

# THREE PARADIGMS OF NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

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*What factors cause a state to pursue the development of nuclear weapons? The explanation for a state's nuclear ambitions is multifaceted, particularly in the North Korean case given the oppressive as well as reclusive nature of the regime since its inception in 1948. The three theoretical models in international relations, which are the security model, the domestic politics model, and the norms model, offer diverging underlying assumptions and different explanations to the fundamental causes of North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The security model primarily focuses on external security threats which require the development of a nuclear deterrent. The domestic model considers the North Korean leadership's parochial interests to stay in power as the fundamental motivation to pursue nuclear weapons. Lastly, the norms model provides the least explanatory power given the weakness that the nuclear taboo shared at the international level effects the country.*

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## Introduction

Why did North Korea choose to develop its nuclear weapons program despite the likelihood of subsequent sanctions and condemnation from the international community? The nuclear test conducted on October 9, 2006 brought the issue of nuclear proliferation to a new height, generating much concern over the continued development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. This paper will examine the underlying causes of North Korea's decision to acquire nuclear arms by applying Sagan's three theoretical models: the security model, the domestic politics model, and the norms model.<sup>1</sup> A separate analysis of the models illustrates the limitations of the individual models as they often suggest different outcomes for the same case. Conversely, these three theoretical models often complement each other, offering a compelling rationalization for North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?: Three Models in Search of a Bomb," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter, 1996-1997): 54-86. Sagan introduces these three models to examine the causes of nuclear proliferation and challenges the prevailing view that national security concerns are the primary cause of nuclear acquisition.

## **Brief Background on North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program**

Often referred to as a hermit kingdom, North Korea has been characterized as isolationist, particularly its centralized economy, since its inception in 1948 under a strict dictatorship. North Korea's first dictator, Kim Il-Sung, developed the principle of self-reliance, or *juche*, and strengthened the influence of the professional military in national decision-making process. Kim Jong-Il, North Korea's second tyrant as well as Kim Il-Sung's son, further increased the dominance of the fundamental principle of extreme self-reliance and concentration of power in the military under the pressure of emerging signs of regime collapse in the 1990s. Under the tight control of continuing brutal dictatorship, the development of a nuclear weapons program has been a priority of both North Korean dictators for several decades, implying North Korea's firm resolve to acquire nuclear capabilities.

The initial efforts of this oppressive regime to build nuclear weapons can be traced back to the 1950s, following the nuclear bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the U.S. and the Korean War. The development of a nuclear weapons program gained momentum in the 1990s when Kim Jong-Il became the supreme leader of the state, confronting a deteriorating economic condition and the collapse of its vital ally, the Soviet Union. In 2003, North Korea became the first state that withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). It was estimated that in 2004 North Korea possessed enough highly enriched plutonium to produce between four to six atomic bombs.<sup>2</sup> The North Korean attempt to acquire nuclear weapons culminated at its nuclear test conducted on October 9, 2006, inviting the enforcement of U.N. Resolution 1718 on October 14, 2006, which banned the provision of conventional arms, nuclear technology and training, and any luxury goods to North Korea. After the nuclear test, former director of Los Alamos National Laboratory, Siegfried Hecker, visited Pyongyang and estimated that North Korea had possessed about forty to fifty kilograms of plutonium, sufficient for six to eight nuclear bombs, but six kilograms were used for the test.<sup>3</sup> Considering the emboldened attempts of North Korea to acquire nuclear capability despite various sanctions and criticism at the international level, the comprehensive understanding of the fundamental causes of the development of a nuclear weapons program in North Korea is essential in the area of nuclear proliferation. The analysis of the causes of North Korean nuclear behavior employing the aforementioned theoretical models is presented in the following.

