

Between Survival and Recognition: A Classical Theory Perspective on North Korea's Nuclear Decision-Making

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Abstract. The concern of nuclear is by all measures one of the thorniest problems haunting geopolitics in 21st century, no diplomatic or coercive means has turned to work normally for solving this problem on Korean Peninsula. A central research question has been: What explains the persistence of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in pursuing and keeping her nuclear weapons program despite international sanctions and profound political isolation? This study transcends traditional realist or rational-choices models to argue that North Korea's nuclear policy is essentially based on a calculated and persistent trade-off of two fundamental, though incompatible, imperatives: the iron law of regime survival and the long-standing aspiration for international recognition. Drawing on a novel theoretical framework which refers back to classical political philosophy, this paper unpacks the core dialectic. The first applies the insights of Niccolò Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt to explain what it calls the nakedly rationalist logic of self-preservation, explaining that denuclearization would be political suicide from North Korea's viewpoint. Following this, it engages with a Max Weberian sociology of legitimacy as a theoretical caution about the DPRK seeking international "recognition" to change its base of rule. The paper concludes by weaving these perspectives together in the form of a dynamic model, referred to as the "dialectical trap." Rather than leaning on one mechanism or pathway to regime survival, I argue that instead the unquenchable thirst for recognition necessitated by the pursuit of survival, exposes that other preservative features central to authoritarian identity are subverted under conditions of recognition—eventually creating an unbreakable cycle where any gains made toward one goal create vulnerabilities to another.

Keywords: North Korea; nuclear weapons; Political Philosophy; Regime Survival; International Recognition; Machiavelli; Carl Schmitt; Max Weber; Dialectical Trap.

1. Introduction

The nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula is not a new phenomenon but instead an age-old cyclical geopolitical dilemma, which has of late proved impervious to standard fixes [1]. The conditions of tension and thawing have alternated over the years, but neither various multilateral diplomatic engagements nor stringent international sanctions have accomplished any part of the primary aim: denuclearization [2, 3]. The fact that the stalemate has endured suggests that traditional international relations theories, including realist security dilemma [4] or rational-choice cost-benefit models, explain only part of what constitutes the "logic" of North Korean behavior [5].

Many academic works suggest that North Korea's compulsion to go nuclear lies far beyond any defensive response and is deeply rooted in North Korea's self-identity as well as core regime security interests [6, 7]. The serial failure of Western rational actor policy tools owes to a basic diagnostic error: viewing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a unitary Western style "rational actor" that would trade away an expensive nuclear program in exchange for economic benefits [8]. However, Pyongyang's "rationality" stems from a unique political philosophy which puts the dynasty's survival as the highest maxim. This paper examines why North Korea stubbornly continues to pursue its nuclear ambitions, even at the cost of economic strangulation and extreme political isolation.

This paper argues that while the necessity of their survival is one side of the coin, North Korean nuclear decision-making reveals a perpetual and strategic hedge between their instincts to survive and a deep want for recognition. And it engenders strategic behavior as a very direct expression of this innate dialectic. In order to better understand this choice, this study will first draw on the ideas of

Niccolò Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt to unpack the cold, material logic that leads to a "survival-first" approach. Second, it will tap into Max Weber's sociology of legitimacy to explore channels forward and dangers caught up in the struggle for "recognition." The paper will then use the "dialectical trap" as a model to draw these components together to describe the cyclical, dynamic, and self-enforcing logic of the nuclear impasse.

2. The Iron Law of Survival: Why Denuclearization Equates to Political Suicide

Indeed, the abandonment of nuclear weapons by Pyongyang is not recognized as a realistic policy option – rather as political suicide. This section sets forth that basic premise in understanding North Korean behavior. Niccolò Machiavelli's principles of state survival, along with Carl Schmitt's decisionism in power politics, serve as an excellent theoretical foundation for this argument.

