

# **Ascension of North Korea as a Nuclear State: A Consequence of Childhood Neglect?<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

North Korea recently announced the rejection of reunification with South Korea, discarding over 70 years of stability in Northeast Asia. Kim Jong-un's new approach to the North–South conflict caught many by surprise, including South Korea. Initial reactions were nearly unanimous: North Korea's decision injects significant uncertainty and risk into an already unstable region, increases instability, and renews fears of a North Korea-initiated war. However, what if North Korea's decision injected stability and consistency into Northeast Asian geopolitics instead? Using an analytic framework grounded in political psychology, this article explains North Korea's ascension to nuclear state status as a direct result of chronic neglect by the international community. The authors adapted the concept of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) to diagnose North Korean decision-making and introduce a new concept—Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder (S-RAD)—based on the DSM-5-TR diagnostic criteria for RAD. The article argues that a new approach, formally recognizing North Korea as an independent nuclear state, would deescalate the likelihood of war and ensure regional peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The authors also identify policy and strategic actions, aligned with treatment criteria for RAD, which can be taken by the international community to treat the underlying S-RAD attachment ruptures.

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Key Words: North Korea, Reactive Attachment Disorder, Strategic Reactive Attachment Disorder, Denuclearization, Reunification, Political Psychology, Non-Proliferation, Korea, Korean War

*Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

– Rita Mae Brown

## Introduction

On January 15, 2024, Kim Jong-un announced rejection of the long-standing publicly stated goal of reunification of North Korea with South Korea, discarding over 70 years of stability in Northeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Kim Jong-un's new approach to the North–South conflict caught many analysts by surprise. South Korea, for its part, issued a delayed response on 1 March—weeks after the unexpected announcement.<sup>2</sup> Initial reactions were all the same: North Korea's decision injects significant uncertainty and risk into the region. The decision purportedly increases instability and renews fears of a North Korea-initiated war.<sup>3</sup> However, what if North Korea's decision actually stabilized the region and made Northeast Asian geopolitics more predictable? The lack of war or major conflict since 1953 heavily implies that power dynamics and regional geopolitics in Northeast Asia are to some degree predictable. If Pyongyang's statement merely codifies the reality of two Korean states, it may actually reduce strategic ambiguity by ending the Korean War, reducing regional tensions, and creating long-term peace. This shift in North Korea's stance challenges the definition of 'deterrence' for the United States, allowing the West to recognize North Korea as a nuclear state.

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, often interpreted as aggressive posturing, can instead be understood through a psychological lens of self-reliance and self-preservation, similar to the effects of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) in adopted children.<sup>4</sup> In December 2023, during the 9th Plenary meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Ruling Worker's Party of Korea, North Korea's Central Committee stated, "the relationship [between North and South] has completely solidified into hostile relations, not ethnic or homogenous relations, but relations between two hostile nations in a state of war."<sup>5</sup> According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-5-TR), RAD is a trauma- and stressor-related disorder which manifests early in a child's development.<sup>6</sup> The International Classification of

Diseases (ICD 11) states that “Reactive attachment disorder is characterized by grossly abnormal attachment behaviors in early childhood, occurring in the context of a history of grossly inadequate child care (e.g., severe neglect, maltreatment, institutional deprivation). Even when an adequate primary caregiver is newly available, the child does not turn to the primary caregiver for comfort, support and nurture, rarely displays security-seeking behaviors towards any adult, and does not respond when comfort is offered.”

As a nation born from the ashes of the Japanese Occupation in World War II, divided from its sibling without any say in the matter, and immediately launched into its own war for reunification, North Korea’s history shows numerous trauma and stress related actions in its early ‘childhood.’ Reunification—based on a familial view of inter-Korean relations—grew increasingly out of step with modern geopolitical realities. North Korea’s self-reliance stems from an inability to trust caused by decades of failed agreements with the United States, inconsistent diplomatic efforts from South Korea, and a continuation of decades of repression endured by the North Korean people.<sup>7</sup> By stepping away from reunification and focusing instead on finding its own path forward, one could argue North Korea finally ‘grew up’ and is now advocating for its own self-interests. Rather than trying to please nations that will never be satisfied with a nuclear North, Kim Jong-un decided to seek validation through abusive, self-serving relationships that guarantee survival of the Kim dynasty.<sup>8</sup> North Korea’s decision to focus on regime survivability provides a unique opportunity for the West to attempt true diplomacy with North Korea. It also provides an opportunity for South Korea to advocate for North Korea’s reintroduction to the international order.

By acknowledging North Korea’s developmental trajectory, the United States can pave the way for a more predictable Northeast Asian security environment. In other words, to preserve regional stability and ensure peace, the U.S. and its allies must acknowledge North Korea’s ascension to the rank of a nuclear state and treat it as such. This article conceptualizes North Korea’s hyper-autonomy and nuclearization as manifestations of ‘Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder’ (S-RAD), an international-politics analogue to Reactive Attachment Disorder, and proposes that acknowledging the DPRK’s nuclear status is the necessary therapeutic response for its traumatic childhood. Throughout this analysis, the United States is treated as a symbolic actor whose chronic policy

reversals render its promises inherently suspect in Pyongyang's eyes, not as a principal guarantor for regional peace and security.

### **Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder (S-RAD)**

Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder is a new conceptual term coined by the authors. S-RAD describes international political and military decision-making processes plagued by a persistent and self-reinforcing distrust between states, in which one nation develops a defensive and inflexible posture toward external engagement after experiencing repeated diplomatic abandonment, failed agreements, or coercive reversals. Modeled after Reactive Attachment Disorder in psychology, Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder is characterized by the inability to form or sustain cooperative political relationships, even when mutual de-escalation is desired. RAD is characterized by four main diagnostic criteria and an age qualifier as listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*: inhibited engagement with caregivers, persistent relational disturbance, documented neglect or deprivation, and evidence that these traumas caused dysfunctional behavior.<sup>9</sup> Due to the rarity of RAD cases in children, and the unique circumstances necessary to meet the requirements for diagnosis, RAD cannot be used directly for political psychology applications. As such, diagnostic criteria for S-RAD must leverage elements of International Relations theory and political psychology to ensure applicability for sovereign states. The authors modified RAD criteria to create appropriate S-RAD diagnostic criteria as follows:

- A. Inhibited engagement: The state rarely seeks reassurance (through alliances, diplomatic overtures, or confidence-building) when threatened and resists or ignores such reassurance when offered.
- B. Chronic relational disturbance: Diplomatic behavior shows (a) low reciprocity, (b) consistently hostile or emotionally negative rhetoric, or (c) disproportionate threat responses to low-level external stimuli.
- C. Documented history of strategic neglect or coercive reversal: The state has experienced serial treaty breaches, broken security commitments, forced isolation, or abandonment by former partners.

- D. Causal linkage: Authoritative state discourse explicitly connects past experiences of betrayal, abandonment, or coercion to its current security policy or diplomatic posture.
- E. Early national onset: The state's formative trauma (its "attachment rupture") must occur within its institutional infancy during the foundational period when core state institutions and external relationships are established.

The goal with S-RAD is to attempt the deployment of a psychological framework (RAD) intended to understand the highly rational actions of nations typically perceived to be '*irreversibly* irrational'. In North Korea's case, understanding the nation's decision-making rationale through the lens of a 'childhood stress and trauma response,' facilitates understanding of *why* North Korea acts the way it does by formally diagnosing the problem. Identification of S-RAD unlocks treatment options for the international order, such as policy actions, intended to reduce the likelihood of future conflict and minimize further damage or harm to the 'parents,' 'child,' and 'siblings.'

