four parties directly concerned,” thus potentially excluding China. The Chinese were displeased by the move.⁷⁵ The April 2018 Panmunjom Declaration’s wording was similar, describing Chinese involvement as optional.⁷⁶

Beyond the speeches of high-level officials, lower-level echelons show similar tendencies. Officials reportedly started to call China “the sworn enemy,” a nicety that was prior reserved for the United States. In March 2014, the officer training school in Pyongyang came up with the slogan “China is our traitor and enemy” and this was not the first time.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, regional officials hold meetings where China is referred to as

⁷⁴ Sang-Man Lee, Sang-Sook Lee and Dae-Keun Moon, *Bukjung Gwanggye: 1945–2020* [North Korea-China Relations: 1945–2020] (Seoul: Institute for Far Eastern Studies, 2021), 242-3.

⁷⁵ Wang, “Looking East,” 56.

⁷⁶ Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula (April 27, 2018),” accessed September 11, 2018, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=1&titleNm=

⁷⁷ Zhu, “Comrades in Broken Arms,” 578-9.

the “thousand-year-old enemy.”⁷⁸

Nuclear weapons were, of course, developed with an eye on South Korea and the United States; however, “one reason [North Korea] built the bomb is its apprehension that [...] China would be too overbearing and influential in Pyongyang as Kim Jong Un undoubtedly perceived after coming to power in 2011.”⁷⁹ Nuclear brinkmanship is not reserved for the Americans; the first North Korean nuclear test (2006) happened during a China-Japan summit, the third (February 2013) happened a few weeks before Xi Jinping became Chinese president, and the fifth (2016) occurred right after the G20 summit hosted in Hangzhou. In May 2017, the DPRK fired a ballistic missile the day Xi Jinping inaugurated the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. A few days later, on 21 May 2017, it fired a medium-range ballistic missile - unable to strike the United States - towards the Sea of Japan, to its east. However, the small camera installed on the missile pointed westward. Hence, the footage that appeared the next day on state television showed for a long time Chinese territory, a clear message that N. Korean missiles could as well aim at China.⁸⁰ Indeed, the North Koreans declared that “the recent successfully developed new rocket Hwasong-12 is a nuclear transportation vehicle that can conduct attacks on the whole of China.”⁸¹ Finally, in September of that year, Pyongyang celebrated the opening of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit in Xiamen by a nuclear detonation. The Chinese

78 Jieun Kim, “North Korea Stokes Anti-China Sentiment in Response to Tougher Sanctions,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/north-korea-stokes-anti-china-sentiment-in-response-to-tougher-sanctions-01042018161757.html>.

79 Blank, “Is the Northern Alliance,” 224; also, Min-hyung Kim, “Why Nuclear? Explaining North Korea’s Strategic Choice of Going Nuclear and Its Implications for East Asian Security,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 56, no. 7 (2021): 1488-502; and Dong Sun Lee, Iordanka Alexandrova and Yihei Zhao, “The Chinese Failure to Disarm North Korea: Geographical Proximity, U.S. Unipolarity and Alliance Restraint,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2020): 593-4.

80 Katsuji Nakazawa, “Pyongyang Missile Footage Is a Dagger to Xi’s Throat,” *Nikkei Asia* (August 21, 2017), <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Pyongyang-missile-footage-is-a-dagger-to-Xi-s-throat2>.

81 Quoted in Charles Parton Obe and James Byrne, “China’s Only Ally,” *RUSI Newsbrief* (July 2, 2021), <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/chinas-only-ally>.

government felt so humiliated that it censored discussions about that test.⁸²

Although North Korea is infamous for its military provocations towards South Korea and the United States, provocations towards China, less known and mediatized, are no less aggressive. North Korean soldiers regularly shoot Chinese traders across the border and torment Chinese fishermen. For example, in 2012, after the North Koreans seized a fishing boat, “they abused the Chinese crew, smashed the boat and desecrated the Chinese national flag.”⁸³ According to an observer, “frequent incursions into China by North Korean soldiers who steal food and other things, and occasionally murder Chinese citizens in the border area have become a source of anger and contempt toward the North Korean regime.”⁸⁴

The North Koreans are wary of Chinese economic penetration. North Korean internal documents show no sympathy towards China and have been encouraging state officials to reduce their economic dependence on the Chinese and work instead with the Russians and the Europeans since 2000.⁸⁵ The North Koreans often sign investment contracts with Chinese entities only to cancel them and walk away with the money.⁸⁶ In August 2012, China’s Xiyang Group complained that North Korean authorities were giving a hard time to Chinese companies working there, which suffered from expropriations. Jang Song-thaek, uncle-by-marriage of Kim Jong-un and one of the top North Korean hierarchs during the late Kim Jong-il and early Kim Jong-un eras, was known as the man of the Chinese in Pyongyang. Kim Jong-un put him in front of a firing squad in December

⁸² Kerry Allen, “China Censors Discussion of North Korea’s Bomb Test,” *BBC*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41152784>.

⁸³ John Garnaut, “China, North Korea - Close as Lips and Teeth,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 13, 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/china-north-korea--close-as-lips-and-teeth-20130213-2ebzl.html>.

⁸⁴ Zhu, “Comrades,” 582-3.

⁸⁵ Zachary Keck, “North Korea Slams Xi Jinping and the Chinese Dream,” *Diplomat* (June 17, 2014), <https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/north-korea-slams-xi-jinping-and-the-chinese-dream/>.

⁸⁶ Garnaut, “China, North Korea.”

2013. The official statement explaining his execution implies that Jang's role in promoting Chinese investments in the Rason Special Economic Zone contributed to his demise.⁸⁷ The high-profile assassination in 2017 of Kim Jong-nam, brother of Kim Jong-un and known supporter of China, emphasizes that the regime highly dislikes pro-Chinese elements.

The DPRK used the Covid pandemic to deal a blow to Chinese economic influence by curbing both legal trade and smuggling into the country. With the North Korean government "recently launching a sweeping inspection of trading institutions and strengthening control of the border with a concrete wall and high voltage wires, many of the remaining Chinese residents abandoned hope of renewed trade and decided to return to China."⁸⁸ Although the wall and fences are certainly part of a genuine effort to block the spread of the virus, it seems likely that they will stay in place even after the pandemic recedes. As put by a North Korea expert, "any North Korean counter-intelligence officer would tell you that China is their biggest domestic security threat because of its potential to disrupt from the inside."⁸⁹

North Korean Discourse about the United States

At the turn of the twenty-first century, North Korea had improved its relations with the United States and was on track to reduce its dependence on Beijing by building relations with Western countries and reviving the Russian connection. But the 9/11 attacks followed by the January 2002

⁸⁷ Fingar and Straub, "Geography," 179; Wertz, *China-North Korea*, 11; and Martyn Williams, "Full Text of KCNA Announcement on Execution of Jang" (North Korea Tech, December 13, 2013), www.northkoreatech.org/2013/12/13/full-text-of-kcna-announcement-on-execution-of-jang/. The story goes that Jang asked the then Chinese premier Hu Jintao to back a coup for ousting Kim Jong-un and installing Kim Jong-nam instead. While Hu was weighing his options, Kim Jong-un heard of the plot and neutralized Jang. Nakazawa, "Pyongyang Missile Footage."

⁸⁸ Seulkee Jang, "Group of Chinese Residents Asked to Return to China as Border Remains Closed to Trade," *Daily NK*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/group-chinese-residents-asked-return-china-border-remains-closed-trade/>.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Christian Davies, "North Korea Looks across the Border for Its Biggest Threat," *Financial Times*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/4f468514-4336-4273-aaf-c427e920412c>.

“axis of evil” moment jettisoned this process. During a private conversation between Bill Clinton and Kim Jong-il in 2009, “Kim added his personal view that if the Democrats had won in 2000 the situation in bilateral relations would not have reached such a point. Rather [...] the United States would have had a new friend in Northeast Asia in a complex world.”⁹⁰ From then on, despite ups and downs, relations remained haunted by the nuclear issue and sanction politics.

