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Research article

Examining Contending Explanatory Models of Nuclear Proliferation: Theoretical and Policy Implications

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Abstract

This study examines major theoretical models that seek to explain states' pursuit of nuclear weapons programmes and decisions to abandon them. A comparative historical analysis of multiple case studies suggests that the traditional 'security' model cannot be supplanted by Scott Sagan's challenger alternatives – the 'domestic political' and 'norms' models. While political dynamics and normative pressures play a significant role in nuclear policymaking, the analysis indicates that these factors are themselves influenced by underlying security considerations. The findings further caution the United States against relying exclusively on normative constraints or the presence of democratic political structures to dissuade allies facing growing nuclear threats from pursuing nuclear breakout capabilities.

Keywords: nuclear proliferation models, theory, US policy, Iran, Korea

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Introduction

Why do states seek nuclear weapons or alternately decide to freeze, downscale and even dismantle their nuclear programmes? Providing an answer to this question is a prerequisite to designing efficacious policies for preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. However, choosing a theoretical model through which to examine the question has become significantly more challenging following the publication of Scott D. Sagan's seminal article 'Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?' (Sagan 1996). Sagan contests the explanatory power of the 'security model' and offers the 'domestic political' and 'norms' models as better alternatives for explaining the decisions of states to go nuclear or refrain from doing so.

According to the security model, nuclear weapons are developed either as a means to deter nuclear and overwhelming conventional military threats, or as an offensive tool designed to 'compel changes in the status quo' (Sagan 1996: 57). The domestic political model focuses on scientists and military officials within the bureaucracy as well as on politicians, who, each out of their own interest, form coalitions in order to prevent or promote nuclear armament. The norms model studies the evolution of normative perceptions as a result of the interaction between different actors, both state and non-state, in the international system. Changing perceptions beget normative pressures that can label the pursuit and acquisition of nuclear weapons as prestigious or rather as warranting opprobrium (Sagan 1996).

Contrary to Sagan, this study suggests that neither the domestic political model nor the norms model can replace or serve as alternatives to the security model in explaining nuclear decision-making. Although bureaucratic and political struggles, as well as normative pressures, play a significant role in explaining the pursuit of, or decision to forgo, nuclear weapons programmes in case studies such as India, South Africa, Ukraine and Argentina, the security model cannot be discounted. In each of these cases examined by Sagan, security-related concerns influenced the shaping of outcomes in domestic political dynamics and normative choices.

The initial section of this study revisits Sagan's critique of the security model by examining his argument, alternative models, and main case studies. The following sections analyse two additional cases – Iran and North Korea. These cases were selected because, in both, security considerations exerted a significant influence on the outcomes of political-bureaucratic struggles and normative pressures in nuclear policymaking. They also represent different outcomes. The Iran-Iraq War prompted the ayatollahs to resume Iran's nuclear programme, despite Islamic norms upheld by supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who regarded nuclear weapons as incompatible with the Islamic concept of a just war. Conversely, in the mid-1990s, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il decided – against the advice of the most influential bureaucratic body in domestic politics, the military – to freeze and dismantle the country's nuclear programme in exchange for a deal with the United States that included security guarantees, economic assistance and the normalisa-

tion of bilateral relations.¹ In both cases, the historical narrative and sequence of events suggest a causal link between rising security concerns and the decision to respond, despite political and normative obstacles, by advancing either towards the pursuit of nuclear weapons or their abandonment.

Kenneth Waltz's proposition that states are actors 'who, at minimum, seek their own preservation and, at maximum, drive for universal domination' (Waltz 1986: 117) offers a useful lens through which to understand how states conceptualise security in relation to their perceived position along this scale. Iran in the mid-1980s and North Korea in the early 1990s were both situated closer to the self-preservation end of Waltz's scale. Their approaches to addressing this situation, however, differed and were shaped by their specific circumstances. For Iran, enhancing its security became closely tied to the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent, having been confronted by a US–Soviet-led international coalition during its eight-year war with Iraq. This coalition not only provided military support to Iraq, but also overlooked its use of chemical weapons in violation of non-proliferation norms and regimes (Chubin 1989; Herzog 1989; Karsh 1989).

For North Korea, security was about preventing economic implosion and thereby ensuring the survival of the Kim regime. After the collapse of the Communist bloc and the Soviet Union, North Korea experienced a dire economic crisis that was exacerbated by droughts, floods and famine in the early 1990s. Isolated under US and international sanctions, and having lost its major economic partners – which had replaced ideology-driven policies with profit-seeking practices – North Korea's economy and the regime were in desperate need of a lifeline. The 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea provided that lifeline. North Korea pledged to freeze and gradually roll back its nascent nuclear programme in exchange for reciprocal sanctions relief and the normalisation of US-DPRK bilateral relations (Farago & Merrill 2021).

The concluding section examines the nuclear policies of two US partners – South Korea and Saudi Arabia. It suggests that, in their nuclear policymaking, security concerns present a significant challenge to US-guarded international non-proliferation norms. Furthermore, the South Korean case illustrates how public opinion in a democracy may support the pursuit of an indigenous nuclear deterrent. Whereas the US administration is expending great effort to alleviate South Korean security concerns, not enough is being done on the Saudi front.