### **The Parents, Child Protective Services, and the Favored Twin**

For the S-RAD analogy to function, it is crucial to identify North Korea's "parents" since attachment trauma hinges on the roles of primary and secondary caregivers. After WWII, the Japanese birth parent abandoned the peninsula leaving a complete institutional collapse and governmental power vacuum.<sup>10</sup> The agreement to split the Korean Peninsula was a mutual decision between the United States and the Soviet Union at the December 1945 Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers.<sup>11</sup> After the five-year trusteeship failed, in 1948, the United Nations took ownership of the Korean problem by sponsoring elections in the U.S.-occupied South.<sup>12</sup> With the U.N. now serving as "Child Protective Services" for the entire peninsula, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was independently established shortly thereafter with support from the PRC and Soviets.<sup>13</sup> In the inter-war years from 1945 to 1950, U.S. assistance—as the only major international caregiver for the South Koreans—was largely confined to diplomatic backing towards the South, a small occupation force, and basic military training. In contrast, the Soviet Union and China provided strong military support, economic subsidies, and ideological/institutional guidance, confirming their role as the North's

primary caregivers.<sup>14</sup> In this analogy, the U.S. is South Korea's foster parent acting under the United Nations Security Council 'CPS' authority, and the Soviets and Chinese serve as North Korea's adoptive parents.

Despite the support North Korea received initially, complicating this pre-war period of child-rearing was the second phase of China's civil war (1945–49) and the Soviet Union's focus on rebuilding after World War II. These efforts diverted Beijing and Moscow's attention and resources away from the peninsula, leaving North Korea in a precarious waiting period akin to an early childhood without reliable primary care.<sup>15</sup> At the outset of the Korean War in 1950, the Soviet Union's boycott of the United Nations (over its recognition of the Republic of China) resulted in Moscow missing the pivotal Security Council vote on North Korean aggression.<sup>16 17</sup> The Soviet Union's absence is similar to an adoptive parent failing to appear at a family court hearing which enabled the UN (CPS) to step in and authorize the U.S.-led intervention during the Korean War.

Crucially, China's entry into the Korean War in late 1950, a massive military intervention which provided Pyongyang critical battlefield support, prevented the North's early collapse and cemented Beijing's status as an indispensable primary caregiver, despite the Soviet boycott.<sup>18</sup> Beijing's decision to intervene was driven not only by ideological solidarity with the nascent socialist regime to its northeast, but by visceral memories of repeated foreign incursions across the peninsula: from the Mongol campaigns of the 1230s, the Imjin War (1592–98), through the Manchu invasions of the 1620s and 1630s, culminating in Japan's colonial conquest (1910–45) which led to World War II.<sup>19</sup> Later, General MacArthur's public calls for a rollback into China itself—including the possible use of nuclear weapons—threatened China once again.<sup>20</sup> For the Chinese leadership, North Korea was a forward buffer: if Pyongyang fell, the United States would deploy troops along China's border undermining Beijing's national security.<sup>21</sup> Ever since, the strategic imperative of preventing a hostile power from establishing a permanent military foothold on China's flank has underpinned Beijing's continued economic lifelines, arms transfers, and diplomatic cover for the DPRK, even in periods when China's domestic upheavals forced it to pull back elsewhere.<sup>22</sup>

Modern research argues that China's decision to intervene also had significant economic drivers, including constraints on economic reconstruction efforts that placed the Chinese in a difficult parenting position.<sup>23</sup> China's massive and conditional intervention reads like a

“parent” who rushes in to save their offspring when attacked. However, in S-RAD terms, supporting an additional child was not something the Chinese were prepared for while struggling to feed themselves.<sup>24</sup> U.S.-led sanctions on North Korea, beginning in 1950, and intensifying over the decades, severely constrained Beijing’s ability to offer anything beyond subsistence-level support, requiring all aid to come directly out of Beijing’s wallet. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, China’s ability to support North Korea was repeatedly limited by domestic upheavals such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956–1957) and the early stages of the Cultural Revolution (beginning in 1966), which diverted resources and political attention inward and led to periods of strained Sino–North Korean relations.<sup>25</sup>

After the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and early 1960s, North Korea actively navigated between its now “divorced adoptive parents,” leveraging competition between Moscow and Beijing for continued support. China’s revolutionary upheaval and state-building efforts meant that the PRC was often unable to provide consistent support or sustained engagement for its neighbor, forcing the North Koreans to turn to the Soviets for additional aid.<sup>26</sup> This delicate balance was formalized through two separate Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaties signed in 1961—one with China and another with the Soviet Union—which explicitly institutionalized North Korea’s relationship with divorced parents.<sup>27</sup> The divorce temporarily increased North Korea’s support in its early years, however, this dual caregiver relationship ruptured in stages. Khrushchev’s 1956 denunciation of Stalin prompted Moscow to curtail aid and withdraw key economic advisors; by the early 1960s Soviet assistance had sharply declined, severing the initial bond of assured support. Decades later, the Soviet collapse in 1991 delivered a second, catastrophic break as support from the Soviet Union vanished under the weight of Russia’s own existential crisis.

For more than 75 years, the United Nations remained largely a bystander, with military forces on the peninsula (United Nations Command) under US operational control and little direct aid to the North.<sup>28</sup> To this day, between economic sanctions preventing international trade, and a large scale military presence in the South—a military knife held to the child’s throat—it is hard to argue that the U.S. could be a trusted ally to the North. The U.S. sanctions relegated China to the role of an adoptive parent unable to access government aid (through the U.S. dollar dominated UN), leading the Chinese to provide only limited economic support due to

their inability to offer meaningful, sustained care. Ultimately, China was forced to reduce direct support to North Korea so long as external entities (the U.S. and UN) agreed to ‘stay off the Chinese doorstep.’ These actions by the PRC reinforced the very attachment dynamics (rescuing when threatened, then withdrawing when autonomous) that underlies a Reactive Attachment Disorder diagnosis, translated in North Korea’s case to S-RAD. North Korea’s abandonment by unreliable adoptive parents, with no constructive or tangible intervention from the UN Child Protective Service (like that which favorably supported the South) explains why the Kim regime now clings so compulsively to nuclear deterrence as its only reliable ‘security blanket.’

In contrast to North Korea’s traumatic childhood marked by abandonment and neglect, South Korea thrived under the attentive parenting of the United States, growing into a prosperous economic powerhouse and a global leader in technology, manufacturing, and international trade.<sup>29</sup> Treated as the favored twin, South Korea enjoyed substantial financial aid, preferential market access, extensive military protection, and diplomatic support from its reliable foster parent, the U.S.<sup>30</sup> Over decades, this nurturing environment enabled Seoul to develop robust democratic institutions, modern infrastructure, and formidable military capability, starkly contrasting Pyongyang’s survival-focused trajectory.

As a result of its prosperous upbringing, South Korea’s government remains deeply committed to reunification, actively seeking reconnection with its estranged sibling. Seoul has, at times, demonstrated independent diplomatic initiative—most notably through the Sunshine Policy of the late 1990s and President Moon Jae-in’s shuttle diplomacy—that shows South Korea can and does act beyond its alliance with Washington. The new South Korean President, Lee Jae-myung, ran on a platform of resetting the South’s relationship with North Korea and he seems poised to make significant progress regardless of the South’s relationship with the United States, stating, “trilateral cooperation among Korea, the US and Japan is also important. But we cannot be unilaterally bound to those alone.”<sup>31</sup> However, the North, still grappling with severe attachment trauma, views such overtures skeptically, perceiving them as threats rather than gestures of reconciliation. Interestingly, public support for reunification has steadily declined over the past decade. While surveys conducted by the Korea Institute for National Unification in 2011 and 2017 showed growing indifference—culminating in nearly half of respondents preferring the status quo or expressing disinterest—by 2024,



only 36.9 percent of South Koreans supported reunification, and 35 percent viewed it as entirely or mostly unnecessary.<sup>32 33 34</sup> These statistics suggest a deep rift between government policy and grassroots sentiment—a gap Pyongyang reads as proof that Seoul’s reunification rhetoric is more political posturing than genuine intent. As if to confirm the S-RAD analogy, Seoul’s persistent advocacy for reunification unintentionally deepens Pyongyang’s mistrust, reinforcing its isolation and compulsion to cling more fiercely to nuclear deterrence.

