

What Drives Nuclear-Aspiring States? The Case of Iran and North Korea

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ABSTRACT

Why do states want to acquire nuclear weapons? In other words, what drives nuclear-aspiring states? This is the basic question that the author seeks to address in this research. To do so, this research will focus on two standout cases: Iran and North Korea. By employing structural realism as a tool of analysis, the author argues that it is the structure of the international system that drives both Iran and North Korea to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Specifically, it is the highly unequal distribution of power both regionally and globally that encourages both states to go nuclear. At the global level, both Iran and North Korea found themselves in hostilities with a much more powerful state, the United States. The hostilities and the fact that the United States is way more powerful increase the fear of being attacked in both countries. Similarly, at the regional level, both states face neighbors that are relatively more powerful and have alliances with the United States. Thus, this imbalance of power and the fear it created in both Iran and North Korea give them great incentive to go nuclear, as nuclear weapons would act as a deterrent against any possible aggression. This research is qualitative and based on the literature study data collection method.

Keywords: nuclear proliferation; national security; distribution of capabilities; structural realism

ABSTRAK

Mengapa negara ingin memperoleh senjata nuklir? Hal inilah yang menjadi pertanyaan mendasar yang ingin dijawab oleh penulis dalam penelitian ini. Untuk melakukannya, penelitian ini akan fokus pada dua kasus menonjol: Iran dan Korea Utara. Dengan menggunakan realisme struktural sebagai alat analisis, penulis berpendapat bahwa struktur sistem internasional lah yang mendorong Iran dan Korea Utara untuk memperoleh senjata nuklir mereka sendiri. Secara khusus, distribusi kekuatan yang sangat tidak merata baik secara regional maupun global yang mendorong kedua negara untuk menggunakan nuklir. Secara global, baik Iran maupun Korea Utara berada dalam permusuhan dengan negara yang jauh lebih kuat, Amerika Serikat. Permusuhan dan fakta bahwa Amerika Serikat jauh lebih kuat meningkatkan ketakutan akan diserang di kedua negara. Demikian pula di tingkat regional, kedua negara menghadapi tetangga yang relatif lebih kuat dan memiliki aliansi dengan Amerika Serikat. Dengan demikian, ketidakseimbangan kekuatan ini dan ketakutan yang ditimbulkannya di Iran dan Korea Utara memberi mereka insentif besar untuk menggunakan nuklir, karena senjata nuklir akan bertindak sebagai pencegah terhadap kemungkinan agresi. Penelitian ini bersifat kualitatif dan berdasarkan metode pengumpulan data studi literatur.

Kata Kunci: proliferasi nuklir; keamanan nasional; distribusi kapabilitas; realisme struktural

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Empire back in 1991, there was a popular belief among people, especially in the Western world, that the world was heading in "the right direction." This implies that with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, thus ending the Cold War, great power politics and inter-state disputes or conflicts—particularly those involving hard or military power—have become highly unlikely, if not obsolete. This belief is based on the assumption that globalization is the main driving force of the 21st century world, and consequently, there will be greater and more intensive economic interactions among nation-states along with the rise of non-state actors like multinational corporations. In addition, due to the rise of economic interactions, it was also believed that states would ultimately harmonize their economic and trade policies toward liberal, free-market policies, thus fostering free-trade all over the globe. It is also worth noting that the notion back then was not only concerning economics but also politics. This means that, along with the spread of markets, states will, sooner or later, employ liberal democracy as their political system. All of these assumptions led to the optimism that the 21st century would not be the same as the previous two centuries, where power politics and war were the main features.

One of the issues that is still being discussed among world leaders and scholars is the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Ever since the United States demonstrated its destructive power in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear technology has spread at a remarkable pace all over the world. This nuclear technology is the necessary ingredient for any state to acquire nuclear weapons. However, the spread of nuclear power did not necessarily translate into the diffusion of nuclear weapons. This was the case as there were only 4 states (Soviet Union, Britain, France, and China) other than the United States that had tested nuclear weapons.¹ Even so, in addition to the 4 states mentioned above, other states soon followed. Israel managed to build nuclear bombs in 1967, and India and Pakistan both tested nuclear weapons in 1974.² North Korea also fell into the chain of reaction as they started their nuclear weapons program after the conclusion of the Cold War. Therefore, in today's world, there are only 9 states in total that have acquired nuclear weapons. Those states are: 1) the United States, 2) the United Kingdom, 3) France, 4) Russia, 5) China, 6) Israel, 7) India, 8) Pakistan, and 9) North Korea.³