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<sup>2</sup> Larry A. Niksch, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program," *CRS Report for Congress*, 5 October 2006, 14. Available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/74904.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Siegfried S. Hecker, "Report on North Korean Nuclear Program," Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, 15 November 2006, 4. Accessed through [http://cisac.stanford.edu/publications/report\\_on\\_north\\_korean\\_nuclear\\_program/](http://cisac.stanford.edu/publications/report_on_north_korean_nuclear_program/) (November 20, 2007).

## **1. The Security Model**

### **1) Assumptions**

The security model explains that a state develops nuclear weapons according to neorealist assumptions on the behavior of states. As Kenneth Waltz argues, the distribution of capabilities across the states ultimately defines the structure of the international system.<sup>4</sup> In an anarchic, decentralized, and self-help international system, a states' struggle to survive stems solely from the relative power or capabilities within the system of states. This pursuit of relative power is often described as a zero-sum game, where one state's gain in power comes at another state's loss. States thus have powerful incentives to continually maximize their power to better guarantee their own long-term security.<sup>5</sup>

The tremendous destructive power of nuclear weapons dramatically shifts the balance of power, virtually guarantying the security of a state while also presenting a grave danger in the hands of rivals. Scott Sagan points out that states must balance against any rival state with nuclear capabilities by obtaining their own nuclear deterrent.<sup>6</sup> States seek to maintain the balance of power through the development of nuclear weapons as conventional forces would ineffectively compensate for the lack of nuclear arms. Access to nuclear weapons is a predominantly effective means to maintain the balance of power against rival states, particularly those with nuclear capabilities. Thus, the development of nuclear weapons is a desirable road to guarantee security against rival powers boasting nuclear arms or for those states interested in altering the status quo in their favor.

Furthermore, it is notable that states have strong incentives to acquire nuclear capabilities to deter threatening states by raising the costs of war forbiddingly high. Sagan maintains that the costs of nuclear war are such that even a small risk of war can generate strong deterrence.<sup>7</sup> Given the devastatingly high cost, leaders are unwilling to suffer the consequences of risking nuclear retaliation. The development of nuclear weapons is considered the ultimate means of deterrence, providing strong incentives for states to acquire them. States, as rational actors, pursue nuclear acquisition to guarantee survival in the system since who holds the power in a state does not matter within the framework of the security model.

### **2) Analysis**

The security model provides powerful explanatory power by examining security concerns as the fundamental motivator for the North Korean nuclear

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading MA: Addison-Wesley Press, 1979), 101.

<sup>5</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2003), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Sagan, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons," 57.

<sup>7</sup> Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 49.

weapons program. First of all, Kim Il-Sung's initial decision to acquire nuclear capability in the 1950s may have been heavily influenced by the Japanese capitulation following the U.S. nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The destructive power of these atomic bombs demonstrated the superior military capabilities of the U.S. and established it as the preponderant power in the international system. North Korean leaders believed that their country had been exposed to U.S. nuclear threat since the Korean War.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, this created tension to develop its own nuclear deterrent against the U.S. The possession of nuclear capability became perceived as an effective means to avoid the Japanese experience by deterring U.S. attempts to launch an attack.

The weakening military ties with the former Soviet Union and China in the 1990s provided another impetus to develop nuclear capabilities. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Chinese economic reform era, North Korea enjoyed nuclear umbrellas from these neighboring states. The defense pact with the Soviet Union and the 1961 Sino-Korean Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance both stipulated that any armed attack afflicting either party would compel the other contracting party to provide extended military and other assistance by all means at its disposal.<sup>9</sup> However, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the integration of China and later Russia into the global economy no longer guaranteed these security commitments. In a self-help international system, the defection of two important allies compelled North Korea to increase their own military capabilities to compensate for its former military dependency on the Soviet Union and China. The lack of a credible nuclear deterrent extended by the Soviet Union and China created a lapse in deterrent capabilities leading North Korea to develop its own.