To fully grasp Pyongyang’s skepticism toward Seoul’s overtures, it is essential to understand how their early separation and subsequent caregiving failures shaped North Korea’s attachment patterns. The U.S. and Soviet Union jointly agreed to divide the twins in 1945.<sup>35</sup> In January of 1950, the U.S. appeared to omit the Korean Peninsula from its protective scope in Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s speech, signaling it was stepping back from a caregiving role. Coupled with the 1949 U.S. troop withdrawal—undertaken in accordance with UN recommendations—gave the impression that Washington was entrusting the peninsula’s future to the UN, tacitly conceding influence in the North to the Soviets.<sup>36</sup> In effect, this created space for Moscow—and later, Beijing—to assert themselves fully as alternative caregivers. When war broke out just months later, North Korea experienced diplomatic whiplash: the U.S., which seemed to be disengaging, now moved swiftly and decisively to defend the South.<sup>37</sup> From Pyongyang’s perspective, the sudden embrace of its estranged sibling (by their once-ambivalent foster parent) was likely jarring. The UN had recommended the withdrawal of U.S. troops, yet after hearing news of the invasion and just prior to his decision to enter the war, Truman is quoted as yelling “We can’t let the UN down!”<sup>38</sup> The unpredictable nature of American engagement in Korea deepened the North’s distrust, fueling what might be seen in psychological terms as the start of the North’s (strategic) Reactive Attachment Disorder. From Pyongyang’s perspective, early exposure to inconsistent caregiving—unreliable Soviet-guided development, Chinese hesitancy, and American unpredictability—reinforced a deep-seated mistrust of external actors. These multinational factors cemented the North’s ideological pivot toward self-reliance (*Juche*).

Post-Korean War, Washington actively nurtured South Korea into prosperity and global prominence while rejecting the North. The stark difference in treatment by their common foster parent, the U.S., inadvertently widened the psychological and ideological chasm between

these sibling states. The North perceives the U.S. as an unreliable or even abusive foster parent acting under the UN's CPS authority, rather than a stable caregiver eligible for reattachment. Pyongyang's perception of U.S. unreliability is reinforced by the recent 2025 strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities.<sup>39</sup> These unprovoked strikes by the U.S. breached prior international assurances and demonstrated that even diplomatic agreements backed by major powers could rapidly collapse into coercive military actions.<sup>40</sup> This unfortunate reality complicates efforts toward lasting peace and explains why South Koreans cannot meaningfully reconnect with the North. As long as Seoul remains closely allied—militarily and diplomatically—with a caregiver perceived by Pyongyang as inherently untrustworthy, reunification is likely impossible.

### **Diagnostic Criteria A: Inhibited International Engagement**

Reactive Attachment Disorder, according to the DSM-5-TR, is characterized in part by inhibited engagement, meaning a child rarely seeks comfort when distressed, and often ignores or actively rejects reassurance when offered.<sup>41</sup> Translating this into international politics, Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder manifests similarly: a nation consistently refrains from seeking diplomatic reassurance through alliances, overtures, or confidence-building measures even when genuinely threatened, and often explicitly resists or ignores reassurances when provided by others.

North Korea clearly demonstrates this behavior, characterized by deep-rooted distrust and historical skepticism toward external diplomacy. Throughout its history, Pyongyang repeatedly faced genuine security threats, from U.S. military deployments on the Korean Peninsula to annual joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises beginning as early as 1955.<sup>42</sup> Yet, notably absent from North Korea's strategic behavior is any genuine effort to build lasting confidence through traditional alliance systems or sustained diplomatic reassurance outside the PRC or USSR (Russian Federation). Although North Korea actively engaged with non-aligned countries via the Non-Aligned Movement, and sought diplomatic legitimacy through the United Nations General Assembly in the mid-1970s, such efforts were largely transactional and failed to produce durable trust-based relationships.<sup>43</sup> These engagements, while noteworthy, did not result in long-term integration into the international system and were often followed by renewed periods of isolation and hostility. One such example is the Rangoon bombing in 1983—an attack on neutral soil

which soured many Third World nations' relationship with North Korea.<sup>44</sup> More recently, during occasional engagements like the Six Party Talks and the historic summits with South Korea in 2000, 2007, and 2018, or the 2018–2019 summits with U.S. President Donald Trump, North Korea consistently reverts to isolated, defensive posturing, rejecting sustained reassurance, and resuming provocative rhetoric and missile tests as soon as diplomatic goodwill faded.<sup>45</sup>

This inhibited engagement parallels the RAD psychology of deprived children who distrust caregivers' intentions, even when caregivers genuinely attempt to offer comfort. For example, after his historical meeting with Kim Jong-un in 2018, President Trump offered direct assurances regarding regime security and proposals for economic relief in exchange for denuclearization steps.<sup>46</sup> North Korea categorically rejected the offers without the unrealistic abrogation of the previous five UN resolutions providing for sanctions relief, which Trump rejected.<sup>47</sup> The North quickly returned to hostile communication and provocative tests which, from a psychological standpoint, mirrors a child with RAD who remains inhibited and emotionally withdrawn, unconvinced by gestures of kindness after long histories of neglect or inconsistency.<sup>48</sup>

North Korea's distrust is reinforced globally by observing the experiences of other nations that engaged diplomatically with the United States. Iran's diplomatic history provides Pyongyang with stark evidence of the inherent risks in seeking or accepting external reassurance.<sup>49</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was initially heralded as a significant diplomatic achievement, providing Tehran reassurances of sanction relief and international normalization in exchange for nuclear constraints.<sup>50</sup> Yet, after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA under President Trump in 2018 and subsequent tightening of sanctions, Iran faced severe economic penalties despite its earlier compliance.<sup>51</sup> This public betrayal vividly confirmed North Korea's suspicions: any U.S.-offered diplomatic reassurance remains fragile, temporary, and ultimately unreliable.<sup>52</sup>

In political psychology terms, inhibited engagement emerges from what scholars describe as "learned helplessness" or "political hyper-vigilance," resulting from repeatedly witnessing external betrayals or broken agreements.<sup>53</sup> The collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2003 further solidified Pyongyang's conviction that diplomatic assurances from external powers are inherently untrustworthy.<sup>54</sup> Rather than seeking reassurance, North Korea has opted for self-contained deterrence,

explicitly refusing multilateral reassurance through security agreements or alliance-based protection.<sup>55</sup> Unlike South Korea or Japan, both deeply integrated into the U.S. security architecture, North Korea avoids alliances and avoids defensive security assurances beyond those established between China and the Russians.<sup>56</sup> Despite repeated U.S. and South Korean invitations, Pyongyang's explicit refusal to return to Six-Party Talks since 2009 is another stark example of its inhibited engagement.<sup>57</sup> Continuing with the Iran example, despite the U.S.'s own intelligence confirming Iran's non-pursuit of nuclear enrichment, the June 2025 strikes on Iran by the U.S. solidify the North Korean's perception and provides concrete evidence that any nuclear deal with the United States *will be broken*, regardless of the North's actual level of compliance.<sup>58</sup>

This deliberate withdrawal by North Korea further parallels RAD behavior, reflecting a political-psychological inability to trust caregivers after years of inconsistent and coercive treatment. Ultimately, North Korea's persistent refusal to seek or accept reassurance, even under genuine threat, is directly based on historical experiences of neglect, abandonment, and coercive political reversals. Mirroring the child who rejects the extended hand of a caregiver, North Korea persists in its strategic isolation, convinced that reassurance is at best illusory and at worst dangerously misleading.

