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ABSTRACT

Periods of mutual enmity in US-North Korean relations are typically interrupted by more conciliatory gestures. How can the many twists and turns in this relationship be explained and hopefully overcome so that more long-lasting détente is accomplished? Drawing eclectically on realism and constructivism, we conclude that a nuclear deal should address not only North Korea’s interests in security and regime survival, but also its status concerns. Applying the same theories to the other part of the dyad – the US – we conclude that it may now have material interests in ameliorating the relationship, but that such a development requires US foreign policy discourse to cease depicting North Korea as “irrational” and “evil”.

KEYWORDS

constructivism; North Korea; nuclear issue; realism; ontological security; status

The relationship between the United States (US) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) has been adversarial for more than 70 years, with periodic interruptions of more conciliatory gestures. The Trump administration is no exception. In fact, the current administration has vacillated more strongly in its relationship with North Korea than any of its predecessors. President Donald J. Trump initially called Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un a “madman” and threatened North Korea with “fire and fury” (White House 2017). However, he met the North Korean leader in Singapore only a few months later, pledging that the two nations would work together for “peace and security” and the “complete denuclearization” of the Korean Peninsula (White House 2018). He even described his meeting with Kim Jong-un in terms of “falling in love” (BBC News 2018).

The failure to reach an agreement in Hanoi in February 2019, however, swept away any optimism remaining from the Singapore summit just eight months before. The two states were once again unable to reach a lasting agreement on denuclearisation, i.e. the biggest strain on the bilateral relationship. Furthermore, the Hanoi debacle was followed by reports that North Korea had resumed its missile tests (Lee 2019). Despite these setbacks, Trump and Kim organised a surprise meeting in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on 30 June 2019. Now the two heads of state praised each other and their “special relationship”, and the months of deadlock and looming hostilities again seemed to be distant memories (White House 2019). While new reports of North Korean weapon tests do not seem to have interfered with the two leaders’ personal relationship, there is still no agreement and there has been little concrete progress.
How do periods of temporary détente become possible and, conversely, why does the bilateral relationship tend to relapse into old inveterate patterns? How can enmity in US-North Korean relations be overcome on a more long-term basis?

Previous commentary has addressed these questions in diverse ways, but there are arguably two main tendencies. The first has dominated policy circles and sees any progress as ultimately unrealistic. Since North Korea defies rational explanation, there is no reason to believe that it will ever stick to a rationally negotiated agreement. Former National Security Advisor, Herbert Raymond (H.R.) McMaster, for example, suggested that classical deterrence theory does not apply to the country because it “engages in unspeakable brutality against its own people … [and] poses a continuous threat to its neighbors in the region and now may pose a threat, direct threat, to the United States with weapons of mass destruction …” (ABC News 2017). The second tendency is represented better in academia. The basis for its equally pessimistic prognosis is instead that both North Korea and the US are highly rational. Nonetheless, based on a narrow realist understanding of what constitutes rational state conduct in international politics, scholars typically assert that each actor’s pursuit of security is more likely to sustain the security dilemma than to contribute to its transcendence.

We agree more with the latter tendency but think North Korea’s interest in security and regime survival and the US’ unwillingness to reward “bad behaviour” are only a part of what should be taken into account when considering how more durable progress could be brought about. The aim of this article is thus to traverse the rationality/irrationality binary presented above and contribute to a broader understanding of how it might be possible to get North Korea and the US to break out of adversarial policies on a more long-term basis. In doing so, we demonstrate that the rationality/irrationality binary itself plays a role in sustaining the antagonism.

In analysing the conditions for progress on the North Korean side, the article agrees that Pyongyang’s interest in security and regime survival has to be taken seriously but argues that the same goes for its interest in status. These two sets of interests are deduced from the International Relations (IR) theories of realism and constructivism, respectively. Moreover, many analysts are too preoccupied with North Korea and forget that its counterparts also affect the ups and downs of the relationship (Bleiker 2003). Of North Korea’s many counterparts, this article focuses on the United States. While the US and North Korea can strike a deal with each other without the involvement of Japan and South Korea, the latter two actors cannot reach comprehensive agreements with North Korea without US participation. Only the US is thus in a position to offer North Korea what it craves: security and status. Conversely, the US is really the only state capable of annihilating North Korea in case of war.

