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## **The Erosion of the UN Security Council Sanctions Regime Against the DPRK**

**Abstract.** This article seeks to examine the rationale behind the decision of the United States, China, and Russia to impose sanctions against North Korea together with the incentives to comply with the principles of the sanctions regime or not to comply with them. The convergence of their initial self-interests allowed the establishment of the UNSC Sanctions Regime. However, this institution was unable to ensure compliance with its norms and principles. Consequently, primarily due to the intensification of great-power contradictions, China and Russia appeared to lose interest in maintaining the Regime, particularly in light of their rivalry with the US. Conversely, the US demonstrated a tendency to exploit the Regime.

**Keywords:** DPRK, WMD related programs, UNSC Sanctions Regime, USA, China, Russia, threat perception, incentives to comply, security.

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From 2006 to 2017, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a series of resolutions establishing and maintaining the sanctions regime against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and its nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) related programs (hereinafter—the Sanctions Regime). As has become evident in recent years, the restrictions failed to achieve their primary objective: preventing North Korea from obtaining and developing nuclear capabilities, which would have a detrimental impact on peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as on the principles of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and, to some extent, on the framework of global governance. Moreover, increasing tensions between major veto-wielding members of the UNSC, namely Russia, China, and the US, have hindered the efficiency of the adopted measures and significantly decreased the probability of future consensus on this matter. The further escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2022, which had a profound impact on Russia-US relations, contributed to Moscow’s firm stance against further enforcement of the anti-North Korean sanctions. It became evident that the initial unani-

mity among the veto-wielding members of the Security Council had dissipated: Russia and China expressed their opposition to the extension of the mandate of the Panel of Experts 1874, a significant supporting institution within the UNSC, which served as an overseeing body of the regime. In these circumstances, the discrepancy between the positions of UNSC members towards the Regime deepened, resulting in an almost unbreakable stalemate that hindered the maintenance and even the existence of the Regime. The primary objective of this research is to determine why the major veto-wielding states started to undermine or continue to support the Sanctions Regime against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea by analyzing changes in their perception of the North Korean issue and the Regime itself.

### **Theoretical Framework: Threat Perception**

As sanctions (both unilateral and collective) have become an increasingly common foreign policy practice, their academic conceptualization has been refined. Gary Hufbauer defined economic sanctions as “deliberate, government-inspired withdrawal, or threat of withdrawal, of customary trade and financial relations,” and explained them as actions taken by the sender aimed at compelling the target to undertake actions that the latter is typically disinclined to perform by reducing and limiting economic collaboration [Hufbauer, 2007, p. 10]. Usually, through sanctions, the sender tries to effect specific foreign policy goals: modest changes in the target’s policy; the target’s regime changes or destabilization; disruption of the target’s military adventures; impairment of military potential, limiting the target’s capability to advance weaponry; and other major policy changes [Hufbauer, 2007, pp. 66–73].

The sheer scale and variety of restrictions imposed on the DPRK by the UNSC, together with the elaborate institutionalization of those restrictions, prompt the use of another well-established research framework, namely, the theory of international regimes designed by Stephen D. Krasner. He introduced the concept of international regimes to facilitate an understanding of cooperation in areas where formal institutions are insufficient and defined regimes as “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations” [Krasner, 1982, p. 186]. Principles are fundamental goals or objectives of a regime, norms are shared expectations and standards of participants’ behavior, rules are proscriptions for actions of regime members, and decision-making procedures refer to the mechanisms and processes that are used to make and implement collective decisions within the regime [Krasner, 1982, p. 186]. Principles and norms (P&N) represent the fundamental variables of any regime and should remain constants for a regime to function according to its original goals. Any alteration to P&N may alter the regime and render it dysfunctional.

We assume here that it is possible to detect the erosion of the Sanctions Regime if it can be proven that its participants deviate from the original principles and norms. Additionally, Krasner identified a set of causal variables that can explain changes within a regime. Among them, two are particularly important: egoistic self-interest and political power. The convergence of independent states’ egoistic self-interest leads to regime cre-

ation, where each state abandons independent decision-making in favor of joint decision-making [Krasner, 1982, p. 196]. In other words, the regime as an international institution may influence the behavior of states, providing strong incentives for them to work toward 'common good' goals even if these goals differ from or contradict their national interests. Alternatively, these 'common good' goals may in fact become the states' national interests.