Sagan's alternative models revisited

Sagan (1996) ponders why India did not move towards the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent immediately after China's nuclear test in the mid-1960s. He finds the

1 The US-North Korean deal, also known as the Agreed Framework, collapsed after less than a decade. The Agreed Framework is discussed in more detail in the relevant section.

answer in the bureaucratic and political battles that were waged over nuclear armament from the mid-1960s up to the 'peaceful' nuclear test of May 1974 – a test that symbolised the victory of nuclear proponents. These domestic battles undoubtedly help explain why India was slow to develop a nuclear deterrent. However, according to Sumit Ganguly, escalating security concerns in the 1960s and early 1970s played a pivotal role in settling the political debate between the opponents and proponents of nuclear proliferation. In fact, in the late 1950s, security concerns led Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who publicly opposed the development of nuclear weapons, to give India's chief nuclear scientist, Homi J. Bhaba, free reign to pursue research into all aspects of nuclear power should circumstances require India to arm itself with a nuclear deterrent. After China conducted a nuclear test in 1964, Nehru's successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, turned to the superpowers and asked them to provide India with nuclear guarantees against the threat from a nuclear China. Simultaneously, Shastri instructed Bhaba 'to work toward reducing the time needed to develop nuclear explosives' (Ganguly 1999: 155).

Following the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, during which Beijing provided assistance to Pakistan and threatened to open a second front along its border with India, an increasing number of voices in the political arena called upon Shastri to exercise India's nuclear potential. Furthermore, Shastri himself warned that 'if the Chinese perfected their nuclear delivery systems India would be forced to reconsider its nuclear policies' (Ganguly 1999: 156). According to Indian analysts, the continuing failure of Shastri's replacement, Indira Gandhi, to obtain satisfactory guarantees from the superpowers against the threat posed by China, coupled with US pressure on India during the 1971 Indian-Pakistani War, eventually convinced Gandhi of the need to move forward with India's research into the military aspects of nuclear power. This conviction not only contributed to India's decision not to join the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), but also led to the nuclear test of May 1974 (Ganguly 1999).

Examining South Africa's nuclear quest, Sagan contends that it was led by the desire of the power and mining industries 'to enhance their standing in international scientific circles. . . . As a result, the first South African nuclear device was actually too large to be deliverable by an aircraft' (Sagan 1996: 70). He further stresses that South Africa initiated its nuclear quest in 1971, long before there was any communist threat of expansion facing South Africa in the form of Cuban forces in Angola in 1975. However, as Sagan himself acknowledges, following the emergence of a communist threat, the military took control of the nuclear programme and redesigned it, highlighting the explanatory significance of the security model in this case study. Sagan also argues that President de Klerk's decision to dismantle and eliminate all evidence of South Africa's nuclear programme stemmed from his determination to prevent sensitive nuclear technology from

falling into the hands of either the African National Congress or white extremists. For Sagan, de Klerk's decision was driven by a domestic political imperative (Sagan 1996). However, the decision – and its rapid execution in 1991, as the apartheid regime was collapsing – can also be understood as a response to a security imperative to prevent nuclear proliferation to untrustworthy elements in the wake of the regime's disintegration.

Unlike de Klerk, the ousted military junta in Argentina left the country's nuclear programme intact in the hands of the democratically-elected Raul Alfonsín government in 1983. Sagan identifies the transition to liberal democracy in Argentina as the dominant factor that led the country to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons, despite its defeat in the 1982 Falklands War, which should have 'strongly encouraged Argentina's nuclear ambitions' (Sagan 1996: 71). Nevertheless, it can be argued that Britain's decisive victory in the war contributed significantly to the subsequent regime change in Argentina (Schumacher 1984). This, in turn, eased the tensions between Buenos Aires and the international community, including the United Kingdom, and ultimately led Argentina to forgo its nuclear weapons programme. In other words, changes in variables pertaining to the domestic political model brought about changes in variables relating to the security model and facilitated the Argentinian decision to abandon the country's nuclear weapons ambitions. Significantly, not all successful transitions to a liberal democracy would necessarily bring about nuclear disarmament. In the face of looming security threats, democracies may move towards the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent, as in the cases of India and Israel.

Sagan (1996) rightly notes that in 1994 changing international norms contributed to the decision of the government in Kiev to join the NPT and to remove all nuclear weapons from Ukrainian territory by June 1996. Had the international norms of the 1950s and 1960s prevailed in the 1990s, and in the absence of the NPT, it is possible that Ukraine would have perceived the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent as a symbol of high international status, as France did in the 1950s and 1960s, rather than as a membership card for the 'exclusive' club of rogue states, such as Iraq, North Korea, Libya and Iran. However, security assurances played a crucial role in the creation of a framework for Ukrainian denuclearisation and the government in Kiev insisted that such assurances would be presented to it in an international document (Budjeryn 2014). Unlike the France of Charles de Gaulle in the 1950s and 1960s, Ukraine in the 1990s had no delusions of grandeur. It was merely interested in assuring its national security and sovereignty, rather than in obtaining global influence. After Russia, the United States, Britain, France and China provided satisfactory assurances in the form of the Budapest Memorandum, Ukraine needed no nuclear deterrent. In this regard, the Kremlin's willingness to reverse its course and recognise Ukraine as an entity separate from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was vital to the success of the

disarmament negotiations with the government in Kiev (Garnett 1995). At that point in the history of the two nations, Ukrainians, including many of non-Russian ethnic origin, did not 'conceive Russia as an enemy to be deterred with nuclear weapons' (Garnett 1995: 8). Hence, no contradiction between variables pertaining to the norms model and variables relating to the security model hindered Ukraine's nuclear disarmament. Conversely, India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran and North Korea are all examples of countries in which security considerations have led governments to decide against operating in accordance with the norms model.