### **Criteria B: Chronic Relational Disturbance**

A hallmark of Reactive Attachment Disorder in psychology is a persistent relational disturbance, often manifesting as low emotional responsiveness, hostility, and disproportionate irritability, even in non-threatening interactions. Translated into S-RAD, this chronic relational disturbance involves diplomatic behavior consistently marked by (a) low reciprocity, (b) consistently hostile or emotionally negative rhetoric, and (c) disproportionate threat responses to relatively minor external stimuli. For instance, after the U.S. reimposed sanctions in 2018, Iran reduced its JCPOA commitments in stages, mirroring North Korea's tit-for-tat missile tests in response to sanctions.<sup>59</sup> In this case, both North Korea and Iran demonstrate the same chronic relational disturbance.

North Korea exemplifies these behaviors through its diplomatic posture. Pyongyang frequently refuses reciprocal diplomatic exchanges or gestures of goodwill, opting instead for unilateral demands or abrupt disengagement. For example, during negotiations following the historic 2018 Singapore Summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un,

North Korea refused to match incremental denuclearization steps with phased sanctions relief, insisting instead on complete sanctions removal prior to verifiable denuclearization.<sup>60</sup> This unwillingness to reciprocate incremental trust-building steps demonstrates profound relational dysfunction similar to a RAD-affected child who resists even minimal cooperative interaction.

Consistently hostile or emotionally negative rhetoric from North Korea further highlights this relational disturbance. North Korean official media regularly employs emotionally charged language like labeling the United States an “imperialist aggressor” and routinely calling South Korea “traitorous puppets.”<sup>61</sup> Such rhetoric persists even during diplomatic thaws or engagement periods. Even during inter-Korean summits or periods of relative diplomatic openness, official statements from Pyongyang frequently revert to aggressive or emotionally charged narratives at the slightest provocation or perceived insult. This activity parallels RAD-affected children who exhibit persistent negativity toward caregivers despite the occasional positive interaction.

Further amplifying its chronic relational disturbance, North Korea often issues disproportionate threat responses to minor or routine international activities. Decades-long, routine defensive operations like the bi-annual joint U.S.–South Korean military exercises frequently provoke North Korean threats of nuclear annihilation or full-scale war.<sup>62</sup> These threats are significantly disproportionate to the relatively predictable and defensive nature of these exercises and mirror “withdrawal” observed in children with RAD who perceive minor environmental changes as existential threats.<sup>63</sup>

Iran’s diplomatic experiences reinforce Pyongyang’s behavior and perceptions.<sup>64</sup> Like North Korea, Iran regularly demonstrates low reciprocity and persistent hostility in diplomatic interactions, particularly after perceived betrayals such as the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.<sup>65</sup> Tehran’s pattern of responding to incremental diplomatic pressure or minor provocations with aggressive rhetoric and sudden increases in uranium enrichment aligns closely with Pyongyang’s own disproportionate threat responses. Iran’s experience with the U.S. validates North Korea’s learned perception that hostility, not cooperation, defines international relationships.<sup>66</sup>

Chronic relational disturbance also extends into the broader geopolitical sphere. North Korea routinely declines diplomatic overtures from regional actors like South Korea, Japan, and even China despite the

latter's status as its primary economic patron. For example, in 2015 and again in 2018, North Korea pointedly refused to send Kim Jong-un or any high-level envoy to Beijing's major military parades or Belt and Road summits, sending lower-ranking officials instead.<sup>67</sup> In some years, Pyongyang has also sharply curtailed cross-border trade or criticized Chinese policy in official media, as seen in the 2017 *Rodong Sinmun* editorial denouncing China's participation in UN sanctions.<sup>68</sup> Such actions illustrate North Korea's pattern of keeping even its closest benefactor at arm's length—a hallmark of chronic relational disturbance within the S-RAD framework. Pyongyang's abrupt withdrawal from inter-Korean communication channels, sometimes triggered merely by symbolic acts such as leaflet drops by defector organizations, reveals a deeply ingrained diplomatic irritability.<sup>69</sup> This behavior also aligns closely with RAD psychology, where neglected children often disproportionately escalate conflict or abruptly withdraw communication over minor perceived slights.

This enduring relational dysfunction, grounded in a deep psychological mistrust, positions North Korea in perpetual diplomatic isolation. North Korea's ongoing refusal to reciprocate goodwill, continual use of emotionally charged rhetoric, and exaggerated threat responses are not merely symptoms of belligerence or irrationality.<sup>70</sup> Rather, they reflect an underlying strategic attachment trauma demonstrated by a deeply ingrained mistrust and insecurity stemming from historical neglect and repeated coercive reversals.

### **Diagnostic Criteria C: Patterns of Strategic Neglect**

Diplomatic relationships, like parent-child bonds, rely on trust built through repeated actions, and require consistent follow-through to reinforce expected behaviors. Since its inception as an independent nation-state post-1948, North Korea has experienced a sequence of policy failures and diplomatic inconsistencies that shaped its developmental trajectory.<sup>71</sup> Each new U.S. administration switches between engagement and isolation, introducing various blends of diplomacy and hardline sanctions. South Korea has mirrored this oscillation at times—isolating the regime under certain leaders and engaging under others, such as with the Sunshine Policy under President Kim Dae-Jung.<sup>72</sup> These shifts, coupled with agreements made and then broken, like the Agreed Framework of 1994 (which collapsed in 2003), have contributed to a profound sense of insecurity and mistrust within the North Korean regime.<sup>73</sup> This backdrop of uncertainty and broken promises starkly parallels the psychological

impacts of childhood neglect, where unpredictable care leads to deep-seated issues of trust and self-worth.

North Korea's diplomatic history with the United States, reinforced by parallel cases such as the U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations, vividly illustrates a consistent pattern of treaty breaches, abandonment, and coercive reversals. When viewing the relationship of North Korea and the United States in a psychological dynamic, North Korea is well aware of how the U.S. treats countries during nuclear negotiations.<sup>74</sup> In addition to its own diplomatic history with the U.S., North Korea also looks to American actions toward other nations—such as Iran—as a model for assessing the reliability of U.S. follow-through on negotiated agreements.

For example, the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and other world powers, likely reinforced Pyongyang's skepticism.<sup>75</sup> Although negotiations began in 2003, the JCPOA was not formalized until 2015, after more than a decade of diplomatic efforts spanning multiple U.S. administrations. Since then, the U.S. has imposed renewed sanctions, withdrawn from the agreement in 2018, and effectively suspended its commitments—actions that North Korea may interpret as evidence of American unreliability.<sup>76</sup> In terms of denuclearization, the failed Agreed Framework from 1994, the 2020 U.S. drone strike that killed Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, and the 2025 U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities shape North Korea's perception of American trustworthiness.<sup>77</sup> The failure of the Agreed Framework is one famous example of the United States' emotional abuse after President Bush called them part of the Axis of Evil.<sup>78</sup>

This backdrop of uncertainty and broken promises starkly parallels the psychological impacts of childhood neglect, where unpredictable care leads to deep-seated issues of trust and self-worth. If one also considers the Congressional investigation which verified that North Korea's plutonium production program was frozen in compliance with the terms of the 1994 deal—from the North Korean perspective—does the U.S. really expect Kim Jong-un to trust any agreement?<sup>79</sup> Even more recently, in March 2025, the United States' own intelligence community confirmed that Iran was not moving toward nuclear weapons.<sup>80</sup> Despite confirmation from Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, who unambiguously briefed Congress on this fact, Trump authorized strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities—an unprovoked attack that, ironically, may now encourage Iran to pursue nuclear weapons.<sup>81</sup>