Despite this reciprocal hostility, Kim Jong-il noticed that “after North Korea-U.S. relations improve, we will become close partners of America” (October 2006).⁹¹ North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye-Gwan proposed to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 2007 to help the United States contain China.⁹² Kim Jong-il expressed his views about America’s role in balancing China during Clinton’s 2009 visit. Kim explained to Clinton that the North Koreans build up their military capabilities due to constant threats from the powerful states neighboring the Korean Peninsula. He hoped that the United States would rethink its approach towards North Korea because, in a barely veiled reference to China, “global power relationships were changing.” He then hinted that better relations with Washington would logically be followed by better North-South and Japan-North Korea relations: “if the bilateral U.S.-DPRK relationship developed, it would lead to many better relationships in Northeast Asia.”⁹³

Kim Jong-un seems to share this outlook: “after denuclearization, we hope to gain the help of the United States to develop our economy and become a normal state” (March 2018).⁹⁴ Kim bluntly told the then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “that he needed the Americans in South Korea to protect him from the CCP, and that the CCP needs the Americans

⁹⁰ “Memorandum of Conversation: President Clinton and Chairman Kim Jong Il” (August 4, 2009), retrieved in Hayes Brown, “That One Time Kim Jong Il Invited Bill Clinton to Vacation in North Korea,” *BuzzFeed*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hayesbrown/this-memo-shows-what-bill-clinton-and-kim-jong-il-talked-abo>.

⁹¹ Lee, Lee and Moon, *Bukjung Gwanggye*, 243.

⁹² Barannikova, *United States-DPRK Relations*, 18.

⁹³ “Memorandum of Conversation.”

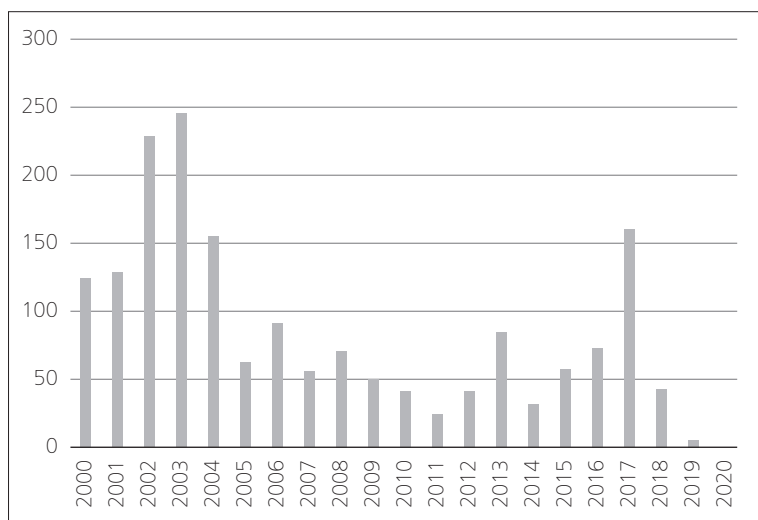
⁹⁴ Lee, Lee and Moon, *Bukjung Gwanggye*, 243.

out so they can treat the peninsula like Tibet and Xinjiang.”⁹⁵

The Institute for Far Eastern Studies of Kyungnam University (*Seoul*) maintains a database of the *Rodong Sinmun* [Workers’ Newspaper], the official mouthpiece of the Workers’ Party of Korea. *Rodong Sinmun* exists to deliver to the reader the views of the Party and publication is preceded by censorship to ensure that the official message comes out appropriately.⁹⁶ I checked the titles of the newspaper’s articles for occurrences of “U.S. imperialism” (*mije*) and “imperialism” (*jegugjuui*), common rhetorical attacks against the United States, from 2000 to 2020 (*Figure 1*).

Critics would counter-argue that North Korean materials cannot be trusted since they could be a tactical ploy to trick the United States into accommodation. I chose this low-visibility indicator because it is unlikely to be a North Korean trick. It stretches the imagination that the North Koreans seriously expect that decreasing the use of “imperialism” in their Korean-language outlets over several years will be picked up and acted

Figure 1. Mentions of “imperialism” and “U.S. imperialism,” 2000-2020



⁹⁵ Byun Duk-kun, “US Military Presence in S. Korea Does Not Bother N. Korea at All: Pompeo,” *Yonhap*, January 25, 2023, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230125000200325>.

⁹⁶ Zhan, “Analysis of Changes,” 202-3.

upon by high-level American officials. It could arguably still be part of a long-running and elaborated conspiracy, but it is less probable than with higher-profile clues.

Despite a peak during the 2017 war scare, occurrences of “imperialism” have become rarer overall since the early 2000s. “U.S. imperialism” appeared last in May 2018, right before the Singapore Summit. There is no more occurrence afterward. The word “imperialism” also rarefied from May 2018, with one occurrence in December of the same year, only four in 2019, and none in 2020.⁹⁷ One senses a change in the way the *Rodong Sinmun* reports U.S. foreign policies. A report on an Australian TV program illustrates that. It describes in a surprisingly neutral language free of references to U.S. imperialism and malevolence how Pacific island states and Quad powers balance against Chinese influence.⁹⁸

North Korea’s traditional emphasis on the withdrawal of American troops from the Peninsula could endanger the U.S. containment of China. However, Kim Jong-un watered his wine significantly. In 2018, he privately informed South Korean president Moon Jae-in that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea was no longer a precondition for diplomacy. Indeed, the joint DPRK-U.S. statement which came out of the June 2018 Singapore summit made no mention of U.S. forces in South Korea.⁹⁹ Kim Jong-un confessed to Pompeo that he indeed preferred U.S. troops to remain in Korea to prevent Chinese hegemony over the Peninsula.¹⁰⁰ Already in October 2000, Kim Jong-il told Madeleine

⁹⁷ Interestingly, North Korean media tended to paint Russia in a more friendly and positive light than China up to 2018. *Rodong Sinmun* mentioned China 30 times and Russia 431 times in 2015, China 71 times and Russia 176 times in 2016, China 86 times and Russia 311 times in 2017, China 492 times and Russia 473 times in 2018. Piao, “Changes in North Korea’s Cognition,” 120; and Zhan, “Analysis,” 199-221. Also, Keck, “North Korea Slams Xi Jinping.” It is tempting to think that the North Koreans leaned on Russia to reduce their dependence on China but needed Moscow less when Trump accepted to dialogue with them.

⁹⁸ “Australian Broadcast Reveals U.S. Attempts to Balance China,” *Rodong Sinmun*, June 6, 2019, 6.

⁹⁹ “Trump Kim Summit: Full Text of the Signed Statement,” *BBC*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44453330>.

¹⁰⁰ Byun, “US Military Presence.”

Albright that North Korea was now seeing U.S. troops stationed on the Peninsula as a stabilizing force. He said the same to South Korean president Kim Dae-jung at the Inter-Korea Summit in June 2000.¹⁰¹ During the Cold War, Nixon and Kissinger convinced the reluctant Chinese that U.S. military presence in East Asia was necessary to safeguard China's interests not only against the Soviet threat but also against a possible resurgence of Japanese expansionism.¹⁰² Similarly, even if the North Koreans feel unease about U.S. presence in the region, they would likely be responsive to security guarantees from the United States.

It is not hard to explain N. Korea's newfound sympathy toward U.S. military presence. "North Korea's political relations with China are and have been toxic almost since Kim Jong Un came to power" and they degraded so much that "in September 2017 Pyongyang turned down a visit by China's foreign minister, Wang Yi, while senior North Korean officials were undaunted by the prospect of military clashes with Beijing."¹⁰³ Hence, engagement with North Korea is possible even without a troop withdrawal from South Korea. Because the China-U.S. competition is now the dominant feature in Asian politics, the North Koreans understand that their old objective of getting U.S. forces out of the Korean Peninsula is unrealistic since the main rationale for their presence is not the North Korean threat anymore.

Furthermore, during the October 2020 military parade which unveiled the Hwasong-16 intercontinental ballistic missile and later short-range and cruise missiles tests, the North Koreans forewent the ritual anti-American outbursts and maintained a relatively low profile.¹⁰⁴ Although Kim Yo-jong (Kim Jong-un's sister) criticized the joint exercises of March 2021, these criticisms were milder than before and she left doors open for

101 Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 591; and "Veiled Dialogues with Kim Jong Il Revealed [Book Review]," *Daily NK*, June 12, 2008, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/%5Bbook-review%5D-veiled-dialogues-wit/>.

102 Yukinori Komine, "The 'Japan Card' in the United States Rapprochement with China, 1969 - 1972," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2009): 494-514.