2.1. Machiavelli's Dictum for the Prince: Nuclear Weapons as the Ultimate Guarantee of Power

Here is a frank statement on political reality in Niccolò Machiavelli's work *The Prince*: The great object of a ruler is to preserve the state (*mantenere lo stato*) and maintain his position [9]. In a world governed by fortuna and human fallibility, the prince should reject contingent obligations and morality for his own virtù in order to survive. This Machiavellian ethos closely aligns with the ruling philosophy of the Kim dynasty, which is defined by its absolute focus on regime preservation and continuity [10].

The Libya model is the most decisive and controversial lesson in international politics for the North Korean regime. In 2003, Libya of Muammar Gaddafi traded its WMD program for legitimacy and the end of sanctions [11]. But in 2011, when popular protests broke out domestically, the same western nations that had given security guarantees launched a military intervention through NATO that resulted in his fall from power and death [12]. Pyongyang's public pronouncements and state media have frequently and unambivalently cited Libya's experience as a "painful lesson" and indisputable proof of the West's treachery, framing the "denuclearization in exchange for security" offer as nothing more than a tactical feint to disarm the country in advance of a later invasion [13]. The overarching lesson gleaned in Pyongyang is that in a crisis, the security of the country, left in the hands of another, is unsafe; only absolute power, kept in the hands of the speaker himself, can guarantee survival.

This biased cognitive schema is further strengthened by counterexamples. For example, South Africa voluntarily dismantled its small nuclear weapons arsenal during the transition from apartheid to democracy, but is frequently dismissed as an anomaly [14]. On the other hand, Ukraine – which gave up the Soviet arsenal it inherited in 1994 in return for security guarantees – is an instructive corollary to the Libyan lesson [15]. The later invasions by one of its guarantors are seen in Pyongyang as solid evidence that gilt-edged commitments of great powers only reflect their own transient interests and that they count for nothing in the end. From a Machiavellian perspective, then, nuclear weapons are the essence of the Kim regime's ultimate virtù—the application of power and cleverness to fend off things from outside and prevent things from falling apart on the inside. For to give away this last pledge on the word of those who have promised but never performed, is the kind of political innocence which Machiavelli most hated; it is a kind of political self-murder.

2.2. Schmitt's Political Decisionism: Framing Denuclearization as a Hostile Political Ploy

While Machiavelli explains why power is indispensable to North Korea, the German jurist Carl Schmitt clarifies against whom this power must be directed. For Schmitt, the essence of "the political" is not governance or negotiation but the fundamental distinction between "friend" and "enemy" [16]. He argued that a state's sovereignty is ultimately expressed in its power to independently identify a public enemy and decide to go to war against it. Schmitt had a particular distaste for liberalism, which

he argued too often cloaked its political goals in universalist ideas of 'humanity', 'the law' and 'peace'. This inclination, he claimed, dehumanizes its enemies and thus supports what at first looks like a nonpolitical but in fact is an absolute war of justice [17].

By their official ideological accounting, the United States and its allies can always be portrayed as implacable, existential enemies. This is no mere rhetorical depiction but a cornerstone of the state's founding and its political culture. Within this correlative of Schmittian friend and enemy, all Western appeals for denuclearization are perceived as strategies of the enemy to disarm the DPRK and thereby bring about its destruction. International law as well as bodies like the United Nations Security Council are not seen as neutral, but rather as a tool of the enemy, one that is used to isolate the DPRK and therefore serve as a pretence for intervention [18].

Thus, when Machiavellian distrust meets a Schmittian world view, it creates a convoluted causal loop entailing an impossible "commitment problem." The West continues to demand "complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization" (CVID) because it has no confidence in North Korea. But the "verifiable" part from Pyongyang's perspective requires full exposure to the "enemy" and all of its secrets. This is not regarded as a "confidence building measure," but rather a move that is completely capitulating. Thus, the actions advocated by the West as a means of building confidence are perceived by Pyongyang to be proof of its worst suspicions. And that particular impasse, which stems from a basic conflict of political philosophies, means the sort of technocratic talks that negotiators have been holding are unlikely to produce a breakthrough.