For over two decades, both Iran and North Korea have navigated protracted and often stalled nuclear negotiations, marked by deep mutual distrust with the international community. While both regimes seek to strengthen their strategic position by engaging selectively with sympathetic states, they have also consistently resisted external offers of assistance that come with perceived threats to their sovereignty. For North Korea, every broken promise or reversal by a major power is experienced as strategic abandonment, deepening its reliance on the only person it can trust itself. North Korea's isolation, without reliable allies elsewhere, prompted Kim Il-sung to develop the *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology to survive the nation's youth. Like a neglected child, *Juche* became the North's entire strategy for survival.<sup>82</sup> Under *Juche*, the North hardens its suspicion toward all outside offers, even those that appear generous on their face, and self-reliance motivates the population to remain loyal, leading to the opportunity for human rights abuses. In contrast, South Korea emerged as a leading G20 economy and a global industrial and military manufacturing powerhouse, aided by attentive parenting in the form of sustained U.S. support and strategic international partnerships.<sup>83</sup> This difference in upbringing could not be more pronounced.<sup>84</sup>

Viewing North Korea's relationship with the rest of the West, it is no surprise that North Korea spent most of its youth lashing out to the international community. North Korea chooses to drive its own agenda by seeking to redefine its role in the global commons. Like an orphaned child refusing to give up a beloved toy, North Korea begrudgingly accepted crippling sanctions and removal from the global economy rather than give up its independent pursuit of nuclear weapons: its only source of comfort. More recently, in response to its erratic and often hostile international upbringing, North Korea is akin to a neglected teenager forced to fend for itself by pursuing nuclear capabilities as a means of ensuring its own security and autonomy while, until recently, simultaneously pursuing reunification with the South.<sup>85</sup> This dual pursuit of independence and acceptance is commonly found in neglected foster children trying to adapt to placement with a new, temporary caregiver.<sup>86</sup>

Rejecting reunification helps North Korea's long-term survival strategy by reinforcing its identity as an independent nuclear entity rather than a temporary rogue state.<sup>87</sup> North Korea's desire to be its own entity does not necessarily increase tensions but rather clarifies its position: it maintains ideological consistency and potentially reduces ambiguities that could lead to conflict. While often overlooked in the news cycle,



Pyongyang's recent military policy shifts—particularly its 2022 formalization of a preemptive nuclear doctrine—signal a more assertive posture aimed at deterrence and regime survival.<sup>88</sup> This shift in North Korea's stance, as well as the statement that the country will not initiate war or avoid one, begs us to reconsider the current global approach toward ignoring North Korea as a legitimate nuclear weapons state.

### **Diagnostic Criteria D: Linkage**

For S-RAD to be valid, authoritative state discourse explicitly connects past experiences of betrayal, abandonment, or coercion to current security policy and diplomatic posture. In 2017, *Rodong Sinmun*—North Korea's official party newspaper—declared, “Historically speaking, the U.S. has never dared to go to war with a country that possesses nuclear weapons or ICBMs.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly cited the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 as proof that ‘we’ cannot trust Western guarantees, embedding past betrayal in the very logic of Iran's nuclear policy.<sup>90</sup> Ironically, even President Obama confirmed as much, declaring the JCPOA “is not built on trust.”<sup>91</sup> Such discourse directly frames nuclear capabilities as a defensive response to historical threats and abandonment, rather than mere acts of rebellion. North Korea repeatedly references historical precedents like the collapse of the 1994 Agreed Framework after early North Korean compliance, followed by the United States labeling it part of the “Axis of Evil” in 2002, as evidence that cooperation without deterrence results in betrayal and coercion.<sup>92</sup>

This perception was reinforced in high-level talks with President Donald Trump in 2018, which eventually fell apart due to the unrealistic expectation that North Korea would completely give up nuclear weapons.<sup>93</sup> Ultimately, North Korea realized there could never be a peace deal with the United States, nor reunification with the South, as long as denuclearization remained a precondition for diplomacy.<sup>94</sup> Such lessons, drawn explicitly by North Korean leaders, have shaped their steadfast rejection of reunification, becoming a strategic pillar to ensure the regime's survival and cement its identity as an enduring nuclear power.<sup>95</sup>

North Korea's recent transition away from reunification ideology is thus presented by the regime as a developmental step toward diplomatic maturity, reflecting a desperate bid for respect and a secure place in the global order. Furthermore, the firm rejection of reunification does not inherently escalate regional tensions; rather, it clarifies North Korea's

geopolitical stance. The North's decision reduces ambiguities that have historically fueled misunderstandings and conflict in the region. The country's public assertion that it will not initiate war, yet will not shy away from one, underscores a defensive posture rather than an offensive threat.<sup>96</sup> North Korea's steadfast rejection of reunification serves as a strategic pillar in cementing its long-term survival and reinforcing its identity as an enduring, sovereign nuclear power. This clear stance diverges sharply from the transient image of a rogue state, instead positioning North Korea as a rational actor within the international system, steadfastly committed to its national ideology and security imperatives.<sup>97</sup> Not all border states or cultural similarities result in allyship, as can be seen by Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>98</sup> North Korea's authoritative discourse makes clear that nuclear ambitions are no longer merely acts of aggression or rebellion, but fundamental to safeguarding its sovereignty against historically validated threats and further neglect.<sup>99</sup>

The North Koreans continue drawing explicit parallels with the experiences of Libya, Iraq, and Ukraine, all of which agreed to denuclearization, only to later suffer invasion or regime change.<sup>100</sup> Like a neglected teenager threatened throughout his life, North Korea refuses to relinquish its first 'gun'—nuclear weapons—as a means of guaranteeing safety and independence, underscoring a defensive posture rooted in perceived historical betrayals. Such explicit linkage, repeatedly communicated through official channels, sets a predictable pattern of behavior within the S-RAD framework, potentially leading to more stable diplomatic interactions if properly understood and respected. This causal linkage is critical to understanding treatment options *a la* revised policy from the international community towards North Korea.

### **S-RAD Age Qualification**

According to the DSM-5, the final qualifier for Reactive Attachment Disorder diagnosis requires the disturbance to be evident between a developmental age of at least nine months and before five years of age.<sup>101</sup> Applying these criteria to Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder necessitates translating the biological age thresholds into institutional equivalents suitable for sovereign entities. These benchmarks serve as analytic guardrails, ensuring that formative traumas attributed to Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder occur only after a state has achieved a minimal level of autonomous agency. For North Korea, the years 1948 to 1950 represent a “newborn” phase characterized by external control and

limited independent action between sovereignty declaration and the onset of the Korean War. During this period, Soviet and Chinese advisors dominated both policy and security with Kim Il-sung seeking permission prior to the 1950 invasion.<sup>102</sup> By requiring that “attachment ruptures” happen after this formative period, the S-RAD criteria prevent analysts from attributing later pathologies to events that occurred before the state could exercise meaningful self-determination. Three heuristic methods can validate this requirement, clearly demonstrating North Korea’s eligibility under the S-RAD age criteria:

***Lifespan-ratio Scaling:***

Lifespan-ratio scaling assumes a median human lifespan (~80 years) and median sovereign lifespan (~150 years), yielding a ratio of approximately 1 human year to 1.9 state-years.<sup>103</sup> Using this method, the DSM’s thresholds for RAD (9 months and 5 years) convert to approximately 1.4 to 9.5 state-years. North Korea’s formal sovereignty began on 9 September 1948. By January 1950 (1.3 years later), it had diplomatic recognition from the Soviet Union (October 1948) and China (October 1949), thus meeting the minimum “developmental age.” Shortly afterward, between 2 and 5 state-years, North Korea experienced the catastrophic trauma of the Korean War (1950–1953), which destroyed 85 percent of its urban infrastructure and killed 12–20 percent of the population, exactly when attachment theory predicts deep-seated relational traumas would form.<sup>104</sup>

***Milestone Equivalence:***

Milestone equivalence matches human developmental milestones to analogous historical events for states that includes *birth* (first juridical recognition), *nine months* (establishment of stable diplomatic relations like the Correlates-of-War criteria requiring recognition by two major powers), and *age five* (institutional consolidation like drafting a constitution, forming a standing army, and maintaining stable governance).

