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Going at it alone? North Korea's adaptability as a small power in a changing world.

This article uses small states scholarship to map North Korea's evolution from a post-colonial small state to a system-influencing state due to its nuclear weapons programme. The framework allows for contributions to: (1) The DPRK literature which in some parts has suggested the future collapse of the state, (2) The small states literature that suggests they can only survive if they integrate larger political and/or economic units, (3) The mainstream IR literature and its dominant Realist streak that considers great powers and their wills as the main drivers in contemporary world politics.

Keywords: North Korea, DPRK, Small States, Globalization, Nuclear Weapons, Development

Introduction

When Kim Jong Il, the former leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK), suddenly passed away in December 2011, the country faced a rather unsure political future. Yet, Kim Jong Il's son Kim Jong Un was swiftly appointed as Pyongyang's new strongman and in the past few years, the DPRK has successfully tested a number of missiles and nuclear weapons, while the North Korean economy has slowly started to expand. Early in May 2016, the DPRK drew much of the world's attention as Kim Jong Un hosted North Korea's first Workers' Party Congress in more than 35 years. Under the eager eyes of invited foreign journalists and in front of several thousand Communist Party cadres, Kim Jong Un was promoted to Party Chairman, the new position allowing him even more relative power over potential political yet unlikely opponents in the elite. Kim Jong Un also praised the country's nuclear status and presented a new five-year economic plan to re-organize production up to 2020.

North Korea's survival as a discrete entity, separate from democratic and economically soaring middle power South Korea, had always been an unlikely proposal. It is also one many Korean affairs analysts would not have been willing to wager much on. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the DPRK had to renegotiate its economic and political relationship with Russia, and would no longer receive Soviet economic assistance and or benefit from 'Soviet style unbalanced trade.'¹ The DPRK was also internally fragile upon the death of its original founder Kim Il Sung in 1994. Crippling floods and famine in 1994 and 1998 further tested the DPRK's resilience. The January 2002 Axis of Evil speech, and the subsequent 2003 Iraq War also led many to wonder if the United States would intervene in the DPRK in a bid to terminate fifty years of dictatorship and political oppression. Yet, despite those less than auspicious conditions, the DPRK has managed to survive. This situation is somewhat surprising considering that the DPRK is, beyond the danger and potential instability that its nuclear weapons program represents, a state with extremely limited political and economic clout within the international system and especially within the globalized world. Though it is often touted as one of the most militarized countries in the world, with about a quarter of its GDP being spent on the military,² quantitative indicators present a rather bleak picture. The DPRK has one of the world's lowest GDPs per Capita at around \$2,000. It ran a negative growth rate for most of the 1990s and barely reached 2% in the past decade. Its stagnating

population of slightly over 20 million has a life expectancy of below 70.³ If the DPRK is a small economy, it is also small when it comes to its political interactions with the rest of the world. Though a member of the United Nations, and a member of the Group of 77 and the ASEAN Regional Forum, the closed-off nature of the North Korean regime and its economic system means that the bulk of its diplomatic relationships has remained with historical allies such as the People's Republic of China, Russia, Cambodia, Laos, or Vietnam. Yet, those allies have now all departed from a centralized communist economy, leaving the DPRK to ponder how to survive in a globalized world.

The DPRK has attracted scholarly interest because of its peculiar political system, the resilience of its nearly unprecedented hereditary dictatorship, the client-patron relationships it has maintained for several decades with the Soviet Union and the PRC, and its struggling economy. On the other hand, the DPRK has often been seen as an irrational and dangerous actor, a rogue state that ought to be sanctioned and alienated until its leadership collapses. While Kim Jong Il's death might have heralded the country's decline, Kim Jong Un now appears to have solidified his position via political purges, nuclear and missile launches – albeit not always successful – and a very visible political Congress in May 2016. Could it be that the DPRK is an example of a new, atypical category of small, and seemingly rather powerless states that, for a number of reasons, have managed to avoid collapse or absorption into a larger economic and political unit? Is it possible for a small state to refuse the encompassing liberal economic order and instead live on the margins of the institutionalized world yet still manage to survive and develop? The literature on small states encompasses many of the themes that observers of Korean affairs have been grappling with for years and has engaged some of the leading International Relations scholars such as Robert Keohane, Peter Katzenstein, or Robert Jackson. Research agendas include how states were created following World War II and especially following decolonization, how small states managed the security dilemma within the Cold War context by either balancing or bandwagoning, how small states sought shelter within international institutions to counterbalance their own weaknesses, or how small states can provide unique and creative solutions to a globalized world.