However, if self-interests change, states' willingness to comply with a regime's rules can diminish, altering their behavior and attitude towards the regime. Oran Young proposed the idea that a more powerful state can impose a regime as a means of reinforcing its hegemony by inducing others to conform to the requirements of this regime through a combination of coercion, cooptation, and the manipulation of incentives [Young, 1982, p. 284]. However, such regimes are prone to decay if the effective power of a dominant actor diminishes (or, as in our case, if a dominant actor — be it the US relative to Russia and China, or the UNSC relative to other states — does not possess the effective capability to coerce others to comply with the norms and rules). He assumed that changes within such a regime can occur due to shifts in the underlying structure of power and its redistribution among regime actors.

Outlining the basic framework, we can employ Hufbauer's and Krasner's definitions of sanctions and international regimes to describe and highlight the principal characteristics of the UN sanctions. In the case of the UNSC Sanctions Regime against North Korea, the sender is the UN Security Council, while the target is North Korea. Here, we must highlight an important feature: the Security Council is not a homogeneous entity; it consists of states with different approaches to security issues. Thus, the political objectives of its sanctions represent a middle ground reached via consensus and unanimous voting, diverging from the initial goals of the states involved. These "averaged" goals were mentioned in the preamble of Resolution 1718, outlining the principles of the Sanctions Regime. It can be argued that the UN Security Council primarily aimed at major changes in the DPRK's policy and tried to force Pyongyang to comply with the NPT, stating that "the international regime on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons should be maintained" and recalling that "the DPRK cannot have the status of a nuclear-weapon state" [Resolution 1718, 2006, p. 1]. Moreover, the resolution noted that the North Korean nuclear test had "generated increased tension in the region and beyond" and that it had become "a clear threat to international peace and security" [Resolution 1718, 2006, p. 1]. Thus, the Security Council invoked Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which is devoted to responding to peace-threatening actions, to justify the establishment of sanctions against the military capabilities of the North. Therefore, it can be posited that the Sanctions Regime was also aimed at impairing Pyongyang's military potential in order to curb North Korean activities endangering regional and global stability. As for the norms of the Regime, the UN Resolutions explicitly indicated that all member states shall comply with the imposed sanctions and maintain the Regime. Initially, all members sought to comply with its norms and objectives, as they were created as a result of the convergence of their interests, but later their positions towards the Regime altered, leading to its erosion.

Besides states' self-interest and power, there is yet another variable that can impact the sender's attitude towards the regime: the perception of threat from the target. While

the balance of power theory draws a direct correlation between a state's power and the threat it can pose, the balance of threat theory assumes that even a powerful state can cause no alarm among its competitors if it does not pose a threatening intent. Conversely, a smaller and less powerful nation may be perceived as more threatening if its government is considered to have threatening intentions [Walt, 1987]. Stephen Walt identified four major variables that can influence states' perception of the level of threat: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and the perception of other nations' intentions. The combination of these factors can incentivize a state to cooperate with another to retaliate against or balance a possible threat. Since survivability is the main interest of a state, we assume that by assessing how VWMs perceive the threat from North Korea, we will be able to determine whether they have preserved incentives to support the Regime or, alternatively, to withdraw their support.

As stated in the UNSC 1718 Resolution, "proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, as well as their means of delivery, constitutes a threat to international peace and security" [Resolution 1718, 2006, p. 1]. Thus, this threat was perceived not as a direct threat to the national security of a given state, but as a common threat to the existing world order. Therefore, we add this indirect threat to Walt's four-factor 'threat mix' that would ultimately impact VWMs' attitude towards the Regime.

## Country-specific Threat Perception

### *The US's Perception of Threat*

Prior to the establishment of the Sanctions Regime in 2006, successive US administrations did not seem to perceive the DPRK's nuclear program as an existential threat to national security, but rather as a threat to international peace and security. Such an attitude followed the logic of Charles Krauthammer's lasting 'Unipolar Moment' [Krauthammer, 2002], which implied that the US was the absolutely dominant (if not the sole) power in international politics and thus was capable of "advancing not just American, but global ends" while others would do America's bidding since "no one wants to be left at the dock when the hegemon is sailing" [Krauthammer, 2002, p. 17]. In other words, in the eyes of American policymakers, the US's national interests (and, thus, threat perception) constituted the world's interests.