Lastly, the perception of the U.S. as the primary threat to North Korea's survival illustrates the role of competing rival states as predicted by the neorealist inspired security model. The Bush administration's classification of North Korea as part of the "axis of evil" in 2002 served to exacerbate concerns with regime survival in North Korea.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the post-September 11 Bush doctrine asserted more aggressive roles for the U.S. in curbing terrorism and unilaterally pursuing its critical national security interests through the spread of democratic values. This doctrine claims that the U.S. must be ready to wage preventive wars since other defenses may not be possible against terrorists or rogue states.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. wars against Afghanistan and Iraq reflects the resolve of the U.S. to protect its vital security interests, solidifying the U.S. preemptive attack strategy in the name of maintaining peace at the international level.

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Scobell and John M. Sanford, *North Korea's Military Threat: Pyongyang's Conventional Forces, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Ballistic Missiles* (The Strategic Studies Institute, April 2007), 81.

<sup>9</sup> Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 120.

<sup>10</sup> Solingen, 119.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Jervis, "Explaining the Bush Doctrine" in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis, 8<sup>th</sup> Edn. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 419.

Consequently, North Korea, often labeled as a rogue state, had cause to fear a U.S. preemptive attack against its territory. *Nodong Sinmun*, the primary North Korean propaganda newspaper, reported on March 15, 2006 that "the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is the major target of the U.S. imperialists' strategy of preemptive nuclear strike."<sup>12</sup> Thus, an aggressively posed U.S. was perceived as a potential nuclear rival and the nuclear test conducted on October 9, 2006 was an essential process to demonstrate a nuclear deterrent.<sup>13</sup>

### **3) Limitations**

Most notably, the security model fails to explain the initial stages of nuclear weapon development under Kim Il-Sung, whereas it provides powerful explanatory power for later efforts under Kim Jong-Il's dictatorship. North Korea undeniably intensified its efforts to develop a nuclear weapons program in the 1960s under the command of Kim Il-Sung. However, during that time Soviet intelligence assessments confirmed that the U.S. did not intend to wage another Korean War nor increase tension in the region. The Vietnam War also did not make provocations against North Korea an attractive choice for the U.S. in 1960.<sup>14</sup> Although the security model predicts that countries will pursue capabilities to counter a threat, the U.S. was perceived to be the least threatening during the initial stages of nuclear development.

Furthermore, the defense pact with the Soviet Union and the 1961 Sino-Korean Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance guaranteed security against any threatening states in the international system. The fact that North Korea enjoyed two nuclear umbrellas under the Soviet Union and China at a time when the U.S. revealed an unwillingness to wage a preemptive nuclear attack exposes an inconsistency between the security model and reality. The security model fails to explain the intensified interest in a nuclear weapons program in the 1960s given the absence of any imminent military threat to its survival and under the protection of two great nuclear powers.

## **2. The Domestic Politics Model**

### **1) Assumptions**

In contrast to the neorealist logic embedded in the security model, the domestic politics model takes domestic actors who control the decision-making apparatus within the state into comprehensive consideration. Although little attention has been devoted to domestic political theory to explain nuclear behavior, the inclusion of domestic politics as a relevant variable provides for a

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<sup>12</sup> "North Korea Says Defense Deterrent Boost Is Response to US Nuclear Policy." *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific – Political*, 15 March, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 151.

<sup>14</sup> Solingen, 119.

more complete explanation for the motivation to develop a nuclear weapons program.

The major proposition of the domestic politics model, as Sagan argues, is that the possession of nuclear weapons is more likely to serve the parochial bureaucratic or political interests of particular players rather than to serve national security interests of the state.<sup>15</sup> Thus, if domestic actors, such as officials in nuclear-related facilities, influential units in the professional military, or politicians with constituents that favor nuclear weapons development, are the primary unit of analysis, security concerns are considered auxiliary. In addition, Sagan points out those domestic actors with parochial interests influence the government's decision-making process either by directly asserting their political power or indirectly through the control of information.<sup>16</sup> This bottom-up view implies that domestic actors assume more active roles in influencing the policy-making process rather than merely follow the political decisions rendered by higher-ranking government officials or leaders.

