1 Introduction

The puzzle

In March 2013, the North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) warned of a “pre-emptive nuclear attack” if the United States convinced the UN Security Council to impose new economic sanctions on North Korea. Despite this warning, the Security Council did impose new sanctions at the behest of the United States, on March 7.1 However, no nuclear attack occurred. Two weeks later, KCNA released a video of North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong-un, discussing a plan for launching nuclear-armed missiles against US bases in the Pacific and the continental United States. The image of Kim Jong-un pointing to maps of the United States with arrows outlining missile trajectories was a vivid accompaniment to recent warnings from North Korea’s media organs that the North Korean People’s Army (KPA) will “destroy not only the military installations ... of south Korea but the ... military bases of the U.S. imperialist aggression forces in the operational theatre of the Pacific.”2 Still, no attack followed.

And on June 25, 2014, KCNA declared that The Interview,3 a comedy starring Seth Rogan and James Franco, was “reckless U.S. provocative insanity” and that its public release constituted an “act of war.”4 In a mockingly dismissive reaction, Seth Rogan tweeted: “People don’t usually wanna kill me for one of my movies until they’ve paid 12 bucks for it.”5 Over the next several


3 The plot of The Interview involves two Americans who plot to assassinate Kim Jong Un while under cover as journalists who intend to interview Kim.


months, Sony Pictures, which produced The Interview, received numerous threats from a group of hackers who were later identified as North Koreans. As Sony executives consulted Korea experts and US State Department officials, they were informed that “this is typical North Korean bullying, likely without follow-up” and that while they may engage in cyberattacks, physical attacks were unlikely given the “North Korean pattern of behavior going back to the 1980s” and because it would be “beyond North Korea’s capabilities.” As the movie approached its December 25 release date, the hacker group escalated its threats to physical violence, warning that if the film was released, “The world will be full of fear. Remember the events of the 11th of September 2001.” A subsequent message was added: “We recommend you to keep yourself distant from the places [where the movies is being shown] at that time. (If your house is nearby, you’d better leave.)” Despite their chilling specificity, US government officials declared the threats wholly incredible. Eventually the film was released without any violence.

North Korean threats of violence against the United States and its South Korean ally have become so common and colorful that they are rarely taken seriously in the United States, more frequently serving as a source of fodder for late night comedians than a credible national security threat. Yet, in the 2014 hacking saga, North Korea conducted highly disruptive computer network interruptions against Sony Pictures, just as it had threatened. Moreover, North Korea has, on occasion, launched acts of small-scale militarized violence – “provocations” – against the United States and its ally South Korea. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, North Korean provocations against the United States triggered a number of recurring crises in Washington and Pyongyang. North Korea’s enduring willingness to engage in small-scale violence, even today, has led US policy officials to dub this phenomenon a “cycle of provocation.”

8 Ibid.
militarized violence to support diplomatic bargaining, the “cycle of provocation” phrase frames North Korean threats and violence as highly rational coercive signals intended to supplement its foreign policy.

However, if we only think of North Korean provocations as part of a predictable cycle of rational manipulation, several important questions about US–North Korea relations will remain unanswered. First, how did the United States and North Korea manage to experience repeated crises with one another without escalation to war? Conventional wisdom holds that the outbreak of war is more likely when dyads experience recurring crises, yet the US–North Korea dyad did not. Moreover, if North Korea’s provocations were part of predictable bargaining cycles, it is unclear why some would trigger crises and others not. Second, why did North Korea, a much weaker power, repeatedly unleash small-scale militarized violence against the stronger United States rather than relying on a non-violent foreign policy or simply initiating outright war? Traditional understanding of power should lead us to expect that a militarily stronger power would seek to coerce its smaller rival, yet in US–North Korea relations we often see the opposite. Third, on what basis did the United States and North Korea assess the threat credibility of one another? In particular, why has the United States only rarely taken North Korea’s threats seriously? US incredulity toward North Korean threat-making has led to the United States being repeatedly caught off guard by North Korean provocations in the past despite the latter’s forewarnings, which contributed to crisis onset on multiple occasions.

