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# The U.S. Involvement in Global Affairs and the DPRK's Aggressions: Investigating the Association Using Statistical Analysis

Alec Chung

This study aims to investigate, using statistical analysis, whether the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) increases its provocations and aggressions toward other states, especially toward the Republic of Korea (ROK), when the U.S. is involved in conflicts around the world. The empirical findings show that, during 1995–2021, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK increased when the U.S. got involved in more global conflicts. Particularly, when the U.S. had conflicts with China–Russia–MENA (Middle East and North Africa) states, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and hostile actions toward the ROK increased. Such findings imply that the DPRK regards the U.S. being preoccupied with multiple conflicts around the world as a chance to act aggressively toward other states because the U.S. will not be able to hinder the DPRK's actions.

**Keywords** U.S. involvement, global affairs, the DPRK, provocations and aggressions, statistical analysis

## INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched its "special operation" in Ukraine, marking the beginning of the Russo–Ukraine war, which is still ongoing as of March 2023. Since the war broke out, the U.S. has continued to support Ukraine by providing military assistance. The U.S. also pledged to increase its presence in Europe. President Joe Biden attended the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit on June 29, 2022, and announced that the U.S. would "enhance our force posture in Europe to respond to the change [in the] security environment, as well as strengthening our collective security" (U.S. Department of Defense 2022).

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) continues to disrupt peace on the Korean peninsula through military

**Alec Chung** is a Research Fellow at the Jeju Peace Institute. Email: scchung@jpi.or.kr.

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provocations.[1] Since the start of the Russo–Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, the DPRK has conducted military provocations fifty-one times – seven artillery fires, twenty-six short-range (ballistic) missile launches, three medium-range ballistic missile launches, two intermediate-range ballistic missile launches, three intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches, and ten other provocations – in 2022 (Center for Strategic Studies 2019).

Because the U.S. is preoccupied with other events, such as the situation in Eastern Europe, it has not made any specific moves to deter the DPRK from destabilizing stability and peace in East Asia. Thus, the DPRK seems to be exploiting events occurring in other parts of the world in its favor, using them as opportunities to continue its provocations and developing nuclear capabilities while staying under the radar (Terry 2022; Katz and Cha 2022). The outbreak of war in Eastern Europe will continue to divert the U.S.'s interest and resources that could have otherwise been allocated toward other areas such as the Korean peninsula.

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine is one of the most recent events that caught the U.S.'s attention, the U.S. has been tirelessly and endlessly intermingled with issues and events such as the rise of China in East Asia, the Cross-Strait (China–Taiwan) relations, the Iranian nuclear program, and others. Since we are living in an interconnected world, an event in one region inevitably affects another region positively or negatively. Besides, the U.S. – which is currently the most superior state in terms of relative economic and military powers – lacks the ability to intervene in multiple events simultaneously. Although the U.S. would prefer to intervene to maintain order and stability around the world by supporting its allies, it is not feasible for one state to project its power worldwide, even though it might be a viewed as a hegemon. After all, "a superpower can never concentrate on just one problem" (Brands and Montgomery 2020, 147).

Under such a circumstance, this study aims to investigate whether the DPRK increases its provocations and aggressions toward other states, especially toward the Republic of Korea (ROK), when the U.S. is involved in conflicts around the world. The empirical findings obtained through statistical analysis show that, during 1995–2021, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK increased when the U.S. got involved in more global conflicts. Particularly, when the U.S. had conflicts with China–Russia–MENA (Middle East and North Africa) states, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK increased. Such findings imply that when the U.S. is preoccupied with various conflicts around the world, the DPRK act aggressively toward other states, such as the ROK, because the U.S. could not afford to hinder the DPRK's actions.

This article is organized as follows: The next section reviews the theoretical framework of this research—the U.S.'s ability to intervene in multiple global affairs

[1] In this article, provocations will refer to actions such as missile launch, nuclear test, artillery fire, exchange of fire, and others, classified by the Center for Strategic Studies (2019). Provocations might not have a specific target state (e.g., missile or nuclear tests) although the DPRK's neighbors will perceive such actions as posing a threat to them. On the other hand, aggressions will refer to hostile actions initiated by one state toward other target states.

simultaneously is limited because an attempt to do so will cause a "strategic overstretch." The third and fourth sections examine the global affairs the U.S. intervened or got involved in and the DPRK's provocations and aggressions since the 1990s. The fifth section introduces the hypotheses, data, variables, and empirical findings of the statistical analysis. The final section concludes the article with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WHY THE U.S.'S ABILITY TO INTERVENE IN MULTIPLE GLOBAL AFFAIRS IS LIMITED

As the Cold War came to an end, the era of U.S. unipolarity began in the early 1990s. Scholars such as Mearsheimer predicted that the U.S. would withdraw from Europe as the Cold War ended, an action that could result in the rise of multipolarity in Europe (Mearsheimer 1990). However, the U.S. did not opt for isolationism. Instead, its grand strategy in the post-Cold War era was pursuing a continued global preponderance that could prevent the rise of new threats (Brands and Feaver 2016). Furthermore, the U.S. sought to spread the liberal principles such as freedom, democracy, economic openness, and rule-based order, believing that pursuing such principles will bring peace and prosperity around the world (Walt 2018, 54-56).

However, the main problem with the continued pursuit of preponderance though is that it is likely to drag the U.S. into an "imperial overstretch" (Kennedy 1987, 515; Posen and Ross 1996, 43). Considering the amount of wealth a state possesses and whether the state grows rapidly and consistently is essential because wealth is the very foundation of military power. Great powers can only maintain their military superiority over others when their wealth is large enough to sustain the current level of military spending, while a state's military power can be used to increase and secure its wealth, forming a virtuous circle between the two (Kennedy 1987, xvi). However, scholars argue that "differential growth rates" among states lead to an emergence of newly rising powers that will challenge and rapidly negate the hegemon's supremacy (Gilpin 1981; Kennedy 1987; Layne 1993). Due to incongruous growth rates and the pace of technological advancement, some states' wealth increases faster than others, shifting the state's position in the international system – some states become great powers, while others lose their status. When a declining state fails to adjust its national interest, global strategy, and defense priorities according to its declining wealth, it faces a situation of "imperial overstretch." For instance, the U.S. could face a situation which "the sum total of the United States' global interests and obligations is … far larger than the country's power to defend them all simultaneously" (Kennedy 1987, 515).