From all of the 9 nuclear weapons states mentioned above, North Korea attracts most of the attention. Ever since the 1950s, North Korea has been aspiring to be a nuclear weapons state.⁴ Although North Korea had previously signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), they withdrew their signature on March 12, 1993. North Korea had previously refused to comply with the IAEA's special inspection demand prior to their withdrawal. However, in July and September 1992, the IAEA was granted access to North Korea's nuclear facility. The inspection revealed excessive plutonium

¹ Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. 2020. "Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." In *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, by John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, 465-480. Oxford: Oxford University.

² Mærli, Morten Bremer, and Sverre Lodgaard. 2007. "Introduction." In *Nuclear Proliferation and International Security*, edited by Morten Bremer Mærli and Sverre Lodgaard, 1-5. Oxon: Routledge.

³ Greitens, Sheena Chestnut. 2020. "Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction." In *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, by John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens, 465-480. Oxford: Oxford University.

⁴ Pollack, Jonathan D. 2011. *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*. New York: Routledge; Smith, Shane. 2021. "Nuclear Weapons and North Korean Foreign Policy." In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea*, edited by Adrian Buzo, 141-154. Oxon: Routledge Jackson, Van. 2018. *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

extraction by North Korea, which was contradictory to what it had previously declared.⁵ North Korea's decision to acquire nuclear power is expected to prompt a nuclear crisis as other states, like the United States and its allies in East Asia, are prone to prevent such a thing from happening.

As for Iran, it is worth noting that Iran has not yet acquired nuclear weapons. Iran has been aspiring to acquire the technology needed to develop its own nuclear weapons since the 1970s. However, since it was revealed that Iraq had a discreet nuclear program back in the 1970s, Iran has been accelerating its nuclear program.⁶ Its nuclear program started to gain international attention back in the 1990s, then began to worry the international community when it was revealed that Iran had been doing "undeclared nuclear activities".⁷ Much like North Korea, Iran's nuclear activities are seen as a potential threat by other states, mainly the United States and Israel. The United States, unsurprisingly, seeks to deny Iran the ability to acquire nuclear weapons of its own. However, to achieve things is, of course, very difficult. Therefore, when the Iran Nuclear Deal was agreed back in 2015, the United States was not able to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons by Iran, although through that deal, Iran would take additional time to acquire such deadly weapons.

Given the two cases explained above, this research seeks to answer a basic question about why Iran and North Korea pursue nuclear weapons of their own. The author will make the case for whether Iran and North Korea are acting defensively rather than offensively. To achieve that, the author employs structural realism or neorealism as a tool of analysis. The author chose this theory for two basic reasons: 1) structural realism is the most parsimonious theory among other realist theories; and 2) although it is parsimonious, the author argues that it can best explain Iran and North Korea's decisions to go nuclear. Therefore, this research does not seek to provide complicated explanations. It seeks to simplify explanations of why Iran and North Korea chose to acquire nuclear weapons and their implications. This means that this article also does not seek to explain the technical aspects of nuclear proliferation. All of this is being done to provide readers with simple yet powerful explanations of the topic being discussed.

It is important to note that this article is not the first article that discusses Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs through the lens of structural or neorealism. There has been previous literature that has made the case for why Iran and North Korea want to acquire nuclear weapons by applying theoretical assumptions of neorealism, mainly the structure of the international system and the distribution of capabilities (power) among states. The first important work concerning Iran's nuclear pursuit is Tagma and Lenze book *Understanding and Explaining the Iranian Nuclear 'Crisis'*.⁸ The authors of this book, particularly Tagma also sought to solve the puzzle behind Iran's nuclear rationale. Furthermore, Tagma also employed neorealism in the efforts to shed lights in this puzzle. The main argument of Tagma's work on Iran nuclear rationale is that it is rational for Iran to seek to acquire to nuclear weapons from a defensive realist standpoint, considering both regional and global distribution of capabilities and the perceived threats aroused from that distribution. However, in this work, it is also argued that the Iranian Nuclear Crisis stemmed from both Iran's and the United States'

⁵ Buszynski, Leszek. 2021. "North Korea's Nuclear Diplomacy." In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea*, edited by Adrian Buzo, -170. Oxon: Routledge.