The answers to these puzzles are important for policymakers in the United States and South Korea who, even today, grapple with themes of provocation, credibility, and crisis management on the Korean Peninsula. Thinking of North Korean violence as part of a cycle rightly captures the regularity of such behavior but ignores the possibility that such “cycles” are endogenous to North Korea’s hostile relationships, and it does not actually answer these questions, which defy popular expectations.

The argument

This book sets out to explain what it describes as a pattern of rivalry interactions in US–North Korea relations by answering these questions,


and it does so by drawing on the logic of reputation – the idea that a state’s past conduct, that is, word and deed, affects how others expect it to act in the future. The past conduct of the United States and North Korea goes a long way in helping us understand why and when the respective sides made decisions about both the resolve and credibility of the other in repeated interactions. The reputation that North Korea assigned to the United States and vice versa illuminates many aspects of US–North Korea relations, including repeated crisis occurrence and the frequency of North Korean challenges; why the United States did not take North Korean threats seriously but was forced to after the onset of a crisis; why North Korea was not deterred from provoking the United States though the latter is a militarily superior power; and why North Korea took US threats seriously on the rare occasions that the latter issued them. Reputation alone is no panacea, but no other alternative suggests itself to this breadth of outcomes.

The pattern of rivalry in US–North Korea relations reveals that every time the United States backed down from North Korean coercion, it did little to ameliorate the open hostility that pervaded the bilateral relationship; on the contrary, the United States often stoked hostility with military exercises, military assistance to South Korea, or a temporarily enhanced military presence despite having backed down in the heat of the moment. It was this behavior – a combination of willfully perpetuating the rivalry while demonstrating an unwillingness to stand firm when challenged by North Korea – that simultaneously signaled to North Korea two things: (1) the United States lacked the resolve to impose military force on it in response to provocations, and (2) the United States communicated honestly about its interests on the Korean Peninsula and only threatened military force when it perceived that its interests warranted it. On its part, North Korea’s ceaseless employment of incendiary rhetoric threatening war far surpassed its ability to live up to those threats. Even though North Korea has a history of sporadically attacking US and South Korean troops, the vast gap between intense North Korean threats and its actual behavior signaled to the United States that North Korean threats were rarely credible. As a result, US decision-makers were surprised when North Korean provocations targeted the United States, even though North Korea had often issued advance warnings.

Provision, credibility of the parties involved, and recurrent crises are not determined solely by the decision-making of one side but rather are contingent on the history of interaction between the two parties. Rather than thinking of provocations as an instrumental part of a coercive bargaining cycle, we gain a fuller understanding of US–North Korea relations by problematizing the “cycle,” more accurately described as part of a broader rivalry pattern: repeated crises, repeated North Korean challenges, and
variation in threat credibility over time, all under conditions of hostile bilateral relations.

Reputation: a contentious concept

Although these arguments are relatively simple, the concept on which they rely—reputation—is highly contested in academic literature. Following Thomas Schelling’s articulation, reputation is described as the causal relevance of the past to the future mediated through the perception of others, which was referred to as the “interdependence of commitments”; the immediate implication was that a state’s resolve to prevent some proscribed action at a particular place and time will influence others’ perception of that state’s resolve later. A generation of scholars built a robust research program on this concept. The logic of reputation is both intuitive and clear: in an anarchical international system, states lack information about other states’ intentions, which leads them to pay particular attention to the states’ behavior to divine the intentions of others. But in recent decades a number of scholars have argued that reputation does not exert causal influence in international relations and that, consequently, states and statesmen do not accrue reputations in any meaningful way. Ted Hopf, among others, found that US decisions to back down during crises in the Periphery did not alter Soviet perceptions of US resolve, suggesting that state A is not likely to assign a reputation for resolve or weakness to state B based on state B’s behavior in crises with states C, D, and E, as long as interests in the issues at stake are low. Following Hopf, Jonathan Mercer made an even stronger claim about the irrelevance of reputation, drawing on social identity theory’s emphasis on in-group/out-group biases to explain why adversaries rarely accrue a reputation for weakness or lack of resolve. According to Mercer, states explain others’ behavior based on either dispositional or situational criteria, which in practical terms meant that states nearly