3. The Glimmer of Recognition: Weberian Legitimacy and the Perils of Transformation

Although the logic of survival appears absolute, it is not the only realm within which the regime is calculating. The demand for "recognition," the imperative to gain legitimate status among nations in order to be able to preserve order as a long-term proposition, is the flip side of the coin. To be sure, the German sociologist Max Weber's theory of legitimacy provides a fuller framework for understanding both the possibly slender hopes for denuclearization and the enormous dangers of that process.

3.1. Weber's Typology of Legitimacy: The Aspiration to Shift from "Military-First" to Economic Performance

Political rule for Weber includes not just coercion, but also the rulers' legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled [19]. He developed three pure types of legitimate domination: traditional, based on respect for long-established traditions; charismatic, relying on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person; and rational-legal, based on a belief in the "legality" of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.

North Korea's present government system is a hybrid. It is founded primarily on traditional legitimacy, embodied by the "Paektu bloodline" of the Kim family, and heavily on charismatic legitimacy, manifested in the personality cults surrounding its leaders [20]. These two forms are reinforced by state ideologies such as Juche (self-reliance) and Songun (military-first), which posit a powerful external enemy to justify the indispensable role of the leader and the military as protectors of the nation [7].

This model of legitimacy is, however, subject to significant long-range challenges. Years of economic stagnation and famine on and off have greatly decreased the efficacy of the regime to act as a provider to the population [21]. At the same time, through tight control of information, knowledge of the outside world is seeping, however slowly, into the country, undermining the official story of charismatic authority [22]. This sets the stage for an interesting theoretical possibility, which is that in order to make itself more sustainable, the North Korean leadership will seek to modify its foundations of legitimacy away from unstable traditional and charismatic bases towards a more rationalized performance approach. This transformation would mean that the right of the system to

rule came not simply from blood or brainwashing, but the extent to which it was efficient in the exercise of power. For that type of a change, integration with the rest of the world and the lifting of sanctions are indispensable. In this rational calculus, giving up its nuclear program becomes the key card to play -- a way the regime can strategically trade its self-preservation into the future.

3.2. The Dilemma of Recognition: The Prohibitive Risks of Transformation

In theory that pathway is possible but the risks involved are so severe that it may well lead to the very collapse of the regime that is being avoided. This is the dilemma of the leadership, the most serious of all ... between existence or acknowledgment. The reform and opening-up required by this transformation could be a "Trojan horse," in so far as it would pose a multi-dimensional challenge to the current governing model.

First, there is the danger of ideological collapse. A full opening up of the nation would mean an uncontrollable flow of foreign information that could substantially undermine the cult of personality and Juche ideology and with it, the charismatic legitimacy of the Kim family [22]. Second, the scene is full of political risks for the economy. Even such a state-led process of marketization would bring about new social strata and networks beyond the traditional state control, and this would be the challenge to the authoritarian center [23].

Third, there is the danger of elite pushback. In the existing Songun structure, military, and conservative party elites enjoy enormous wealth and power. Any reform directed at reorienting national priorities from the military to development would be a palpable threat to the established interests of this group [24]. And then the sequencing of denuclearization, too could create a security vacuum. If the regime hands over the one thing that has always given it a strategic edge, without securing a serious security pact in return, it will find itself subject to a period of immense weakness and vulnerability -- perhaps like that of Libya. Such high risks create a strong downward spiral, buttressing the survival-first logic of Machiavelli and Schmitt. This Catch-22 helps to explain the back-and-forth character of North Korea's foreign policy—an eclectic attempt to stay on the tightrope between existence and acknowledgement.