This article focuses especially on one specific argument from the small states literature: Olav Knudsen suggests that the small state experience is composed of stages that range from identity formation, state creation and achievement of security to decline, either by absorption within a more powerful state's orbit, or by economic integration into a system such as the

European Union, for example. This article applies Knudsen's framework to the North Korean case and questions his last stage, decline by absorption or integration, by suggesting that for the DPRK, this stage could be avoided because of one specific niche power, nuclear weapons. There are a number of examples of small states that have disappeared or lost their independence in the 20th century: the German Democratic Republic was dissolved in 1990, Sikkim was an independent monarchy for centuries until it became part of India in 1975, the Republic of Biafra seceded from Nigeria in 1967 and survived for three years before it was reintegrated into its original state, South Vietnam existed from 1954 to 1976 as an independent communist state, and Tibet was an independent kingdom until it became an autonomous region of the PRC. Hence, considering survival and especially how to maintain independence is not a trivial question. By using the literature on small states, this paper first considers North Korea as a contested state in the international system. It then reviews the literature on small states, and its shortcomings and contributions, in light of the DPRK's own experience. Finally, it looks at the DPRK's development through stages (survival, in-between great power rivalry, rejection of international world order and development of nuclear weapons) by ultimately presenting conclusions about the DPRK's Byungjin line, a balance of military power and economic development as an alternate stage in small state survival strategies. By using the literature on small states, the paper is able to consider a more layered analysis of particular aspects of the DPRK and its development while avoiding the regular trappings of International Relations and its encompassing focus on power. It also aims to state modest albeit novel claims to the literature on small states by considering what happens when neither absorption nor conformity occurs for a state in a regional area that does not provide institutional shelter or at least where shelter is denied to specific states such as the DPRK.

The DPRK: A Contested State

Following the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 to remove the vestiges of Japanese colonial structures, the DPRK was established in 1948 but has struggled to become a legitimate political unit. The Korean War and the subsequent 1953 armistice have left the country divided since then, and the two Koreas have evolved in a near-constant state of tension.⁴ This 'mother crisis' has led to a precarious economic situation precipitated by the DPRK's domestic choices and a commitment to self-reliance under both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.⁵ Both the Republic of Korea and the DPRK were small states that became collateral concerns for leading Cold War powers such as Washington and Moscow. For Browning, small

states usually retain an inability to act freely as they become entangled in conflicts and rivalries over the balance of power and question of hegemony.⁶ The DPRK fits this pattern, as its economy was bolstered principally and for many years by Chinese and Soviet investments, as well as by a number of Eastern European countries that participated in North Korea's development effort.⁷ As a newly decolonized state in the early 1950s, the DPRK dutifully supported a number of national liberation movements across the African continent but it was too small to adopt any balancing attitude toward the West during these times. It also did not really have to do so: indeed, the DPRK was in need of protectors, and its security was largely assured by the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union.

With the South Korean economy and military was bolstered by the United States, the two Koreas started to compete with one another for domination over the Korean peninsula but also for recognition and engagement with other countries around the world, especially in other parts of Asia and Africa.⁸ This engagement phase, lasting roughly from the 1950s to the 1980s, was largely influenced by the Non-Aligned Movement and allowed the DPRK to develop alliances especially with countries fighting against colonial powers and forms of Western or capitalist hegemony. Thus, even if the DPRK is to be considered a small state, it has not always been as isolated as it often appears to be. In order to understand how these changes have come to be, Hey suggests that a system level of analysis is crucial to explain small states' behavior: they might not be able to motivate change at the global level but this does not mean they always are passive.⁹ In this vein, the DPRK has taken a number of 'roles' over its six decades of existence, and has evolved from a post-colonial small state to an economic opportunist struggling to embrace globalization while at the same time retaining its independence and protecting its borders with a nuclear deterrent.