The Ayatollahs' decision to go nuclear

Tension and war in the Gulf

In 1966, during the reign of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the renowned Iran-watcher Rouhollah Ramazani wrote: 'The image of a great past usually lay at the heart of Iranian irredentism. From the beginning of Iran's independent existence in modern times its policymakers strove to restore the ancient boundaries of the country. Irredentism was responsible for many wars with small and big powers' (Ramazani 1966: 306-307). A few years later, Ramazani added that historical and economic imperatives dictate that Iran must assume a paramount role in the Gulf, 'no matter who rules in Iran' (Ramazani 1972: 88). This observation was proven to be accurate in subsequent years. After the toppling of the Shah in 1979, the new leadership of Islamic clerics remained committed to fulfilling Iranian regional aspirations, despite being perceived as a threat and treated as a pariah by both the United States – Iran's ally prior to the Islamic Revolution – and the Soviet Union.

Following the Islamic Revolution of February 1979, the accession to power of the ayatollahs and their supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, was marked by even more ambitious visions of regional dominance than those of the Shah. As Efraim Karsh notes, the new regime was obsessed with extending 'its hegemonic claims from the geopolitical to the spiritual (or ideological) domain . . . envisioning Iran's supremacy as taking place within an entirely new, and hitherto unprecedented system – that of an Islamic order' (Karsh 1989: 26). In order to achieve this goal, it was not enough merely to force the Ba'ath regime in Iraq and the Sheikhs of the Gulf to recognise Iran as the predominant power in the region and to accept its territorial claims. If Iran were to export its revolution successfully to other Gulf states, then secular and oppressive Sunni regimes had to be toppled. For that purpose, the *Pax Irana* and the status quo established in the region pursuant to the Algiers Agreement of March 1975 between Iran and Iraq had to be challenged (Karsh 1989).

Tehran's proclamations and actions after the revolution clearly evinced a resolve to bring down the Ba'ath regime in Iraq. For example, on 19 October 1979, Ayatollah Montazeri, a leading Shiite theologian and later Khomeini's deputy, said that the Iraqi people, of which three-quarters are Shiites, opposed Saddam Hus-

sein, the Iraqi president. He added that if Khomeini were to instruct the Iraqis to overthrow their leadership, 'the entire Iraqi nation would rise' (Foreign Broadcast Information Service 1979a: R8). For Iran's foreign minister, Sadeq Qotbzadeh, such a scenario was inevitable. In April 1980, in an interview with the Turkish daily newspaper *Milliyet*, he said: 'There is no other way out than the complete collapse of the Ba'ath party. These people have nothing in common with Islam. Problems cannot be resolved unless the Ba'ath administration is overthrown. . . . They are more dangerous than Zionists. That is why mediation and bilateral talks are out of the question' (Foreign Broadcast Information Service 1980: I25). Moreover, on 17 April 1980, Khomeini called upon the Iraqi people and army to 'turn their back on the Ba'ath regime and overthrow it . . . because this regime . . . is attacking the Koran and Islam' (Abdulghani 1984: 189). These proclamations were followed by a renewal of Iranian assistance to separatist Kurds and anti-government Shiite groups in Iraq as well as by an increasing number of skirmishes along the Iran-Iraq border (Abdulghani 1984; Rubin 1983).

However, Iraq, which had benefited a great deal in terms of economic and military development from the détente in the region following the 1975 Algiers Agreement, was interested neither in severing its relations with Iran nor in going to war. Immediately following the Islamic Revolution and during the spring and summer of 1979, Saddam Hussein attempted to engage with the Iranians. On 14 February 1979, Saddam

stressed that Iraq has no aims in Iran . . . [and] supports whatever expresses the national interests of the Iranian people . . . Iraq is anxious to deal on a sound basis with the choice of the Iranian people . . . This must be done on the basis of non-intervention in domestic affairs and respect for each other's sovereignty. (Foreign Broadcast Information Service 1979b: E1)

Iraq also welcomed the break in Iran-Israel relations, as well as the Iranian withdrawal from the UK-led and US-supported Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), and offered to assist Iran in joining the Non-Aligned Movement. Furthermore, Saddam officially invited the Iranian premier to visit Baghdad in order to discuss ways to improve bilateral relations. By spurning Iraq's gestures of goodwill and marking the deposal of Saddam and his regime as the primary target of the Islamic Revolution, the ayatollahs left Saddam with little choice but to pre-empt while Iran was still suffering from the after-effects of the revolution (Karsh 1989; Rubin 1983).

On 22 September 1980, the Iraqi Air Force struck Iran's major military airfields in a futile attempt to eliminate its air force on the ground. The next day, five Iraqi divisions invaded Iran. The Iran-Iraq War had begun. From the outset of the war, Iraq and Iran's strategic objectives were very different in *Clausewitzian* terms. Saddam planned to conduct a limited war and concentrated the Iraqi military's

main effort on Khuzistan in order to separate the Shatt al-Arab waterway from the rest of Iran. On 28 September 1980, Saddam announced that Iraq had achieved its territorial goals. Subsequently, he attempted to initiate negotiations in an effort to end the hostilities and reach a settlement (Herzog 1989).

The ayatollahs' regime, on the other hand, was fighting a total war. Thus, capturing Baghdad was, according to Iranian spokesmen, merely a stepping stone on the path to liberating Jerusalem. The success of tens of thousands of Iranian *Basij* militia volunteers and Revolutionary Guards in pushing Iraqi forces back to the border by mid-1982 gave credence to the Iranian notion, and later slogan, that 'the faith of the Islamic troops is stronger than Iraq's superior firepower' (Chubin 1989: 15). This notion contributed to Khomeini's decision towards the end of 1982 to invade Iraq. Iran's goal was to capture the predominantly Shiite city of Basra, in the hope that this would create an impetus that would lead to the downfall of Baghdad and the Ba'ath regime. Prominent voices in Iran who opposed the invasion of Iraq were ignored. Among the opponents of the invasion were most of the military leadership, President Sayyed Ali Khamenei and Prime Minister Mir Hussein Musavi. They doubted Iran's military ability to carry out Khomeini's goals successfully and pointed out the political obstacles and high cost in terms of human lives and materials that Iran might incur on the way to Basra and Baghdad (Karsh 1989).