4. The Dialectical Trap: Synthesizing Survival, Recognition, and Identity

Previous sections have outlined the politics of survival and recognition from different theoretical approaches. But the real irony of North Korea's situation isn't the logic of each of these particular cases -- it's how these individual logics complicate and overlap with one another, producing not a stable dynamic but a viciously positive feedback loop. This section concludes by integrating these perspectives into an explanatory model dubbed "the dialectical trap", which assumes that the regime is stuck in the proverbial 'circle from hell' whereby solving one existential dilemma co-produces and is vexed by another.

The thesis opens the process: the iron law of survival. In Machiavellian and Schmittian terms, the primordial aim of the regime is self-preservation in a supposedly hostile world. This logic naturally leads to the pursuit of nuclear weapons as the only credible assurance of safety. But this project also necessarily produces its certain contradiction, the recognition crisis. Its nuclear pursuit and nuclear possession brought worldwide condemnation, harsh sanctions, and international isolation. As a result, this decay erodes the regime's long-term stability and capacity to govern, creating great Weberian pressure to find new grounds to ensure legitimacy through the economy, and that requires international recognition and integration.

The regime is thus driven to seek a synthesis -- how the need for a nuclear deterrent can be reconciled with the need for economic development. But any effort at a genuine synthesis is meant to fail because of the static nature of its identity. As per constructivist theory, the North Korean state identity is rooted in the ideologies of Juche (self-reliance) and Songun (military-first) [7, 25]. The bomb fosters this identity in a way that nuclear weapons are not just an asset of the state—they are its ultimate symbol, one which clarifies the ability of the nation to prevent itself from being colonized

again, to draw a line against foreign domination [6]. So the very steps necessary to achieve international respectability (real denuclearization, structural changes, and openness) are seen as a direct attack on the essence of national pride. This would be tantamount to a betrayal of the state's primordial narrative and could be interpreted as political suicide, or a challenge to the survival of the regime at its most existential level.

This leads to a synthesis failure. What stands in the path of resolving the antithesis, the demand for recognition, are the basic premises of the thesis (the calculus of survival, now buttressed by identity). The fear of being led ideologically and politically exposes the regime to a sick cycle of stepping back from any substantial engagement by doubling down on its nuclear shield only to return to the starting point of being further isolated and financially crushed. This dialectical trap highlights the cyclical character of North Korean diplomacy: cycles of calibrated outreach (recognition seeking) will inevitably be followed by cycles of belligerence and weapons testing (reaffirmation of survival and identity) when the requirements of collaboration come to be seen as too menacing. The regime is not behaving irrationally; instead, it is behaving rationally in an infernal, self-reproducing logic.

5. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has shown that decision-making on nuclear North Korea alternates between two conditions of a deep-seated philosophical and strategic dilemma. The problem is more than just becoming a basic issue of military security or diplomatic tactics, it touches the regime's being of political philosophy. The approaches of Machiavelli and Schmitt provide powerful insights into why survival always wins out. At the same time, Weber's theory of legitimacy points to the unobtrusive but continuous undercurrent of pressure for change.

Based on these elements, the paper suggests a new explanation in the name of a "dialectical trap". This logic clarifies why seeking survival through nuclear weapons creates a boundless impotence to international acknowledgment, this time, however, with the political path to such acknowledgment blocked at its core due to being directly based upon the core of the regime's identity and hence its survival choice. For Pyongyang, to get rid of its nuclear arsenal means to lose not only a weapon but also its theory of state, legitimacy and survival formula. This finding has important implications for international communities: pressure and sanctions-only policies will probably not work since they only serve to tighten the noose of this trap and enhance the dominance of survival. A conceivable route to denuclearization may require a new way of thinking—one that seeks, not to create a situation where a choice is forced between survival and recognition, but to create conditions under which the very discursive structure of what constitutes survival can be slightly, safely and incrementally disentangled from its nuclear moorings. This is no small task; yet understanding the self-reinforcing logic of the trap is the necessary first step in even imagining a way out.

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