- **Birth** (First juridical recognition):
  - September 9, 1948 – The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea formally proclaims its independence and adopts its provisional constitution in December 1948, establishing the core legal framework of the new state.<sup>105</sup>
- **Nine-month milestone** (Stable diplomatic recognition):

- October 6, 1949 – diplomatic recognition from the People’s Republic of China.<sup>106</sup>
- October 12, 1949 – North Korea secures diplomatic recognition from the Soviet Union.<sup>107</sup>
- These formal diplomatic ties meet the Correlates of War criterion of recognition by two major powers and inaugurating permanent embassies in Pyongyang.<sup>108</sup>
- June 25, 1950 – North Korean government and military are capable of waging war against the South in 1950.<sup>109</sup>
- **Age-five milestone** (Institutional consolidation & first major external crisis):
  - July 27, 1953 – Roughly five years after its founding, North Korea signs the Korean War Armistice, marking both an external security crisis and the consolidation of key institutions (the standing Korean People’s Army, the Supreme People’s Assembly’s five-year plans, and early central banking functions).
  - In the immediate post-armistice period (1953–58), Pyongyang experiences traumatic abandonment episodes: most notably Soviet aid reductions beginning in 1956 and the withdrawal of Chinese “volunteer” forces in 1958.<sup>110</sup>
  - Traumatic foster parent actions including visible U.S. nuclear deployments on the peninsula under their UN-endorsed foster parent authority.<sup>111</sup>

Under the milestone method, North Korea’s formative “attachment ruptures” fall squarely within its state “early childhood,” satisfying the S-RAD developmental-window criterion.

### ***Generational Buckets***

Generational buckets categorize the first 10–15 years of a state’s existence as its political infancy, during which formative identity and attachment patterns are established.<sup>112</sup> Though less precise, this method aligns with comparative-politics literature on nation-state development.<sup>113</sup> During North Korea’s political infancy (in the first decade 1948–1958), the nation endured profound relational and existential threats: total war destruction (1950–53), a cooling of Soviet support and influence (beginning in 1956), and visible nuclear encirclement by the United States (deployment of nuclear artillery in South Korea).<sup>114 115 116</sup> All these

instances of deprivation and neglect clearly fit the RAD developmental criteria within North Korea's formative "infancy."

### ***Reviewing the Heuristics***

As mentioned above, none of these heuristic conversions are currently listed or formally defined in the literature, and each of them require academic refinement and empirical validation through future research. However, this analysis is critical to defusing methodological objections that the S-RAD concept cherry-picks timelines; it is possible to stretch or compress the measuring-stick and still place Pyongyang's attachment traumas in its first "childhood" phase. Despite differences in precision, all three heuristics concur that North Korea's formative traumas occurred within the critical window required by RAD criteria and any one of these methods can be used to qualify S-RAD "attachment ruptures." Consequently, Pyongyang's contemporary attachment dysfunction is characterized by inhibited diplomatic engagement, hostility, and hyper-autonomy in the *Juche* ideology.<sup>117</sup> *Juche* can be convincingly traced back to its early experiences of abandonment and existential threat from the Korean War devastation, the withdrawal of Chinese forces in 1958, Soviet Aid cuts in 1956, and the U.S. forward deployment of Honest John nuclear missiles in January 1958.<sup>118 119</sup> If early abandonment and existential threat wired these behaviors, it is possible to satisfy both psychological theory and political reality, enabling informed therapeutic policy responses analogous to RAD interventions.

### **Treatment Options: Recognizing North Korea's Nuclear Status**

Officially recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state could fundamentally transform the dynamics of regional security by enhancing predictability in international interactions. Recognition as a nuclear state should alleviate North Korea's perceived need to continuously prove its nuclear capabilities through provocative testing, eliminating a significant source of regional tension and uncertainty. If actions speak louder than words, acknowledging its nuclear status allows the global community to bring North Korea back into the international fold and encourage its adherence to a rules-based global order. This approach would not only acknowledge the reality on the ground but also incentivize North Korea to engage with international treaties and norms, facilitating its transition from a pariah state to a recognized player on the global stage.

Acknowledgment opens the door to new diplomatic engagements centered on arms control and nuclear safety, rather than the unrealistic and unattainable goal of complete denuclearization.<sup>120</sup> By shifting the focus to management and containment (like agreeing to a regulated number of nuclear weapons and establishing a stringent inspection regime), both regional and global security can be enhanced. Such measures would not only curb the expansion of North Korea's nuclear arsenal but also integrate its existing weapons into a monitored framework, reducing the risks associated with uncontrolled proliferation.<sup>121</sup> Based on RAD therapy, this approach replicates a “secure-base” intervention strategy, providing North Korea predictable diplomatic interactions, clear boundaries, and consistent reassurance.<sup>122</sup> For example, just as RAD treatments recommend stable and predictable caregiving to restore a child's sense of security, a clearly defined nuclear recognition agreement would similarly offer North Korea consistency, reducing its need for aggressive posturing or provocative actions.<sup>123</sup>

Drawing on Donna Hicks's Dignity Model, nuclear recognition functions as a “dignity repair” within the S-RAD framework.<sup>124</sup> RAD therapy restores a child's secure base, and dignified treatment restores a traumatized state's sense of worth and agency.<sup>125</sup> Hicks identifies ten core elements of dignity; recognition directly addresses several of them.<sup>126</sup> First, it provides acknowledgment of North Korea's sovereign identity and security concerns, countering years of dismissal and demonstrating fair treatment by affirming its choices as a nation. Second, by establishing clear, mutually respected boundaries around nuclear status, it extends inclusion and benefit of the doubt, showing Pyongyang that its defensive posture will be met with predictable reassurance rather than punitive surprise. Third, consistent agreement terms foster understanding through a shared framework for interpreting behavior, and independence that allows North Korea to exercise agency without fearing external abandonment.

Just as RAD clinicians use stable, predictable caregiving to rebuild a child's trust, a defined nuclear recognition agreement offers North Korea the safety of knowing what to expect from the international community. This clarity and consistency in Pyongyang's status reduce the regime's compulsion for aggressive signaling; it no longer needs provocative tests to prove its worth or to guard against existential threats. Over time, a dignity-based approach grounded in acknowledgment, inclusion, and fair, bounded reciprocity can transform Northeast Asian diplomacy from

reactive containment to respectful dialogue, laying the groundwork for pragmatic, calibrated arms control. After 75 years of conflict, rather than imposing idealistic denuclearization demands, only a treatment that heals the underlying attachment and dignity wounds can stabilize the region's nuclear dynamics for the long term.

Oddly, many will argue that acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear state implies that U.S. policy on deterrence has failed.<sup>127</sup> Ironically, the opposite is true. For over 70 years, North Korea has avoided large-scale attacks against South Korea. The shelling of Yeonpyeong Island and the sinking of the South Korean naval corvette, *Cheonan*, were highly calculated provocations which inflicted maximum damage to South Korea while avoiding restarting the war.<sup>128 129</sup> This is a massive indication that North Korea was not very worried about the South's response, no different than a neglected child lashing out and seeking negative attention. It is clear then, that the United States' deterrence efforts have been highly successful in deterring large-scale North Korean aggression and the breakout of war. The United States' only failure to this point was its attempt to halt North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons, completely misunderstanding the drivers of this pursuit. After its economy collapsed in the 1980s, North Korea saw nuclear weapons as the only way to gain international recognition as an independent nation-state.<sup>130</sup> After South Korea gained global recognition, North Korea realized it would never be able to shake its reputation as a pariah, and continued human rights violations (a necessity to maintain internal control over the population) and its aggressive stance toward the South only made things worse. As a result, North Korea continued to pursue nuclear weapons in spite of the sanctions and isolation to maintain dignity and gain global recognition.