The realities of war and Islamic norms collide

The opposition to Khomeini's decision to invade Iraq was not the only challenge to the judgement of the supreme leader from within the Iranian regime. The future of Iran's nuclear programme – initiated by the Shah in 1974 – was also at the centre of a heated debate between Khomeini and other prominent ayatollahs and politicians. Khomeini, who was as passionate to uphold Islamic norms as he was to topple the Ba'ath regime and spread the revolution, perceived nuclear weapons as an anathema to Islam – a product of Western imperialism that contradicts Islamic ideology and the concept of just war. In this context, Khomeini labelled the acts of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing and maiming tens of thousands of innocent civilians, as evil. Immediately after coming to power, and despite rising tensions in the Gulf, Khomeini began clamping down on Iran's nuclear programme. He froze contracts with the German and French companies Kraftwerk and Framatome for the construction of nuclear reactors near Bushehr and Ahwaz and cancelled Iran's agreement with the European Gaseous Diffusion Uranium Enrichment Consortium (EURODIF) for the supply of nuclear fuel for the aforementioned reactors. Khomeini also forced drastic cuts in manpower and research activities upon the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI), a circumstance that led many nuclear scientists to leave Iran and seek their fortune elsewhere (Melman & Javedanfar 2007).

Khomeini's actions, however, did not represent a consensus within the Iranian leadership. Among those who spoke out in favour of continuing the deposed Shah's nuclear programme was Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, the secretary-general of the Islamic Republic Party and head of Iran's judicial system. Beheshti claimed that as Iran's geo-strategic aspirations in the region had not fundamentally changed, it was still in need of the nuclear programme. Three months after the revolution, Beheshti told his aides that Iran needed nuclear weapons despite the heavy burden that a weapons programme would place on Iran's economy (Melman & Javedanfar 2007). Fereidun Fesharaki, a former energy advisor to the Shah, recalls that in May 1979, one of Khomeini's advisors told him: 'It is your duty to build this [nuclear] bomb. Our civilization is in danger and we have to do it' (Bhatia 1988: 82). These voices in support of a nuclear weapons programme became stronger and much more influential as the war with Iraq stretched on and took its toll on the Iranian military and people.

From the onset of the war, an international coalition composed of global powers and regional actors assisted the Iraqi war effort politically, economically and militarily. For example, the Soviet Union and France were important sources of arms and equipment for the Iraqi military. Complementarily, in 1984 the United States initiated Operation Staunch in an effort to block arms sales to Iran. The United States and the Soviet Union also took an active role in the Tanker War between the two belligerents when, in 1987, they granted Kuwait's request to protect its tankers from Iranian naval attacks. France, Britain, Italy and the Netherlands joined the superpowers in this naval policing activity that enabled Kuwait to continue subsidising the Iraqi war effort and to serve as a transshipment point for arms destined for Iraq. Other major sources of support for Iraq within the Arab world included Saudi Arabia, which led a policy of pushing down oil prices in order to reduce Iran's oil revenues, and Egypt, from which Iraq purchased military equipment. Thus, while Iran was exhausting its military inventory, Iraq enjoyed a regular supply of arms and equipment (Chubin 1989; Herzog 1989; Karsh 1989).

In 1987 and 1988, the United States became directly involved in the fighting as US naval forces attacked Iranian boats and oil platforms. In this regard, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, attributed the success of the Iraqi effort to recapture the port city of Fao (April 1988) to increased US naval activity against the Iranian fleet. The fact that Iraq, in defiance of non-proliferation norms and regimes, introduced chemical weapons to the battleground as early as 1984 did not stop the assistance and support that it received from the superpowers and other countries. The chemical warfare, however, did play havoc with the morale of the Iranian forces. After the results of the February 1988 Iraqi chemical attack on Halabja were published, the number of Iranian volunteers (*Basij*), which had stood at around 300,000, dropped by a third. Simultaneously, the fear that Iraq might arm the missiles that it had begun launching in 1984 against Iranian

urban centres with chemical warheads increased the level of panic among the population (Chubin 1989; Herzog 1989; Karsh 1989).

Iran resumes its nuclear quest

In 1984, despite Khomeini's ideological abhorrence of nuclear weapons, Iran resumed its nuclear quest. The Iranians contacted Kraftwerk Union and asked the German company to complete the Bushehr nuclear project which Khomeini had frozen. However, the two semi-complete reactors at Bushehr were the target of Iraqi bombardments throughout the war² and the Germans refused to carry out any work as long as the war continued. In 1985, Iran launched a PhD programme in nuclear science and technology at the Amir Kabir Technological University and called upon nuclear scientists who had left the country after the revolution to return (Feldman 1997). In February 1986, A. Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, made a clandestine visit to Iran and met with Ayatollah Rafsanjani. The following year, Khan visited Iran again. These visits resulted in an agreement to train Iranian scientists in Pakistan to operate centrifuge cascades for enriching uranium. Khan also sold centrifuge design blueprints and 400 centrifuges to the Iranians (Melman & Javedanfar 2007).