⁶ Albright, David, and Andrea Stricker. 2010. "Iran's Nuclear Program." In *The Iran Primer: Power, Politics, and US Policy*, edited by Robin Wright, 77-81. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

⁷ Hobbs, Christopher, and Matthew Moran. 2014. *Exploring Regional Responses to a Nuclear Iran*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁸ Tagma, Halit M.E, and Paul E. Lenze Jr. *Understanding and Explaining the Iranian Nuclear 'Crisis'*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020.

behavior. With regards to the United States, Tagma argued that offensive realism is best explained its behavior, considering that it want to curb Iran's nuclear program in its efforts to maintain primacy.

The second important work belongs to Popoola, Oluwadara, and Adesegun⁹. Their article entitled "North Korea Nuclear Proliferation in the Context of the Realist Theory: A Review" sought to explain North Korea's nuclear proliferation. In doing so, they also employed the structural realist theory and concluded that the North Korea's case strongly confirm the main tenets of neorealism. They maintained that North Korea, much like any other state in the system, has a great incentive to try to ensure their own survival. However, one interesting point that the authors argued in their article is that North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, although fell within the main tenets of neorealism, makes little strategic sense. They argue that proliferating nuclear weapons has left North Korea worse off in terms of economic capabilities. This is of course due to sanctions imposed on the country. They argued instead, that North Korea should do more in terms of soft power.

Thus, it is important to note that this research is not the first one to examine Iran and North Korea's nuclear aspirations. These 2 works are the main guiding literature for this research. The author's aim in this research is to strengthen their argument that both Iran and North Korea's aspirations to pursue a nuclear deterrent highly confirm the neorealist theory of international politics. However, unlike the 2 works mentioned above, this research seeks to compare directly the case of both Iran and North Korea to further show the explanatory power of neorealism when it comes to states' behavior.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs the structural realist theory of international politics as an analytical tool. Structural realism is one of the 3 main strands of the realist theoretical tradition of International Relations. Structural realism emerged as a refinement of classical realism. As the name suggests, structural realism (also known as neorealism) has a big difference on the main emphasis to what best explain states' behavior. Classical realism put forward a theory of IR that maintains human nature as the main driving force behind states' power-seeking behavior. On the other hand, structural realism does not buy to that argument. Rather, structural realists believe that the main driver of states' behavior is the structure of the international system.

Structural realism, also known as 'the new realism'¹⁰ or neorealism, falls within the realist theoretical tradition of International Relations. Structural realists basically argue that what drives states' power-seeking behavior is the structure of the international system, rather than human nature. The reality that there is no central authority or global government in the international system causes states to seek their own interests narrowly defined as security through the pursuit of power (primarily military power), according to structural realists. This structural realist basic assumption of states' behavior is completely different from that of classical realists, which emphasizes the centrality of human nature as the main driving force behind states' power-seeking behavior. This is the reflection of the efforts of the proponents of structural realism to provide a more scientific and systematic

⁹ Popoola, Michael Akin, Deborah Ebunoluwa Oluwadara, and Abiodun A. Adesegun. 2019. "North Korea Nuclear Proliferation in the Context of the Realist Theory: A Review." *European Journal of Social Sciences* 58(1), 75-82.

¹⁰ Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc

analysis of international politics¹¹, which was spearheaded by Kenneth Waltz through his book *Theory of International Politics*.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods are employed to conduct this study. In the field of political science and international relations, a qualitative approach is used when a researcher wants to "explain how and why" certain things happen.¹² By using this qualitative approach, this research is more concerned with the meaning¹³ of the issue being discussed (in this case, the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea). Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault¹⁴ mentioned that qualitative research "operates within theoretical frameworks". This means that, unlike quantitative researchers who seek to test a theory, researchers using a qualitative approach seek to find data that matches their choice of theory. Theory plays an important role in qualitative research as it provides a lens through which the researcher can see how the world works. As for the data collection technique, this study is based on library research where most of the data is obtained through scientific journal articles, books, and other online resources

Analysis

a. Constant Realities in A New Century

As it is mentioned in the background earlier, it was believed that the world was heading in a different direction after the end of the Cold War. It was argued that as the world entered a new century where globalization spurs economic interdependence among states, power politics is a thing of the past. As nations all over the world are expected to adopt liberal democracy, conflicts—let alone wars—between states would be significantly reduced. However, this is not the case. As time has progressed, we have seen that the optimism was short of realization. We may be entering a world where globalization is one of the important features, but it does not change the basic features of international politics, as the author will explain below.