This drastic pivot from isolation to bold nuclear pursuit mirrors the psychology of neglected youth, who, finding traditional avenues of support closed off, may turn to extreme measures simply because no viable alternatives remain. Recognizing North Korea as a nuclear state finally accepts reality and allows the international order to stop pretending they can halt North Korean nuclear development. North Korea's choice to double down on nuclearization is less an act of irrational defiance and more an adaptive, if dangerous, survival strategy intended to force nations to accept them as an independent country, raised in a 'household' suffering from chronic insecurity and international exclusion. Therapeutic progress, whether in a clinical setting or in diplomacy, depends on persistent, consistent engagement and the slow rebuilding of trust. This process

cannot be rushed or forced without risking regression, as was seen following the failures of the 1994 Agreed Framework.<sup>131</sup>

Any movement toward sustainable stability with North Korea requires patient, incremental steps from the international community. Neither the United States nor South Korea can accomplish this alone, and both must maintain realistic expectations about the pace and sequence of change, no matter how problematic North Korea's past actions have been. Lasting peace will only be created through the steady reinforcement of predictable rules and the demonstration of respect for North Korea's sovereignty; not through quick fixes like a unilateral declaration ending the Korean War or coercive reversals pausing military exercises like Freedom Shield.<sup>132</sup> Ultimately, the effectiveness of this approach will hinge not only on North Korea's willingness to reciprocate, but also on the international community's capacity for restraint, resolve, and strategic patience, something that may not be possible unless the U.S. reverses its current policies towards North Korea. The biggest risk to nuclear recognition is impatience from the international community, with the involved parties once again reversing stance after only a few years, something confirmed by the June 2025 U.S. strikes on Iran.<sup>133</sup>

### **Contraindications: Addressing the Risks of Nuclear Recognition**

Recognizing North Korea's nuclear status carries significant—and difficult-to-ignore—risks. Most notably, recognition of North Korea's nuclear status could embolden other states to pursue nuclear weapons, thereby weakening the already strained credibility of the global non-proliferation regime. The foundational premise of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) is that states which abstain from nuclear development will be rewarded with security guarantees and peaceful nuclear cooperation.<sup>134</sup> However, those that pursue weapons outside the treaty will face isolation and penalties designed to halt nuclear weapons production. As a chief architect and guarantor of the NPT system, if the United States were to pivot toward accepting North Korea's nuclear status, it would effectively acknowledge the failure of non-proliferation principles and completely undermine the international rules-based upon which modern diplomacy is built. More importantly, it could seriously affect the United States credibility after the recent 2025 strikes on Iran. Nuclear recognition would also send a clear message: defection from the international regime may be punished in the short term, but persistence



and technical success will eventually be rewarded with recognition and legitimacy.

This shift would not occur in a vacuum. Regional powers like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and even Japan or South Korea might interpret U.S. recognition of North Korea not as an isolated strategic adjustment, but as a precedent with global applicability. If North Korea, through decades of defiance and sanctions evasion, is ultimately accepted into the nuclear club, why should others believe that their own nuclear aspirations will be permanently blocked? Would this permanently embolden Iran after the unprovoked 2025 attacks on their nuclear facilities? Moreover, recognition will feed a broader narrative of strategic decay with U.S. adversaries seeing it as an implicit concession of American decline. This will serve once again to show that, given enough patience, Washington no longer has the will, cohesion, or strategic foresight to enforce international norms. This perception reinforces a strategic narrative among adversaries—that U.S. resolve is transient and subject to the population's approval—which shaped resistance movements in Iraq and Afghanistan and influenced the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>135 136</sup> If Iran sees a model for negotiating from North Korea's situation, Iran may choose to escalate enrichment efforts rather than return to compliance with the JCPOA. The domino effect in Northeast Asia, could lead to allies (and fellow NPT members) like South Korea and Japan to initiate quiet technical hedging programs, reasoning that the U.S. security umbrella may not be a permanent or reliable substitute for independent deterrence.

This cascade effect where one state's success emboldens others is precisely what non-proliferation architects feared when designing the post-World War II nuclear order.<sup>137</sup> Recognition of North Korea, however justified by present circumstances, risks undermining decades of normative scaffolding. The challenge, then, is not just to prevent proliferation in North Korea, but to contain the symbolic power of its nuclear success. Without a parallel effort to reaffirm the value of non-nuclear status, recognition may set off a slow-motion unraveling of the very regime that the United States has spent generations trying to uphold.

This shift may also further alienate key regional allies such as Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, states whose security policies remain tightly tethered to the perceived permanence of American extended deterrence. For Seoul, the optics of U.S. disengagement could shift the South Koreans toward pursuit of an indigenous nuclear capability, especially among hawkish constituencies who view Washington's

recalibration as abandonment.<sup>138</sup> South Korea, after all, does not simply fear North Korea's weapons, it fears being left to face them alone.<sup>139</sup>

Nevertheless, the risks of nuclear proliferation triggered by recognizing North Korea's nuclear status remain manageable, provided the international community adopts a nuanced, multilateral approach. Recent actions—most notably the recent U.S. military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities despite ongoing diplomatic negotiations, and Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in direct violation of international agreements—have severely undermined both nations' reliability as trustworthy diplomatic guarantors. Unlike Iran or other would-be proliferators, North Korea alone combines a history of forcible division, direct wartime occupation by its potential adversary, and century-long dual-parent abandonment, all of which create a security environment without parallel in the NPT regime. North Korea's core security fears revolve precisely around scenarios like Ukraine's, where assurances proved meaningless in the face of military aggression, reinforcing Pyongyang's commitment to nuclear weapons as the ultimate safeguard against betrayal.

### **Global Institutions and Policy Options**

The role of providing a secure diplomatic and security framework for North Korea must fall to a broader coalition of more credible international actors. China, Japan, and the European Union, supported by neutral global institutions such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), offer the most practical foundation for rebuilding diplomatic trust and stability. Specifically, the UN Security Council could establish a dedicated "Korean Peace and Security Commission" (e.g., an expanded and formally empowered version of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue), tasked with officially registering North Korea's nuclear status as a context-specific exception.<sup>140</sup> This UN commission should formally declare an end to hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, clearly framing North Korea's nuclear recognition as arising from uniquely severe historical and geopolitical circumstances, explicitly distinguishing Pyongyang's situation from other potential proliferators (i.e., the Koreans had no say in the division of the peninsula), and supporting a withdrawal of UNC troops from the Korean peninsula. The forum would later provide a track 1.5 platform—a hybrid dialogue involving both government officials (in a non-official capacity) and non-governmental experts—to negotiate regional confidence-building

measures.<sup>141</sup> The confidence-building measures should include mutual notification procedures, demilitarized corridors, crisis communication hotlines, joint humanitarian and disaster response exercises, and cross-border environmental projects which offer reliable diplomatic structures to sustainably repair Pyongyang's severe attachment injuries and reduce its compulsive reliance on nuclear deterrence.