Yet, neither Bill Clinton's administration's engagement with the DPRK, which culminated in the "Agreed Framework" in 1994, nor the post-9/11 'global war on terror' declared by George W. Bush's administration (which was preceded by an infamous 'Axis of Evil' speech in which the newly elected president publicly blamed Pyongyang for "arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction while starving its own citizens" [Bush, 2002]) could counter that threat. The "Agreed Framework" effectively broke down in 2003, and while the White House's demands for the 'complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement' of all nuclear activity in North Korea under the Bush administration did establish the rhetorical framework for a possible solution (the abbreviation CVID would gradually transform into the 'complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization' and was partly reproduced in Resolution 1718, which demanded that the DPRK should "abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, veri-

fiable, and irreversible manner” [Resolution 1718, 2006, p. 2]), it did not provide for such dismantlement. Over time, Washington politicians adopted a policy of “wait and see,” believing that North Korea would collapse in a manner similar to the Soviet Union [Ogden & Anderson, 2008, p. 74].

However, following the successful demonstration of the DPRK’s nuclear capabilities and the continued development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the possibility of a nuclear conflict on the Korean Peninsula and a subsequent nuclear threat to the US (as well as to its regional allies) became a real concern.

At this stage, all the direct threat factors except intentions had a “low impact” on the perception of threat level. The power and offensive capabilities of the DPRK, which had suffered economically after the end of the Cold War and several years of famine, were no match for the US-led military forces in the region. Geographic proximity, or in this case geographical remoteness, in the absence of a long-range ICBM, remained an insurmountable obstacle. Regarding intentions, the DPRK openly positioned its nuclear development as targeted against the US and its allies. Consequently, Washington could not ignore this factor and was forced to counter the DPRK’s actions, thus this variable can be labeled as having a “high impact” on the threat level.

Besides, the indirect threat to the world’s peace and security was further fueled by concerns over the development of WMD technologies among rogue states that might have transferred them to terrorist organizations [US NSS, 2002]. An overall assessment of the threat perception mix is provided in Table 1.

*Table 1. Influence of variables on the level of perceived threat — US, prior to 2006*

Aggregated strength	Offensive capabilities	Geographic proximity	Intentions	Indirect threat
Low	Low	Low	High	High

The establishment of the UNSC Sanctions Regime in 2006, initiated by the United States, represented a significant triumph of American foreign policy. The principles and norms of the newly imposed Sanctions Regime partially aligned with the United States’ foreign policy objectives. As the Bush administration shifted from unilateral and multilateral engagement towards international economic pressure, the Sanctions Regime became an important tool for the United States in its efforts to eliminate the North Korean threat. However, at the dawn of the Sanctions Regime, the hawkish stance of the United States laid the groundwork for its future erosion. The United States made no secret of its desire to destroy North Korea’s ruling system and hoped to use international sanctions for this purpose. Repeatedly, the United States attempted to empower the Regime to strangle the North Korean economy, but these initiatives were consistently rejected by the PRC and the Russian Federation, who perceived the possible dissolution of the DPRK as a threat to their security.

The eighteen-year duration of the sanctions regime has yielded no benefits for the United States, as the imposition of sanctions on North Korea has not resulted in any meaningful change in that country’s behavior. B. Obama, D. Trump, and J. Biden, who succeeded G. Bush as presidents of the USA, were unable to devise a comprehensive strategy towards North Korea. Obama’s approach, which he termed “strategic patien-

ce,” emerged in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. It involved a reduction in diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang in response to its provocations and an intensification of pressure and isolation of Pyongyang by the international community [Obama, 2010]. However, this approach failed to generate sufficient pressure to compel Pyongyang to abandon its WMD development. Furthermore, in the 2010s, the United States and China engaged in a rivalry that compelled Washington to adopt a policy of “Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific.” This policy aimed to counterbalance China’s growing influence, thereby diverting attention from North Korea.

D. Trump, who employed a rather flamboyant approach to North Korea, also failed to find a solution to the stalemate. Against the backdrop of the 2017 escalation, Trump simultaneously expressed a willingness to personally negotiate a way out of the nuclear crisis directly with Kim Jong-un and used verbal threats against North Korea and China. At the same time, he called for “maximum pressure” and advocated a rejuvenation of diplomatic talks [Huxley, Schreer, 2017]. Moreover, he aspired to “strike a great deal” and resolve the nuclear issue at once [Kim, 2020], but the United States was not prepared to discuss the preemptive withdrawal of sanctions, which the DPRK considered a cornerstone for future negotiations. As a result, four turbulent years of his presidency failed to improve the situation, likely convincing North Korea to accelerate its WMD development.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the change in the US administration stalled all activities on the US-DPRK track. By the beginning of 2021, Biden’s administration formulated a “calibrated, practical, measured” policy towards the DPRK. It encompassed maintaining pressure on North Korea while being open to engagement, aiming for denuclearization yet accepting step-by-step agreements, and incorporating and leading alliance partners on the nuclear issue [Richey, 2021]. Nevertheless, it became evident that the US lost interest in bilateral negotiations with the DPRK, as growing tensions with Russia and China became a more important challenge to American foreign policy.