As a result, there is an extensive amount of research that has been conducted on the DPRK, and that has helped us understand the country further. The bulk of research falls under several broad themes: (1) North Korean leading figures and inner-political workings,¹⁰ (2) North Korea's socialist policies and its economic development,¹¹ (3) Politics of divisions and reconciliation,¹² (4) The past, war, and managing foreign military influences,¹³ (5) North Korea's nuclear weapons development and strategic interactions,¹⁴ (6) Engagement and the potential fostering of bilateral and multilateral cooperation,¹⁵ (7) Human rights and human condition,¹⁶ (8) Propaganda and political instruments of control,¹⁷ and (9) Foreign Relations and Partnerships to name a few.¹⁸ Up until more recently, there was a reticence in considering

the DPRK as a rational actor, as leading scholarship concentrated mostly on collapse scenarios.¹⁹ Hence, North Korean survival was not envisaged as a long-term option, its future was intrinsically mapped within the context of being absorbed by South Korea, and its proliferation behaviours not believed to be persistent-enough to yield a nuclear deterrent.

Small State Literature in a North Korean Context

The literature on small states emerged essentially after World War II, and has been greatly influenced by historical events such as the process of decolonization. With the creation of a large amount of states, this new availability of data coupled with changes in behavioral sciences meant that in the quest to find a middle ground theory of Foreign Policy, it appeared possible to develop new theories about a plethora of phenomena. The literature is itself divided in a number of subfields, with research spanning from the concepts of recognition, self-determination, balancing and bandwagoning, to how to contend with the globalized world, and especially how small states and institutions relate to one another.²⁰ The field has soared with studies on European membership and how small and defenseless states needed at times to seek shelter from potentially threatening powers, and thus gaining protection via NATO membership for example.²¹ International relations as a discipline has been often been concerned with classifying states according to their access to particular resources, and their ability to yield power. In this vein, Handel sees five discrete types of states: superpowers, great powers, middle powers, small powers and micro-states,²² with small states usually lacking the power and thus ability to influence outcomes in the international system.²³ Just as with any theory and benchmark, finding an appropriate, and to some extent encompassing definition of what exactly a small state is has occupied a large part of the literature, with a general focus on population indicators. In Europe, smallness is often defined at around the 15-million people mark²⁴ while the World Bank defines small states as having less than 1½ million people. Part of the literature has also focuses on Pacific Island States because islands are rather suitable candidates to the small state label. Given that their geographical isolation and lack of easy territorial expansion opportunities mean that their own economic determinants might not be subject to much change.²⁵ While islands have been legitimate candidates to small state studies, there is a understandable degree of variation in the literature on what small exactly means. But if one returns to the literature's genesis, that is to say during the 1960s and 1970s, small states were considered to have around 10-15 million inhabitants²⁶ and up to 20 or 30 million in the case of underdeveloped countries according to David Vital, one of the field's pioneers.²⁷ The

consensus then was that small states were also characterized by limited resources and thus a small economy.²⁸ Most of today's small states however boast solid gross national incomes and only qualify as potential small states because of their insularity or low population, such as Iceland for example.²⁹

With a population, according to the World Bank of just over 10 million in 1960 and figures reaching about 25 million 50 years later, the DPRK surely fit the literature's criteria during the Cold War era. The political, ideological and especially geographical context North Korea found itself in has also limited the country's own expansion: population flow was politically blocked, and there was very little easy access to the country because it is a peninsula and because of its closed militarized borders. Thus, the DPRK could easily be imagined as an island. Economic indicators however are harder to come by, especially for the Cold War period, but recent figures from the Bank of Korea show a GNI per capita below \$1,000, placing the DPRK decidedly in the Low-Income Countries group. The DPRK's experience also resonates with small states' vulnerability and their need to seek shelter and protection from a specific alliance or states. As a former Japanese colony, Pyongyang sought support from the USSR and the PRC for decades in an attempt to stabilize as a solid satellite and communist ally.