During the last seven decades (since the end of World War II), the U.S.'s share of global wealth decreased from half to less than a quarter, although it continues to maintain the world's strongest military power in terms of quantity and quality, backed by its massive defense spending. However, the U.S. increased its involvement and defense obligations across East Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the entire Western hemisphere during the Cold War era to contain the expansion of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc. The U.S. also continues to intervene in various regions today, for

instance, to contain the rise and expansion of China and Russia.

Nevertheless, maintaining preponderance over other states is "expensive" and leads to a "strategic overextension" because the U.S. has to defend its own core interests and those of its allies (Layne 1997, 96-99). Thus, continuing to pursue preponderance could cause the U.S.'s economic strength to deteriorate. In such a situation, it is doubtful whether the U.S. would be able to preserve enough material capabilities and resources to provide extended deterrence while maintaining credibility with its allies (Layne 1997, 107-108).

Besides, the global financial crisis that occurred in 2008 accelerated the decline of the U.S. and ended the era of unipolarity (Layne 2012). The rapid rise of China, armed with revisionist aims, in recent decades has also contributed to the U.S.'s relative decline (Brands and Feaver 2016). Furthermore, the U.S. economy was hit hard by the recent coronavirus disease pandemic that swept the world. Thus, the U.S. primacy in areas such as military and economy is decreasing rapidly, especially since the beginning of the 21st century. In such a situation, it has become more difficult for the U.S. to maintain its status as a hegemon and intervene in multiple global affairs simultaneously.

## THE U.S. INVOLVEMENT AND INTERVENTION IN GLOBAL AFFAIRS

One of the events with the most significant impact on U.S. foreign policy in the 2000s was 9/11, which occurred in 2001. In response to 9/11, the Bush administration declared the "war on terror" and invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 because the Taliban regime was providing a safe haven to Al-Qaeda, a terrorist organization led by Osama bin Laden, which was responsible for the 9/11 attack. The Afghanistan war lasted until August 2021, approximately 20 years. After initiating a war in Afghanistan, the U.S. invaded Iraq in March 2003 to oust Saddam Hussein – then the leader of Iraq. The reason for the invasion was that Iraq was alleged to be supporting terrorists while possessing weapons of mass destruction. The war officially lasted until December 2011.

While the U.S. seemed to have achieved swift military victories in both campaigns, the U.S. got caught in a quagmire, continuing to fight against insurgents during the nation-building process and installing a democratic regime in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, the U.S. had to spend an excessive amount to fund the prolonged wars in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, the U.S. continued to intervene and got involved in global affairs throughout the 2010s. As the Arab Spring – a series of pro-democracy protests – occurred in 2010 and 2011, the U.S. concentrated its focus on the Middle East and North Africa. As a civil war broke out in Libya, the U.S. conducted a humanitarian military intervention in 2011 as a member of NATO. The U.S. also intervened in the Syrian Civil War beginning in 2014. Besides, as the Islamic State (IS) started to gain territories under its control and expand its influence in the Middle East, the U.S. took military actions to roll back and defeat IS, beginning in 2014. Finally, in Afghanistan, the Biden administration decided to fully withdraw the U.S. troops in August 2021, while the Taliban retook control of the country.

Meanwhile, the "National Security Strategy" released by the White House on October 12, 2022, stipulates that the U.S.'s top global priority is "Out-Competing China and Constraining Russia" (White House 2022a). Throughout the recent decades, China continued its rapid economic growth, becoming the world's second largest economy after surpassing Japan in 2010. With the wealth it has accumulated for decades, China has dramatically increased its defense budget annually, modernizing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in terms of quantity and quality. Besides, China is seeking to increase its ability to project its power across the South China Sea, an act that is causing territorial conflicts with its neighbors in Southeast Asia (Fravel 2011; Scott 2012; Chubb 2015).

As signs of hegemonic competition between the U.S. and China increased, the U.S. adopted policies of "rebalancing," increasing its focus on Asia. For instance, the Obama administration announced the "pivot to Asia" or the "rebalance in Asia" strategy in November 2011, increasing its presence in Asia. In addition, the U.S.–China trade war began during the Trump administration period, imposing sanctions and countersanctions on each other, a dispute that affected other economies as well. Furthermore, in May 2018, the U.S. renamed its "Pacific Command" as the "Indo-Pacific Command," emphasizing the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean, in addition to the Pacific, to the U.S. strategy in Asia. The act was viewed as the U.S. sending a signal to China that it intends to regard the region as its key area of interest. As a result, some scholars claim that we are currently living in an era of the U.S.–China "hegemonic" or "strategic" competition (Mearsheimer 2011; Layne 2018; Zhao 2019).

The strategic and hegemonic competition between the U.S. and China persists and will continue in the 2020s. The Biden administration continues to engage in a trade war with China, imposing tariffs on Chinese imports to the U.S. The U.S. also seeks to collaborate with its allies to counter China's expansion. For instance, in 2017, the Trump administration agreed with Australia, India, and Japan to re-establish the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, widely known as the Quad. China views the Quad as an institution intended to counter China's rise in the Indo-Pacific, although the four states never announced such an intention officially.

Preventing the clash between China and Taiwan is another issue the U.S. is paying attention keenly. Most recently, in August 2022, as a furious reaction to the U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, China conducted military drills and fired missiles toward Taiwan's territorial waters (Perlez 2022; Lee and Wu 2022). The U.S. does not want a war erupting between China and Taiwan. However, the Biden administration made it clear that the U.S. will not stand by if China decides to invade Taiwan, showing how much the U.S. is committed to defending its partner in the Indo-Pacific (Wang 2022).

Other than military alliances, the U.S. is also seeking to decouple its economy from China's by creating numerous economic institutions and technology alliances, such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and the Chip 4 Alliance, with like-minded allies such as Japan, the ROK, and Taiwan. As such, since the U.S. is preoccupied with hindering China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific, it will have little time or effort to spare concerning the Korean peninsula.