Despite the change in priorities, the United States has consistently demonstrated its support for the UNSC Sanctions Regime, as the DPRK’s nuclear programs remained an existential threat to the US and the US-led world order. On several occasions, they have tried to implement additional sanctions, but these attempts were blocked by Russia and China. At the same time, proposals by Russia and China to partially lift sanctions on humanitarian grounds have been roundly rejected by the US. Furthermore, since the outbreak of the active phase of the Ukrainian crisis in February 2022, the United States has repeatedly blamed Russia for undermining the Sanctions Regime and breaking its limits, due to alleged weapon trade between Moscow and Pyongyang. In March 2024, the US blamed Russia for vetoing the prolongation of the Panel of Experts 1874 and sought to create a new international group with more than 50 countries to coordinate intelligence, counter-proliferation efforts, and relevant legislation to enforce sanctions policy.

For the past 18 years, North Korea has persisted in its military development despite the imposition of international sanctions and restrictions. The threat from the DPRK to the US has undergone a rapid transformation. The balance of threat model posits that four main variables impact threat perception. In the recent year, Pyongyang demonstrated the existence of newly created conventional and nuclear weaponry that could pose a



significant threat to South Korean and American forces deployed in the region [Council on Foreign Relations, 2022]. Additionally, it has significantly expanded its cyberwarfare capabilities, which can be employed to fund illicit WMD-related programs and used as an offensive tool [Manyin, Nikitin, Rennack, 2024]. While the overall aggregated strength of North Korea is currently of a “low” impact on the perceived level of threat, it is important to recognize that its offensive capabilities have undoubtedly increased, with a correspondingly “high” threat to the US.

As for geographic proximity (remoteness), which has precluded the DPRK from attacking the US using conventional weapons, North Korea has partially overcome this obstacle by developing new ICBMs. Currently, the DPRK has the capacity to target the US mainland, as well as its overseas bases, including Guam, and all of Japan and South Korea. Consequently, we assess the impact of proximity to be of a “medium” level. With regard to hostile intentions, the DPRK continues to present its nuclear arsenal as primarily defensive. However, given its harsh rhetoric towards the United States and South Korea, these actions have a significant impact on the level of threat. Moreover, North Korea has declared that it would consider the use of nuclear weapons as a preemptive response to any attack on the Kim regime [Issuing a Decree..., 2022]. Given that the DPRK lacks the capacity to verify the possibility of an attack on North Korea, it can be assumed that Pyongyang would be willing to use nuclear weapons even in the event of credible rumors of an attack [Asmolov, 2024a].

In conclusion, the intensifying threat posed by the DPRK forces the US to endorse the sanctions regime as the sole means of influencing Pyongyang, given the failure of different unilateral and multilateral formats (overall changes in threat perception are provided in Table 2).

**Table 2. Influence of variables on the level of perceived threat — US, 2024**

Aggregated strength	Offensive capabilities	Geographic proximity	Intentions	Indirect threat
Low	High	Medium	High	High

### ***The PRC’s Perception of Threat***

The People’s Republic of China has consistently demonstrated a profound interest in the Korean Peninsula. As one of its closest allies, North Korea has been regarded as a vital asset for Chinese security, serving as a bulwark against U.S. military forces deployed on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, the importance of a stable and allied DPRK was always paramount, and the maintenance of the status quo was one of the main objectives of Chinese foreign policy towards Korea.

In the mid-1990s, the PRC openly expressed its strong opposition to a nuclear North Korea. The development of weapons of mass destruction programs could lead to heightened tensions between North Korea and the United States, potentially drawing China into a military conflict [Ji, 2001]. To forestall such scenarios, Beijing sought to position itself as a pivotal actor capable of addressing the DPRK’s nuclear program. China succeeded in persuading the United States, Japan, and South Korea that its role is important for the peaceful resolution of the ongoing crisis [Yi, 1995]. Moreover, Chinese ambitions to display its ‘international responsibility’ and to improve bilateral relations

ons with the United States encouraged Beijing to play a more proactive role regarding the nuclear issue [Shulong & Xinzhu, 2008].