Similarly, the domestic politics model holds that the preferences of domestic players in internationalization and nuclear policy are closely intertwined. Leaders and ruling coalitions supporting integration into the global economy tend to oppose the acquisition of nuclear weapons, which hinders domestic reforms favoring internationalization.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, dictators with the disinclination towards economic integration are more likely to seek the possession of nuclear weapons to further their political goals and stay in power. The nuclear weapons program becomes a tool for political propaganda in authoritarian, economically isolated regimes in which constituencies are less dependent on global markets.

## **2) Analysis**

An examination of the fundamental domestic structure of North Korea largely coincides with the predictions of the domestic model. The ultimate goal of developing a nuclear weapons program is to keep Kim Jong-Il in power, not to assure the security of the North Korean state.<sup>18</sup> Domestic politics of regime survival emerges as the significant variable to explain the underlying cause for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Domestic philosophies such as the military-first policy, the fundamental principle of self-reliance, the subsumed role of international trade, and nuclear weapons as a source of hard currency help to explain North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

North Korea is considered the most explicit representation of the politics of the military. Since the inception of the North Korean authoritarian regime in 1948, bureaucratic actors dominated the decision making process, particularly the Korea Workers' Party (KWP), Korean People's Army (KPA), and the National Defense Commission (NDC). The concentration of power in the hands of the military strengthened under the dictatorship of Kim Jong-Il compared to the early

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<sup>15</sup> Sagan, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Sagan, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Solingen, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Solingen, 122.

decades of Kim Il-Sung. The military-first politics, Kim Jong-Il's primary ruling method, deviated from the previous practice of the KWP's dominance over the military.<sup>19</sup>

The political influence of the KWP, as the ruling communist party, has gradually diminished over the decades while military organizations such as the KPA and NDC have grown to solidify their paramount positions in hierarchy at the national level. This military-first policy of North Korea enshrines the dominance of the KPA as the state's highest priority for national resources.<sup>20</sup> Also, the NDC holds exclusive power over military command and funding under the oppressive rule of Kim Jong-Il. North Korea's 1998 constitution, particularly Article 100 and Article 102, stipulates that the NDC is the highest military guidance organization of state sovereignty and the chairman provides leadership over all armed forces and guidance over all defense affairs.<sup>21</sup> Kim Jong-Il further strengthened his control over the military by simultaneously assuming the positions of Chairman of the NDC, General Secretary of the KWP, and Supreme Commander of the KPA. In doing so, Kim Jong-Il virtually achieved the complete control of the military in the state.

The superior capacity of the military and its unparalleled share of the country's resources provide strong incentives for military organizations under the strict control of Kim Jong-Il to develop the nuclear weapons program. As Sagan argues in his organization theory, a state in which the professional military assumes a strong and direct influence on the decision-making process only reflect the biases and parochial interests of military organizations rather than the objective interests of the state.<sup>22</sup> The extensive involvement of the military in the decision-making process inevitably compels the military organizations to assure the stability and legitimacy of the regime as a priority; threats from potential rival states are considered subordinate to the overall stability of the regime. The military should favor the acquisition and control of nuclear capabilities as the ultimate means to assure its dominant power at the domestic level. The military-first politics under Kim Jong-Il thus creates the optimal condition for the development of nuclear weapons to maintain the militaristic dictatorship.

In addition to the parochial interests of military organizations, the fundamental principle of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, referred to as *juche*, also reflects the objective of the dictator to maintain his legitimacy and monolithic power through the possession of nuclear weapons. The governing principle of *juche* is characterized by four aspects of independence in thought, politics and diplomacy, economics, and defense.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, North Korea is identified as economically collectivist, ethnically racist, diplomatically isolationist, and culturally nationalist, which justifies the dictator's complete control over all aspects of the

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<sup>19</sup> Kim Sung Chull, *North Korea under Kim Jong-Il: From Consolidation to Systemic Dissonance* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 93.