The rationale behind the ayatollahs' decision to resume Iran's nuclear quest was derived from the realities of war, as evident from Ayatollah Rafsanjani's own words. Significantly, this decision was the result of security imperatives taking precedence over normative considerations. On 6 October 1988, referring to Iraq's use of WMD on the battlefield and to the international community's mild response to this abrogation of WMD regimes and norms, Rafsanjani told the Revolutionary Guard that 'the war had shown chemical and biological weapons to be "very decisive," and that "all the moral teachings of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious position"' (Chubin 1989: 22). In the same year, Rafsanjani 'told a group of his followers: "We must fully equip ourselves with defensive and offensive chemical, biological, and radioactive weapons. From now on, you must use every opportunity to accomplish this task"' (Feldman 1987: 137).

In mid-1988, after Iraqi forces recaptured Fao, Mohsen Reba – a senior Revolutionary Guard commander – wrote to Khomeini that 'Iran could only win the war [with Iraq] if it had more men, funds for arms, and access to new arms, including laser and atomic weapons' (Chubin 2008: 56). Shahram Chubin (2008) claims that Reba's letter persuaded Khomeini to accept UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 598 of July 1987 and end the war. Whether it was Reba's letter or a series of Iranian defeats in Majnoun (May 1988), Shalamche and Mehran (June 1988), and Dehloran (July 1988), coupled with the low morale of the fighting forces and the

2 The reactors were attacked in March 1984, February 1985, November 1987 and July 1988.

Iranian public, in July 1988, Khomeini accepted UNSC resolution 598 (Herzog 1989). The war ended, but Iran's reinvigorated quest for nuclear technology had only begun.

In the decades following the Iran-Iraq War, US-EU-led international pressure on Iran and intermittent negotiations succeeded in slowing down the development of the nuclear programme, but failed to persuade the ayatollahs' regime to invariably abide by the NPT, the safeguards agreement and other Iranian non-proliferation commitments. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed in July 2015 between Iran and the permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany (P5+1) was the latest attempt to contain Iran's nuclear quest. Under the JCPOA, also referred to as 'the nuclear deal', Iran agreed to scale down its nuclear programme substantially for a period of between ten and fifteen years and submit it to a rigorous international inspection regime in exchange for sanctions relief. According to US intelligence assessments, before the nuclear deal went into effect in January 2016, Iran had had the capability to enrich enough weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear weapon over the course of a few months. However, under the constraints of the deal a year was theoretically required to accomplish such a feat, thereby providing the United States and the international community more time to detect and prevent an Iranian attempt to cross the nuclear threshold (Robinson 2023).

In May 2018, President Donald Trump, who has been a leading opponent to the Obama administration-brokered JCPOA, announced that the United States was pulling out of the nuclear deal. President Trump argued that the deal failed to address Iran's belligerence and war-by-proxy strategy in the Middle East as well as the threat posed by its missile programme, while only delaying a confrontation over the nuclear programme. In addition, the Trump administration accused Iran of concealing past weaponisation activities after Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu exposed (April 2018) thousands of Iranian documents obtained by the Mossad and related to project Amad – a nuclear weapons programme that Iran has refused to acknowledge. In contrast to US intelligence, the Israelis are convinced that Iran did not halt its research into weaponisation in 2003 (Federation 2018; BBC News 2018).

The withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 resulted in reinvigorated Iranian nuclear-related activity. Consequently, US military and intelligence officials estimate that Iran can enrich enough weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear weapon in between one and two weeks. They also assess that Iran needs between several months and a year to complete acquiring necessary weaponisation capabilities that would enable it to go nuclear (Kerr 2023). As of mid-2025, the tension between Iran on the one side and the United States on the other has reached new heights. A new nuclear deal or a strike on Iran's nuclear installations are the two options that the second Trump administration presents

to the ayatollahs in an effort to end their pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities. While the United States and Iran began negotiations on a new deal in April 2025, with Oman acting as mediator, President Trump reaffirmed that the military option remained on the table (Barnes et al. 2025).

The decision to dismantle North Korea's nuclear programme

North Korea's decision to dismantle its nuclear programme in 1994 serves as another quintessential example of the powerful influence of security consideration on the outcome of political debates and the effectiveness of normative constraints in nuclear policymaking. In the face of strong opposition from within the North Korean military – perhaps North Korea's most important and influential bureaucratic organ – Kim Jong-il decided to strike a deal with the United States on an initial freeze and the eventual disarmament of North Korea's nuclear programme in exchange for security guarantees and political as well as economic inducements. Kim's decision did not correspond with North Korea's overarching normative guideline – its ideology of self-reliance (*Juche*) – and was made despite the fact that the nuclear programme was perhaps among the last remaining totems that served as a source of national pride for North Koreans.

The birth of the juche ideology and its predominance in North Korean policy

The *Juche* ideology emerged after the end of the Korean War (1950–1953) and advocated self-reliance in all areas, including economics and security. Apparently, North Korean leader Kim Il-sung was disappointed in what he perceived to be limited Soviet and Chinese support during the war and realised that the strategic and political objectives of his allies were far from overlapping North Korea's. For example, Joseph Stalin, the Soviet leader who gave the green light to Kim's invasion of South Korea, instructed his ambassador to the UN, Jacob Malik, not to veto a US-sponsored UNSC resolution to invoke a US-led UN military action against the invading North Korean forces. Bruce Cumings, relying on US intelligence sources, claims that 'there is no evidence of an upturn in Soviet military shipments to North Korea after June 25 [the day the war broke out]; if anything, a decrease was registered' (Cumings 1997: 266). According to Rosemary Foot (1985), Soviet military assistance with the war effort in Korea reached sufficient levels only towards the end of 1951, after the battles had reached a stalemate. China, under Mao Zedong, was concerned more about the survival of North Korea as a political entity and less with its territorial integrity. Therefore, Mao's defensive line on the Korean Peninsula stretched from Pyongyang in the West to Wonsan in the East. The renowned China-watcher and US diplomat Allan S. Whiting (1960) claims that Mao could have accepted a new demarcation line on the Peninsula north of the 38th parallel, but the US rollback strategy of reunifying the peninsula and the march towards the Yalu River pushed China to enter the war (Zhang 1995).