At an early stage, China’s involvement in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue was mainly connected to geographic proximity, which had a “high” impact on the threat perception. Nuclear advancement of the DPRK could have led to a nuclear war near Chinese borders, and in the case of an incident, Chinese territory might have been exposed to radioactive fallout. With regard to the aggregated strength and characteristics of capabilities, China has never assumed that the North Korean nuclear arsenal could be aimed at China, and it is clear that the DPRK’s conventional capabilities were inferior to the Chinese.

As for the intentions, China perceived North Korean actions, including nuclear tests and aggressive rhetoric towards the United States, Japan, and South Korea, as a threat to the status quo in the region. However, the DPRK has never demonstrated any hostile intentions towards the PRC, which were backed up by any military action. Nevertheless, the DPRK has undoubtedly posed a threat to Chinese relations with other regional actors. Consequently, we posit that the intentions of the DPRK have a “low to medium” impact on the threat level, while the indirect threat has a “medium to high” level of impact (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Influence of variables on the level of perceived threat — PRC, prior to 2006**

Aggregated strength	Offensive capabilities	Geographic proximity	Intentions	Indirect threat
Low	Low	High	Low to Medium	Medium to High

From 2006 to 2024, relations between China and the DPRK have fluctuated. By 2009, China had likely concluded that it had no possibility of averting North Korean nuclear programs, as the DPRK had repeatedly expressed their importance for the Kim regime. Following several rounds of economic sanctions and the collapse of the Six-Party Talks due to the inability of parties to reach any kind of agreement, China became much more interested in the preservation of Pyongyang’s regime rather than in helping the international community, namely the US and its allies, to solve the nuclear issue [Lee, 2014].

A short shift towards a more hardline policy can be traced after the inauguration of Xi Jinping in 2012. During his first visit to the Korean Peninsula, Xi met with South Korean officials but did not visit the North. Simultaneously, Beijing started to characterize its relationship with Pyongyang as “normal relations between states” rather than a “blood alliance” [Kim, 2018]. Furthermore, at about the same time, Jang Song-Thaek, a significant intermediary between China and North Korea, was executed, which, according to some assessments, could have also contributed to the deterioration of China-DPRK relations [Jiang, 2019]. Most importantly, the nuclear tests of 2013 and 2016 were perceived by the Chinese side extremely negatively, as they undermined regional stability. The development of the DPRK’s WMD programs has encouraged the US and its allies to strengthen their military capabilities in the region, undermining China’s security. As a result, Beijing has increasingly cooperated within the Sanctions Regime, trying to punish the DPRK for its reckless behavior.



The situation underwent a significant transformation in 2018, with China becoming marginalized in the political détente on the Korean Peninsula. The rapid de-escalation of US-DPRK relations and Trump's approach of "maximum engagement" may have instilled concerns in Beijing that it might be excluded from the settlement of the Korean issue. Consequently, the PRC actively engaged with North Korea, resulting in a series of high-level meetings between Xi and Kim. Additionally, Xi provided Kim with a state-owned Boeing 747—400 to travel to the Singapore summit, which Xi had used himself [Frohman, Rafaelof, Dale-Huang, 2022].

The failure of the US-DPRK negotiations ultimately led to a deeper integration of North Korea into the Chinese sphere of influence. Concurrently, the intensification of the US-China trade conflict eliminated any motivation for Beijing to support Washington's position in the UNSC. Prior to this, China had attempted to enhance its regional image and improve relations with the US, but by the late 2010s, the prospect of political normalization had been lost. As a result, the PRC became more reluctant to maintain the Sanctions Regime.

The restrictions imposed by the UN resolutions were abided by (with reservations) state-owned and large private Chinese companies wary of becoming the target of secondary US (not UNSC) sanctions. However, Beijing was much less eager to control the mass of small businesses engaged in barely licit or overtly illicit activities [Leshakov, Solovyov, 2023, p. 24]. The PRC's official response to the request of the Panel of Experts under the UNSC Sanctions Committee 1718 (on the DPRK) regarding the brands of alcoholic beverages supplied from June to October 2022 for the amount of more than \$3.2 million is indicative. Specifically, China responded that "alcoholic beverages are not on the list of items prohibited for export to the DPRK, and the Resolution didn't authorize the Panel to interpret the scope of luxury goods" [Report, 2023, p. 74]. China's official response, cited verbatim in the Report of the Panel, strongly rejected all wrongdoing on Beijing's behalf and consistently rebuked experts for using "unreliable information" [Report, 2023, pp. 227—234].