<sup>20</sup> Scobell and Sanford, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Kim, 99.

<sup>22</sup> Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, 48.

<sup>23</sup> Kim, 105.

state.<sup>24</sup> Kim Jong-Il envisions a utopian state where the need to depend economically or militarily on other states is unnecessary and undesirable to preserve the sovereignty of the state. Given this national priority of self-sufficiency, the acquisition of nuclear weapons is perceived as inevitable to achieve the realization of this fundamental governing principle. North Korea's nuclear weapons program is the ultimate expression of *juche* in national security. Thus, the interests of the military and Kim Jong-Il are inevitably concentrated on the nuclear weapons program to assure the survival of his regime.

The correlation between a state's desire of nuclear weapons and lack of economic integration also provides an explanation in agreement with the domestic model's predictions. Heavily reliant on the principle of extreme self-reliance, this authoritarian regime has a strong disinclination towards an open economy. The elite opposition to global integration, under Kim Jong-Il, significantly deteriorated the national economy, particularly in the 1990s. The Korean Ministry of National Unification and the Bank of Korea report that gross national product growth decreased by 4.5 percent in 1991-1994 and 3.8 percent in 1995-1998.<sup>25</sup> The worsening economic condition and food shortages gave a rise to an increasing number of supporters of economic reforms, opposing the policy of hardliners who strictly adhere to the principle of self-reliance. The reformer's support for opening the market to alleviate the economic hardship inevitably conflicted with the interests of the hardliners in the professional military, whose pursuit of nuclear weapons may have hindered the implementation of necessary economic reforms. However, the influence of reformers was very limited under the prevailing governing principle of self-reliance, which perceives an open economy as a threat to the principle of *juche*.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, the reformers were eliminated from the power structure, creating a favorable political condition to further the development of nuclear weapons. The economic isolation of North Korea signals the prevalence of military interests in the decision to acquire nuclear capabilities.

Nuclear technology further proved attractive when the need to alleviate the deteriorating economy emerged as a national priority among elites and Kim Jong-Il. The rapid economic decline in the 1990s and subsequent natural disasters led to a prolonged downward economic slide characterized by widespread food shortages to such an extent that the sustainability of Kim Jong-Il's dictatorship became jeopardized. Also, the ballooning trade deficit contributed to a near economic collapse, rising to 1.3 billion dollars in 2003 when the GDP was estimated only at 23 billion dollars.<sup>27</sup> Kim Jong-Il thus sought sources of hard currency without substantially changing the fundamental structure of economy.<sup>28</sup> The underlying principle of *juche* coupled with the need to prevent the economic

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<sup>24</sup> Solingen, 127.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Horowitz, "Who's Behind That Curtain? Unveiling Potential Leverage over Pyongyang," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2004-05): 29-30.

<sup>26</sup> Solingen, 137.

<sup>27</sup> Horowitz, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew J. Coe, "North Korea's New Cash Crop," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 76.

dissolution of the ruling groups generated strong incentives to engage in illicit activity. Transferring nuclear technology or materials to other states emerged as an attractive nontraditional source of hard currency, which in turn encouraged the continuing development of the nuclear weapons program. In April 2005, U.S. officials estimated North Korea's total income from illicit activities at 500 million dollars, which accounts for thirty five to forty percent of the revenue of legitimate exports.<sup>29</sup> This illicit activity, including transfers of nuclear technology to clients such as Egypt, Iran, Syria, or Yemen, is vital to maintaining the power of Kim Jong-Il. The threat of economic collapse only adds to the motivation to develop and maintain nuclear weapons as an additional means of income.