Meanwhile, in Europe, in February and March 2014, Russia invaded and annexed

Crimea through a referendum, an act denounced as illegal by the international community. In response, the Obama administration imposed (and subsequently expanded) sanctions on Russia, demanding Russia's withdrawal from Crimea. On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, attempting to widen its sphere of influence on the West. While President Putin expected a swift military victory, the war continues as of March 2023. As the war broke out, while strongly condemning Russia, the U.S., G7, and the European Union (EU) imposed economic sanctions on Russia, causing severe damage to its economy (White House 2022b). At the same time, the U.S. also provided a series of military assistance, reaching a total value of U.S.$27.5 billion as of January 2023 (US Department of State 2023). Furthermore, while the U.S. had pursued NATO's gradual eastward expansion since the beginning of the post-Cold War era, Russia's invasion of Ukraine accelerated the process.

As the war in Ukraine shows no signs of ending, the U.S. is likely to be preoccupied with increasing its involvement in Europe while strengthening the European states' defense so they can counter Russia's expansion. As Walt mentioned, unless the U.S. demands the European states to do more to defend its continent, "Washington will find itself doing more than is needed in Europe but not enough in Asia" (Foreign Policy 2022). In other words, the U.S. being tied up in Europe, again, indicates that it will not be able to afford to direct its attention to the Korean peninsula. Ending two costly wars in the Middle East – in Afghanistan and Iraq – in the past decade might have increased the U.S.'s chances of directing its attention toward the Korean peninsula. However, the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine offset that chance, as the invasion intercepted the U.S.'s time and resources that could have been spent on the DPRK.

This section examined the issues and regions that the U.S. intervened (either willingly or being dragged into a conflict unwillingly) throughout the last three decades. As the U.S. continues its relative economic decline, its resources and ability to intervene in various regions will diminish. As a result, the U.S. cannot afford to concentrate its efforts on multiple issues at the same time, especially when it is engaged in counterbalancing other great powers such as China and Russia.

## THE DPRK'S ACT OF PROVOCATIONS AND AGGRESSIONS SINCE THE 1990S

Through continued provocations such as missile and nuclear tests, the DPRK seeks to enhance its security and secure its survival (Lee 2007). Especially by developing nuclear weapons, the DPRK is trying to overcome its weakness vis-à-vis the ROK–U.S. regarding conventional weapons. At the same time, the DPRK also intends to use its nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip to acquire economic aid from the U.S. and international society in exchange for dismantling them (Kim 2019, 237). Thus, the DPRK conducts provocations such as nuclear tests to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities. Besides, the DPRK also conducts provocations and initiates conflicts on the Korean Peninsula to entrap China. The DPRK believes that the risk of being abandoned by China decreases when the U.S. increases its military presence on the Korean Peninsula. Specifically, the DPRK expects China to take a firm stance against the U.S. because China regards the

DPRK as a strategic asset, increasing its commitment to China–DPRK ties (Park and Park 2017, 376).

The DPRK started to develop its nuclear weapons seriously in the early 1990s. In December 1991, as the Cold War came to an end, the U.S. completed the withdrawal of its nuclear weapons from the ROK. However, after refusing to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect its Yongbyon nuclear facility in March 1993, the DPRK announced that it would withdraw from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). As the first DPRK nuclear crisis began, tensions between the U.S. and the DPRK continued to escalate. Nevertheless, the negotiation between the DPRK and the U.S. succeeded, and the two signed the Agreement Framework (also known as the Geneva Agreed Framework) in October 1994. Thus, the first DPRK nuclear crisis seemed to have ended peacefully, as the U.S. promised to provide economic assistance while the DPRK agreed to freeze its nuclear program.

However, while the Agreed Framework signed in 1994 seemed to have ended the crisis, the second crisis began in 2002, as the DPRK continued to develop its nuclear weapons. In 2002, U.S. intelligence found that the DPRK was developing a highly enriched uranium program. As a result, the Agreed Framework collapsed and, in January 2003, the DPRK announced that it would withdraw from the NPT. To seek a peaceful solution to the DPRK nuclear crisis, China brokered six-party talks (composed of China, the DPRK, Japan, the ROK, Russia, and the U.S.) to encourage the DPRK to return to the NPT and freeze its nuclear program. Other members intended to provide economic assistance in exchange for the DPRK's compliance. Still, the talks faced stalemates and, in October 2006, the DPRK conducted its first nuclear test. The final six-party talk convened in November 2007, and the DPRK conducted its second nuclear test in May 2009. Finally, in 2012, the DPRK amended its constitution and eventually proclaimed itself a nuclear state. Afterward, the DPRK conducted a series of nuclear tests in February 2013, January 2016, September 2016, and September 2017.

Delury (2013) points out that the Obama administration failed to prevent the DPRK's nuclear proliferation for numerous reasons. Specifically, the U.S. prioritized other agendas, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and reviving the U.S. economy, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, and hindering Iran's nuclear program. According to Delury, the Obama administration focused more on preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons than on denuclearizing the DPRK because it regarded Iran as more of a threat to the world, including the U.S. The Obama administration also adopted the policy of "strategic patience" in which the U.S. would start a negotiation, normalize the DPRK–U.S. relations, and provide economic assistance only if the DPRK completely denuclearized first. Kim (2019) also mentioned that because the U.S. was preoccupied with incident in the Middle East such as the two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of the IS, and the spread of the Arab Spring, it was not able to concentrate its time and effort on denuclearizing the DPRK. Also, the Obama administration's strategic patience policy was, in essence, a "benign neglect" strategy (Kim 2019, 242).

Unlike the previous administration, the Trump administration shifted the U.S. strategy toward the DPRK and pursued a policy of "maximum pressure," pressuring the DPRK to abandon its nuclear program through tougher sanctions while leaving the military option on the table (Kim 2020). Although the DPRK showed a willingness

to negotiate with the U.S. by holding a series of Trump–Kim summits (in April 2018 and February 2019), the second summit collapsed. The Hanoi summit ended without an agreement because, while the DPRK was not dismantling its nuclear facility in Yongbyon, it asked the U.S. to lift its sanctions. Since that was an unacceptable condition from the U.S. perspective, Trump walked out of the meeting.