In May 2022, China and Russia vetoed U.S. proposals to strengthen sanctions against the DPRK. China has also suggested that the DPRK's missile tests occurred as a response to the U.S.-Korean military exercises [United Nations, 2022]. Furthermore, China's decision to abstain from the vote to extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts 1874 exemplifies its opposition to the Sanctions Regime. This signals a significant shift in Beijing's stance on the North Korean nuclear issue, indicating that it no longer sees the Regime as aligned with its interests.

As for the balance of threat model, eighteen years have slightly affected the Chinese perception of threat from North Korea. Geographic proximity is a constant, always having a "high" level of impact on the threat perception. Aggregated strength and state of offensive capabilities have remained at a "low" impact. Due to the comprehensive UN sanctions, North Korea can obtain scarce commodities only from China, which accounts for over 90 % of its foreign trade, making it dependent on Beijing. Regarding the DPRK's offensive capabilities, there is no evidence that its armed forces have been positioned for conflict with China. As for the intentions, they had a relatively "low" impact. The dissolution of U.S.-Korean accords and the deterioration of inter-Korean relations have compelled Pyongyang to maintain its alliance with Beijing, which has the effect of

reducing the perceived threat. At the same time, the DPRK's aggressive rhetoric toward the United States and South Korea may lead to another deterioration of the situation and have a negative impact on China's relations with the USA. Therefore, it can be concluded that currently, the level of perceived threat is determined only by geographic proximity and indirect threat factors (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Influence of variables on the level of perceived threat — PRC, 2024**

Aggregated strength	Offensive capabilities	Geographic proximity	Intentions	Indirect threat
Low	Low	High	Low	Medium to High

***Russia’s Perception of Threat***

The profound political and economic crises in the final years of the Soviet Union significantly influenced the evolution of Russia’s stance on the North Korean nuclear issue and its subsequent approach to the Sanctions Regime. The Russia-DPRK relations were predominantly driven by political and ideological motivations and subsequently diminished as the Soviet Union, and later Russia, faced economic difficulties. By the time of the first North Korean nuclear crisis, Russia had largely distanced itself from the political settlement and was mainly left outside of political processes in the 1990s.

Prior to the creation of the Regime in 2006, Moscow actively reengaged in negotiations on the nuclear issue. The Russian Foreign Ministry proposed a “package solution,” calling for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the provision of security guarantees to the DPRK. In the Six-Party Talks format, Russia focused on reaching a consensus with all parties involved to find a peaceful solution. However, when the DPRK conducted a nuclear test, Moscow supported the establishment of the UNSC Sanctions Regime, despite previously opposing sanctions, as such pressure, if unsuccessful, would leave no other options but the use of military force.

Russia’s willingness to endorse the Sanctions Regime was influenced by a number of factors. Moscow explicitly declared that it would not consider the DPRK a nuclear power, as this would contribute to the destruction of the NPT. The preservation of the NPT regime remained a priority for Moscow [Putin, 2000], as the continuation of North Korea’s nuclear program could theoretically lead to a military conflict. By voting for the Regime, Russia expressed its concern regarding Pyongyang’s provocative actions. Additionally, it was a direct consequence of Russia’s desire to strengthen its international image and improve relations with the United States.

As for the model of balance of threat, the major incentive for addressing the nuclear issue was its geographic proximity to the DPRK. Possible malfunctions of North Korean nuclear sites near Russia’s border could cause an ecological crisis in the Russian Far East, while a military conflict, which might have arisen as a consequence of North Korean brinkmanship diplomacy, could have resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe. Consequently, this variable consistently exerted a “high” level of influence. Regarding aggregated strength and offensive capabilities, the Russian side did not consider these to be significant concerns, attributing them a relatively “low” impact. Given the overall poor conditions of the DPRK economy and the chronic lack of modern weaponry, North Korea was unable to pose a significant threat to Moscow’s interests. With regard to hos-

tile intentions, the DPRK has never positioned its nuclear arsenal as directed towards Russia. However, the possibility of escalation in the region could have resulted in a deterioration of security, and the DPRK's actions provided the US-led alliances with a rationale for enhancing their military presence in the region, thereby reducing Russia's security. For the overall assessment of the balance of threats for Russia prior to 2006, see Table 5.