The author argues that the current reality of international politics in the 21st century is fundamentally unaltered. To make the case, the author would like to explain 3 important assumptions about 21st century international relations, which are consistent with the theory of structural realism. First, the international system, although it has experienced changes in terms of the distribution of power, remains fundamentally unchanged. As Kenneth Waltz put it,¹⁵ "Changes of the system would do it; changes in the system would not." This means that, despite the remarkable growth of international institutions, the organizing principle of the international system remains anarchic in nature. Furthermore, when anarchy is still the organizing principle, it is unwise to assume that states would not behave according to the logic of anarchy to pursue security above all else.

¹¹ Jackson, Robert, and Georg Sørensen. 2013. *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹² Vromen, Ariadne. 2010. "Debating Methods: Rediscovering Qualitative Approaches." In *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, edited by David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, 249-266. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ Taylor, Steven J., Robert Bogdan, and Marjorie L. DeVault. 2016. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Waltz, Kenneth. 2000. "Structural Realism after the Cold War ." *International Security* 25(1), pp. 5-41

Second, nation-states are still, by far, the main and most dominant actors in international politics. This comes from the reality that nation-states have internal and external sovereignty, which means they are independent actors, free to roam in the realm of international politics. Another thing to take note of is that nation-states have power. This ultimately means that, although transnational actors such as IOs, NGOs, and MNCs play a role in the global economy, in the end, it is the states that decide what is good for them. They have the power to do so, as other actors do not. The third and last point is that, although globalization has indeed created a world where there is a significant rise in economic interactions and integration, the idea of globalism, which is where globalization belongs to¹⁶, as I would argue, has created an unstable world as well.

All three of the points mentioned above are completely consistent with the structural realist theory. The argument is that it is important for us to understand the basic reality of international politics (which has not changed) in the 21st century in order to attain an understanding of Iran and North Korea's behavior to acquire nuclear weapons. From the first point, we can conclude that the international system does indeed remain anarchic in nature. This means that in a world where there is an absence of a global or world government and where power is the main currency, security – particularly the military aspect of security – remains the central issue. On the second point, the proliferation of nuclear weapons by Iran and North Korea proved that states remain the dominant actors in international politics. This is due to the fact that states have both internal and external sovereignty, so they can act independently. International institutions, both in terms of organizations and laws, play an important role. However, in the end, states decide what best suits their interests.

As for the last point, mainly, it is useful to observe the impact of globalism and globalization from an American perspective. It has been argued by some scholars that¹⁷ Ever since the end of the Cold War, and with the rise of globalization, the United States has been pursuing a liberal grand strategy, famously known as liberal hegemony. Through this strategy, Mearsheimer¹⁸ said that America "sought to remake the world in its own image." The essential point of this liberal grand strategy is that the United States was believed to be a good force to spread liberal democracy and its values to nations all over the world to spur mankind's prosperity.

How does this relate to Iran's and North Korea's nuclear ambitions? The author argues that, as will be explained further in the following section, not only the elites in Washington are bent on achieving liberal hegemony, but they also believe that the world is "shrinking." Globalization has brought geographically-distant nations closer than any comparable period in history. Thus, this belief suggests that what happens somewhere around the world should and must be America's concern. As a result, the United States increased its presence and interventions around the world.

b. The Basic Structural Argument

To provide a basic structural explanation of why Iran and North Korea seek to acquire nuclear power, it is important to review the basic assumptions of structural realism. Based on previous works by renowned structural realist scholars such as Waltz¹⁹ and Mearsheimer²⁰, the author concludes that

¹⁶ Porter, Patrick. 2015. *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War and the Limits of Power*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press

¹⁷ See for instance: Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

the structure of the international system is primarily defined by two basic features: 1) Anarchy as the ordering principle and 2) power is the main currency of international politics. Anarchy simply refers to the non-existence of a global government that can enforce rules and norms on states and protect them in the event of danger. While, it is true that anarchy itself as an ordering principle does not necessarily translate into a never-ending war, it does not necessarily spur or encourage inter-state cooperation either. However, when anarchy is coupled with the existence of power as the main currency or to put it in another term, as the main determinant of states position in the international system, it creates a great incentive for states not to fully trust other states, as they have, to some extent, offensive military capabilities.²¹