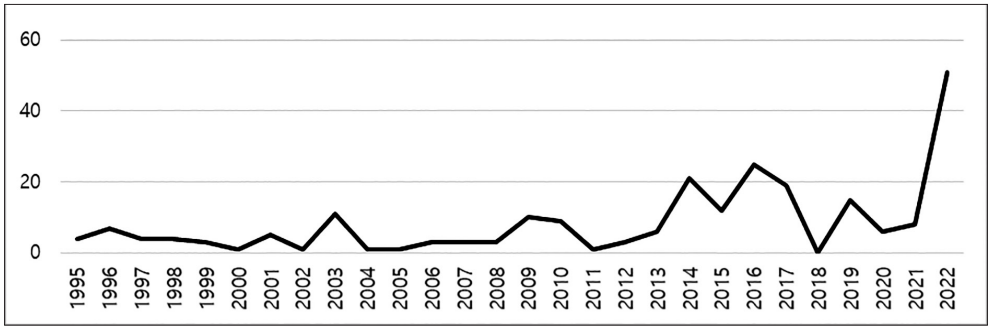
Regardless of the two summits' results, the DPRK has succeeded in becoming a de facto nuclear state throughout the decades. Thus, according to scholars like Sagan,

"It is time for the U.S. government to admit that it has failed to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach the United States. North Korea no longer poses a nonproliferation problem; it poses a nuclear deterrence problem" (Sagan 2017, 72).

As mentioned above, the DPRK proclaimed itself a nuclear state in 2012. Since then, while the U.S. has been engrossed in other global affairs, the DPRK has continued advancing its nuclear capabilities, although the exact level it has reached as of this moment is unclear. For instance, the DPRK has tried to diversify its delivery system to extend the range of its nuclear weapons, which includes short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) (Korda 2022, 116-121).

Figure 1 shows the number of provocations the DPRK conducted every year from 1995 to 2022 (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2019). The DPRK's provocations increased substantially in years such as 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2022. The majority of the provocations in these years are SRBMs, MRBMs, IRBMs, and ICBMs launches.

Furthermore, in January 2021, the DPRK's leader, Kim Jong-un, announced the list of new weapons that the DPRK aims to develop, including tactical nuclear weapons (Bicker 2021). While the specific definition of "tactical nuclear weapons" is yet to exist, the DPRK could lower its nuclear weapons' explosive yield by trying to minimize the nuclear warheads (Panda 2021, 8-10). The DPRK acquiring tactical nuclear weapons could escalate tensions and risks on the Korean peninsula by "[lowering] the threshold




Source: Beyond Parellel, CSIS

**Figure 1.** The Number of DPRK's Provocations

for nuclear use" (Panda 2021, 17). Limiting tactical nuclear weapons' explosive yields could increase the chances of the DPRK using them when it deems necessary, allowing the DPRK to gain leverage in future negotiations with the U.S. and the ROK.

Although it is unclear whether the DPRK already possesses tactical nuclear weapons, the DPRK passed a law on September 9, 2022 declaring its right to launch preemptive nuclear strikes against adversaries when an attack is deemed imminent (Kim 2022). Such a change in its nuclear doctrine, in addition to its goal of developing nuclear weapons quantitatively and qualitatively, will increase the U.S. and the ROK's fear of the DPRK's aggressiveness and likely escalate the chances of military conflicts on the Korean peninsula.

Other than missile and nuclear provocations, the DPRK occasionally initiates aggressions such as direct military clashes aimed toward the ROK such as the 1st and 2nd Battle of Yeonpyeong in 1999 and 2002, the Battle of Daecheong in 2009, sinking of the ROK's warship *Cheonan* and bombarding Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. Besides, the DPRK conducts other forms of military actions such as (air, ground, and maritime) incursions into the ROK's territory, firing artillery rounds into the West Sea, or exchanging fire with the ROK at the Northern Limit Line (NLL) and Demilitarized Zone (DMZ).

In short, the DPRK continues to conduct various acts of provocation that destabilize peace in East Asia. However, the U.S. is showing little signs and actions to thwart the DPRK. If such a trend continues in this and the next decade, the DPRK will not just continue to act aggressively toward its neighbors but also succeed in achieving the goals regarding its nuclear weapons it announced publicly in recent years. Especially since the U.S. is currently prioritizing "Out-Competing China and Constraining Russia" (White House 2022a), as mentioned above, the DPRK might feel that the window of opportunity to "push for gains" is open (Brands and Montgomery 2020, 90).

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

### Hypotheses

The primary goal of this study is investigating, using statistical analysis, whether the DPRK increases its provocations and aggressions toward other states when the U.S. is involved in numerous conflicts around the world. To find answers to the research question, this section will introduce data, variables, and test the following hypotheses:

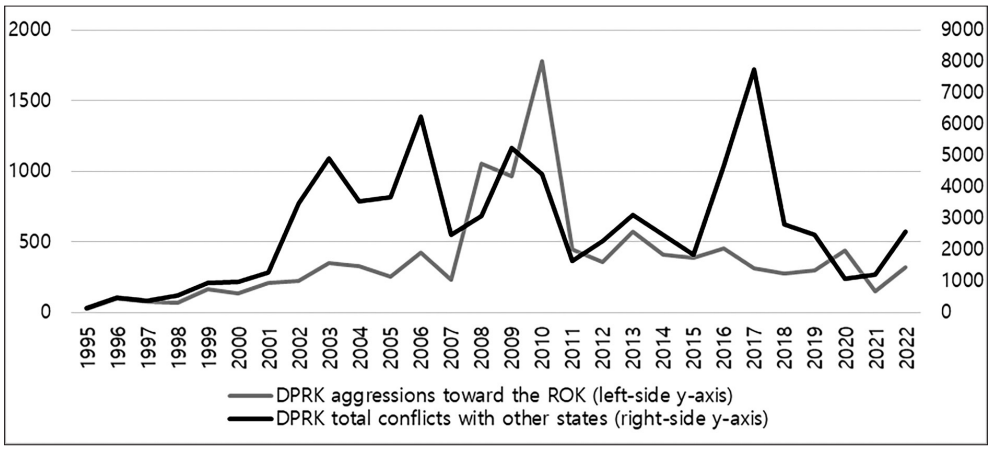
**Hypothesis 1:** *An increase in conflict between the U.S. and other states is positively associated with the DPRK's provocations.*
**Hypothesis 2:** *An increase in conflict between the U.S. and other states is positively associated with the DPRK's conflict with other states.*
**Hypothesis 3:** *An increase in conflict between the U.S. and other states is positively associated with the DPRK's aggressions toward the ROK.*

**Dependent variables: The number of DPRK's provocations, DPRK's conflicts with other states, and DPRK's aggressions toward the ROK.**

As shown in the hypotheses, the dependent variables of this study are the number of DPRK's provocations and conflicts with other states. The data regarding the number of DPRK's provocations is obtained from CSIS shown in Figure 1. On the other hand, the number of DPRK's conflict with other states and aggressions toward the ROK will be measured using the Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS).[2] The databases collect events that are reported in news articles and code information according to the event date, source country, target country, each event's intensity, and others. Each event's intensity is coded according to the Conflict and Mediation Event Observations (CAMEO) scale which ranges from –10.0 to 10.0.[3] Because the ICEWS data is available from 1995, the period of empirical analysis will be limited to 1995–2021.