The focus on the international system and environment in which small states evolve has also tended to eclipse their own domestic politics. This means that in many cases, elite ideas are not considered, as material or structural explanations are favored.³⁰ This elimination of the 'black box' model in foreign policy seems hardly appropriate when the general foreign policy analysis field has focused a lot of efforts for several decades on explaining this very box functions. That small states' domestic conditions and governing structures be dismissed as irrelevant in the grand scheme of the system is problematic indeed, as it paints small states as helpless entities. Smallness however does not necessarily have to equate to weakness in every area. Some such as Neumann have suggested weak and small states could be holding comparative advantages when it comes to sizable natural resources.³¹ Finally, security has also been part of the small states discussion in the 1970s, and especially nuclear weapons. There are disagreements regarding the effect nuclear weapons would have if small states were to hold them and some such as Vital have suggested that nuclear weapons would have a rather limited deterrent value against any great power.³²

The contentions arising within the small state literature eerily resonates with the

DPRK's situation. Despite the DPRK's economic difficulties, natural resources are plentiful in the country albeit not always exploited or exploitable within the current state of industrialization and mechanization in the country. Contrary to what Vital suggests about the irrelevance of nuclear weapons as an equalizer for small states, very few could claim nowadays that the DPRK's nuclear capacity is irrelevant. Experts have been divided for a number of years on whether DPRK weapons tests were as successful as heralded by the regime, and missile technology as robust as it would need to be in order for the DPRK to have a credible and usable nuclear deterrent weapon, ready to be launched.³³ Yet, the international community, led by the United Nations, has created a comprehensive web of sanctions since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 in an attempt to stop Pyongyang's proliferation attempts, and to help manage nuclear facilities and materials. If North Korea's nuclear weapons were not conceived as relevant or salient-enough to threaten peace and stability, much less time and effort would have been monopolized to curb the DPRK's behavior.

International Relations as a discipline has often exclusively focused on great powers and has sometimes dismissed smaller actors as insignificant. Yet, small states can still be system-affecting even though they are not necessarily able to be system-determining as stated by Robert Keohane in his seminal 1969 Lilliputian article.³⁴ Four decades later, there is much interest in small states studies. This is because post-USSR fragmentation led to state creation, and new debates also arose over supranational institutions and their relations with the state-system. As such, new studies have reassessed the field and highlighted the need to understand how small states, as a variable in International Relations and the Foreign Policy field, impact the system.³⁵ While a large part of the literature still focuses on how weak small states are, this has paved the way for the study of economic vulnerability. It has also put the spotlight on how small states are often considered 'in between', forced to choose protection from a range of actors that might offer it, or having to struggle to secure shelter. While small states appeared to have little choice but to be dependent on either the USSR or the US during the Cold War,³⁶ the other 'constellations' or networks weak powers belong to are seen as increasingly important in a globalized world.³⁷ This is particularly true for the DPRK, as it has oscillated between and exploited cracks within the Communist blocks during the Cold War, swaying between the USSR and the PRC. At the same time, the DPRK has engaged with the Non-Aligned Movement and retained its own domestic political independence as much as possible with the creation of its own brand of socialism via its Juch'e ideology. Hence, though small states have been understood as weak and essentially patients of the international system instead of true

agents, they are also self-aware, especially when it comes to their potential weaknesses. Thus, they often are ‘outside-focused’, they pay attention to the international system, and how they develop strategies to cope with specific weaknesses. These strategies have increasingly been labelled as ‘smart’ and ‘innovative’ especially because small states might have more freedom and less entanglements to consider, thus allowing them to ‘fly under the radar’ and develop strategies that depart from the gamut of traditional policies.³⁸ But small states are also known to be vocal about ideas, given that their own resources might be more limited than others in the system. East has noticed already in the 1970s the propensity for small powers to make more use of verbal statements which allowed them to take fewer risks in light of their small capabilities.³⁹