In July 1953, after three years fraught with US nuclear sabre-rattling incidents, the war ended with an armistice and with the two Koreas in possession of nearly the same territory as they had held before the war broke out. However, tension and mistrust continued to characterise US-DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) relations throughout the Cold War. Against this backdrop and the US decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, North Korea initiated its nuclear quest (Farago & Merrill 2021).

From the late 1960s onward, US-Chinese rapprochement only reinforced North Korean conviction in the importance of the *Juche* ideology of self-reliance. The warming of US-China relations resulted from the Nixon administration's determination to prevent China from falling victim to Leonid Brezhnev's aggressive doctrine, as manifested in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. Aware of the growing tension between the two communist countries along their mutual border, the US administration feared an imminent Soviet military action against China to include a pre-emptive strike against Chinese nuclear installations (Burr 2001, document 9). On 18 August 1969, Boris Davydov, a KGB officer stationed in Washington, contacted State Department Vietnam expert William Stearman and asked him 'What the US would do [sic] if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations . . . [And] what would the US do if Peking called for US assistance in the event Chinese nuclear installations were attacked by us?' (Burr 2001: document 10). In early September, the Nixon administration responded by extending deterrence to China through a public statement issued by Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson, clarifying that the United States would not remain indifferent to a Soviet attack on China (Kissinger 1994).

In the following years, the historic visits to Beijing of National Security Adviser Kissinger and President Nixon in July 1971 and February 1972, respectively, marked the beginning of an era characterised by political normalisation, cooperation and increasing economic interdependence between the United States and China. This trend soon manifested itself in a growing US-China trade volume that by 1990 stood at \$20 billion (US Census Bureau 2024), making the United States China's most important trading partner. Simultaneously, as its dependency on trade with the United States was increasing, China's credibility as a North Korean ally was weakening. In the mid-1980s, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il wrote in his book *On the Juche Idea of Our Party*: 'Of course, one may receive aid in national defence from fraternal countries and friends. But it is impossible to depend on others for the defence of one's own country' (Kim 1985: 53). This notion became even more evident after the collapse of the Communist Bloc and the Soviet Union as Russia and China discarded Cold War ideology and embraced economic growth as the driving force of their foreign policies. In September 1990, Russia and the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) established diplomatic relations and agreed, within the framework of a November 1992 treaty, to tighten bilateral relations and pro-

mote mutual trade. At the same time, Russia distanced itself from North Korea, and in 1996, President Yeltsin opted not to renew the 1961 Soviet–North Korean Treaty of Friendship, but to replace it with a less binding amity pact (Ahn 2012). China and the Republic of Korea established diplomatic relations in 1992 and bilateral trade between the two countries increased exponentially throughout the decade at an average rate of twenty percent per annum (Roy 2004).

Security imperatives override Juche ideology and military opposition

In accordance with the *Juche* ideology, the waning credibility of North Korea's traditional allies should have encouraged the Kim regime to continue its nuclear quest with vigour. Instead, in December 1988, North Korea entered into dialogue with the United States and was willing to trade its nuclear programme for security guarantees, sanctions relief and normalisation. A few years into the dialogue, North Korea took a major step towards building trust with the US-led international community by signing a safeguards agreement with the IAEA on 30 January 1992. However, IAEA inspections of North Korean reprocessing facilities during the summer of 1992 revealed that North Korea had produced more plutonium than it had declared. Furthermore, the IAEA was denied access to two underground facilities that were suspected of containing waste from undeclared reprocessing. While North Korea was failing to meet its safeguards obligations, experts estimated that it possessed enough weapons-grade plutonium for one or two nuclear weapons (Fitzpatrick 2011; Park 1997).

Thus, the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations were highly suspicious of North Korea's intentions and conditioned a nuclear deal on its upfront and full compliance with IAEA demands (Sigal 1998). This US policy was supported by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimate that highlighted the destabilising impact of North Korea's severe economic crisis on the regime and attributed the signing of the safeguards agreement to its 'desperate need for Western economic assistance' (Wampler 2005: document 2), rather than its acceptance of nonproliferation norms. The CIA estimate further noted that by refusing to fully implement the safeguards agreement, the heir apparent Kim Jong-il signaled to ultra-conservatives and members of the old guard that 'he can be entrusted with the country's future, particularly in view of his close identification with failing economic policies and fruitless overtures to the West, as well as signs of growing public dissatisfaction and rumors of military opposition' (Wampler 2005: document 2).

In spite of apparent resistance from North Korea's military to concessions to the United States, Kim Jong-il continued to pursue a nuclear deal with the US administration. If anything, the opposition of DPRK generals to a nuclear deal was used by North Korea's chief negotiator Kang Sok-ju as a bargaining chip in the negotiating process. North Korea envisioned a long-term step-by-step trust

building deal that would allow it to dismantle gradually, while receiving security guarantees and two proliferation-resistant light water reactors [LWRs] to ease its energy shortage. On 27 September 1994, Kang suggested that 'North Korea would agree to cooperate with the IAEA after a "considerable amount" of the nonessential parts of the new [LWR] reactors were in place and when essential components were shipped' (Wit, Poneman & Gallucci 2004: 301). Kang presented his proposed compromise again on 6 October 1994: 'It is impossible to accept the American position that the new reactor project could take place only after safeguards were imposed. The military already believed the project was a trick to reveal military sites . . . [However, North Korea] would be willing to "take all steps necessary to implement IAEA safeguards" after 70 to 80 percent of the new reactor components had been delivered' (Wit, Poneman & Gallucci 2004: 307–308).