103 Glyn Ford, *Talking to North Korea: Ending the Nuclear Standoff* (London: Pluto, 2018), 16.

104 Brooks and Leem, "A Grand Bargain."

cooperation.¹⁰⁵ Coincidentally with the decrease of rhetorical attacks towards Washington, North Korean officials started in 2017 to drop their traditional emphasis on “deterrence” against the Americans and the South Koreans to talk instead of an abstract “balance” of military forces on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁰⁶

I do not argue here that the DPRK “fell in love” with America; the North Koreans remain deeply distrustful of the United States and its allies. However, Pyongyang signaled on many occasions in recent years its ability to make concessions and its openness to working with the United States. Meanwhile, the N. Korean government is worried by Chinese power and influence. Thus, if we consider that “the regime is capable of acting pragmatically in furtherance of its own self-interests” - and there is no reason not to - then Washington has a formidable trump card to play against China.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, well-crafted U.S. policies can entice North Korea into beneficial working relations.

Policy Recommendations

Although the door for a balancing coalition is open, sanctions and the official state of war between America and North Korea render open cooperation with the DPRK difficult in the short term. There is thus a need for low-level, discreet measures to build momentum and reduce N. Korean dependence on China. This part proposes a few of such low-hanging fruits.

105 “Kim Yo Jong Breaks the Silence, but What Does It Mean?” (38 North, March 16, 2021), https://www.38north.org/2021/03/kim-yo-jong-breaks-the-silence-but-what-does-it-mean/#_ftn1; and Yo-jong Kim, “It Will Be Hard to See Again Spring Days Three Years Ago,” *KCNA*, March 16, 2021, http://www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_01_02&iMenuID=8.

106 Robert Carlin, “North Korea: New Terminology Portends Ongoing Policy Shift” (38 North, October 5, 2021), <https://www.38north.org/2021/10/north-korea-new-terminology-portends-ongoing-policy-shift/>; and Soo-hyang Choi, “N.K. Leader Calls for Boosting Military Capabilities but Says Enemy Is ‘War Itself’,” *Yonhap*, October 12, 2021, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20211012000953325>.

Before all, balancing against China can start without any formal alliance with Pyongyang; an informal entente suffices. During the Cold War, China and the United States never officially allied. Yet, the Soviets had to augment their forces guarding Chinese borders because they knew of the newfound closeness between Beijing and Washington. They were reluctant to redirect reinforcements away from Europe, their primary concern, and therefore had to raise numerous new units instead. This exhausted Soviet economy still more while costing the Americans nothing. The same occurred with Yugoslavia; after the Stalin-Tito split, Washington discreetly encouraged the Yugoslavians to resist Moscow's wrath. For a very small investment, Yugoslavia's 180 degree turn largely complicated Soviet planning in southern Europe and even allowed for the subsequent Albania-USSR split. Because the main Chinese aim is positive - dominating Asia - while the American aim is negative - containing China - any state willing to balance against China is already a win, even without a close alliance with the United States. Relations with Pyongyang do not have to become harmonious overnight; they just need to be palatable enough so the Chinese cannot consider their defense perimeter as extending to the inter-Korean border anymore and that they feel the urge to reinforce their Manchurian border.

China is fully aware of the risk of North Korea switching sides. When active contacts between Americans and North Koreans gained traction in 2018, the Chinese worried that Pyongyang would turn against Beijing, especially after the North Koreans dropped the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea as a precondition for diplomacy.¹⁰⁸ Thus, low-visibility, small-footprint policies will allow the delaying and softening of Chinese reprisals against North Korea. More trivially, it also limits the domestic political backlash from American foreign policy traditionalists.

¹⁰⁷ Fuqua, *Nuclear Endgame*, xix. Also, Andrei Lankov, "The Perspective from Pyongyang: Limits of Compromise," *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2021), 107-18.

¹⁰⁸ Jane Perlez, "China, Feeling Left Out, Has Plenty to Worry about in North Korea-U.S. Talks," *New York Times*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/world/asia/china-north-korea-nuclear-talks.html>.

Diplomatic and Military Exchanges

Balancing need not be at first high-profile defense cooperation and can start with small, low-visibility steps.¹⁰⁹ In their dealings and contacts with North Korea, the United States should emphasize the threat posed by China's increased power to the autonomy and the survival of the DPRK and lure the N. Koreans with the promise of support. Specifically, North Korea has launched its nuclear program to compensate for its backwardness in conventional forces. Washington and Seoul could tout North Korea future military aid to finance, train, and modernize its decrepit army. Military-to-military exchanges to gain insights into each other's strategies and needs could happen in a friendly third country such as Vietnam.

The United States can also boost N. Korean defensive capabilities by giving the North Koreans access to intelligence about China's force posture. The DPRK obviously lacks modern intelligence capabilities. When Chinese troops concentrate on the border, the North Koreans are reduced to using antiquated Il-28 bombers to keep an eye on their movements.¹¹⁰ The North Koreans are likely hungry for fresh and accurate intelligence about what the Chinese are doing. America could gain their respect, kick-start cooperation, and boost their capabilities by feeding them valuable intelligence - notably in terms of imagery, one of the main N. Korean weaknesses.

The next step is to prepare the North Korean military for competing with China. If direct training or financing of the North is still too contentious politically, a more acceptable course of action is to finance new military bases and barracks oriented toward the Chinese border and

¹⁰⁹ Målfrid Braut-Hegghammer, "Engaging North Korea: The Warming-up Phase," *Survival*, vol. 63, no. 6 (2021): 119-25; and Hugo Meijer and Luis Simón, "Covert Balancing: Great Powers, Secondary States and US Balancing Strategies against China," *International Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 2 (2021): 463-81.

¹¹⁰ Ryan McMorrow, "China Adds Troops, Cameras, Radiation Detectors at North Korean Border," *Global News*, January 19, 2018, <https://globalnews.ca/news/3975147/china-north-korea-border-security/>.

relocate the DPRK's military away from Seoul. Although an open program of military relations is hard to put in place in the short term due to the sanction regime, such small steps would motivate North Korea into cooperative behaviors.

Oil

Because of the sanctions, the DPRK is short of petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) for both economic and military purposes. Pyongyang can legally purchase only 500,000 barrels of oil per year.¹¹¹ First, the oil embargo does nothing to roll back the nuclear weaponry of the North. Second, it is unlikely to do any good to human rights or to promote democracy and only harms the civilian economy and the people's capacity to sustain themselves. Third, it places Pyongyang at the mercy of Beijing because it has few choices other than to please the Chinese in exchange for oil smuggling.¹¹² Fourth, the shortage of POL not only does not diminish N. Korean capabilities to threaten S. Korea and the United States but harms North Korea's ability to defend itself against China.

Indeed, an offensive war against the South would see massive armies clashing over a small piece of land - the Munsan-Cheorwon corridor. The Korean People's Army would have a few days to break through Southern defenses before attrition immobilizes its offensive.¹¹³ Therefore, lack of POL is unlikely to bring the decision and change the outcome of a Second Korean War. Hayes and von Hippel report that:

111 United Nations Security Council, "Supply, Sale or Transfer of All Refined Petroleum Products to the DPRK" (2021), <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1718/supply-sale-or-transfer-of-all-refined-petroleum>.

112 Leo Byrne, "North Korean Oil Tanker Stops in Chinese Port in the First Recorded Visit since 2017," *Diplomat* (July 24, 2021), <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/north-korean-oil-tanker-stops-in-chinese-port-in-the-first-recorded-visit-since-2017/>; and Christoph Koettl, "How Illicit Oil Is Smuggled into North Korea with China's Help," *New York Times*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/24/world/asia/tankers-north-korea-china.html>.

113 Motin, "Conventional Balance"; O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion"; and Suh, "Blitzkrieg or Sitzkrieg?"

The DPRK could quickly cut its non-military use by about 40% of its annual oil use with a variety of end use reduction and substitution measures; There will be little or no immediate impact on the Korean Peoples' Army's (KPA's) nuclear or missile programs; There will be little or no immediate impact on the KPA's routine or wartime ability to fight due to energy scarcity, given its short war strategy and likely stockpiling; The DPRK has the ability to substitute coal and electricity for substantial fractions of its refined product use, as well as its heavy fuel oil use (the product of oil refining) for heat production; The immediate primary impacts of responses to oil and oil products cut-offs will be on welfare.¹¹⁴

Conversely, a defensive war against China would see lesser concentrations of forces over larger distances while North Korea would enjoy the inherent strength of the defense. A war with China would thus be a more protracted fight where the North Koreans will be hard-pressed to sustain their military apparatus for the long haul. In that configuration, shortages of POL may seriously diminish Northern efforts to stop a Chinese invasion.