Considering the structural factors explained above, states fundamentally adhere to the structural logic,²² which emphasizes that in a system where there is no global government and where the units have, to some extent, offensive capabilities,²³ it is therefore rational for states to pursue their own interests first, which in the world of structural realism is narrowly defined as security. Therefore, from the Iranians and North Koreans' perspective, it could be argued, the structural factors give them huge incentive to acquire nuclear weapons, as both Iran and North Korea are living in a system where the balance of power is unfavorable to them. This is the basic structural explanation for Iran's and North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. Although this may seem to be very simplistic, some scholars have pointed out, this very basic structural realist explanation has very considerable explanatory power, which that we would expect from a sound theory of international politics.²⁴

c. Analyzing Iran and North Korea's External Environment: A Closer Look at the Unequal Distribution of Power

Following the basic structural explanation provided in the previous section, this section is intended to provide a more in-depth analysis by focusing on Iran and North Korea's external strategic environments. That means, we ought to take a look at the distribution of power between Iran, North Korea, and other states in the system. In order to provide such an analysis, the author would like to build upon the explanation given by Tagma.²⁵ Through the lens of defensive structural realism, Tagma maintained that to explain national security policy, it is important to analyze the distribution of power both at the global and regional level. Although Tagma's analysis focused solely on Iran's nuclear ambitions, the author contends that his methodology could also be used to examine North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

First and foremost, we ought to take a look at the distribution of capabilities at the global/international level. To start with, since both Iran and North Korea accelerated their nuclear weapons programs after the end of the Cold War, thus, it is important for us to analyze the polarity or the distribution of power after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The post-Cold War polarity was a

²⁰ Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Donnelly, Jack. 2005. "Realism." In *Theories of International Relations*, edited by Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Christian Reus-Smit Matthew Paterson and Jacqui True, 29-54. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

²³ Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Tagma, Halit M. E. 2020. "Realism and Iran's Nuclear Program." In *Understanding and Explaining the Iranian Nuclear 'Crisis'*, by Jr. Halit M. E. Tagma and Paul E. Lenze, 65-103. Lanham: Lexington Books.

unipolar one.²⁶ This means that the system had only one great power. Because there are no other great powers to balance against, structural realists argue that unipolarity is inherently unstable.²⁷ Thus, it could be argued that the balance of power logic is virtually nonexistent as the sole great power has the leverage to pursue policies without considering what other states might respond.

This was certainly the case after the conclusion of the Cold War, where the United States, having emerged victorious, found itself as the single great power. The new power reality led the United States to pursue a grand strategy that was essentially prone to failure. Scholars famously labeled this new American grand strategy as Liberal Hegemony, which has 2 basic elements: first is the promotion of international cooperation, mainly through international institutions; and second, the promotion of liberal and democratic values throughout the globe.²⁸ Although to many people this strategy was seem to be virtuous its implementation, however, did not necessarily reflect this. When we looked back at the second element of the liberal grand strategy (the promotion of liberal and democratic values), the United States and its Western allies had, in some cases, used military power to advance this goal. For instance, the United States, along with its allies, has launched costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These wars were seen as just wars as their aim was indeed to spread democracy to free and protect the people of both Iraq and Afghanistan from authoritarianism and illiberal ideologies. The results of these wars are, of course, well-known, as both turned out to be foreign policy blunders. In short, the post-Cold War American foreign policy is highly militaristic.²⁹

Therefore, the author argues that it was this highly militaristic American foreign policy that mainly put the Iranians and the North Koreans a vulnerable position. As previously stated, the United States has demonstrated a willingness to use all necessary means to achieve its goal of promoting world peace through the spread of liberalism. One of their means, of course, is military intervention and regime change to try to topple despotic regimes. In the case of Iran, American foreign policy in the greater Middle East to create a democratic region creates a great incentive on the side of the Iranians to secure themselves by pursuing greater power, where the United States might actually intervene militarily and topple their regime.³⁰ This is similar, of course, to the North Korean case. North Korea was mentioned in 2002 by the then President George W. Bush as one of the states that form the "Axis of Evil". North Korea's fear was further intensified as the Bush Administration has put the use of force into consideration in dealing with the so-called rogue states seeking to acquire nuclear