More recently, Brunn has looked at how small states have used fora such as the United Nations to express specific views and attempt to influence the broader political agenda.⁴⁰ In the case of the DPRK, propaganda has played an increasingly important role over the years to attempt to keep other countries at bay, and especially when it comes to the relationship the DPRK has had with its brother in arms South Korea, or the United States. Contention about American military presence has influenced Pyongyang in its decision to develop a nuclear deterrent. Hence, the DPRK has often let the world know about its nuclear weapons status, and how the weapons would be used as a deterrent in case North Korean sovereignty was threatened. As a result, it is easy to read about Pyongyang’s nuclear stance and ideas via the Korea Central News Agency, one of North Korea’s most visible propaganda outlets, as it is published daily, is translated into English and is easily accessible online. In this particular light, the DPRK is atypical, given that most small states have, when they can, developed strategies to be relevant in the international system by being norm entrepreneurs and supporters of ‘good’ values. This has been especially true in the field of non-proliferation and denuclearization: Mongolia for example has declared itself a nuclear-weapon-free zone in 1992, and New Zealand has actively campaigned to secure other nuclear-weapon-free zones around the world.⁴¹ How one makes itself relevant when resources are limited has therefore been one of the areas that small state literature has focused on more recently. The tide has thus resolutely shifted from presenting states as weak and in need of protection to considering that small state status is actually ‘survivable’ especially because it is possible, under some conditions, for small states to adapt.⁴²

The DPRK: Atypical Development in a Connected World

(1) State Establishment and Contention

The DPRK is a product of both colonization and separation. These processes could be sufficient by themselves to explain how the DPRK has struggled to develop as a stable unit, but the added devastation caused by the Korean War only a few years after the establishment of the DPRK state in 1948 led the DPRK to need to establish itself again in the 1950s. This was done partly against South Korea, with both states developing different political and economic systems, as well with the help of the socialist world.

The DPRK attempted to strengthen its own legitimacy and right to exist by weakening South Korea. South Korea's 1960s protest movements were followed closely by Pyongyang,⁴³ and the South Korean intelligentsia was targeted to eventually induce a communist revolution in the South.⁴⁴ Pyongyang also hoped to capitalize on the death of South Korean leader Park Chung Hee by isolating the ROK from the Non-Aligned Movement and instigating an international front against Seoul via Korean diplomatic missions abroad.⁴⁵ The Kwangju uprisings provided another opportunity for Pyongyang to highlight the instability and weaknesses inherent within the South Korean system.⁴⁶

But the DPRK required foreign assistance to rebuild and develop, especially after the Korean War. A number of Eastern European countries that participated in North Korea's development effort⁴⁷ such as Poland, Hungary but also Eastern Germany which supported the reconstruction of the town of Hamhung in the late 1950s.⁴⁸ Armed with a relative economic and industrial know-how, the DPRK started to see itself as a potential model for less-developed and struggling Third World countries that had become independent in the 1950s and the 1960s. With a head start of about a decade or two and no historical and political connection to mar a potential relationship, Pyongyang provided assistance to Nasser during the Suez Crisis of 1956, helped with the rebuilding of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. It also supported a number of national liberation movements across the African continent, or what would be term 'bandwagoning,' essentially joining forces to counterbalance the established Western liberal world order.⁴⁹ The DPRK also attempted to strengthen its own legitimacy and right to exist by weakening South Korea. South Korea's 1960s protest movements were followed closely by Pyongyang,⁵⁰ and the South Korean intelligentsia was targeted to eventually induce a communist revolution in the South.⁵¹ Pyongyang also hoped to capitalize on the death of South Korean leader Park Chung Hee by isolating the ROK from the Non-Aligned Movement and instigating an

international front against Seoul via Korean diplomatic missions abroad.⁵² The Kwangju uprisings provided another opportunity for Pyongyang to highlight the instability and weaknesses inherent within the South Korean system.⁵³