We argue that two conditions must also be met on the US side if talks are to be fruitful and produce long-lasting results. First, while acknowledging that realism can be used to explain and motivate almost any policy, we demonstrate how forging closer relations with North Korea might also be seen as aligning with US material interests. Second, based on constructivist tenets, we argue that US foreign policy discourse relies on depicting North Korea as “irrational” and “evil”. While such statements are arguably a source of US ontological security, they contravene North Korea’s interest in status. We suggest that such statements have to end if the relationship is to be set on a more secure footing.

IR research tends to juxtapose realism and constructivism as if they were mutually exclusive monoliths. In the final analysis, material factors either have independent explanatory power (realism) or gain their meaning through
intersubjective practices (constructivism). This makes it difficult to combine the two theories. The aim of this article is not to add to scholarly debates about the relative veracity of, or exact relationship between realism and constructivism (see for example Barkin 2003). It instead aims to propose, in a spirit of “analytic eclecticism” (Sil and Katzenstein 2010), that it is crucial to understand and reckon with both theories if the goal is to move the US-North Korean relationship towards a more lasting détente. Indeed, theoretical orthodoxy may not take us very far with respect to North Korean-US relations. The article expands on the conditions mentioned above, and discusses whether they have been met in historical instances where talks began, continued or broke down, as well as in situations where enmity was reproduced, temporarily put on hold or rekindled. In doing so, it exemplifies how insights from different theories can be pragmatically combined to understand international politics and generate lessons with implications for policy practice.

**A realist lesson: North Korea’s interest in security and regime survival**

Realists theorise states as operating in an anarchical system, in which self-help is the primary means for ensuring regime survival and security (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001). Due to their destructiveness, nuclear weapons are seen as the ultimate security guarantee for states (Waltz 1979, 185). There are several competing realist schools, but only offensive realists might construe North Korea and its nuclear arsenal as a direct threat to the US and its allies. Most other realists should agree that North Korea has developed nuclear weapons as a tool for survival (Anderson 2017, 623-624). With few reliable allies, and located in a particularly volatile region, North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons is seen as anything but irrational and as a means for ensuring security and regime survival. As demonstrated above, this perspective is already well represented in the debate on how to handle North Korea. This section explains in greater detail how security and regime survival have played out as conditions for progress in US-North Korean relations. We investigate the extent to which these interests have been met in previous interactions and with what implications.

The Korean War (1950-53) ended in an armistice agreement only and tensions on the peninsula persist. Both during the war and for some time after, a policy of using nuclear weapons against North Korea was repeatedly on the US agenda (Calingaert 1988, 177; Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 61). The fact that the war took place in the decade after the US had dropped atom bombs on Japan arguably made the threat seem even more credible to Pyongyang. Moreover, since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent ending of security guarantees from Moscow, North Korea has had to fend for itself (Cha 2002, 216-220; Kim 2010, 49).

Even though the North Korean Army is large in number, its strength is just a tiny fraction of the combined forces of the US and its allies, and its conventional military equipment is outdated. North Korea has compensated for its relative inferiority in conventional military terms through the development of a nuclear deterrent. History also provides valuable lessons for the leadership in Pyongyang. In 2003, the US attacked Iraq, which did not have nuclear weapons. Eight years later, a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led coalition orchestrated regime change in Libya after Muammar
Gadda\textsuperscript{fi} had agreed to abandon his country’s nuclear programme. North Korea, by contrast, has managed to stay out of harm’s way.

Pyongyang has issued a wide range of demands throughout its lengthy process of nuclear development. Some demands, such as US troop withdrawal from the Korean Peninsula, have been dropped during the negotiation process (Landler and Sang-Hun 2018), whereas others, notably the removal of sanctions, remain. The alleviation of sanctions and the provision of foreign aid and investment are often seen as part of a liberal engagement strategy, but for North Korea, such economic benefits are means for regime survival. Thus, even North Korea’s economic demands can be understood from a realist viewpoint.

There are signs that North Korea is more willing to negotiate when measures are taken to address and reduce its physical insecurity. In 1991, the North Korean leadership demanded the removal of US nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula and threatened to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which it had signed in 1984 but failed to ratify. In the end, the US removed its nuclear weapons. Whether this improved North Korea’s security or was more of a symbolic victory is difficult to say, but the removal was followed by an agreement between the two Koreas to achieve a nuclear-free peninsula (Joint Declaration 1992). By contrast, President George W. Bush’s repeated guarantees that the US had “no intention” of attacking or invading North Korea had little effect as the US did not withdraw any troops from Japan or South Korea to demonstrate its sincerity (Cha 2012, 310-312).