Researchers often count the number of positive/negative events that occurred between the two states to measure state relations (Kagotani et al. 2014; Hwang and Nishikawa 2017; and You and Kim 2020). Similarly, a state's hostility toward others can be measured by counting the number of hostile actions state A targeted toward state B. Thus, using the ICEWS, we will count the number of events with intensity value below zero (conflict events) to quantify the DPRK's conflict with other states and confrontational actions toward the ROK.

Although it is possible to measure the dependent variables – the number of DPRK's




Source: ICEWS

**Figure 2.** The Number of DPRK's Conflicts with Other States/DPRK's aggressions toward the ROK

[2] For more information regarding the ICEWS, see https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/icews (accessed January 4, 2023).

[3] For more information regarding the CAMEO scale, see https://eventdata.parusanalytics.com/cameo.dir/CAMEO.SCALE.txt (accessed January 14, 2023).

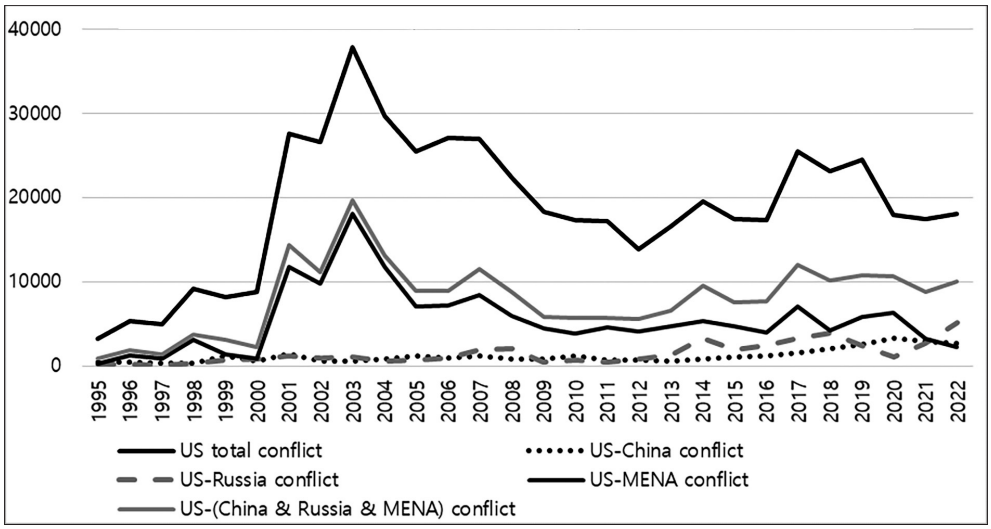
provocations, its conflicts with other states, and its hostility toward the ROK – on a daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis when employing the data from CSIS and ICEWS, one year will be assigned as the unit of analysis because only yearly data was available for other data used as control variables.

Figure 2 shows the number of DPRK's conflicts with other states and aggressions toward the ROK. The former and the latter recorded the highest value in 2017 (7,729 conflicts) and 2010 (1,782), respectively.

**Independent variables: The number of conflicts between the U.S. and other states**

To measure how much the U.S. was involved in global and regional affairs, the number of conflicts between the U.S. and other states will be utilized. First, the total number of conflicts the U.S. had with other states will be measured to test how the U.S. being preoccupied with conflict affects the DPRK's actions. (Within the total number of conflicts the U.S. had with other states, conflicts with the DPRK are excluded to remove the possibility of endogeneity between the independent and the dependent variables.) Besides, as mentioned above, the U.S. has focused on competing with China and Russia for years and decades. Thus, whether increased conflicts with China–Russia are associated with the DPRK's provocations and conflicts with other states will be tested. Finally, the U.S. has also actively intervened or had conflicts with states such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Thus, these states will be grouped as the MENA and measure how many conflicts the U.S. had with them each year.

As shown in Figure 3, the total number of conflicts the U.S. had with other states increased substantially in the 21st century. An increase in the conflicts can be attributed




Source: ICEWS

**Figure 2.** The Number of DPRK's Conflicts with Other States/DPRK's aggressions toward the ROK

to an increase in conflict between the U.S. and MENA states, particularly Afghanistan and Iraq because the U.S. started wars with the two states in 2001 and 2003, respectively. While the number of U.S.–MENA states conflicts decreased and remained almost constant throughout the 2010s, the number of U.S.–China and U.S.–Russia conflicts increased in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In other words, while the U.S. involvement in the MENA region seem to have decreased, from the U.S.'s perspective, conflicts with other great powers such as China and Russia are showing signs of increasing.

**Control variables: the U.S.–to–World gross domestic product (GDP) ratio, the U.S. Republican administration period, domestic instability with the DPRK, and the DPRK's gross national income (GNI) growth rate**

Besides the independent variables of interest of this study, other variables that might affect the DPRK's number of provocations and conflicts with other states will be controlled. For instance, a rise or decline of the U.S.'s share of the global GDP might affect he DPRK's actions. As mentioned above, the U.S. continues to intervene in multiple regional incidents even though its share of the global GDP seems to be declining. Thus, if a drop in the U.S.–to–World GDP ratio is associated with an increase in the DPRK's provocations and conflicts, that would indicate that the U.S. is becoming overstretched to deter the DPRK's actions. GDP data for the U.S. and the world is obtained from the World Bank (n.d.).