The decision of the Clinton administration to accept Kang's proposed compromise resulted in the finalisation of the Agreed Framework on 21 October 1994. It stipulated that North Korea would freeze its nuclear programme and 'when a significant portion of the LWR project is completed, but before delivery of key nuclear components, the DPRK will come into full compliance with its safeguards agreement with the IAEA' (Wit, Poneman & Gallucci 2004: 317, 421–423). The dismantling of North Korea's graphite-moderated reactors and the related facilities was to commence after the completion of the first LWR unit and was to be completed by the time the second LWR unit was ready (Wit, Poneman & Gallucci 2004).

Unfortunately, the Agreed Framework, which was supposed to alleviate North Korea's security concerns and help it revive its economy, did not work out as planned. Mutual suspicion resulted in a failure to honour key Agreed Framework commitments. Consequently, the Agreed Framework had become obsolete by the late 1990s, and the Kim regime clandestinely resumed its pursuit of nuclear weapons, focusing on uranium enrichment. Shortly afterward, around the turn of the millennium, North Korea received from Pakistan a uranium enrichment starter kit. Although the Clinton administration was well aware of the uranium project, it chose not to act. However, after the Bush administration assumed office in January 2001, it decided to break the Agreed Framework. In October 2002, US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly was sent to Pyongyang to confront the North Koreans about their uranium project. As a result of Kelly's visit and the subsequent suspension of oil shipments to North Korea, the Kim regime expelled IAEA inspectors and withdrew from the NPT. The Agreed Framework collapsed (Farago 2016; Kartman, Carlin & Wit 2012).

In the past two decades, while efforts to rebuild trust between the two countries and reach sustainable nuclear deals failed to bear fruit, North Korea has enhanced its nuclear capabilities. Between 2006 and 2017, North Korea conducted six nuclear tests, and it is estimated to possess approximately 45 nuclear weapons to

include thermonuclear warheads. Complementarily, North Korea has improved the mobility and survivability of its delivery systems by acquiring solid-propellant and Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) capabilities. The ability to incorporate high-precision guidance and in-flight manoeuvrability systems to its arsenal of short-range missiles allows North Korea to develop tactical nuclear weapons that threaten US allies and assets in the vicinity of the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has also improved the range and capabilities of its Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) so they could cover the continental United States. For example, the Hwasong-17 ICBM that North Korea began testing in 2022 can reach potentially anywhere in the United States and is designed to carry multiple re-entry vehicles (warheads), according to US intelligence estimates (Nikitin 2023; Smith & Yim 2023).

Conclusion

Thus far, US-led international normative pressure and more than two decades of intermittent negotiations have evidently failed to persuade North Korea and Iran to set aside their security concerns and abandon their nuclear ambitions. Sooner rather than later, the United States' restrictive normative policy of depriving even allies of their NPT-sanctioned right to acquire an independent nuclear fuel cycle may face challenges from South Korea and Saudi Arabia – both of whom are apprehensive about the growing nuclear and missile capabilities of their regional adversaries. For example, in April 2023, on the eve of a summit meeting between Presidents Joseph Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol, a Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) poll showed that more than fifty-six percent of South Koreans were in favour of acquiring a nuclear deterrent (Hwang 2023). This finding is starkly at odds with the argument that the rule of democracy is necessarily conducive to a decision not to go nuclear, or alternatively, to abandon an existing nuclear programme. Public opinion may turn out to be a tailwind for proponents of an indigenous nuclear deterrent and a headwind for an administration in search of other solutions to its security dilemma.

Significantly, it appears that the US administration is cognisant of the limited ability of democratic domestic political structures as well as international norms and rules to prevent allies from seeking a nuclear deterrent to balance out their adversaries. Therefore, the United States attempts to assuage its allies' fears by resorting to military and diplomatic tools chosen from within the realm of the security model. On the Korean Peninsula, having failed to stop North Korea from crossing the nuclear threshold and obtaining an impressive and rapidly growing nuclear arsenal and missile capabilities, the United States focuses on bolstering extended nuclear deterrence to South Korea. In this regard, during their April 2023 summit, Presidents Biden and Yoon signed a joint declaration that included the establishment of a Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) between the two allies – a

mechanism intended to allow South Korea to influence US nuclear policymaking and contingency planning on North Korea. The United States further pledged to 'enhance the regular visibility of strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula' (White House 2023) – assets such as the Ohio-class USS Kentucky nuclear-armed submarine that entered the port city of Busan in mid-July 2023, marking the first visit of a US nuclear-armed submarine to South Korea after more than four decades (Nam 2023).

It is too early to judge whether the upgraded US-ROK strategic cooperation would affect the divided public opinion in South Korea on the issue of US extended nuclear deterrence credibility. A poll conducted by the South Korean *Asan* Institute in November 2022 showed that fifty-three percent of South Koreans thought the United States would use its nuclear power to respond to a nuclear attack by North Korea on South Korea, if the response did not threaten the security and territory of the United States. However, fifty-four percent of South Koreans were of the opinion that the United States would be deterred from using nuclear force in response to a nuclear attack on South Korea, if exposed to North Korean nuclear retaliation against US territory (Kim, Kang & Ham 2023).