Prior to the 2018 summit, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that the US was prepared to provide North Korea with security guarantees that would be “different and unique” (Carungcong 2018). This kind of conciliatory rhetoric arguably helped bring about the three summits between Trump and Kim. As was shown in Hanoi, however, vague promises are not sufficient in the long run for persuading North Korea to denuclearise.

We concur with Richard C. Bush (2003) that complete North Korean denuclearisation is not equivalent to mere US commitments to non-aggression. Such an arrangement would create an “imbalance in Washington’s favor”. Hence, if progress is desired, the first realist lesson is that the United States will have to take more tangible steps to address North Korea’s interest in security and regime survival.

However, while North Korea is obsessed with state security and regime survival, some of its behaviour could prove counterproductive. According to the so-called deterrence paradox, North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons might not make it more secure. If Pyongyang is perceived as too much of a threat, it might instead become a more likely target for foreign attack (Cha 2002, 216-220). North Korean actions may thus be guided by another logic besides security and regime survival, as understood in material terms. We propose that Pyongyang also has an interest in status.

**A constructivist lesson: North Korea’s interest in status**

Constructivists stress the socially constructed nature of the international system and the drivers within it (Wendt 1992). The more specific argument in this article is that North Korea is developing nuclear weapons not just to defend its territory from outside intervention, but also to obtain the status of a great power (Sagan 1996; Chung 2016) and a respected counterpart to the US in negotiations on the future of the Korean
Peninsula (Bluth 2017, 47). Support for this thesis can be found for example in an address to the UN General Assembly in 2017 by North Korea’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ri Yong-ho, who stated that the pursuit of nuclear weapons, although “forced” by the United States and for purely “defensive purposes”, had resulted in “… our country [North Korea] achieving the status of a nuclear weapon state and a rocket power, and this prestige has now become an immortal destiny of the DPRK” (United Nations 2017, italics added).

Nina Tannenwald (1999) argues that a “nuclear taboo” has emerged in international politics, delegitimising both the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons. The diffusion of this normative prohibition explains why many states have chosen to forego nuclear weapons despite the fact that they could have developed them. By contrast, our point is that prospective great powers are socialised in the perhaps more overlooked norm that ties the possession of nuclear weapons to a notion of “greatness” or “great power-ness”. All the traditional great powers, the US, China, Russia, the UK and France, possess nuclear arsenals. In addition to their function as a deterrent, therefore, states may also seek nuclear weapons to obtain status. Jacques Hymans (2006), for instance, points out that the decision to “go nuclear” is driven by a leader’s perception of the state’s identity and place in the international hierarchy. More concretely, a nuclear weapon can help materialise North Korea’s self-perceived greatness and satisfies its craving for status and pride, in addition to meeting its interest in security (25-40).

In discussing the “emerging international structure” after the end of the Cold War, Kenneth Waltz established that “a great power’s panoply includes nuclear weapons”. He suggested that “Japanese and German nuclear inhibitions arising from World War II will not last indefinitely” (Waltz 1993, 64, 66-67). Waltz’s point was not primarily that Japan and Germany would have to arm themselves for defensive reasons, or that the logic of power conversion means that booming economic capability must necessarily translate into military capability. Instead, Waltz conjectured that these rising powers would only be able to achieve proper great power status through the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Using “the father of neorealism” to establish a constructivist argument may seem odd, but in international politics status is “in large part based on military and economic power”, and nuclear weapons in particular define what it means to be a great power (Welch Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 72; see also Ringmar 2002; Ward 2019, 212-213).

Looking further into the case of Japan, Japanese politicians, as well as scholars and analysts around the world, have stigmatised Japan’s security stance as “abnormal” in the post-Second World War period, at least in part due to the country’s decision to forego nuclear weapons (Hagström 2015). There are historical and ideational reasons behind Japan’s decision, and any reversal of this policy would certainly be criticised both domestically and internationally (Katzenstein 1996; Midford 2002). At the same time, however, it seems that Japan will only gain the status of a normal great power by remilitarising, ultimately by arming itself like other great powers.