15 See, for example, Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), ch. 6.
always assign the most malign intentions to the word and deed of rivals, with
the logical conclusion that states nearly always believe a rival’s threats. 18

Others have followed Mercer’s pessimistic treatment of reputations, though
based on rational rather than psychological factors. 19 The best representation
of the rationalist pessimism about reputations comes from Daryl Press, who
found no evidence of reputation driving states’ credibility assessments in
a handful of seminal twentieth-century crises, pointing instead to material
capabilities and interests as the sources of threat credibility. 20 The various
arguments advanced by these Reputation Pessimists shared in common that
they challenged the interdependence-of-commitments logic advanced by early
Reputation Optimists like Schelling. The ontological implication of such
pessimism is nothing short of separating cause and effect in international
relations from its historical context. The policy implications are also great: if
each dispute is independent of all past disputes, then all causally relevant
variables can be found within the confines of the geography, power distribution,
issue stakes, or capabilities of the current dispute; states can back down from
conflict without having to worry about developing a reputation for weakness
and, by extension, inviting future aggression.

Solving the puzzles intrinsic to the US–North Korea rivalry pattern by
drawing on the logic of reputation – and comparing historical evidence
against that logic and alternative explanations – thus has important implica-
tions for theoretical debates about whether, when, and how reputation matters
in international politics. In the past decade, some scholars have succeeded in
showing that a variety of reputations are causally meaningful in a variety of
texts 21 but have largely avoided addressing directly the narrow causal
claims advanced by Reputation Pessimists concerning the effect of a reputa-
tion for resolve (and irresoluteness) on threat credibility in a rivalry context.
This book’s primary theoretical contribution is an important corrective to the

18 Mercer, Reputation & International Politics, 44–73.
What makes a rivalry pattern?

The term “rivalry” in a bilateral relationship refers to a condition of shared hostility in which each state has a high expectation of a future conflict with the other. This definition bridges competing definitional approaches within the large literature on rivalries in international relations. Rather than describing the entire history of US–North Korea relations as a rivalry, however, this book conceives of a pattern of rivalry within that overall history involving decisions and interactions between the two parties that seem to obey a logic found in enduring rivalries. Some might argue that even the hostile periods in the US–North Korea relationship do not fit an intuitive conception of rivalry because the vast power asymmetry and geographical space between the two states would seem to eliminate the “need” to engage in conflict. However, there are at least five reasons for describing what we repeatedly see in this book as a rivalry pattern.

First, power parity in a dyad is neither necessary nor sufficient to determine a rivalry. As of 2001, there were around twenty major–minor power rivalry

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dyads, what Brantley Womack and others refer to as “asymmetric rivalries.”\textsuperscript{24} Second, other rivalries research, using the dispute-density approach, already classifies certain periods in US–North Korea relations as a rivalry.\textsuperscript{25} Following the 1953 Armistice Agreement that effectively ended the Korean War, intermittent crises in which either or both sides experienced casualties and which contained the real prospect of war continued to erupt throughout the Cold War; the period from 1966 through 1976 was particularly “dispute-dense,” to use the term of rivalries scholars. Third, the US relationship with North Korea was entirely predicated on competing claims regarding the legitimate existence of South Korea (which North Korea views as a “Korean” matter) and competing claims regarding acceptable US and North Korean behavior as international actors. The perpetual threat of conflict constituted the only basis for their interaction throughout the Cold War; they did not cooperate with each other within multilateral institutions, they had no diplomatic relations, and they had no economic or cultural relations. What is more, while North Korea’s hostile behavior continuously posed a threat to certain US interests, such as the protection of its citizens, its allies, and its preferred rules and norms, the antipathy that North Korea held for the United States ran much deeper; fear and hatred of the United States were a part of North Korean identity starting from the formidable experience of the Korean War but fitting a strong historical xenophobic element in Korean nationalism that came from centuries of subordination to outside great powers.\textsuperscript{26} Fourth, outside of rivalries, only conflicts over high-salience issues are sufficient triggers for deliberate escalation to violence; in a rivalry context, a rival’s words and deeds take on added meaning based on the extent to which they reinforce existing biases, which means low-salience issues and otherwise ambiguous words and deeds can become triggers for violence when they might not in non-rivalry contexts.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{25} See, for example, Diehl and Goertz, War and Peace in International Rivalry; Bennett, “Integrating and Testing Models of Rivalry Duration.”