Whether the Republicans or the Democrats control the U.S. administration could also affect the DPRK's behaviors. Since 1995, the U.S. had two Republican presidents—George W. Bush (2001–2008) and Donald Trump (2017–2020). During the period, Bush and Trump showed tough stance and pressured the DPRK to denuclearize. Such hardline attitudes of the U.S. might have induced the DPRK to refrain from demonstrating aggressive actions and provocations toward its neighbors. Regarding

**Table 1.** shows the descriptive statistics of the variables introduced thus far.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

| Variable | Obs | Mean | Std.dev | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| DPRK's Provocations | 27 | 6.889 | 6.577 | 0 | 25 |
| DPRK's Conflicts | 27 | 2706.593 | 1913.528 | 158 | 7729 |
| DPRK's Conflicts toward the ROK | 27 | 388.3704 | 366.0896 | 26 | 1782 |
| U.S.A–World conflict (excluding DPRK) | 27 | 17955.81 | 7966.034 | 3232 | 35626 |
| U.S.A– (CHN&RU.S.&MENA) conflict | 27 | 8005.926 | 4383.822 | 833 | 19669 |
| U.S.A– (CHN&RU.S.) conflict | 27 | 2461.852 | 1604.996 | 456 | 5987 |
| U.S.A–MENA conflict | 27 | 5544.074 | 3916.432 | 293 | 18048 |
| U.S. / World GDP | 27 | 0.255 | 0.030 | 0 | 1 |
| U.S. Republican administration | 27 | 0.444 | 0.506 | 0 | 1 |
| DPRK domestic instability | 27 | 134.407 | 68.754 | 24 | 341 |
| DPRK GNI growth rate | 27 | -0.048 | 2.992 | -6.5 | 6.1 |

this variable, one indicates the Republican administration years while zero indicates the years governed by the Democrats.

The DPRK's domestic conditions might be other factors that affect the dependent variables. For instance, domestic instability might induce the DPRK's leadership to initiate provocations and conflict with other states. Such decision has the effect of unifying the domestic public while strengthening the regime's legitimacy (Levy and Vakili 1992, 135). Similarly, a state experiencing an economic recession or a decline might initiate diversionary disputes to divert the public's attention away from the economy (Oneal and Russett 1990, 276–277; Oneal et al. 1996, 17–18). As such, a domestic economic crisis might induce the DPRK to act aggressively toward other states while conducting more provocations. The DPRK's GNI growth rate data is from the Economic Statistics System of the Bank of Korea (n.d.).

**Empirical Analysis**

Considering the nature of the dependent variables – the number of DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK – empirical analysis will be conducted by employing count models. Among count models, the negative binomial regression model (NBRM) will be used to produce efficient estimates because the dependent variables' means and standard deviations shown in Table 1 reveal that they are overdispersed (the variance being larger than the mean). If the variance of the dependent variable was equal to its mean, the Poisson regression model (PRM) would have been a preferred choice (Long and Freese 2014, 512). Additionally, because yearly data are used for empirical analysis, the presence and effect of autocorrelation should be removed. Although events and observations might affect one another in reality, for statistical analysis, correlation between the observations should be removed to meet the assumption that the error term should be independent in regression models (Becketti 2013, 168). As the Dickey–Fuller test detects the presence of autocorrelation in the dependent variables, the count model with the Newey–West standard errors, which correct the effect of autocorrelation, will be employed for empirical analysis (You and Kim 2020, 61–62).

Table 2 shows the results of empirical analysis regarding how the U.S. being involved in conflicts affect the number of DPRK's provocations. According to the result, when the U.S. was more involved in worldwide conflicts (excluding conflicts with the DPRK), the DPRK increased provocations ($p < 0.01$), providing empirical evidence supporting Hypothesis 1. Specifically, an increase in the number of conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia–MENA states was positively associated with the number of DPRK's provocations ($p < 0.01$). An increase in the number of conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia bloc (the two great powers) had a positive effect on the number of DPRK's provocations ($p < 0.01$). When examined separately, an increase in the number of U.S.–China and U.S.–Russia conflicts also increased the number of DPRK's provocations ($p < 0.01$ in both cases). Besides, when the U.S. had increased conflicts with the MENA states, the DPRK conducted more provocations ($p < 0.01$). The findings suggest that when the U.S. is preoccupied with conflicts with the great powers such as China and Russia, or when the U.S. is entangled in conflicts in the MENA, the DPRK

**Table 2.** Factors Affecting the Number of DPRK's Provocations, 1995-2021

| VARIABLES | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| U.S.–World conflict (excluding the DPRK) | 0.0001** | | |
| | (0.00001) | | |
| U.S.–(China & Russia & MENA) conflict | | 0.0002** | |
| | | (0.00002) | |
| U.S.–(China & Russia) conflict | | | 0.0004** |
| | | | (0.0001) |
| U.S.–MENA conflict | | | 0.0001** |
| | | | (0.00003) |
| U.S. / World GDP | -5.515 | -6.404* | 1.300 |
| | (3.671) | (3.242) | (3.983) |
| U.S. Republican administration | -0.931** | -1.315** | -1.545** |
| | (0.352) | (0.286) | (0.300) |
| DPRK domestic instability | 0.004** | 0.003** | 0.003** |
| | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| DPRK GNI growth rate | -0.050 | -0.063* | -0.080* |
| | (0.036) | (0.031) | (0.039) |
| Constant | 2.193 | 2.319* | 0.065 |
| | (1.127) | (0.976) | (1.188) |
| Log likelihood | -77.8934 | -76.6679 | -75.8377 |
| AIC | 6.2143 | 6.1235 | 6.1361 |
| BIC | -53.1652 | -55.6163 | -53.9807 |
| Observations | 27 | 27 | 27 |

Newey-West standard errors in parentheses ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

increases its act of provocation. The reason for increased provocation could be attributed to the situation which the U.S. would not be able to respond to the DPRK's actions swiftly due to its limited resources. In other words, the DPRK is exploiting the situation which the U.S. being bogged down in other regions in its favor.