France is another example. It suffered humiliating defeats and occupation in the Second World War and its colonial empire declined rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas realists may argue that the French political leadership decided to acquire nuclear weapons due to doubts about US security guarantees, from a constructivist perspective they did so also to entrench the perception of France as a great power among domestic and international audiences (Sagan 1996, 76-79).
International norms thus seem to be pulling North Korea in conflicting directions. What might be called a norms paradox means that the harder North Korea attempts to gain international status as a great power through a myopic focus on nuclear weapons, the more it will be construed as illegitimate and abnormal in line with Tannenwald’s notion of a nuclear taboo, and its acquisition of nuclear weapons will be seen as unacceptable and deplorable.

Status, however, can be pursued through other means as well. Examples from the 1990s show that North Korea is more willing to negotiate when it is acknowledged as a respected counterpart. After former US President Jimmy Carter went to Pyongyang in 1994, for example, the administration of US President Bill Clinton made major progress in shaping the Agreed Framework (Goodby 2003). In June 2018, moreover, North Korea made pledges to denuclearise after its leader was given time in the international spotlight, sitting next to and shaking hands with the leader of the most powerful country in the world (Dian 2018).

There are also examples of how North Korea started to roll back progress when it was exposed to status-harming stigmatisation. For instance, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush labelled North Korea a member of the “axis of evil” together with Iran and Iraq. This not only increased regime insecurity, but it can be argued that North Korea also took it as an insult. A spokesperson for the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated in response that the US should refrain from threatening an “independent and sovereign state” in such a manner, emphasising North Korea’s status as a legitimate actor on the international stage, rather than a “rogue” excluded from the international community (Baker 2002). North Korea subsequently left the NPT, as it had threatened to do back in 1993, and the Agreed Framework collapsed (Huntley 2006, 723-724). Thus, the first constructivist lesson is that it may be necessary to reward North Korea with status through other means to compensate for the loss of nuclear weapons that a lasting agreement would have to entail.

A realist lesson: US strategic interests

According to realist thinking, a state’s strategic interests are defined in terms of its own power relative to that of potential challengers. Power can be enhanced either through the acquisition of arms, as in North Korea’s case, or by skilfully navigating among friends and enemies by forging strategic alliances (Waltz 1979, 168). Broader US strategic interests in Northeast Asia arguably affect its willingness and ability to make progress with North Korea. The US has had a large military presence in the region throughout the postwar period. Troop levels have varied over time, but there are currently 28,500 troops in South Korea and around 47,000 in Japan. Alongside its naval forces and missile arsenals, these form the basis of the US ability to project power in the region.

Since normalising relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the 1970s and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has enjoyed an unrivalled position in Northeast Asia. In the 1990s, China’s military expenditure trailed that of the US, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) lagged far behind its US counterpart in terms of modernisation (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2018). From a realist viewpoint, Beijing was still too weak materially to pose a threat to US regional influence in the decade after the end of the Cold War. The absence of a major threat to US interests in the region arguably made Washington more amenable to discussing and entering into agreements with Pyongyang. As noted above, the Bush administration
agreed to withdraw US nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, and the Clinton administration entered into the Agreed Framework with North Korea in 1994.

However, the spirit of cooperation ended with the collapse of the Agreed Framework in the early 2000s. North Korea was producing high-grade uranium in contravention of the agreement, but the Bush administration had also failed to deliver on its promises. It had not supplied heavy oil to North Korea as agreed; it had delayed the construction of two promised light-water reactor power plants; and it had made no move towards diplomatic normalisation and the lifting of sanctions (Wit 2001, 88; McCormack 2004, 154-157). Washington’s decreasing willingness to compromise and negotiate might also be seen in light of China’s military advances. In the first half of the 2000s, China’s military expenditure increased twofold. There was a paradigm shift to “informatisation” in 2002, when Beijing announced its ambition to modernise the PLA to include new, high-tech weaponry (Furuoka et al. 2016, 141). This new Chinese challenge was difficult to address head-on, and North Korea provided a convenient excuse for the US to maintain its military presence in the region without having to confront its looming challenger (Hagström and Turesson 2009; Hughes 2009).