A few easy (and quiet) fixes exist. Washington could turn a blind eye to ship-to-ship transfers of oil destined to North Korea and Russia trading POL with the DPRK. Although Washington has no official direct relations with Pyongyang, American non-governmental organizations do operate in North Korea. It could deliver POL through them under the pretext of humanitarian activities. This would not represent a novel policy for Washington, since the 1994 Agreed Framework already included the delivery of oil to the DPRK.

¹¹⁴ Peter Hayes and David von Hippel, "Sanctions on North Korean Oil Imports: Impacts and Efficacy" (Nautilus Institute, September 9, 2017), <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/sanctions-on-north-korean-oil-imports-impacts-and-efficacy/>.

Supporting North Korean Territorial Claims

A low-hanging fruit to sow dissent between Beijing and Pyongyang and build momentum is to support the North Korean claim over the Baekdu Mountain. Armed clashes over the mountain occurred between the two countries during the late 1960s.¹¹⁵ This move would cost nothing, requires no concession from either Seoul or Washington, and would likely be well-received by the South Korean public opinion, which also sees Baekdu as a historical Korean land and is highly distrustful of China.

In addition, China and North Korea never clearly delineated their exclusive economic zones and continental shelves in the resource-rich Yellow Sea.¹¹⁶ Another irritant in the Sino-DPRK relation is illegal Chinese fishing in North Korean waters. Washington could make gestures of support in these cases too to reassure the North Koreans and put the Chinese on their back foot.

Economic Support

International sanctions are now so extensive that almost all of North Korea's foreign trade is illegal. Because of that, North Korea's licit and illicit trade is almost exclusively oriented towards China, which grew to over 90 percent of the total North Korean trade after the 2016 enhanced sanction regime.¹¹⁷ There are however a few low-visibility steps possible to make a dent in N. Korean dependency on China.

Washington should close its eyes to North Korean workers abroad, an important source of revenue for the country.¹¹⁸ Also, due to travel restrictions and sanctions, U.S. humanitarian organizations have a hard

115 Daniel Gomà Pinilla, "Border Disputes between China and North Korea," *China Perspectives*, vol. 52 (2004): 4.

116 Huaigao Qi, "Maritime Delimitation between China and North Korea in the North Yellow Sea," *Ocean Development & International Law*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2020): 358-85.

117 Minnich, "Denuclearization," 21.

118 Tae-jun Kang, "How North Korea Uses 'Students' and 'Trainees' Overseas to Bypass UN Sanctions," *Diplomat* (January 4, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/how-north-korea-uses-students-and-trainees-overseas-to-bypass-un-sanctions/>.

time operating in North Korea and American tourism is nonexistent.¹¹⁹ The North Koreans, especially under Kim Jong-un, emphasize attracting international tourists as an easy way to grow the economy.¹²⁰ Tourists from the United States, Japan, Europe, and other like-minded countries could be encouraged to visit the DPRK to provide North Korea with hard currency. The U.S. government could ease restrictions and use humanitarian organizations and tourists to bolster the DPRK's economic and social resilience. Also, helping North Korea to develop renewable energy sources (notably wind power) would bolster North Korean resilience without eliciting much hostility from both domestic and international audiences.¹²¹ These practical and low-visibility policies could create momentum to sign a peace treaty with North Korea, the first step before more substantive cooperation.

A Low-Risk, High-Return Investment

A fresh approach to the North Korean conundrum is urgent. The DPRK has been an enduring problem consuming Washington's attention and resources for over seven decades: it could now become a formidable thorn in the side of China and Russia. Continuing the status quo will only result in more of the same: a nuclear-armed North Korea increasingly aligned with China and Russia.¹²²

Sanctions aimed at stopping the nuclear program and improving human rights: North Korea is now a nuclear power and the state of human

¹¹⁹ Jasper, *Engaging North Korea*, 13-26.

¹²⁰ Dean J. Ouellette, "The Tourism of North Korea in the Kim Jong-un Era: Propaganda, Profitmaking, and Possibilities for Engagement," *Pacific Focus*, vol. 31, no. 3 (December 2016): 421-51; and Dean J. Ouellette, "Understanding the 'Socialist Tourism' of North Korea under Kim Jong Un: An Analysis of North Korean Discourse," *North Korean Review*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 55-81.

¹²¹ Troy Stangarone and Sean Blanco, "Renewable Power for North Korea" (National Interest, September 28, 2021), <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/renewable-power-north-korea-194580>.

¹²² Blank, "Is the Northern Alliance," 211-31.

rights is as distressing as ever. Although this policy had good intentions, it is now unjustified both on moral and rational grounds. Meanwhile, North Korea's geography and military capabilities make it a valuable ally to reestablish a balance of power in Northeast Asia. Indeed, it is clear that the North Koreans deeply worry about China and would appreciate cooperation with the United States to protect themselves. This confirms realist insights about balancing incentives weighing on neighbors of formidable powers. Entrenched habits on both sides of the fence may derail U.S.-DPRK rapprochement. It would notably require sweeping the nuclear issue under the carpet - it is already halfway under. It may also require "bribing" North Korea by way of low-visibility cooperative policies. However, it is a low-cost bet with a potentially high reward: correcting the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and increasing regional stability.

Many of the points made in this paper also apply to the cases of Afghanistan, Iran, and Myanmar. It would be regrettable that ideological pursuits stand in the way of stability and shared interests. The Afghans, the Iranians, and the Burmese border Chinese and Russian powers and could support U.S. interests and great power competition efforts. North Korea and the United States have sound strategic reasons to work together; it is worth a shot. If China-North Korea relations are as "close as lips and teeth," it is maybe time for the teeth to bite the lip.

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State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflicts in Autocracies

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Abstract

Recent literature has analyzed why states established state security forces but has rarely analyzed the effect of state security forces on political phenomena. To fill this gap in part, this study explores the effect of an autocracy's state security forces on its decision to initiate an interstate armed conflict. We argue that an autocracy's state security forces increases the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed conflict because state security forces are likely to reduce costs of an armed conflict and increase the prospect of incomplete information situations in crisis bargaining. Specifically, an autocratic leader is less likely to suffer from domestic audience costs because state security armed forces consist of volunteers and thus the public is less likely to be concerned if they are sent abroad. Additionally, an autocracy's state armed forces increases the likelihood of incomplete information situations. This is because an autocracy's state armed forces are likely to reduce the level of military effectiveness in an armed conflict but the autocracy and its adversary are likely to disagree with its military effectiveness. The empirical results in this study supports this argument.

Key Words: state security forces, interstate armed conflict, costs of war, incomplete information

Introduction

Recent literature has analyzed paramilitary organizations as a type of coup-proofing strategy, called state security forces, and have particularly focused on factors that encourage autocracies to established state security forces.¹ However, scholars have paid relatively little attention to the effect of state security forces on political phenomena, although state security forces have certainly affected domestic and international political processes. To address this gap in the literature, we analyze the effect of state security forces on the initiation of an interstate armed conflict.

We argue that an autocracy's state security forces increase the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed conflict because of low costs of war and incomplete information in the crisis bargaining. First, the leader generally suffers from domestic audience costs when they consider initiating an interstate armed conflict, because the public should bear costs of war. However, unlike regular armed forces, state security armed forces consist of volunteers who support the autocratic leader, and are well-trained. Thus, the public is less likely to be concerned if they are sent abroad. Second, an autocracy's state security forces increase the prospect of incomplete information situations in crisis bargaining, which makes states likely to fail to find mutually acceptable settlements and thus case an armed conflict. This is because the level of military effectiveness in an armed conflict reduced by state security forces is clearly revealed only when a state engages in conflicts with its adversary. Because of this

1 See Erica De Bruin, "Mapping Coercive Institutions: A New Data Set of State Security Forces, 1960-2010," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 58, no. 2 (2020): 315-25; Abel Escriba-Folch, Tobias Böhmelt and Ulrich Pilster, "Authoritarian Regimes and Civil-Military Relations: Explaining Counterbalancing in Autocracies," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 37, no. 5 (2020): 559-79; Desha M. Girod, "Reducing Postconflict Coup Risk: The Low Windfall Coup-proofing Hypothesis," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2015): 153-74; Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 28, no. 4 (2011): 332-50; Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Bohmelt, "Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing? On the Relationship between Regime Type and Civil-Military Relations," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2012): 355-71; Jun Koga Sudduth, "Coup Risk, Coup-Proofing and Leader Survival," *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 54, no.1 (2017): 3-15.

characteristic of military effectiveness, an autocracy with state security forces is likely to overestimate its military effectiveness in an armed conflict. However, its adversary is likely to underestimate its military effectiveness. This incomplete information situation increases the likelihood of an autocracy's decision to initiate an interstate armed conflict. This empirical findings of this study support this argument.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In the first section, a brief review of the literature reveals that prior studies have focused primarily on why autocracies established state security forces without paying much attention to the effect of state security forces on political phenomena. In the second section, we clarify what state security forces are and explain how an autocracy's state security forces affect its decision to initiate an interstate armed conflict. The third section examines the effect of an autocracy's state security forces on its initiation of an interstate armed conflict. In the final section, we discuss the implication of the results.