Regarding the control variables, an increase in the U.S.'s share of the global GDP led to a decrease in the DPRK's provocations but only in Model 2 ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the empirical findings are not robust enough to conclude whether the rise or decline of the U.S. economy affect the DPRK's decision to conduct more provocations. The DPRK's number of provocations decreased when Republicans governed the U.S. ($p < 0.01$ in all three models). Because Republican presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump adopted hardline policies such as imposing sanctions, the DPRK might have constrained its aggressions. On the other hand, domestic instability within the DPRK was positively associated with its number of provocations. Such finding provides empirical support for the argument that leaders initiate provocations toward other states as means to gain

**Table 3.** Factors Affecting the Number of DPRK's Total Conflicts, 1995-2021

| VARIABLES | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 |
|---|---|---|---|
| U.S.–World conflict (excluding the DPRK) | 0.0001** | | |
| | (0.00001) | | |
| U.S.–(China & Russia & MENA) conflict | | 0.00005** | |
| | | (0.00001) | |
| U.S.–(China & Russia) conflict | | | 0.00001 |
| | | | (0.00004) |
| U.S.–MENA conflict | | | 0.00006** |
| | | | (0.00001) |
| U.S. / World GDP | -1.127 | -3.034* | -4.282* |
| | (1.113) | (1.499) | (2.133) |
| U.S. Republican administration | -0.391** | 0.262* | 0.292** |
| | (0.131) | (0.106) | (0.103) |
| DPRK domestic instability | 0.007** | 0.009** | 0.008** |
| | (0.001) | (0.002) | (0.002) |
| DPRK GNI growth rate | 0.002 | 0.038 | 0.036 |
| | (0.010) | (0.022) | (0.020) |
| Constant | 5.653** | 6.787** | 7.171** |
| | (0.419) | (0.676) | (0.903) |
| Log likelihood | -233.1978 | -234.1910 | -234.1456 |
| AIC | 17.7184 | 17.7919 | 17.8626 |
| BIC | -66.1097 | -64.1233 | -60.9182 |
| Observations | 27 | 27 | 27 |

Newey-West standard errors in parentheses ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

public support and strengthen the regime's authority and legitimacy. On the other hand, an increase in the DPRK's growth rate showed a negative association with the number of its provocations in Models 2 and 3 ($p < 0.05$) but not in Model 1. The results suggest that the DPRK's provocations decrease when its economic condition is good.

Table 3 shows the results of empirical analysis regarding how the U.S. being involved in conflicts affect the number of DPRK's conflicts with other states. According to the result, when the U.S. was involved in worldwide conflicts (excluding conflicts with the DPRK), the DPRK's conflict with other states increased ($p < 0.01$), providing empirical evidence supporting Hypothesis 2. Specifically, an increase in the number of conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia–MENA states was positively associated with the number of DPRK's conflicts with other states ($p < 0.01$). While an increase in the number of conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia bloc (the two great powers) had no effect, an increase in the U.S.–MENA states conflict was positively associated with the DPRK's conflicts with other states ($p < 0.01$). In other words, rather than when

the U.S. was engaged in conflicts with China and Russia, the DPRK had more conflict with other states when the U.S. was preoccupied in the MENA region.

Regarding the control variables, an increase in the U.S.'s share of the global GDP led to a decrease in the DPRK's conflict with other states in Model 5 and 6 ($p < 0.05$) but not in Model 4. In other words, a decrease in the U.S.'s share of the global GDP (which is the current trend) will positively affect the DPRK's number of conflicts with other states, providing empirical support for the U.S. overstretch argument. Meanwhile, unlike the results shown in Table 2, the DPRK's number of conflicts increased when Republicans governed the U.S. in Model 5 and 6 ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$, respectively). On the other hand, Model 4 showed an opposite result. Thus, it is unclear whether the DPRK had more conflicts with other states when Republicans are governing the U.S. Regarding domestic instability within the DPRK, same as the results shown in Table 2, it was positively associated with its number of conflicts with other states. However, an increase in the DPRK's growth rate had no effect on the number of its conflicts between the DPRK and other states.

Table 4 shows the results of empirical analysis regarding how the U.S. being involved in conflicts affect the number of DPRK's hostile actions toward the ROK. According to the result, the U.S. involvement in worldwide conflicts (excluding conflicts with the DPRK) was positively associated with an increase in the DPRK's aggressions toward the ROK ($p < 0.01$), providing empirical support for Hypothesis 3. Specifically, although an increase in the number of conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia had no effect on the DPRK's actions, an increase in the U.S.–MENA states conflicts showed a positive association with the DPRK's confrontational actions toward the ROK. The results indicate that, rather than when the U.S. was engaged in conflicts with China and Russia, the DPRK acted more aggressively toward the ROK when the U.S. was preoccupied in the MENA region.

Regarding the control variables, an increase in the U.S.'s share of the global GDP led to a decrease in the DPRK's conflict with other states ($p < 0.01$ in all three models). The results suggest that a decrease in the U.S.'s share of the global GDP will positively affect the DPRK's number of aggressions toward the ROK, providing empirical support for the U.S. overstretch argument. On the other hand, other control variables such as the U.S. Republican administration periods or the DPRK's domestic instability had no effect on the DRPK's actions toward the ROK. Meanwhile, an increase in the DPRK's growth rate increased the DPRK's confrontational actions toward the ROK ($p < 0.01$ in all three models).

In short, the results in Tables 2, 3, and 4 show that when the U.S. gets involved in more global conflicts, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK also increase. Particularly, increased conflicts between the U.S. and MENA states are positively associated with the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK. For instance, while the U.S. was entangled in multiple incidents for years in the MENA region such as wars (in Afghanistan and Iraq), nuclear crisis (with Iran), and civil wars (in Libya and Syria) during the period 1995–2021, the DPRK continued developing nuclear weapons and acting aggressively toward other states. Such findings imply that when the U.S. is preoccupied with various conflicts around the world, the DPRK seizes the chance to act