After the breakdown of the Six-Party Talks in 2009, the United States hardly engaged with North Korea at all. Instead, the administration of US President Barack Obama adopted the tactic of “strategic patience”, which entailed maintaining sanctions and keeping pressure on North Korea to make it more compliant (Tan 2017, 310). In essence, the Obama administration largely ignored North Korea after the quick collapse of the so-called Leap Day Deal in 2012, in which Pyongyang agreed to suspend missile- and nuclear-related activities following the death of Kim Jong-il (Panda 2016). Arguments have been made that the Obama administration shared the Bush administration’s view of North Korea as “untrustworthy”, and thus did little to change its approach to the country (Farago 2016). However, from a realist perspective, the primary US interest may have been to maintain the regional status quo, including its own military presence in Northeast Asia. Hence, it is likely that the US interest in containing China trumped the interest in having improved relations with North Korea.

Since Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2012-13, the PRC has emerged even more clearly as the US’ greatest rival on the global stage and the foremost threat to US interests. After 40 consecutive years of economic and military expansion (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2018), China has just begun to challenge US dominance in Northeast Asia. Among other things, it has tried to gain influence with US allies, particularly South Korea (Zhao 2015, 381). The Trump administration has dealt with China’s continued rise by issuing threats of increased tariffs and a trade war, further straining bilateral relations. The resurgence of Chinese anti-American propaganda from the Korean War testifies to the deteriorating situation (Kuech 2019). In contrast to his predecessor, however, Trump has actively tried to improve relations with North Korea. These developments also make sense from the viewpoint of US strategic interests. Indeed, we think they exemplify a so-called wedging strategy. By offering improved relations to North Korea, US strategists may hope to end China’s influence over the country. A historical example of this approach is US President Richard Nixon’s trip to China in 1973, which aimed to divide the two most powerful communist states in the world: the Soviet Union and the PRC (Bernkopf Tucker 2005, 117). This is also the perception among policymakers in Beijing, who construe all US actions as efforts to contain China’s rising power in Northeast Asia (Zhao 2015, 384-385).
In sum, the second realist lesson is that US policy towards North Korea is driven by its interest in maintaining its power position in East Asia. Having long been the perfect excuse for maintaining the US military presence in Northeast Asia without antagonising China, North Korea could now develop into a means for limiting China’s regional influence. Needless to say, the latter position is more amenable to US-North Korean détente than the former.

**A constructivist lesson: US interest in ontological security**

While US material interests are often overlooked in the discussion about North Korea, another aspect tends to be even more neglected: US reliance on the notion of North Korean irrationality and viciousness for upholding its own identity. High-ranking US policymakers have frequently called North Korea “irrational”, “mad”, “unhinged”, “reckless”, “crazy” and “erratic” (respectively, Blair 2016; CBS News 2017; Evans 2017; Office of Representative Ted Lieu 2017; USA Today 2017; Choi 2018; Hamedy 2018; US Department of Defense 2018). It is not only Republicans, such as the former UN Ambassador, Nikki Haley, and the late Senator John McCain, who have used this imagery. Democrats such as Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) and President Obama (Blair 2016; Office of Senator Bob Menendez 2016; Bremer 2017), as well as non-political officials such as Navy Admiral Samuel Locklear, former commander of the US Pacific Command, and his successor Admiral Harry Harris have also done so (Shinkman 2014; Straits Times 2017).

North Korea is represented not just as irrational, but frequently also as evil. They are not the same things, although both have decidedly negative connotations. President Bush labelled North Korea evil in 2002, just as President Ronald Reagan did back in the 1980s (Goodby 2003). North Korea’s human rights record and treatment of its own population certainly justify this label. For instance, former Secretary of State John Kerry stated that Kim Jong-un’s rule has been characterised by “egregious displays”, citing “stories of grotesque, grisly, horrendous public displays of executions on a whim and fancy” (Cho 2015).

In the 1980s and 1990s, even before North Korea had reached the current level of advancement in its ballistic and nuclear capabilities, North Korean foreign policy was described as “erratic and periodically violent” and “logic-defying” (Roy 1994, 308; see also Smith 2000). We argue that these depictions recur because they help fortify the US’ identity of being a rational force for good. This constructivist explanation highlights the US’ interest in having a stable identity, or ‘ontological security’ and how this requires the continuous reproduction of invective against North Korea. Overcoming this factor is yet another condition for progress in US-North Korean relations.