Coup-proofing Strategies and State Security Forces

Autocratic leaders are willing to reduce coup risk, and thus are likely to employ policies to reduce capabilities of the elite to coordinate a successful coup-proofing strategies.² Specifically, coup-proofing strategies are employed because of two political purposes of autocratic leaders. First, autocratic leaders desire to diminish the bargaining power of the elite against political leaders by reducing the elite's ability to mount a coup.³ In autocracies, the balance of power between the leader and the elite determines the relative share of the benefits or resources that they would obtain, and thus the leader tries to increase their share of power at

2 Sudduth, "Coup Risk": 4-5.

3 Milan W. Svobik, "Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 53, no. 2 (2009): 479-83.

the expense of the elite. The elite deter such opportunistic behavior of leaders by threatening to stage a coup.⁴ Thus, autocratic leaders try to increase their share of power relative to the power of the elite by reducing the elite's capability to stage a successful coup with coup-proofing strategies.

Second, the interest conflict between the elite and the leader may occur, because the elite's interests often diverge from the leader's interests.⁵ The elite's ability to stage a coup is likely to increase over time, if the leader takes no action. Thus, in order to survive, the leader should diminish the elite's ability to stage a coup whenever the leader expects that employing coup-proofing strategies would not provoke the elite's coup attempt, while the elite try to deter the leader from reducing their power by threatening to stage a coup and keep their status quo.⁶

There are three types of coup-proofing strategies.⁷ First, autocratic leaders may intervene in recruiting, promoting, or assigning soldiers by exploiting political, family, ethnic, or religious loyalties. In these procedures, potentially disloyal junior officers are entrenched in long-term assignments, and lose their military qualifications. Potentially disloyal senior commanders are rotated on a regular basis to prevent them from mobilizing their troops to stage a coup by hindering their close ties with their troops.

Second, autocratic leaders are likely to institutionalize political commissioners with a disciplinary status equal to respective military commanders. Political commissioners may constrain the discretion of all levels of the military command chain, and may stress autocratic leaders' direct assertive control over the military by monitoring and controlling.

4 Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Svolik, "Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes": 479-83.

5 Stephen Haber, "Authoritarian Government," *The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy* (2006), 693-707.

6 Sudduth, "Coup Risk": 4-5.

7 Pilster and Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99": 333-7.

Third, autocratic leaders may use the counterbalancing techniques that divide the military into rivaling organizations to induce an artificial balance between those organizations. These counterbalancing techniques include both seeking to create rivalries between existing military units and establishing paramilitary organizations with command structures outside the regular army. These counterbalancing techniques make any military unit face resistance of another military unit with independent command structures, when the military unit tries to stage a coup attempt. That is, an increase in the number of military organizations in a state hinders coordination to stage a coup attempt. Furthermore, leaders minimize their reliance on a threatening preexisting military unit by creating a new reliable and loyal military unit, reshape their threat environment.

Autocratic leaders are more likely to employ the third coup-proofing strategy, the counterbalancing techniques, than others, and focus particularly on the creation of parallel organizations.⁸ Prior studies have generally referred to parallel military organizations that can be distinguished from regular military forces as state security forces.⁹ To define the state security force, three criteria are required.¹⁰ First, the state security force must be an armed group. If a group is not armed or does not have law enforcement powers, this group is not a state security force group. Security forces with armed forces are generally located within or near the capital, collect intelligence, monitor, confront other civilian and military actors, eliminate rivals, suppress dissent, intimidate opponents, and fight insurgent to protect their regimes and leaders from domestic threats.

Second, the state security force must be administratively controlled by a state recognized by the international society. That is, a state security force group must have the ability to organize, recruit, train, equip, and fund a security force. They particularly require operational specialization and training, and have close ties to leaders by recruiting commanders and

⁸ Tobias Böhmelt and Ulrich Pilster, "The Impact of Institutional Coup-Proofing on Coup Attempts and Coup Outcomes," *International Interactions*, vol. 41, no.1 (2015): 162-6.

⁹ De Bruin, "Mapping Coercive Institutions": 317-8; Escriba-Folch, Böhmelt and Pilster, "Authoritarian Regimes and Civil-Military Relations": 565-8.

¹⁰ De Bruin, "Mapping Coercive Institutions": 317-8.

personnel from support groups. These characteristics of the state security force encourage them to undertake special tasks that the regular military may refuse.

Third, a state security force group must be ground-based forces. Generally, navy and air force units do not have weapon systems to conduct or prevent coups d'état, because coups require infantry units to seize key public buildings or eliminate high-ranking politicians but do not involve the large-scale use of armed forces.¹¹

Table 1. Examples of State Security Forces

Name	Country	Type
Battalion Ansars	Bangladesh	Interior Troops
Garde Nationale	Chad	
Territorial Troop Militia	Cuba	Paramilitary
Revolutionary Guard	Iran	Interior Troops
Republican Guard	Iraq	
Islamic Legion	Libya	
Interior Troops	Nicaragua	
Guard Command	North Korea	Secret Service
Interior Troops	Soviet Union-Russia	Interior Troops
Defense Companies	Syria	

Structures of state security forces vary across states' political and social characteristics. Table 1 reports state security force groups that several autocratic states have. For example, the Middle East states, such as Iran and Iraq, generally have interior troops that leaders can directly control and can recruit from support groups. The Guard Command, the North Korean state security force, is a secret service agent. Cuba has a paramilitary group, called the Territorial Troop Militia that performs rear guard duties for the military and is under military control.¹²

Prior studies on state security forces have paid attention primarily to

¹¹ Pilster and Bohmelt, "Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing?": 357-9.

¹² De Bruin, "Mapping Coercive Institutions": 318.

which factors affect leaders' decisions to establish state security forces or the effect of the state security force on coup risk. However, although state security forces as armed forces and paramilitary organizations are involved in armed conflicts with regular armed forces, only a few studies have focused on how the state security force affects international armed conflicts. For example, Belkin and Schofer argued that a state with a state security force is likely to initiate an international armed conflict, when the state's leader expects that they can control the costs of the conflict and other counterbalancing strategies are unavailable or ineffective.¹³ This is because the leader may expect that the rivalry between the regular armed forces and the state security forces can be aggravated by three aspects of an armed conflict; first, procedures for conflict preparation can prompt the regular armed forces and the state security forces to offer divergent assessments of their military capabilities or to stress the strategic importance of their own missions; second, an international armed conflict can unmask differences over battle field tactics of the regular armed forces and the state security forces; third, an international armed conflict can prompt the regular armed forces and the state security forces to take credit for success or avoid blame for failure. These three aspects of an international armed conflict create rifts between the regular armed forces and the state security forces, and thus improve the leader's survivability. Thus, the state security forces in a state encourages the leader to decide to initiate an international armed conflict.

However, we argue that Belkin and Schofer's study has several limitations. First, they analyzed all types of regimes to examine their hypothesis.¹⁴ However, democracies are less likely to have state security forces because of three characteristics of democracies: strong civil societies and democratic political institutions in a democracy significantly reduce coup risk; an ineffective military caused by state security forces significantly reduces a democratic leader's survivability; news media and

¹³ Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, "Coup Risk, Counterbalancing, and International Conflict," *Security Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2005): 147-55.

¹⁴ Belkin and Schofer, "Coup Risk, Counterbalancing, and International Conflict": 147-55.

strong civil society in a democracy can more easily detect problematic agent behavior of state security forces, and can more easily correct it via sanctions.¹⁵ In addition, democracies are less likely to initiate an armed conflict, because democratic institutions reduce democratic leaders' political survivability when they decide to initiate an international armed conflict.¹⁶ In sum, democracies are less likely to have state security forces, and are less likely to initiate an international armed conflict. These two characteristics of democracies can make us overestimate the effect of state security force on the onset of an international armed conflict, when we analyze all regime types. Thus, to more appropriately examine the effect of state security force on the onset of an international armed conflict, we should analyze only autocracies.