**Table 4.** Factors Affecting the Number of DPRK's Conflicts Toward the ROK, 1995-2021

| VARIABLES | Model 7 | Model 8 | Model 9 |
|---|---|---|---|
| U.S.–World conflict (excluding the DPRK) | 0.0001** | | |
| | (0.00001) | | |
| U.S.–(China & Russia & MENA) conflict | | 0.00004 | |
| | | (0.00002) | |
| U.S.–(China & Russia) conflict | | | -0.0001 |
| | | | (0.0001) |
| U.S.–MENA conflict | | | 0.0001** |
| | | | (0.00001) |
| U.S. / World GDP | -15.158** | -15.989** | -18.752** |
| | (1.687) | (1.747) | (3.725) |
| U.S. Republican administration | -0.390 | -0.0002 | 0.111 |
| | (0.232) | (0.171) | (0.220) |
| DPRK domestic instability | 0.002 | 0.004 | 0.003 |
| | (0.002) | (0.003) | (0.003) |
| DPRK GNI growth rate | 0.047** | 0.072** | 0.068** |
| | (0.015) | (0.015) | (0.025) |
| Constant | 8.397** | 9.066** | 9.957** |
| | (0.718) | (0.868) | (1.520) |
| Log likelihood | -182.9777 | -183.5936 | -183.3605 |
| AIC | 13.9984 | 14.0440 | 14.1008 |
| BIC | -60.8938 | -59.6620 | -56.8325 |
| Observations | 27 | 27 | 27 |

Newey-West standard errors in parentheses ** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$

aggressively toward other states, including the ROK, believing that the U.S. will not be able to intervene and deter the DPRK's provocations.

On the other hand, while an increased conflict between the U.S. and the two great powers – China and Russia – was positively associated with the DPRK provocations, it did not affect the number of DPRK's conflicts with other states or aggressions specifically aimed toward the ROK. The results might be obtained because the conflicts between the U.S. and MENA states outnumbered the conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia until recent years such as 2018 and 2021, as shown in Figure 3. (Although the conflicts between the U.S. and China–Russia outnumbered the U.S.–MENA states conflicts by 7,852 to 2,177 in 2022, the year 2022 is not included in the empirical results shown in Tables 2, 3, and 4.) Because relatively fewer conflicts occurred between the U.S. and the two great powers, compared to the conflicts the U.S. had with the MENA states during 1995–2021, the former might not have shown statistically significant association

with the dependent variables other than the number of the DPRK's provocations.

Meanwhile, although the association was not statistically significant in some models (1, 3, and 4), a decline in the U.S.'s share in the global economy led to an increase in the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and aggressions toward the ROK. The results provide (limited) empirical evidence that a relative decline of its economy constrains the U.S.'s ability to intervene in multiple incidents simultaneously while the DPRK is exploiting the situation in its favor. Other control variables – the U.S. Republican administration periods, domestic instability with the DPRK, and the DPRK's growth rate – had different impacts on the dependent variables depending on the models. Thus, there is not enough consistency in the findings to claim how the variables are affecting the DPRK's actions.

## CONCLUSION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ROK

This study aimed to examine whether the U.S.'s involvement in various global conflicts leads to an increase in the DPRK provocations and aggressions toward other states. Specifically, the author aimed to investigate whether the DPRK takes advantage of the situation in which the U.S. is preoccupied with conflicts in other states to increase its belligerent actions. The empirical findings obtained through statistical analysis show that, during 1995–2021, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and confrontational actions toward the ROK increased when the U.S. was engaged in disputes. Primarily when the U.S. was engaged in conflicts with China–Russia–MENA states, the DPRK's provocations, conflicts with other states, and hostile actions toward the ROK increased. Considering the empirical results regarding the U.S.'s share of the global GDP (one of the control variables), the U.S. being overstretched when engaged in conflicts with other states – not being able to address multiple international conflicts simultaneously – would open the window of opportunity for the DPRK to increase its provocations and aggressions.

The findings suggest the following implication for the ROK. Regarding the DPRK's nuclear program and continued provocations, suppose the U.S. aims to address the issues such as the rise of China, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the expansion of NATO, and the Iran nuclear deal before turning its attention to the Korean peninsula. In that case, time will continue to act in the DPRK's favor, allowing it to succeed in increasing the range of its missiles and diversifying delivery tools while developing tactical nuclear weapons, which will further enhance the DPRK's capability to conduct more aggressions. Considering the limited ability and resources of the U.S., we need to admit that the U.S. cannot intervene in every global affair simultaneously. Thus, the realistic goal would be for the U.S. to act as an offshore balancer while supporting its regional allies to take the leading role in addressing urgent issues. In other words, the ROK playing the leading role, rather than relying on the U.S. to take action, might be the only realistic option if the ROK wants to constrain the DPRK's aggressions and seek denuclearization of the DPRK.

Some argue that seeking China's cooperation is one of the options for the U.S. and the ROK to deter the DPRK's provocations and halt its nuclearization. As mentioned

above, being preoccupied with countering China's rise is one of the reasons the U.S. cannot concentrate on blocking the DPRK's nuclear program. At the same time, however, China also benefits from the DPRK's continued effort to develop nuclear weapons because such an attempt attracts the U.S.'s attention, diverting its resources away from China (Horowitz 2015, 20-21). Besides, if China has to choose between the survival of the DPRK regime armed with nuclear weapons or a denuclearized DPRK regime that could collapse, China would opt for the latter scenario (Kim 2019, 240). Thus, it is far from clear whether seeking China's cooperation will take the ROK closer to denuclearizing the DPRK.

Eventually, due to the anarchic nature of the international system, a state must "self-help" to increase its security and ensure its survival (Waltz 1979, 105). To do so, a state must choose to balance internally (increasing its own strengths and capabilities to defend itself against others) or externally (by forming alliances and coalitions with others against their opponents) (Waltz 1979, 168). Still, relying on external balancing could be risky because there is no guarantee that allies will provide assistance and deterrence when a state is in danger. Allies might refuse to come to aid if they do not want to be entrapped in other state's conflicts. In other words, a state cannot be sure whether its allies are credible. On the other hand, allies might not be able to assist because their resources and capabilities are stretched thin, already being involved in other conflicts. In that case, even if a state's allies are credible, they cannot provide assistance when a state's security is threatened, not due to their lack of will but because of their limited strength.

The same logic applies to the ROK. Even though the U.S.'s credibility concerning the ROK's security is firm, its preoccupation with other global issues restricts its ability to address increasing threats posed by the DPRK. Thus, self-helping rather than relying on the U.S.'s assistance would be the more reliable choice for the ROK to deter the DPRK's provocations and nuclear threats. In other words, while continuing to seek the U.S.'s cooperation, the ROK should take the leading role and balance against the DPRK internally rather than depending on external balancing – waiting for the U.S. to increase its attention to the Korean peninsula.

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