(2) Being in the Middle

The DPRK's state development was bolstered by its relationship with regional powers, and especially the support it received from both the USSR and the PRC. Though there was an obvious Communist support coming from Moscow during the years following the Japanese occupation and the Korean partition, it is not until late 1948 that Stalin and Kim Il Sung started to trade telegrams and developed a personal relationship.⁵⁴ Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Zhou Enlai accepted a similar overture by Pyongyang in 1949.⁵⁵ Though a Communist North Korea had apparently joined hands with the two largest Communist countries in the world, it also did so for non-ideological reasons. On the one hand, the relationship between the Soviet Union and North Korea was based on trade and production. On the other hand the relationship with the People's Republic of China was initially based on ideological affinity but carried border implications that were important for Beijing to manage. However, beyond the apparent closeness and ideological synergies and support for a Communist world and especially anti-American visions of power the trio shared, it was at time far from being as close as 'lips and teeth.' Over the next decade, ideological discords and geopolitical concerns often rocked the DPRK-PRC-USSR partnership well before Gorbachev's Perestroika reformed the Soviet world and Deng Xiaoping changed the nature of Chinese economic development. The death of Stalin in March 1953 had significant impact on the North Korean-USSR-China relationship as Nikita Khrushchev's rejection of Stalin's cult of personality led to a strand of revisionism within the Communist ideology. Both North Korea and China joined sides in an anti-revisionism movement, and the Soviet-PRC split left North Korea in a difficult position when Beijing's drastic economic reforms during the Great Leap forward led to a near country collapse. During the 1960s, the DPRK concentrated a large part of its diplomacy on Africa, with a number of North Korean officials touring various countries after full diplomacy relations were established with Guinea in 1958, thus marking the beginning of Pyongyang's Africa years. Pyongyang went on to develop relationship with more than a dozen African countries, and established a number of trade agreements.⁵⁶ This behavior is very consistent with parts of the small state literature which suggests that small states often prioritize their own economic issues⁵⁷ or that they also attempt to engage into peaceful, non-aggressive diplomatic relationships.⁵⁸

(3) Survival in a Multilateral World

Despite these engagements, the DPRK was ill-prepared to interact with the international, multilateral world as the Cold War ended. But United Nations Security Council Resolution 702 recommended that both DPRK and ROK receive United Nations General Assembly Membership. With this decision, the Koreas' full membership took effect on 19 September 1991.⁵⁹ As famine and drought hit the DPRK rather harshly in 1997 and 1998, many countries felt compelled to participate in an aid effort aimed at alleviating population suffering. From rice shipment to debt cancellation, aid was delivered by countries that had long-established ties with the DPRK, while seemingly non-traditional allies delivered aid through IGOs or NGOs. "Shelter" thus came in the form of aid from the DPRK's own constellation, essentially countries it had developed links with over the years, as well as beyond. North Korea received 2,000 tons of rice from Taiwan in March 1997,⁶⁰ 30 tons of free grain from Pakistan in September 1998,⁶¹ and 1,000 tons of rice from India in 1999,⁶² while Vietnam kept on delivering rice to Pyongyang all throughout the 2000s and beyond.⁶³ Long-time allied Mongolia sent more than thirty-five tons of goat meat directly to the DPRK after Pyongyang had requested aid from the United Nations early 2011.⁶⁴ On the other hand, some countries offered conditional aid. Japanese-backed Mexican initiatives for example pledged a large crude oil donation in 1999 in exchange for North Korea to commit to the end of its nuclear program.⁶⁵ Israel also asked in 2000 for North Korea to agree to an arms control agreement in exchange for its humanitarian assistance.⁶⁶ Other important contributors such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand, who had supported the DPRK with large donations to the World Food Program in the late 1990s severed their aid packages because of Pyongyang's nuclear program development.⁶⁷