Second, Belkin and Schofer's study measured a state's level of state security force with the number of military and paramilitary organizations and the relative size of the paramilitary groups compared to the total armed forces.¹⁷ However, the weapon systems typically employed by navies and air forces are less suitable to stage or prevent a coup attempt, because their weapon systems are generally used in large-scale conflicts while a coup attempt requires infantry units for the seizure of key buildings and the elimination of high-ranking politicians.¹⁸ This implies that state security forces are less likely to have rivalry relationships with navies or air forces and thus a state's level of state security force including navies and air forces makes us underestimate the effect of state security forces on the leader's decision to initiate an international armed conflict to create or consolidate the rivalry between state security forces and regular armies.

Third, Belkin and Schofer's study explained how a state's state security force affects the likelihood of its initiation of an international armed conflict with the relationship between the regular military organizations

15 Pilster and Bohmelt, "Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing?": 357-9.

16 Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation for the Democratic Peace," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 93, no. 4 (1999): 791-807.

17 Belkin and Schofer, "Coup Risk, Counterbalancing, and International Conflict": 155-9.

18 Pilster and Bohmelt, "Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing?": 357-9.

and state security forces.¹⁹ However, the leader can decide to initiate an international armed conflict, and thus to understand the relationship between state security force and the initiation of an international armed conflict we should specifically consider how the state security force affects the leader's expected payoffs from initiating an international armed forces.

Thus, we suggest a theory to explain the effect of state security forces on expected payoffs of the leader from initiating an international armed conflict, analyze only autocracies, and measure a state's level of state security force excluding navies and air forces. In the next section, we explain how state security forces encourage the leader to decide to initiate an international armed conflict with domestic political costs and anticipated benefits of initiating an international armed conflicts.

The Effect of State Security Force on the Expected Payoffs of the Leader from Initiating an International Armed Forces

We argue that an autocracy with state security forces is more likely to initiate an armed conflict than an autocracy without state security force. Belkin and Schofer analyzed how an initiation of an interstate armed conflict affects the rivalry between the regular forces and the state security forces in order to examine the effect of state security force on the onset of an interstate armed conflict.²⁰ However, the analysis of the rivalry between the regular forces and the state security forces does not sufficiently explain the decision of autocratic leaders to initiate an interstate armed conflict. This is because they consider not only domestic political costs of an armed conflict but also economic and international political costs of an armed conflict when they estimate their expected payoffs from an armed conflict. Thus, to more sufficiently analyze the

¹⁹ Belkin and Schofer, "Coup Risk, Counterbalancing, and International Conflict": 147-55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

effect of state security force on the onset of an interstate armed conflict, we should consider the costs of war more comprehensively.

To estimate the comprehensive costs of war, we employ Fearon's rationalist approach to war.²¹ Fearon assumed that states are rational.²² He argued that rational states prefer negotiated settlements to war because war is very costly. That is, states generally resolve their interest conflicts with negotiated settlements that can allow them to avoid high costs of war. However, three mechanisms make states fail to find mutually acceptable settlements: incomplete information, commitment problems, and issue indivisibilities.²³ First, states have private information about relative capabilities or resolve that their enemy does not know and incentives to misrepresent such information to obtain better settlements. Private information and incentives to misrepresent may make incomplete information situations where rational states are unable to locate a mutually preferable negotiated, and thus may cause interstate conflicts. Second, rational states may face situations in which mutually preferable bargains unattainable because under anarchy of the international society one or more states might renege on the terms, called commitment problems. Under commitment problems, states would be unable to arrange a settlement that they would prefer to war. Commitment problems are generally caused by the presence of offensive advantages, changing balance of power, or objects that can increase future bargaining power. Third, states might face issues that they cannot admit compromise and thus make them decide only to fight with each other, called issue indivisibilities.

We argue that state security forces in autocracies encourage leaders to initiate an interstate armed conflict by reducing costs of war and/or causing incomplete information in two ways. First, state security forces generally consists of volunteers, while regular forces in most states consist

²¹ James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414.

²² Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War": 379-414.

²³ *Ibid.*

of conscripts. Conscription implies that young male citizens should complete their mandatory military service even if they do not want to join the military. Furthermore, under a conscription system, if their political leader decides to initiate an armed conflict, they might lose their lives in the conflict regardless of their opinion about the conflict. Thus, in a state with the conscription system, citizens are more sensitive to their leader's decision to initiate an armed conflict. However, states security forces recruit soldiers from loyal political, ethnic, or religious groups. Also, volunteers of state security forces can decide to join or quit the military, when their state initiates an armed conflict. Generally, they are professionally trained and well-equipped, and thus their survivability in an armed conflict is higher than the regular armed forces' one. Thus, the public is less likely to concern sending state security forces to an interstate armed conflict than sending the regular armed forces consisting of conscripts. The difference of recruiting between state security forces and the regular armed forces implies that an autocratic leader bears lower domestic political costs of war when sending state security forces to an armed conflict than when sending the regular armed forces.

Furthermore, the leader is likely to bear low costs when she uses state security forces in an interstate armed conflict, because a conflict might be a chance for her to improve loyalty from them. Generally, the leader is less likely to worry about coup risk when she deploys state security forces to an interstate armed conflict, because they recruit soldiers from loyal political, ethnic, or religious groups. An interstate armed conflict may provide a chance for the leader to strengthen loyalty from state security forces by distributing booties from the conflict, when her state wins. As the size of a group decreases, the leader can provide more private goods for each member of the group and thus can more improve their loyalty to her.²⁴ State security forces are generally smaller than regular armed forces. Thus, if the leader initiates an armed conflict with state security forces and

²⁴ Bueno De Mesquita et al., "An Institutional Explanation for the Democratic Peace": 793-803.

wins the conflict, she can provide more private goods and improve loyalty from them. However, if the leader wins an interstate armed conflict with regular armed forces, she would be more likely to fail to improve loyalty from them because she is less able to provide sufficient private goods for them due to the large size of regular armed forces. In sum, low costs of using state security forces and smaller sizes of state security forces imply that initiating an armed conflict is a more available foreign policy in an autocracy with state security forces than in an autocracy without it.

Second, incomplete information in the crisis bargaining may be worsened by military effectiveness reduced by the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy. Generally, the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy is likely to reduce leadership qualities and initiative.²⁵ To check regular armed forces with a credible paramilitary group, autocratic leaders are likely to emphasize political, family, ethnic, or religious loyalties in the recruitment, promotion, and assignment procedures in state security forces.²⁶ Thus, soldiers in state security forces focus on revealing their loyalties rather than acquiring and developing military leadership qualities or exercising military initiative. Autocratic leaders also try to hamper promotions of competent soldiers to weaken regular armed forces.²⁷ Such promotion processes in regular armed forces discourage soldiers from developing military leadership qualities and exercising military initiative. Furthermore, the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy is likely to reduce the ability to coordinate different parts of armed forces.²⁸ Regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy are less likely to train together, because an autocratic leader fears that joint exercises can be chances to coordinate a coup attempt. The

25 Pilster and Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99": 333-7.

26 Pilster and Bohmelt, "Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing?": 357-9.

27 Pilster and Bohmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99": 333-7.

28 Ibid.

absence of joint exercises between regular armed forces and state security forces may reduce their battlefield performances by reducing the ability to coordinate different parts of their armed forces. Thus, the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy reduces military effectiveness in an interstate armed conflict.

Military effectiveness reduced by the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy is likely to worsen incomplete information situations in the crisis bargaining. Generally, military leadership qualities and the ability to coordinate different parts of armed forces in an autocracy are revealed only when the autocracy experiences an armed conflict. An autocracy with state security forces is likely to overestimate its capabilities to fight, because even an autocratic leader does not have sufficient chances to recognize its military leadership qualities and ability to coordinate different parts of armed forces before initiating an interstate armed conflict, such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1990 or Siad Barre's Somalia in 1977. However, other states are likely to underestimate capabilities to fight of an autocracy with state security forces, because they cannot have sufficient information about their autocratic adversary's military leadership qualities and capabilities to coordinate different parts of armed forces. Also, historical cases have revealed that most states with strong state security forces were defeated. Thus, military effectiveness reduced by the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy increases uncertainty that makes difficult to find mutually acceptable settlements and the likelihood of an interstate armed conflict.

In sum, state security forces in autocracies reduce domestic political costs of war, because using state security forces consisting of volunteers is less likely to entail public grievances against initiating an armed conflict and armed conflicts are likely to improve autocratic leaders' survivability by aggravating the rivalry between state security forces and regular armed forces. Thus, state security forces allow autocratic leaders to consider initiating an interstate armed conflict as a more available foreign policy because of relative low costs of initiating an interstate armed conflict.