### **3) Limitations**

The explanation of the domestic politics model, which takes into consideration the parochial interests of domestic actors as the primary cause of the nuclear acquisition, does not adequately account for the nuclear behavior of North Korea during the 1990s. North Korea's decision to sign the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994, is considered an anomaly in the framework of the domestic politics model. Despite the dire circumstances characterized by the severe food shortages, natural disasters, economic collapse, and increased concentration of power in the military, North Korea agreed to halt its nuclear weapons program in 1994. This bilateral agreement between North Korea and the U.S. called for North Korea to freeze reactors in Yongbyon, allow inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and remain a party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT).<sup>30</sup> The Agreed Framework demonstrated North Korea's willingness to suspend its nuclear weapons program and thus abandon the most profitable source of revenue supporting the ruling groups and Kim Jong-Il himself. This reversal of nuclear behavior of North Korea, despite severe domestic pressure, does not follow the logic of the domestic politics model.

### **3. The Norms Model**

#### **1) Assumptions**

The norms model takes into consideration the identity of the state, symbolic functions of nuclear weapons, and prevailing shared norms in the international community as the primary units of analysis in explaining the choice to develop a nuclear weapons program. It shares a commonality with the

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<sup>29</sup> Sheena Chestnut, "Illicit Activity and Proliferation: North Korean Smuggling Networks," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 92.

<sup>30</sup> Daryl Kimball and Paul Kerr, "The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance," Arms Control Association, August 2004, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework.asp?print> (accessed December 10, 2007).

domestic politics model in that both have received little attention in explaining a state's nuclear behavior. The major assumption of the norms model maintains that states are motivated to acquire nuclear capabilities when they perceive it as a symbol of prestige and modernity, enhancing a state's status. This constructivist approach places an emphasis on a logic of appropriateness, which is defined as political action as the product of rules, roles, and identities that stipulate appropriate behavior in given situations.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the symbolic functions of nuclear weapons and a state's modernity, the formation of norms within the international regimes provides a counter rationale to acquiring nuclear capabilities. Sagan maintains that shared norms and beliefs determine legitimate and appropriate actions in international relations.<sup>32</sup> Codified norms in the international regimes, such as the NPT, constrain state behavior by discouraging actions against the shared values of the international community.<sup>33</sup> Defecting states are highly condemned at the international level and subsequently perceived as illegitimate. However, there is a prevailing view in international relations that the norms model provides the least explanatory power in comparison to the security model and domestic politics model. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that this model offers another theoretical analysis in examining state behavior.

## **2) Analysis**

In accordance with the norms model, it is possible to argue that the symbolic functions of nuclear weapons mainly serve as the cause of the development of nuclear weapons program in North Korea. In a reclusive state like North Korea, symbolic practices reinforce the state's identity to the international community and also underscore its legitimacy to the people.<sup>34</sup> The development of nuclear weapons, which requires tremendous resources, modern technology, and prohibitively large capital investment, enables a state to gain prestige both at the domestic and international levels and elevate its status significantly. On April 24, 2006, the KPA officially stated that "the development of nuclear weapons is a great achievement that matchlessly glorifies the country's dignity and the nation's pride."<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the acquisition of nuclear capabilities contributes to shaping the positive perception of this regime's identity,

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<sup>31</sup> For the definition of a logic of appropriateness, see Steven D. Krasner, "Sovereignty and Its Discontents," in *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Scott Sagan, 73.

<sup>33</sup> The NPT was established to prevent nuclear proliferation and facilitate nuclear disarmament while allowing the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Opened for signature in 1968, the treaty entered into force in 1970. See "Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," (UN Department of Disarmament Affairs, 2002), <http://www.un.org/Depts/dda/WMD/treaty/> (accessed December 9, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Carol Medlicott, "Symbol and Sovereignty in North Korea," *SAIS Review XXV*, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2005): 71.

<sup>35</sup> Scobell and Sanford, 87.

generating intense feelings of nationalism and pride particularly when regime survival is threatened. The symbolic functions of nuclear weapons that create a modernized national identity both within and beyond its territory undergird the legitimacy and coercive power of the dictatorship.