\textsuperscript{27} For scholars who have posited hostile and uncertain contexts as creating sufficient conditions for low-salience issues to serve as triggers, see Leng, “When Will They Ever Learn?”; Colaresi and Thompson, “Hot Spots or Hot Hands?”; Paul R. Hensel, “One Thing Leads to Another: Recurrent Militarized Disputes in Latin America 1816–1986,” Journal of Peace Research 31,
Why US–North Korea relations?

This dynamic – low-salience issues becoming a source of crisis and escalation because of their context – precisely describes most of the crises experienced between the United States and North Korea, as our historical chapters will reveal. The fifth most important reason for describing a rivalry pattern in US–North Korea relations is because it is a relationship marked by shared hostility, with a high expectation of future conflict. If either of these criteria were not true, the basis for the long-term, sustained US military presence on the Korean Peninsula would be unobvious. For all these reasons, this book uses the term “rivalry pattern” to describe the periods of hostility between the United States and North Korea.

Why US–North Korea relations?

There are unique payoffs that come from applying the “reputations in rivalry” framework (elaborated in the next chapter) to US–North Korea relations. Our approach in the chapters that follow is methodologically useful for making a contribution to theoretical literature, and the chapters double as historiography on an aspect of Korean affairs that complements extant area studies research. That North Korea continues to pose a challenge in the present day only strengthens the need for critical examination.

Theoretical and methodological imperatives

Analysis of the rivalry pattern in US–North Korea relations gives us greater leverage than simply another random data point or case study in contributing to theoretical debates. First, any attempt to weigh in on the reputations debate with new evidence would need to satisfy both the conditions under which the effects of reputations are expected to be strongest and the conditions under which the predictions of alternative theories have an equally good chance, if not a better one, as the reputational approach to be observed. The case histories documenting the rivalry pattern in the chapters that follow serve this purpose well because rivalries are “ideally suited for testing propositions about reputations for resolve,” they satisfy the in-group/out-group threshold of the psychology-based explanation of threat credibility, and the extreme asymmetry in military capabilities between the United States and North Korea makes it easy to

calculate what rational theories of threat credibility would predict for this set of cases.

The second benefit of focusing on cases in US–North Korea relations is that it brings the study of reputation back to the context that first gave the issue salience as a research topic in international relations – the rivalry context. Reputation Pessimists have principally challenged the relevance not of every type of possible reputation but of reputations for resolve and its effect on credibility, yet new-wave reputation optimism tends to show the importance of various types of reputation other than resolve.29

The third payoff of our case selection is the presence of recurring crises, which allow us to compare each crisis to the next in a way that controls for culture, regime type, and in this case relative power distribution, all of which come closer to approximating experimental conditions than social science normally allows.30 The interests at stake also remain fairly consistent. The first three episodes examined include issues in dispute that take on the appearance of low salience but that are imputed with high security significance by the actors involved because of the rivalry context in which they occur. The 1993–4 nuclear crisis has a very different issue at stake as compared to the prior three episodes, but it also contains multiple observations within that single episode. The nuclear issue at stake in 1993–4 remained the primary issue in dispute some eight years later when the Bush administration clashed with North Korea.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the rivalry pattern in US–North Korea relations provides a “Sinatra test”: if reputations can make it here (in a context where they are least likely to have effect), they can make it anywhere.31 The crisis histories in this book represent a “least likely” set of cases for our reputational framework because it is within crises, as opposed to under normal or routine conditions, that decision-makers should be least likely to consider the adversary’s behavioral history when making credibility assessments and most likely to simply focus on the present crisis circumstances. By focusing on crises, our historical cases should prove harder for reputational explanations of threat credibility and easier for alternative explanations of the same. Despite this, we find that our “reputations in rivalry” framework not only explains

29 A rare exception to this characterization is Barbara Walter, though her focus on reputations for resolve was not between rival states but between states and separatists. Walter, Reputation and Civil War.