Furthermore, state security forces in autocracies are also likely to cause incomplete information situations that increase the likelihood of an interstate armed conflict, because military effectiveness reduced by the rivalry between regular armed forces and state security forces in an autocracy increases uncertainty in the crisis bargaining.

Hypothesis: As an autocracy relies more on state security forces, it is more likely to initiate an interstate armed conflict.

Research Design

The general expectation of this study is that state security forces is likely to make an autocracy initiate an interstate armed conflict. The unit of analysis is country-year for autocracies from 1975 to 1999. Prior studies have generally identified autocracies with the level of democracy using the *Polity V* dataset's polity 2 scores.²⁹ Polity 2 scores are ranged from -10 to + 10, and the higher score means the higher level of democracy. Generally, if a state's polity 2 score is lower than +6, prior studies have identified the state as an autocracy. Thus, we analyze states whose polity 2 scores are lower than +6. We examine an armed conflict that an autocracy initiates using the Militarized Interstate Disputes 5.0 (MID 5.0) dataset.³⁰ The MID 5.0 dataset measures the hostility levels of armed conflicts that take the value one in the conflict that there is no militarized action, the value two in the conflict that there is a threat to use force, the value three in the conflict that there is a display of force, the value four in the conflict that states use armed forces, and the value five in the conflict that states use armed forces and cause at least 1,000 battle-related deaths. By using this variable, we measure the dependent

²⁹ Monty Marshall and Keith Jagers, "Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2006" (Unpublished Manuscript) (University of Maryland, 2008).

³⁰ G. Palmer et al., "The MID5 Dataset, 2011-2014: Procedures, Coding Rules, and Description," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2022): 470-82.

variable *Conflict* as a dichotomous variable that takes the value “one” in the conflict that an autocracy initiates and its hostility level is equal to or higher than 4 and “zero” otherwise. To examine the effect of an autocracy’s state security forces on its initiation of an interstate armed conflict, we employ a logistic regression. To account for potential unobserved state-level heterogeneity, standard errors are clustered by states.

State Security Forces

We hypothesize that state security forces increases the likelihood of an autocracy’s initiation of an interstate armed conflict. We measure an autocracy’s reliance on state security forces using Pilster and Böhmelt’s counterbalancing data.³¹ Pilster and Böhmelt measure the level of a state’s reliance on state security forces with the number of rivaling military organizations and their relative sizes to regular armed forces.³² To measure sizes of regular armed forces, they excluded navies and air forces, because they do not have ground units to stage a coup attempt. Instead, marines were included, because they have capabilities to defend coup plotters as ground units. Pilster and Böhmelt identified all ground-combat compatible military organizations using the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ (1975-1999) Military Balance dataset.³³ They calculated the level of state *i*’ reliance on state security forces in year *t* with the following formula:

$$C_{it} = \frac{1}{\sum_j S_{jit}^2}$$

where s_{jit} is the personnel share of the ground-combat compatible military or state security forces *j* in state *i* in year *t*.³⁴ If a state’s C_{it} is 1,

³¹ Pilster and Böhmelt, “Do Democracies Engage Less in Coup-Proofing?”: 359-62.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

it has only one state security force organizations. The higher value of C_{it} indicates that a state has more effective organizations of state security forces and thus relies more on state security forces. Their dataset covers all states and Taiwan from 1975 to 1999. We employ the natural logarithm of this measure.

Control Variables

To isolate the effects of the primary independent variables on the initiation of an interstate armed conflict, we employ control variables. The first control variable is *Polity Score*, an autocracy's level of democracy.³⁵ We measure this variable using the *Polity V* dataset. The second control variable is *military regimes* to control the effect of leaders' military experiences on decisions to use force.³⁶ We measure *military regimes* using Geddes, Wright, and Frantz's regime dataset.³⁷ The third control variable is *ethnic fractionalization*, because an autocratic leader might use an interstate armed conflict as a diversionary tool.³⁸ This variable measured by the Fearon and Laitin's dataset.³⁹ Fourth, economic grievance can be the surest drive force of diversionary warfare.⁴⁰ This indicator will be measured by the *annual inflation rate (consumer price)* of each state published by the World Bank.⁴¹ The fifth control variable is *military*

35 Marshall and Jagers, "Polity IV Project."

36 Jessica L. Weeks, "Strongmen and Straw Men: Authoritarian Regimes and the Initiation of International Conflict," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 106, no. 2 (2012): 328-37; Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organizations*, vol. 68, no. 3 (2014): 529-38.

37 Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2014): 313-31.

38 Kyle Haynes, "Diversity and Diversion: How Ethnic Composition Affects Diversity Conflict," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2016): 261-63.

39 James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 83-4.

40 Sara McLaughlin Mitchell and Brandon C. Prins, "Rivalry and Diversionary Uses of Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 48, no. 6 (2004): 940-47.

41 World Bank, "Data Bank," accessed April 15, 2022, <https://databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx>.

spending, a state's annual military spending per GDP to control the possibility that a state has hostile interstate relations.⁴² The sixth and seventh control variables are *one year after a successful coup* and *one year after attempted (failed) coups* to control the possibility that a new junta or a state with a recent coup attempt is not easy to use armed forces. The next set of control variables are regions. Some regions, such as the Middle East, have historically had more interstate militarized conflict than others. We measure regions as dummy variables based on the VDEM's Politico-Geographic Region index that classifies the countries into Post-communist, Latin America, North Africa & the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe & North America, East Asia, South Asia, Southeastern Asia, Caribbean, and Pacific. The last sets of control variables are *major power* and *post-cold war*.

Results

We begin by examining the influence of an autocracy's state security forces on its initiation of an interstate armed conflict. All models in Tables 2-4 can be interpreted with higher odds ratios indicating that an autocracy's initiation of an interstate armed conflict becomes more likely as independent and control variables increase. Odds ratios of the independent variable in all models in Tables 2-4 are higher than one and statistically significant. These results support the hypothesis that an autocracy's state security forces increase the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed conflict.

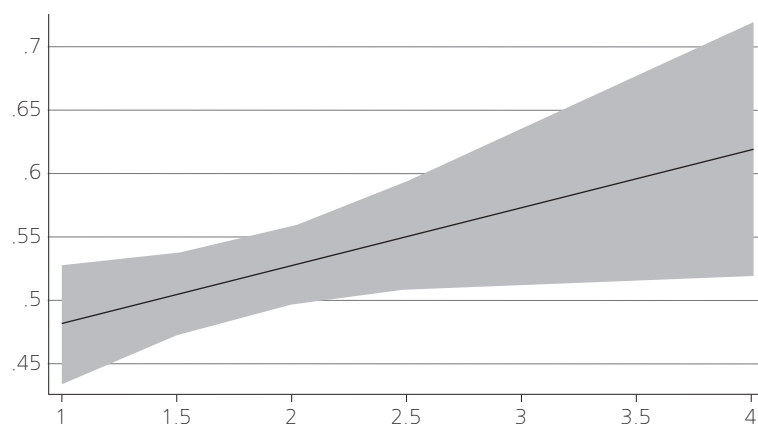
⁴² World Bank, "Data Bank."

Table 2. State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflicts

Model 1	
<i>State Security Forces</i>	1.203** (.112)
Constant	0.772 (.136)
N = 1079 LR chi2(1) = 4.00 Prob > chi2 = .0456 Pseudo R2 = .0027	

* p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01 (two-tailed). Cell entries report odds ratios and cluster-corrected standard errors (in parentheses) from logistic regressions.

Figure 1. State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflict



Note : The x-axis is the level of an autocracy's reliance on state security forces, and the y-axis is the likelihood of an autocracy's initiation of an interstate armed conflict.