Second, recognition must be conditional upon a binding, verifiable framework of international oversight. Unlike prior agreements dependent on U.S. or Russian security guarantees, verification of North Korea's nuclear commitments must reside entirely under the jurisdiction of an empowered and impartial UN Monitoring Commission, modeled closely on, but exceeding the enforcement capabilities of the IAEA. This neutral commission would manage stringent verification and inspection protocols to transparently confirm Pyongyang's compliance with negotiated arsenal limits, removing the threat of unilateral U.S., Chinese, or Russian interference. This commission is critical to building trust on both sides between the North Koreans and the rest of the world. Furthermore, this commission would establish and enforce a robust multilateral "no-attack" protocol, explicitly prohibiting any military strike against North Korea's nuclear facilities without direct authorization by the UN Security Council. To ensure these guarantees are credible, any violation of the no-attack protocol would trigger automatic, pre-authorized multilateral sanctions overseen by the UN Monitoring Commission and removing the need for further Council debate or vetoes.

Third, to address broader proliferation concerns triggered by recognizing North Korea, the international community should significantly reinforce incentives for NPT compliance among non-nuclear states. Credible global actors, including the European Union, China, Japan, India, the IAEA, ASEAN, and organizations in Latin America and Africa, should collaboratively offer enhanced economic benefits, security assistance, and civil nuclear technology partnerships exclusively to NPT-compliant states. These differentiated incentives would clearly demonstrate the tangible benefits of adhering to non-nuclear commitments, counterbalancing fears of an emerging nuclear precedent.

## Conclusion

As much as the West wants to deny reality, possession of a single working nuclear weapon creates a *de facto* nuclear state. Continued refusal to acknowledge North Korea's nuclear status eliminates opportunities for

engagement and creates regional instability that risks a military conflict. Without trust, there can be no diplomacy. If the international community continues to treat North Korea as a rogue actor to be managed through coercion, then it will continue to act like one. If the global order, including the U.S. and South Korea, adopts a posture of strategic maturity, recognizing North Korea's nuclear status not as a reward, but as a reality, it can begin to rewrite the rules of engagement. This does not legitimize DPRK human rights abuses or signal the end of deterrence. Rather, it marks a shift toward behavioral predictability and away from doctrinal purity. North Korea is no longer a problem to be solved, but an adult actor born of prolonged neglect. Increased international engagement reaching down into the North's domestic population will slowly deprogram the population and reduce internal tolerance for North Korea's repressive government structure and continued human rights abuses. Like a child who has learned that love is conditional, North Korea has hardened its worldview around survival rather than reconciliation. And yet, for all its defiance, the country has remained inside the bounds of rational deterrence. The Kim regime does not seek destruction; it seeks acknowledgment.

Like a neglected child left to fend for itself, North Korea internalized the belief that survival requires autonomy. In its case, this means nuclear weapons. Despite dramatic overtures, the North Korean impression is that American diplomacy is performative and easily abandoned. Each new U.S. and South Korean administration alternates between engagement and hostility, making long-term trust impossible. Over time, these reversals have produced a Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder: a syndrome in which nation-states conditioned by diplomatic trauma develop a rigid and defensive posture toward external engagement and cannot disengage due to a complete and utter lack of trust. This is psychological entrenchment rooted in the conviction that vulnerability or trust leads to betrayal.

North Korea's rejection of reunification and desire to be a stand-alone nation is a watershed moment. Taking new approaches to engaging Kim Jong-un, such as bringing North Korea into the international community, could lead to more predictable interactions, reducing the need for provocative nuclear testing and military shows of force. The international order must seize upon North Korea's announcement to provide a secure diplomatic base focusing on credible non-aggression and nuclear status recognition. The U.S. should replace punitive sanctions and recurring military exercises with consistent, bounded track 1.5 engagement or step out of the way so that other entities, like the European Union, can do so.

Recognition of North Korea as a nuclear state is not “rewarding bad behavior”; rather, it functions as the critical “secure base” intervention that attachment theory prescribes before any lasting behavioral change is possible. This analogy is not meant to equate international policy directly with behavioral management training but rather draws on attachment theory’s emphasis on the need for a secure, acknowledged relationship before any secondary interventions can succeed. In clinical contexts, attachment repair precedes more targeted interventions—whether psychoeducation or behavioral strategies—by creating a baseline of trust and psychological safety. In the case of S-RAD, formal recognition is a prerequisite for any progress toward more constructive and cooperative state behavior. As the foster parent working under CPS, the U.S. and UN continue to wait for trust before acting, not realizing that North Korea is waiting on them to acknowledge the reality of the North’s predicament.

If the U.S. and the UN are to move beyond reactive management and toward true resolution, other key steps must include formally ending the Korean War, reviewing U.S. and UN force posture on the peninsula, and decoupling the U.S. and South Korean militaries by completing the Conditions-based OPCON Transfer Plan and disestablishing Combined Forces Command. Although outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that declaring an end to the Korean War could provide a form of political closure—signaling a credible move away from punitive containment, reducing existential anxiety for Pyongyang, and serving as the diplomatic equivalent of the “secure base” intervention prescribed in attachment theory. The United States should consider initiating a reduction of its military footprint in South Korea, starting with halting large-scale joint exercises and conducting a significant troop withdrawal. Force posture drawdowns do not signal abandonment of allies but would instead reduce the ambient threat environment as a confidence-building step. It also allows the U.S. to focus on dealing with the PRC without having to worry about another war against North Korea and acknowledges South Korea’s desire for improved relations with the North after the South’s 2025 election. The power vacuum that is likely to be left by a U.S. withdrawal creates space for other nations to treat S-RAD by conducting outreach necessary to reintegrate North Korea with the international order.

Long-term benefits for the U.S. and the rest of the world include reduced military expenditures, greater global economic integration, and de-escalation in Northeast Asia—with South Korea playing a key role in both. Policymakers, military professionals, and scholars should consider

the benefits of stability and predictability over the uncertain outcomes of continued non-recognition of North Korea's nuclear status. North Korea's persistent human rights abuses are not separate from its strategic behavior, but symptoms of the same trauma that produced its Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder. Prolonged international hostility empowered the regime to justify domestic repression as a survival mechanism. Treating S-RAD by decoupling human rights from nuclear recognition opens the door to sustained, predictable engagement with the international community. Ultimately, this policy approach will erode the legitimacy of the Kim regime and the need for internal control will diminish. Human rights improvements will become both possible and more sustainable with advocacy continuing through multilateral international forums. Priority should be given to resolving the root cause of the abuses which are, ultimately, due to North Korea's entrenched isolation and hyper-autonomy as a symptom of S-RAD.

By following these policy recommendations, the international order can 'treat' the Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder plaguing the Korean Peninsula and leverage other nations—without the same attachment ruptures—to forge the healthy emotional (i.e., geopolitical and diplomatic) bonds necessary to permanently resolve the Korean conflict. It also creates an opportunity for South Korea to step up as North Korea's twin and use its global standing in economic and diplomatic forums to pursue a more independent and constructive approach to inter-Korean relations.

To move forward, scholarship must confront this reality head-on. Further research must consider how trust can be built in adversarial relationships defined by betrayal, especially when one actor views institutional guarantees as inherently reversible. What forms of symbolic, unilateral action can initiate conflict resolution? How would nuclear recognition affect global non-proliferation? Can deterrence function without forward deployment? What does minimalist extended deterrence require? Furthermore, preliminary parallels suggest that other states—such as Iran and Cuba—may exhibit similar patterns of Strategic-Reactive Attachment Disorder. Future research should systematically examine whether Iran's nuclear posture and diplomatic behavior reflect the same causal linkages and chronic relational disturbances observed in North Korea, or whether the U.S.-Cuba relationship could be repaired using a similar analytical framework. These are practical questions that define the limits of diplomacy in an era of failed denuclearization. If the international

order accepts that North Korea is no longer waiting to be fixed—but demanding to be recognized—then the burden of maturity no longer lies with the North. The world must adapt to a new reality and stop trying to repeat the same failed mistakes of the past.

## Notes:

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