²⁶ Krauthammer, Charles. 1990. "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs* 70(1), 23-33; Viotti, Paul R., and Mark V. Kauppi. 2012. *International Relations Theory*. Boston: Longman; Jørgensen, Knud Erik. 2018. *International Relations Theory: A New Introduction*. London: Palgrave; Ikenberry, G. John, Michael Mastanduno, and William C. Wohlforth. 2011. "Introduction: unipolarity, state, and systemic consequences." In *International relations theory and the consequences of unipolarity*, edited by G. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and William C. Wohlforth, 1-32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

²⁷ Donnelly, Jack. 2005. "Realism." In *Theories of International Relations*, edited by Scott Burchill, Andrew Linklater, Richard Devetak, Jack Donnelly, Christian Reus-Smit Matthew Paterson and Jacqui True, 29-54. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

²⁸ Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Abulof, Uriel. 2014. "Revisiting Iran's nuclear rationales." *International Politics* 51(3), 404-415; Bowen, W.Q., and J. Brewer. 2011. "Iran's nuclear challenge: Nine years and counting." *International Affairs* 87(4): 923-943; Chubin, S. 2007. "Iran: Domestic politics and nuclear choices." In *Strategic Asia 2007-08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, edited by A.J. Tellis, M. Wills and N. Bisley, 301-340. Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research.

weapons.³¹ In short, the possibility of an American military intervention put both Iran and North Korea in insecure positions and, therefore, from their point of view, it was rational for them to seek to acquire nuclear weapons.

With regards to North Korea, it has always perceived the United States as a potential threat to its national security. Cronin³² mentioned that ever since North Korea began its nuclear pursuit in the 1990s, the United States has worked to great lengths to try to both slow down and eventually prevent North Korea from acquiring such deadly weapons. In doing so, the United States has employed coercive diplomacy, threatening Pyongyang with economic sanctions and also stating that Washington may resort to force if deemed necessary. And while they may have had numerous talks between the two countries, the hostility has never ceased to exist.³³ Indeed, from a realist perspective, the increasing pressures and threats from the United States only further incentivize North Korea to not back down from its pursuit of a nuclear deterrent. This mainly reflected North Korea's sensitivity to its external environment (that is, the structure of the international system), particularly the huge power disparities with its main perceived adversary, the United States. John Mearsheimer put this point well when he said that there is no possible way that Pyongyang could trust the United States and give up its nuclear deterrent, given the United States policy record of regime change in countries it perceived as rogue states.³⁴ Thus, nuclear weapons, in the case of North Korea (as it would also be the case with Iran), are the ultimate guarantor of its continued existence, given the weapons' destructive capabilities, amidst potential mortal threats from the United States.

A similar explanation also implies the case of Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Ever since the 1979 Revolution toppled the Shah's regime, US-Iranian relations have mainly been characterized by hostility.³⁵ Much like North Korea, Iran has been clouded by the possibility of a regime change imposed by the United States. Indeed, United States records of fostering regime change in Iran go back to 1953, when the CIA launched a coup to put the Shah back in power. Furthermore, Washington's resort to the policy of regime change was at its peak during the George W. Bush Administration, particularly after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Back then, the Bush Administration declared a new foreign policy approach focusing on eradicating global terrorism, which became famously known as the Global War on Terror. As John Mearsheimer stated, the United States objective was not simply to go after terrorist-extremist organizations like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban but went beyond that. Specifically, the United States was also bent on confronting rogue states like Iraq and Iran to reduce and eventually eliminate the threats of terrorism and nuclear proliferation.³⁶

At the regional level, unipolarity has, of course, impacted Iran's strategic and national security policies. As mentioned above, the United States has been in an antagonized relationship with Iran ever since the Pahlavi dynasty was overthrown during the 1979 Revolution. The current

³¹ Buszynski, Leszek. 2021. "North Korea's Nuclear Diplomacy." In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary North Korea*, edited by Adrian Buzo, -170. Oxon: Routledge; Kaufman, Joyce P. 2021. *A Concise History of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

³² Cronin, Patrick M. 2008. "The Trouble with North Korea." In *Double Trouble: Iran and North Korea as Challenges to International Security*, edited by Patrick M. Cronin, 79-89. Westport: Praeger Security International

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Yonhap News Agency. 2018. *N. Korea will not give up nuclear weapons: Mearsheimer*. March 20. Accessed May 18, 2023. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20180320010200315>

³⁵ Sharma, Anu. 2022. *Through the Looking Glass: Iran and Its Foreign Relations*. New York: Routledge.

³⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. 2018. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

conservative regime in Iran has always perceived the United States with hostility. The author contends that the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have exacerbated the two countries' antagonistic relationship, with Iran viewing the US as a potential threat to its national security.³⁷ However, the United States is not the only major power that has antagonized relations with Iran. Other states, like Saudi Arabia and Israel, also have an uneasy relationship with Tehran. In the case of Israel, Israel has been worried about the prospect of Iran dominating the region, as it would mean significantly affects Israel's interests in a negative way. Therefore, Israel is also bent on preventing Iran from acquiring the capability to perform aggressive behavior. Not only that, as it is mentioned by Mearsheimer & Walt³⁸ the Israel Lobby has been pushing an unsound policy toward Iran.

On the case of North Korea, on the other hand, sound structural explanations were provided by Popoola, Oluwadara, & Adesegun.³⁹ They argued that the rationale behind North Korea's nuclear weapons programs lies in three reasons. The first is the collapse of the Soviet Union. It could be argued that the collapse of a major great power as big as the Soviet Union was a wakeup call for North Korea that great powers—let alone weaker powers—are not prone to survival. Second, the reality that its southern neighbor, South Korea, has been expanding and advancing its capabilities mainly through economic and social development, has created a situation where North Korea is under pressure to maintain its position in the region. The third and final reason is that the United States has maintained a strong military presence in the Korean peninsula, thus further creating a sense of insecurity and vulnerability, where it could not be guaranteed that American military power would be used against them.⁴⁰

Regionally, North Korea (much like Iran) is confronted with a highly imbalance in the distribution of power with its immediate neighbors. For starters, to its south, North Korea faced South Korea that has significantly more latent capabilities, mainly in terms of economic power. Add to this is the fact that South Korea is a very close ally of the United States (North Korea's main perceived adversary), which has its troops stationed in the South. Furthermore, Japan is also on North Korea's close proximity. Much like South Korea, Japan has undoubtedly larger economic power and also a close ally to the United States. Lastly, other great powers in the region, China and Russia are both larger and more powerful, although North Korea clearly perceived them with significantly less suspicion. Given this regional power reality, it is clear that North Korea is basically the weakest and most vulnerable state in East Asia. Thus, consistent with the prediction of structural realism, North Korea has pursued their own nuclear deterrent in its efforts to guarantee its survival considering its very dangerous regional environment.

Conclusion

This study's main aim is to answer the basic question of why Iran and North Korea pursue their own nuclear deterrents. In doing so, the author has employed structural realism as the main tool of analysis in determining the main cause of both Iran's and North Korea's nuclear-aspiring behavior. Thus, the main argument put forward in this research is that it is the structure of the international

³⁷ Tagma, Halit M. E. 2020. "Realism and Iran's Nuclear Program." In *Understanding and Explaining the Iranian Nuclear Crisis*, by Jr. Halit M. E. Tagma and Paul E. Lenze, 65-103. Lanham: Lexington Books.

³⁸ Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. 2007. *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

³⁹ Popoola, Michael Akin, Deborah Ebinoluwa Oluwadara, and Abiodun A. Adesegun. 2019. "North Korea Nuclear Proliferation in the Context of the Realist Theory: A Review." *European Journal of Social Sciences* 58(1), 75-82

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

system that mainly drives both the North Koreans and Iranians to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Specifically, it is the imbalance of power between Iran, North Korea, and other major powers in the system, both at the regional and global level. This imbalance of power created both vulnerabilities to Iran and North Korea's national security and huge incentives to seek greater power to try to ensure their survival within dangerous external environments. Thus, given that we currently live in a nuclear age and also given nuclear weapons' enormous destructive capabilities, it is only natural and rational for both Iran and North Korea to seek to acquire such deadly weapons, as they will act as the countries' main deterrents against possible threats. With that said, this study also further strengthens previous works' arguments and the explanatory power of structural realism as a tool for analyzing states' external behavior.

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