Beyond statistical significance, we calculate marginal effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable in Tables 2-4. The results are graphically presented in Figures 1-3, which displays how we should expect the likelihood of an autocracy's initiation of an interstate armed conflict to vary as its reliance on state security forces while all other variables constant. In substantive terms, the effect of an autocracy's reliance on state security forces on its initiation of an interstate armed conflict is considerable. Specifically, Figures 1-3 reveal that if an autocracy

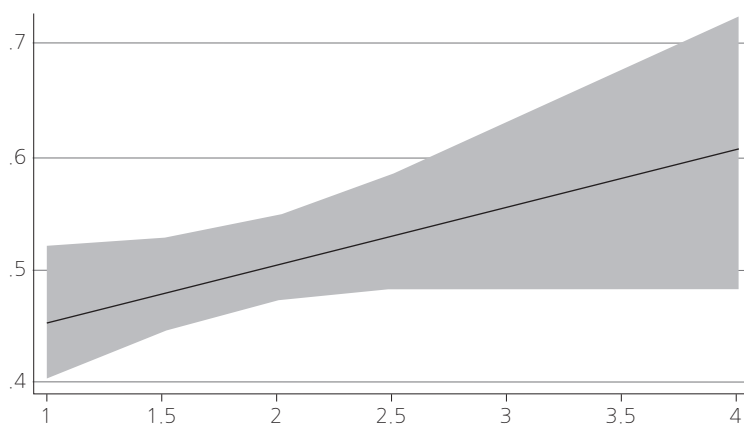
has “one” effective state security force organization, the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed conflict is around .45. However, if an autocracy has “three” effective state security force organizations, the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed conflict is over .55. This result supports the hypothesis.

Table 3. State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflicts with Domestic Variables

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>State Security Forces</i>	1.203** (.112)	1.219** (.115)	1.221** (.116)	1.201 (.138)	1.234** (.117)	1.220* (.145)
<i>Polity Score</i>		1.00 (.004)	1.001 (.004)	1.005 (.006)	1.001 (.004)	1.007 (.006)
<i>Military Regime</i>		1.617*** (.276)	1.554*** (.266)	1.717*** (.327)	1.614*** (.281)	1.618** (.315)
<i>Polity*Military</i>		1.005 (.012)	1.006 (.012)	1.001 (.012)	1.006 (.012)	1.005 (.013)
<i>Ethnic Fractionalization</i>			1.683** (.415)			3.404*** (1.057)
<i>Inflation</i>				1.000 (.000)		1.000 (.000)
<i> yrs After Successful Coups</i>					1.979 (.834)	3.233* (1.971)
<i> yrs After Coup Attempts</i>					1.725** (.390)	1.424 (.366)
<i>constant</i>	0.772 (0.136)	.682** (.130)	.527*** (.124)	.641 (.154)	.636** (.123)	.380*** (.099)
<i>Number of Observation</i>	1079	1071	1054	705	1071	697
<i>Likelihood of Ratio</i>	4.00**	14.09***	17.39***	14.34**	23.72***	35.17***
<i>Pseudo R²</i>	0.003	0.010	0.012	0.015	0.016	0.036

* p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01 (two-tailed). Cell entries report odds ratios and cluster-corrected standard errors (in parentheses) from logistic regressions.

Figure 2. State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflicts with Domestic Variables



Note : The x-axis is the level of an autocracy's reliance on state security forces, and the y-axis is the likelihood of an autocracy's initiation of an interstate armed conflict.

Regarding control variables although odds ratios of most control variables are not statistically significant, the odds ratios of *Military Regime* and *Ethnic Fractionalization* are statistically significant. First, a military autocracy is more likely to initiate an interstate armed conflict. This result supports prior studies' argument that autocratic leaders facing high coup risk is likely to initiate an armed conflict.⁴³ This is because a military regime generally faces higher coup risk than other regimes. Second, as a state's level of ethnic fractionalization increases, the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed conflict increases. This result implies that an autocratic leader is likely to initiate an interstate armed conflict, if the leader perceives that the likelihood of civil war onset is high. This is because an increase in ethnic fractionalization increase the likelihood of civil war onset.⁴⁴

43 Jonathan Powell, "Leader Survival Strategies and the Onset of Civil Conflict: A Coup-Proofing Paradox," *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 45, no.1 (2019): 30-5.

44 Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity," 83-4.

Table 4. State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflict with All Control Variables

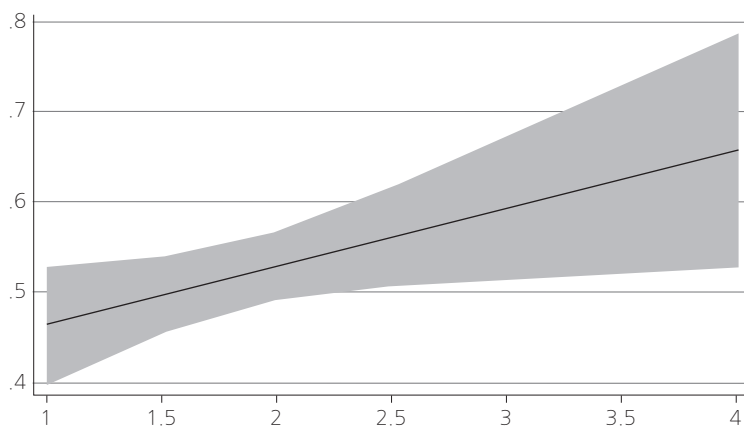
	Model 7
<i>State Security Forces</i>	1.340** (.195)
<i>Polity Score</i>	1.019** (.009)
<i>Military Regime</i>	1.320 (.332)
<i>Polity*Military</i>	.991 (.014)
<i>Ethnic Fractionalization</i>	3.405** (1.681)
<i>Inflation</i>	1.001 (.000)
<i>Military Spending</i>	1.016 (.017)
<i>Major Power</i>	.242*** (.116)
<i>Post-Cold War</i>	.702* (.145)
<i>yr After Successful Coups</i>	4.521** (2.991)
<i>yr After Coup Attempts</i>	1.461 (.461)
<i>Post-Communist</i>	2.067 (2.071)
<i>Latin America</i>	1.128 (1.077)
<i>Middle East & North Africa</i>	1.905 (1.735)
<i>Sub-Saharan Africa</i>	2.258 (1.998)
<i>Western Europe & North America</i>	3.106 (5.440)
<i>East Asia</i>	5.953 (6.481)
<i>Southeast Asia</i>	2.0245 (1.921)
<i>South Asia</i> ⁴⁵	3.674 (3.886)
<i>Constant</i>	.171* (.172)

N = 618 LR chi² = 58.65*** Pseudo R² = 0.066

* p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.01 (two-tailed). Cell entries report odds ratios and cluster-corrected standard errors (in parentheses) from logistic regressions.

⁴⁵ Pacific and Caribbean countries were omitted due to collinearity.

Figure 3. State Security Forces and the Initiation of Interstate Armed Conflict with All Control Variables



Note : The x-axis is the level of an autocracy's reliance on state security forces, and the y-axis is the likelihood of an autocracy's initiation of an interstate armed conflict.

Finally, we ran tests for model fit. The Wald's chi-squared statistics of all models in Tables 2-4 are significant at $<.001$. These results indicate a fair/good model fit, and reveal that an autocracy's state security forces should be considered to predict the likelihood of initiating an interstate armed conflict.

Conclusion

In this study we explored the effect of an autocracy's state security forces on its decision to initiate an interstate armed conflict. The recent literature analyzed why states established state security forces but has neglected the effect of state security forces on political phenomena. To fill this gap in part, we focused on the decision of autocracies to initiate an interstate armed conflict. We argue that an autocracy's state security forces increases the likelihood of its initiation of an interstate armed

conflict because state security forces are likely to reduce costs of an armed conflict and increase the prospect of incomplete information situations in crisis bargaining. Specifically, an autocratic leader is less likely to suffer from domestic audience costs when the leader decides to initiate an interstate armed conflict. This is because state security armed forces consist of volunteers and thus the public is less likely to be concerned if they are sent abroad. Additionally, an autocracy's state security forces increase the prospect of incomplete information situations that make states likely to fail to find mutually acceptable settlements in crisis bargaining. This is because an autocracy's state security forces are likely to reduce the level of military effectiveness in an armed conflict. However, the level of military effectiveness is clearly revealed, only when a state engages in conflict with its adversary. This characteristic of military effectiveness encourages the autocracy to overestimate and its adversary to underestimate its capability to fight. This incomplete information situation increases the likelihood of crisis bargaining failure and thus the likelihood of an autocracy's decision to initiate an interstate armed conflict. The empirical results in this study support this argument. This study implies that state security forces can affect various types of political phenomena and thus we should analyze the effect of state security forces on them.

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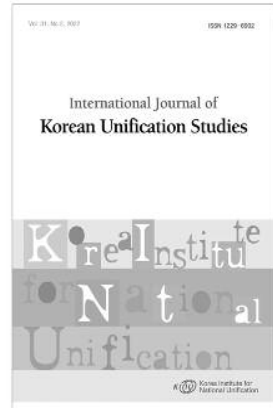
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