*Table 5. Influence of variables on the level of perceived threat — Russia, prior to 2006*

Aggregated strength	Offensive capabilities	Geographic proximity	Intentions	Indirect threat
Low	Low	High	Medium	Medium to High

By the early 2010s, Russia seemingly lost interest in the resolution of the North Korean issue. During the presidency of D. Medvedev, Moscow sought to enhance its diplomatic ties with Western countries and considered North Korea's provocations detrimental [Toloraya, 2014]. Consequently, it tried to distance itself from Pyongyang. A source in the Kremlin even referred to North Koreans as “crooks and swindlers” and blamed them for using “bluffing, threatening, and blackmailing” in an interview with the Russian news agency Ria Novosti. As a result, Russia repeatedly supported the implementation of the UNSC Resolution. However, following the temporary stabilization of the situation on the Korean Peninsula and the onset of the Ukrainian Crisis, Russia's approach to North Korea underwent a notable shift.

The significant deterioration of Russia's relations with Europe and the US, which had been trying to influence Moscow's policy towards Ukraine, led to Russia's much more active pursuit of the “pivot to the East” policy. This shift resulted in a visible intensification of Russia-DPRK relations and a series of visits and meetings between official representatives of the two countries [Asmolov, Zakharova, 2020]. Nevertheless, the harsh response to the nuclear test indicated that Moscow still placed greater value on its international obligations than on improvements in political relations and the development of economic ties.

The most significant shift in Russia's approach to the DPRK and the Sanctions Regime began in 2022. The deterioration of relations with the United States prompted Moscow to reconsider its position toward Pyongyang. The U.S. policy of exerting maximum pressure on Russia through sanctions and the inconclusive Putin-Biden summit in Geneva led to a substantial breakdown in diplomatic ties between the countries and eventually to the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. Russian officials have indicated that Moscow is becoming increasingly disinclined to adhere to the norms of the regime: Marat Khusnullin, Russia's deputy prime minister, has publicly discussed the possibility of engaging North Korean construction workers in Donbass; other senior Russian officials, including Oleg Kozhemyako, governor of the Primorsky Krai, and former Defense Minister S. Shoigu, have presented Kim Jong-un with various weapons, including rifles, swords, body armor, and a reconnaissance UAV [Panel of Experts..., 2024]. It is evident that these actions are not comparable to Chinese circumventions of sanctions, but they should be acknowledged as explicit violations of the established Regime.

Overall, the development of Russia-North Korean relationships has significantly affected the threat level perceived by Russia. In the framework of the balance of threat theory, only geopolitical proximity remains a significant contributor, having a “high” level of impact on threat perception. Aggregated strength, offensive capabilities, and hostile intentions have lost their influence and now have a “low” level of impact. Even the indirect threat has diminished in importance due to comprehensive rivalry with the Collective West, now exerting a “medium to low” impact (see Table 6 for the overall assessment). This assumption is supported by the removal of a paragraph devoted to the Korean peninsula from the latest edition of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of Russia, indicating that solving the North Korean nuclear issue is no longer a significant objective [The Concept of the Foreign Policy..., 2023].

In these circumstances, it is less likely that the Russian Federation will comply with the limitations of the Sanctions Regime. It remains debatable whether Russia will openly dismantle the Regime. While it seems probable that the Russian government will continue to abide by major UNSC restrictions and will not support North Korea’s WMD programs, there is little chance that it will return to discussions regarding additional sanctions [Asmolov, 2024b]. Nevertheless, should Moscow’s relations with the “collective West” normalize in the near future, it is possible that Russia may once again sacrifice its bilateral ties with North Korea for the sake of potential political concessions from the U.S. and the EU.

*Table 6. Influence of variables on the level of perceived threat — Russia, 2024*

Aggregated strength	Offensive capabilities	Geographic proximity	Intentions	Indirect threat
Low	Low	High	Low	Medium to Low

### **Structural Threats as the Key Factors of Regime’s Erosion: in Lieu of Conclusion**

An analysis of the perceived direct threat is not sufficient to describe all the incentives that may have led veto-wielding states to join the Sanctions Regime initially. The main reason for the erosion of the regime appears to be the aggravation of great-power contradictions. In other words, the regime as an institution was unable to irreversibly subordinate the egoistic aspirations of states to the proclaimed principles and norms intended to ensure the “common good” (i.e., Pyongyang’s compliance with the NPT and the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula). The DPRK merely created a structural prerequisite for the manifestation of such aggravation by demonstrating the regime’s inability to ensure the achievement of these goals even in the context of maximum consensus among the UN Security Council members.