(4) Developing a Niche Nuclear Power

With the United States' Manhattan project leading to the development and eventual use of nuclear bombs in Japan and the USSR's own nuclear test in 1949, Kim Il Sung expressed interest in having Korean scientists work in the field of nuclear research as early as the mid 1950s.⁶⁸ The introduction by the United States of nuclear weapons in South Korea in 1960 might have swayed Pyongyang's alleged initial peaceful intentions toward developing their own nuclear deterrent, especially in light of the newly-developing Sino-Soviet split.⁶⁹ The main

partner that enabled North Korea to develop nuclear weapons in the past decade has been Pakistan though. Pyongyang also started to be a linchpin in the weapons trade by selling and trading knowledge out to Iran, Libya, Syria and Myanmar. It eventually became known that the Pakistani government had not directly participated in sending nuclear technology to the DPRK though. Instead, one of its top nuclear scientists, Abdul Qadeer Khan, had done so. The DPRK's nuclear capacities have provided the country with a credible deterrent and have been touted by the North Korea government and especially via KCNA as necessary to ensure the respect of Korean sovereignty, security and territorial integrity.

The North Korean nuclear programme costs relatively little money, with estimated cumulative production and testing phase at about US\$ 3 billion for the first two launches.⁷⁰ When compared to North Korean military expenditures over the past decades, the programme appears almost ridiculously cheap. North Korea's annual military spending has ranged from US\$ 0.68 billion in 1970 to US\$ 7.84 billion in 2010, with an average yearly spending of US\$ 4.28 billion.⁷¹ With GDP figures ranging from US\$17 billion to US\$24 billion in 2010, depending on sources,⁷² North Korean military spending is consequent however, especially in light of how much investment would be needed to support more traditional sectors such as agriculture or manufacturing. The DPRK nuclear program has also led to sanctions: as of 2016, there are five United Nations Security Council Resolutions that partly constrains North Korea's economy activity. There is currently little evidence available to that would support the fact that international sanctions have been able to curb North Korean proliferation behaviour. But sanctions have had effects on the ground, and on society. Indeed, while luxury-goods trade involving illegal activities often perpetrated by diplomats has become more difficult,⁷³ specific sanction status such as being place on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism has prevented the DPRK from borrowing international development funds.⁷⁴

(5) Relationship with Global Governance

The DPRK has taken little opportunity to speak in very public fora, and its rare apparitions at the United Nations General Assembly have often been used to present aggressive and strong anti-hegemonic statements. Cambodia, as a close partner to the DPRK given the personal relationship between Kim Il Sung and King Norodom Sihanouk, was tapped by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to examine the potential to bring Pyongyang into discussion within the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). North Korea's participation to the

ARF's Bangkok meeting in the summer of 2000 led to a flurry of activity and engagement, with meetings organized with South Korea, the United States as well as Japan.⁷⁵ Those still represent timid steps within the globalised world, and one cannot talk of the DPRK being integrated within the system. In the past few years, and in concert with Kim Jong Un's ascent to power, the DPRK has increased its communication on the Millennium Development Goals and what is needed from the international community in order to meet the goals. This communication could have been strategized by the DPRK elite as a way to engage with the international community and United Nations agencies in order to receive support. The MDGs could potentially be used as a pretext to receive aid without admitting to its own domestic population that the leadership is facing difficulties. This is also a platform that has allowed the DPRK to voice its own views and concerns about development, environment, and especially about energy, resource management and conservation.