The existing literature defines ontological security as “a sense of continuity and order in events” regarding identity and “biographical continuity” (Giddens 1991, 53, 243). Scholars agree that states’ ontological security-seeking is demonstrated in autobiographical narratives, in which the state is situated in the past, present and future, and differentiated from others (Giddens 1991; Berenskoetter 2014; Rumelili 2015). In fact, depictions of North Korea as irrational and evil may not only help to satisfy ontological security needs in and beyond the US, but also delineate more generally the boundary between the rational, good and normal inside, and the irrational, evil and abnormal outside of Western-centric international politics (Shim 2014, 121-122; Choi 2015, 1-30).
As Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014) has argued, the effective socialisation of most states into dominant norms requires the concomitant stigmatisation of some other states. Or, as Erik Ringmar (2014) has demonstrated, practices of recognition in international politics depend on the contemporaneous non-recognition of a small number of others, “accentuating and exaggerating differences and forgetting nuances and variations” (447). The continuing stigmatisation of North Korea and other rogue states thus helps to enforce compliance with the existing international order, imposing what is considered to be desirable behaviour on most actors.

The US interest in ontological security can be demonstrated by zeroing in on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when President Bush labelled North Korea, Iran and Iraq the axis of evil. The attacks had challenged a US identity premised on being the invulnerable hegemon and force for good. North Korea of course had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks. Yet, Bush justified the country’s inclusion in the axis of evil by stating that it was a primary supplier of illegal ballistic missiles and a “sponsor of international terrorism” (Wagner 2002, 25). On a more profound level, however, North Korea represented a clear adversary, the juxtaposing of which could help put US identity on more solid ground once again.

By contrast, this kind of stigmatisation was not seen when the Clinton administration negotiated the Agreed Framework in 1994. Instead, Clinton focused on the regional and global security situation when announcing the agreement. Naturally, hostile language vis-à-vis Pyongyang remained among the lower ranks of the US policymaking system, especially Republicans in Congress, but there was no such emphasis from the highest office (C-SPAN 1994; Jackson 2018, 238). Hence, in 1994, US ontological security did not seem to require a uniform branding of North Korea as evil in the way it did in 2002. The US identity was arguably particularly secure during this period, characterised as it was by the “end of history” (Fukuyama 1989) and the US’ “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer 1990/91).

The Trump administration has become notorious for its use of strong language, but its statements on North Korea during its first year did not diverge much from those of past Republican leaders. In February 2018, Vice President Mike Pence cancelled a meeting with the North Korean delegation to the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, headed by Kim Jong-un’s sister Kim Yo-jong, explaining:

The sister of Kim Jong-un is a central pillar of the most tyrannical and oppressive regime on the planet, an evil family clique that brutalizes, subjugates, starves and imprisons its 25 million people. [...] For all those in the media who think I should have stood and cheered with the North Koreans, I say: The United States of America doesn’t stand with murderous dictatorships, we stand up to murderous dictatorships (South China Morning Post 2018).

With this language in mind, it is puzzling from an ontological security perspective that the Trump administration completely changed its language and strategy towards Pyongyang within months. One possible explanation for why this may have been easier for the Trump administration than for past US administrations is Trump’s own lack of regard for democracy. He has frequently called the US media the “enemy of the people” and shown more admiration for such leaders as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey and Vladimir Putin in Russia than for the US’ European and democratic allies (Nordland 2017). For Trump, the need to uphold the US identity as the protector of democracy may thus be less important than it was for most of his predecessors. Another possible explanation is that the US is quite secure in its ontology at this moment too, as it was
during the Clinton administration. However, the seeming resonance of the mantra that Trump will “make America great again” makes this explanation seem quite untenable. There is clearly a shared feeling that the US is failing to be as great as it should be.

The domestic reaction to Trump’s policy shift on North Korea helps substantiate the thesis that a stable identity is important to US decision-makers. Senator Bob Menendez was highly critical of the summit with Kim Jong-un, stating that it gave the North Korean leader legitimacy and status on the global stage: “We have given a free pass to an international pariah who abuses his own people, kills his own relatives, and routinely threatens our national security” (Office of Senator Bob Menendez 2018). Chris Murphy (D-CT) (2018), moreover, stated that “Kim’s gulags, public executions, planned starvation, are legitimized on the world stage”.