The question facing the South Korean public at present resembles the question French President Charles de Gaulle asked President Kennedy during his visit to Paris in late May 1961, at the height of the Cold War and the Berlin Crisis: Would the United States 'be ready to trade New York for Paris?' (Sampson & Lafantasie 1993: document 30). The Kennedy administration surmised that if de Gaulle doubted US resolve, so did the Soviets, and was determined to convince the French leader of US extended nuclear deterrence's credibility. The problem was how to accomplish that (Sampson & Lafantasie 1993: document 30). The further North Korea improves the range and capabilities of its ICBMs, the harder it will become to convince the South Korean public and leadership that the United States is committed to trading New York for Seoul or Busan.

Not only the public, but also a growing number of South Korean politicians and academics are considering the nuclear option. Their concerns stem not only from the quantum leap in North Korea's nuclear capabilities and doubts about the credibility of US extended deterrence, but also from the emergence of a multi-polar international system, characterised by an assertive Russia and China. They argue that South Korea should not overlook the inadequacy of the US response to recent Russian and Chinese aggression. For example, Go Myong-hyun of the Asan Institute criticised the US response to Russian nuclear threats against Ukraine, noting that NATO forces were prepared to respond only with conventional means. Hong Joon-pyo, an influential conservative politician and the mayor of Daegu, has expressed concern that, in the event of simultaneous Russian and North Korean attack, the United States might not prioritise South Korea's security and could fail to respond effectively to a North Korean nuclear

strike. In this context, Cheong Seong-chang of the Sejong Institute pointed out that South Korea has failed to persuade the United States to guarantee an immediate and automatic overwhelming response to a North Korean nuclear attack (Kang 2024). For Lee Geun of Seoul National University, the aforementioned circumstances require South Korea to pursue a nuclear weapons option (Lee 2022).

The ongoing debate in South Korea echoes concerns from the 1970s. At that time, President Park Chung-hee decided to launch a clandestine nuclear programme in response to what he perceived as weakening US security guarantees. Under the Nixon administration's retrenchment policy, a US army division was withdrawn from South Korea, and US-China relations entered a period of rapprochement (Bernal 2023). For Park, Taiwan's political status and security had been compromised in the service of Washington's strategic priorities, which necessitated improved ties with Beijing. In his view, it did not seem improbable that South Korea could meet a similar fate (Pollack 2004). In the mid-1970s, the United States resorted to threats of abandonment to bring South Korea back into compliance with non-proliferation norms and regimes (Sukin 2023). By the mid-2020s, against the backdrop of rapidly deteriorating US-China relations, South Korea has become an integral component of Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed at checking China's growing power.

In contrast to North Korea, Iran has not crossed the nuclear threshold yet, but can go nuclear in a matter of months if it chooses to. Even if the United States and Iran agreed to re-implement the JCPOA, or to reach a new deal, the Iranians would be able to produce nuclear weapons within less than a year because of their technological advancements after the collapse of the JCPOA in 2018 (Kerr 2023). Saudi anxiety over Iran's nuclear programme is amplified by the kingdom's concerns about and vulnerability to Iranian aggression in the Gulf. In September 2019, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran climaxed after Iranian cruise missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) hit the kingdom's oil installations and temporarily disabled nearly half of its production capacity. The failure of the Trump administration to provide Saudi Arabia with military assistance during the attack was perceived by the Saudis not only as an act of abandonment, but also as a sign of the United States' weakening credibility as a regional balancer. Aware of its military and strategic conundrum and in an effort to ease tensions in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia initiated a dialogue with Iran in April 2021. Two years into the dialogue, through Chinese mediation, the two countries restored diplomatic ties that had been severed in 2016 (Shine, Guzansky & Shavit 2023).

However, the recent improvement in Saudi Arabia-Iran relations has changed neither the Saudis' perception of the Iranian threat nor their plans to catch up with the Iranians by acquiring an independent nuclear fuel cycle. Thus, Saudi Arabia – a signatory of the NPT with a vision of building sixteen nuclear reactors by 2040 – rejects US pressure to sign a '123 agreement' with the United States which would entail commitments to refraining from indigenous uranium enrichment and the

processing of plutonium as a condition for nuclear cooperation between the two countries. Saudi Arabia is also unwilling to sign the IAEA Additional Protocol that facilitates tighter supervision over declared nuclear installations as well as access to undeclared sites suspected of nuclear activity. As an alternative to possible nuclear cooperation with the United States, South Korea, and France, Saudi Arabia is examining Chinese and Russian proposals (Guzanski 2023).

Similar to other case studies examined in this article, it appears that security considerations significantly influence Saudi nuclear policymaking. Thus, a continued US effort to impose normative constraints on Saudi Arabia in excess of its NPT and safeguards agreement commitments could eventually benefit China and Russia. Instead, in order to prevent a nuclear arms race from erupting in the Gulf, the US administration should focus on tackling Saudi security concerns. Critical to US success is containing Iran's independent nuclear fuel cycle and research into weaponisation, preferably through a revised nuclear deal rather than a military operation.

Before leaving office, the Biden administration attempted to promote the establishment of an extraterritorial, US-run and IAEA-supervised nuclear fuel cycle in Saudi Arabia, in an effort to break the deadlock in the US-Saudi nuclear dialogue (Nissenbaum & Lieber 2023). The Saudis, for their part, have continued to postpone the deadline for their nuclear tenders, to the chagrin of China and Russia (Aguinaldo 2024). Importantly, the success of the US-Saudi nuclear dialogue in resolving disagreements is contingent upon the outcome of the April 2025-initiated negotiations in Oman and Rome between the second Trump administration and Iran. Persuading the Iranians to scale back their nuclear programme and rely on imported nuclear fuel is a key challenge for the US administration in the negotiations, one that it is actively seeking to overcome (Knickmeyer 2025). If the Iranians yield to US pressure, this could assist the administration in its efforts to convince the Saudis to accept a nuclear programme based on a restricted nuclear fuel cycle.



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