At the G-77 meeting in September 2013, the DPRK talked about a changing North Korean outlook, with a new focus on knowledge-based economy, but reiterated the principle of sovereignty. It also emphasized poorer countries' right to develop, a point that could indeed question the effects of international sanctions on the general development of the DPRK. Essentially, the DPRK is not willing to compromise on its own vision of security and sovereignty as well as its weapons program development but is looking for independence on these matters while still seeking international support for development.⁷⁶ Indeed, In 1998, the DPRK suggested via its newspaper Rodong Sinmun that South Korea's attempt to attract foreign investments and foreign capital would most likely lead to its ruin.⁷⁷ Almost two decades later, the DPRK has started to slowly embrace the concept of investment it had rejected so publicly and vehemently in the past. Changes within the DPRK society have been made following knowledge partnerships, exploratory missions abroad, inter-ministerial talks and the establishment of a number of Special Economy Zones. A number of structural and legal changes have thus occurred, with for example the creation of the Economic Development Association in 2013, a North Korean 'NGO' that aims to support the establishment of foreign businesses, and which is reachable in Pyongyang via email and phone.⁷⁸ Legal work to create a system supportive of international investments has started, with the Korea's Lawyers' Association developing an external civil law office that can act as a legal representative and provide legal services to local as well as foreign business, while mediating and arbitrating between entities as well if needed.⁷⁹

Conclusion: Investing to Create a Future

The DPRK is no exceptional state, yet it is the only state that has managed to develop nuclear weapons while maintaining an often negative growth rate.⁸⁰ The toll for the North Korean society has been tremendous: while large sums have been devoted by the state to the development of military technology,⁸¹ constraints on the society that have come from international sanctions and alienation within the international community have greatly impaired the DPRK's development. The DPRK has chosen to gamble its survival on developing a weapons system that has constricted its growth and nearly ensured its own downfall. While this is hardly a path that would be recommended for other small nations struggling to become independent, the DPRK's more recent endeavours to slowly develop its economy, now that might have assured its survival with its nuclear deterrent. This might lend support to Knudsen's concept of small state-ness being "survivable" with appropriate change. Yet, suggesting that the DPRK has managed to survive without shelter from either strong states or international institutions would be misleading. China still remains the DPRK's largest trading partner, totally nearly US\$6 billion in 2014.⁸² The DPRK has also received a large amount of aid via service-oriented organizations: Sweden provided more than a quarter of the World Food Program's 1996 food appeal while Estonia offered €32,000 in 2008,⁸³ Germany supported the DPRK both via the WFP as well as its domestic agency German Famine Aid,⁸⁴ and France has channelled a lot of its contributions via two non-governmental organizations, Première Urgence Internationale and Aide Médicale Internationale, with yet more than €500,000 offered in 2011 alone.⁸⁵

Is there hope for the DPRK to 'normalize' and achieve Knudsen's last 'integration' step? In recent years, some steps forward have been made. Singapore has become engaged in the DPRK via Maxgro Holding, which was set up as a joint venture in 2001 and gave the company the use of 20,000 hectares of North Korean land to cultivate paulownia, a fast-growing hardwood.⁸⁶ The North Korean outfit Sek replaced South Korean mini-major Hahn Shin Corporation in May 2003 as Italy's partner for a \$20 million series of animation deal, with Sek paying a large sum of money to acquire 30% of the Asian distribution rights to four biopics.⁸⁷ The Kaesong project has also been successful with aluminium products⁸⁸ though the recent zone closure, initiated by South Korea because of suspicion that Kaesong revenues were

supporting the DPRK's nuclear program highlights the still fickle nature of trading and interacting with the North.

Looking at the DPRK through the lens afforded by small states literature provide new insights to North Korean studies, by adding credence to the increasingly more salient non-collapst paradigm. How the DPRK manages to survive still remains a contentious question though, but the North Korean case adds to the small states literature by showing added support for resourcefulness of seemingly weaker actors. Yet, the DPRK remains a puzzling case within the international relations discipline, defying realist powerplay while being far from genuinely engaging with the neoliberal world order. But there might be other areas in which further questioning of the status, role and foreign policy of North Korea would be welcomed. This could include scholarship on the types of security institution needed in Northeast Asia given proliferation. It could also include studying countries, especially in the Middle East such as Syria and Iran, that have been involved in weapons trade with the DPRK, or that have proliferated despite international sanction regimes. It is also understood that not many small states are in the position, nowadays, to develop a credible nuclear deterrent. In this particular case, the Korean case might sit at the margin of what small states can achieve.

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