The sudden rapprochement with North Korea was a bitter pill to swallow not just for Trump’s adversaries in the domestic political sphere. Some Republicans also sought to nuance the president’s use of language when praising Kim as an “intelligent” leader who “loves his people” (Vazquez 2018). Senator Jerry Moran (R-KS), for instance, called Kim Jong-un a “despot tyrant”, but without criticising Trump’s rapprochement per se. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) raised concerns about Trump’s friendliness with “brutal dictators”, citing meetings with Duterte and Putin alongside that with Kim. Other senators, however, defended Trump, saying that he had done “a great job” and emphasising the importance of striking a deal with North Korea (Golshan 2018). To Democrat senators, the Trump administration’s change of heart towards North Korea simply threatened US biographical continuity. To Republican senators, by contrast, the issue was more complex. While most of them may want to maintain the US’ identity as a defender of democracy, they were unable to support the opposition’s criticism for reasons of partisanship linked to the current level of polarisation.

It is possible to conjecture that Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and re-imposed sanctions on Iran to satisfy the US interest in ontological security as he started negotiations with North Korea. Our analysis is supported by the events in the spring and early summer of 2019, as the US increased its military presence in and around the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz following alleged Iranian attacks on oil tankers. This military build-up has been accompanied by aggressive rhetoric on both sides (US Department of State 2019). Perhaps the US does not need North Korea as the enemy – any rogue state will do to maintain ontological security (Campbell 1992).

We believe that the second constructivist lesson is that further long-term progress in US-North Korean relations is conditional on US policymakers ceasing to rely on the notion of an evil and irrational North Korea. Some might challenge this conclusion by arguing that North Korea’s crimes against its own population provide proof of its evil nature, and that things must be called by their proper name. While all democrats have to agree that the first objection is correct, the second does not necessarily follow, particularly in the case of US foreign policy. To mention just two examples, the US’ commitment to democracy and freedom is clearly more flexible when it comes to close allies such as Saudi Arabia and the Philippines, countries that could easily qualify as “murderous dictatorships” (Amnesty International, n.d. a and b). Leaders sometimes choose to be flexible on values when other interests appear more pressing. Others may challenge our conclusion by stressing that actors are bound to certain identity narratives and that change is more difficult than is implied here. This is correct, but the first step towards such change is to recognise US rhetoric about North Korea as an identity narrative and not just as an objective description.
Conclusion and policy implications

From this study, we draw the fairly uncontroversial conclusion that there are multiple conditions for successful negotiations, lasting agreements and détente between Washington and Pyongyang. By drawing on realist and constructivist theories in an eclectic fashion, we have been able to pinpoint quite clearly what the biggest hurdles are and how they might be managed and bilateral enmity overcome. The policy implication derived from the constructivist focus on status and ontological security is that if the US wishes to make progress with North Korea, the country needs to receive substantial recognition of its status in lieu of nuclear weapons. This does not mean courting and flattering Kim Jong-un and his subordinates, but rather treating him as the head of state that he is and handling North Korea as the sovereign nation that it is. Treating North Korea as a respected counterpart presents a challenge, however, especially given US reliance for its ontological security on the notion that North Korea is irrational and evil. At the same time, examples from the Clinton and Trump administrations demonstrate that US ontological security does not have to rely on these notions, or at least that North Korea does not have to be targeted.

Even if negotiations can be put back on track and trust increased through such measures, US strategic interests and North Korea’s fixation with physical security remain difficult and seemingly incompatible challenges. As we have seen, Pyongyang demands that security guarantees should be reflected in action, not least through US troop withdrawals from South Korea. At the same time, the US strategic interest in maintaining its regional military presence remains intact. There may be one quite bold way to cut this Gordian knot and provide North Korea with regime and state security while entrenching the US position in Northeast Asia against China: Washington could include North Korea under its nuclear umbrella. The chances of that happening may be near zero and such a policy might also have negative side-effects by exacerbating tension in Sino-US relations. Yet bold policy of this kind will be needed to end the current deadlock in US-North Korean relations.

North Korean demands for sanctions relief proved to be the deal breaker for the US in Hanoi. However, despite the failure to reach a deal and new North Korean weapon tests, hostilities have not reached the same level as before. The Trump-Kim meeting in the DMZ in June might have contributed to a more optimistic atmosphere, but major issues remain unresolved. Talks are likely to continue, and we hope that the above insights drawn from an eclectic approach to IR theory may be of use to overcome enmity on a more long-term basis.

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