### **3) Limitations**

Despite the explanations forwarded by the norms model, which focuses on constructivist factors such as prestige and identity of the state, the norms model reveals severe limitations in explaining the decision to develop nuclear weapons. The proposition that a state's nuclear behavior is largely determined by the norms and shared beliefs of the community of states does not offer sufficient explanatory power for the North Korean case. Most interestingly, the predominance of nuclear taboo and the signing of the NPT appear to have factored little into North Korea's overall ambitions.

Overall, the North Korean case does not conform to the constructivist perspective that emphasizes norms as a significant factor shaping state behavior. The argument that North Korea developed its nuclear weapons program to assert prestige and modernity is in conflict with the fact that the shared norms against nuclear weapons at the international level stigmatizes any regime that attempts to acquire nuclear capabilities. Since the initial nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan by the U.S. in 1945, the normative stigma against nuclear use has been commonly accepted by the international community. The non-use and non-acquisition norms are explicitly codified in the NPT, implying the special status of nuclear weapons, which is distinguished from conventional weapons due to the tremendous destructive power of nuclear weapons. According to the norms model, compliance with the shared nuclear norms reinforces the identity of states and their status as legitimate members of the international community.<sup>36</sup> However, these shared global norms and codified treaties against the acquisition of nuclear weapons did not ultimately constrain the behavior of North Korea. Consequently, North Korea's nuclear weapons program invited various sanctions by the U.N. and severe criticism at the international level, stigmatizing the identity of North Korea as a rogue state or axis of evil. While the norms model may have predicted such stigmatization, it failed to predict that North Korea would still choose nuclear armament. The nuclear taboo of the norms model appears to lack sufficient explanatory power in this case.

### **Conclusion**

The three competing theoretical models provide different perspectives to examine the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. The security model, which has received the most attention in international relations, utilizes neorealist assumptions to explain nuclear acquisition. The perceived

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos," in *The Culture of National Security*, ed. Peter Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 143.

external threats to national security, particularly from the U.S. and its allies, compel this autarkic regime to develop its nuclear deterrent to assure survival and sovereignty. The possession of nuclear weapons deters threatening states by raising the costs of war to an unacceptable level, which in turn lowers the probability of war. Under the security model, the security concerns of the North Korean regime are the primary causes of nuclear acquisition.

The domestic politics model sees the parochial interests of domestic groups as the most important factors that lead to the development of a nuclear weapons program. Given the dire circumstances under the strict dictatorship, the increasing domestic pressures forced the leadership to choose nuclear development as a means of regime survival. North Korea's military-first politics, fundamental governing principle of extreme self-reliance, centralized economic system, and demand for hard currency reflect the primary goal of staying in power for the ruling groups and the dictator Kim Jong-Il.

The norms model takes a constructivist approach, focusing on the symbolic functions of nuclear weapons, the identity of the state, and global norms as the major motivations behind nuclear arms acquisition. Although it is possible to argue that North Korea pursues nuclear capabilities for a prestigious identity and legitimacy, the nuclear taboo shared in the international community only serves to further stigmatize North Korea, undermining its legitimacy. Overall, it seems that the North Korean case does not adhere to the global norms that supposedly shape state behavior.

Overall, these three theoretical approaches to the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program offer diverging analysis on the causes of nuclear acquisition. The security model, domestic politics model, and norms model provide theoretical tools to enhance the understanding of what compels North Korea to acquire nuclear capabilities despite the conceivable limitation of the norms model to explain North Korea's defiance of shared norms against nuclear weapons. It is clear that while North Korea has implicitly accepted the scenario described by Sagan's security model, the decision to pursue nuclear development most likely stems from the interests of regime. Nuclear weapons are the ultimately expression of *juche*, creating an enduring deterrent furthering the cause of self-reliance. Moreover, choosing nuclear arms over more pragmatic needs validates the military apparatus as the primary organ in the state's political structure. While a strong case for nuclear armament can be made on North Korea's security situation, it is unlikely that the regime under Kim Jong-Il would abandon its nuclear ambitions in regard to these concerns alone.

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