Compared to direct threats to UNSC member states from the DPRK’s nuclear program, structural and strategic factors that do not directly depend on the DPRK’s conduct—such as the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation, the formation of the “strategic confrontational triangle” involving the US, PRC, and RF, and the sharp aggravation of the confrontation between the Russian Federation and the “collective West”—now have a much greater impact on the veto-wielding members’ attitudes towards the sancti-

ons regime. These factors have influenced the attitude of each UN Security Council member towards the regime to varying extents.

This is especially true for the People's Republic of China, which is North Korea's most important partner and is widely recognized as a crucial actor in the eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Over the years, Beijing has developed a rather ambiguous stance on the DPRK nuclear issue. On one hand, it has consistently sought to promote the denuclearization of North Korea, repeatedly voting in favor of new sanctions packages. On the other hand, China has maintained close economic ties with Pyongyang, ultimately undermining the Sanctions Regime. This ambiguity may be linked to a possible indirect threat stemming from the development of the DPRK's nuclear programs.

North Korean actions have posed a significant challenge to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) since the early 1990s, undermining not only the treaty's core objective of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons but also the image and credibility of nuclear-armed states. One potential consequence of such illicit actions could have been the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region. Pyongyang's actions might have served as a catalyst for other states to pursue similar pathways, leading to an increase in the number of nuclear-armed nations.

In such a scenario, the most significant threat would likely come from Taiwan, which, by acquiring nuclear weapons, could guarantee its independence from the People's Republic of China. Similarly, South Korea and Japan might begin pursuing nuclear capabilities, given their demonstrated capacity to develop military nuclear programs in a relatively short period. It is evident that such arsenals would significantly diminish Chinese security, as they would likely be integrated into the U.S. military presence in the region.

Furthermore, other states with weaker economic capabilities compared to Tokyo, Seoul, or Taipei might seek to obtain weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). As regional rivalry between the Chinese and American governments intensifies, an increasing number of countries may be motivated to follow the DPRK's example to ensure their survival in the event of a military conflict. Given that China has territorial and maritime disputes with neighboring countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, the latter might pursue nuclear weapons as a means of deterring Beijing. It can be reasonably presumed that China's initial decision to align with the United States on the North Korean nuclear issue and support the Sanctions Regime was motivated by a desire to avoid such a scenario.

However, as the Chinese-American rivalry began to emerge in the 2010s, the PRC became less inclined to continue supporting the American-led Sanctions Regime, which directly contributed to U.S. security. Support for the Regime proved to be a useful political bargaining chip, allowing China to gain some leverage over the U.S. In 2017, the Trump administration appeared to adopt a more flexible stance on trade issues between the United States and China in response to Beijing's cooperation on the DPRK issue [Huxley, Schreer, 2017]. In recent years, the significance of the DPRK as a buffer state between Chinese and U.S. forces in South Korea has increased considerably. In the context of the geopolitical turbulence that began following the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in February 2022, China appears to be providing tacit support to Russia, which

has proclaimed itself engaged in a conflict with American neocolonialism and the “collective West.” This has introduced a new ideological dimension to the Sino-U.S. rivalry, further diminishing Chinese commitment to the Regime.

As tensions within the “strategic triangle” of the U.S., China, and Russia intensify [Asmolov, Babaev, 2024], significant shifts in the balance of threats are occurring. The recent signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between Russia and the DPRK will likely be perceived by the U.S. and its partners in Northeast Asia (especially the ROK) as a strategic threat and a direct challenge to the Sanctions Regime.

Currently, all VWMs addressed in this research are in violation of the principles and norms of the Regime. The United States has used the Regime as an offensive tool with the intention of dismantling the North Korean ruling regime, which exceeds the Regime's proclaimed political objectives. In contrast, China and Russia view this intent as inconsistent with their current self-interests and as a breach of the Regime's norms. Comparing the current levels of threat perception among the United States, China, and Russia reveals that only the United States is interested in maintaining the UNSC Sanctions Regime against North Korea. It seems plausible to suggest that this is due to the perceived existential threat posed by the North Korean nuclear program to the United States and its allies. Despite the DPRK's previously demonstrated willingness to prioritize survival over conflict with the United States, its proclivity for brinkmanship diplomacy and the destructive potential of its WMD programs on the regional security of U.S. allies necessitate a response from Washington. Additionally, due to the geopolitical rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China, the North Korean nuclear arsenal is becoming an increasingly influential factor. American scholars view this as a significant threat to the United States' position in the region, which could undermine Washington-led world order [Mastro, 2024]. If the three major powers continue with their mutually augmented deterrence, they may inadvertently contribute to the risk of mutually assured destruction.

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