

A new chapter or more of the same: Understanding the Biden Administration's Approach to North Korea

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Abstract

Following the transition from the Trump administration to the Biden administration, North Korea's provocations significantly escalated, drawing global attention to US policy towards the region. Under Biden, North Korea conducted 168 provocations, up from 35 under Trump, highlighting a shift in tensions (CSISb 2025). Using a qualitative, inductive methodology, this study employs documentary analysis and a constructivist lens to analyse the rationale behind the Biden administration's approach to North Korea. This dissertation finds that the Biden administration's North Korea approach is driven by a deliberate and pragmatic recalibration aimed at reasserting the US as a principled leader, through cautious diplomacy, strengthened values-based alliances and a commitment to the rules-based international order. It then adds value due to its contemporary nature to the existing scholarly literature on US North Korea policy.

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List of abbreviations

CVID: Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearisation

DPRK: Democratic Republic of Korea

GNO: Global Nuclear Order

IAEA: International Atomic Energy Agency

IR: International Relations

NCG: Nuclear Consultative Group

NKSPAE: North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act

ROK: Republic of Korea

THAAD: Terminal High Altitude Area Defence

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

US: United States

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Introduction

During Joe Biden's presidency, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea) carried out 168 provocations, a considerable increase from the 35 recorded during the Donald Trump administration (CSISb 2025). Even by its own aggressive standards, North Korea escalated tensions significantly in autumn 2021, initiating a surge of missile tests that peaked in 2022, marking the most conducted in any single year (AFPI 2022: 1). These provocations included the firing of an intermediate-range ballistic missile over Japanese territory in October and a record launch of twenty-three missiles in a single day in November (CFR 2024). Frequent tests continued into 2023 and featured the Hwasong-18, North Korea's first solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile, capable of reaching US territory and designed for faster launches, transportation and concealment (CFR 2024).

North Korea's provocations escalated further in 2024. Pyongyang radically amended its constitution to renounce the goal of unification and designate the Republic of Korea (ROK/South Korea) as an 'invariable principal enemy' (Soo-Yeon 2024). This shift was accompanied by the detonation of the Gyeongui and Donghae inter-korean roads and rail lines as part of a phased separation (Kim 2024). In June 2024, Kim Jong-Un hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin for a summit that renewed Russia's security commitments from the Cold War era, and in return, Kim dispatched 10,000 soldiers to fight for Russia in its war against Ukraine in October 2024, along with the provision of artillery shells and missiles (Cha and Katz, 2024: 103-104, Revere, 2024: 34-35).

Under the Biden administration there has been a sizeable shift in provocations and escalatory tensions. This has followed high-profile summits and missives between Trump and Kim Jong-un under the previous administration, placing North Korea further in the global spotlight (Howell, 2023: 1-4). As a result, the Biden administration has faced increased pressure from the media to “do something” (The White House, 2024: 13).

Research question

In light of such events, this dissertation seeks to answer the question: ‘What is the rationale behind the Biden administration’s North Korea approach?’. Whilst there has been extensive literature produced on US DPRK policy of former administration’s, there is very little on the Biden administration’s due to its contemporary nature. This dissertation is therefore significant in that it provides an original contribution by analysing US DPRK policy at a time of heightened tensions. The primary aim of this dissertation was to uncover both the substance of the administration’s policy and to provide a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind it. To do so, this research utilised a constructivist theoretical lens. The conclusion this dissertation reached was that the Biden administration’s approach to North Korea is driven by an aim to reassert the US as a pragmatic and principled actor, reflected in its emphasis on cautious diplomacy, strengthened alliances and a commitment to the rules-based international order. To outline how the dissertation reached this conclusion, this dissertation is structured as follows. Following on from this introduction, a literature review is conducted on the former US administration’s North Korea policies. Chapter two then outlines my theoretical lens of constructivism. This is followed by an explanation of my methods. Chapters three through five, make up the body of my research organised around three themes: a post-Trump recalibration

of US DPRK policy, security through alliances and normative leadership. Each also presents a distinct aspect of US policy and its content. Finally, I offer my concluding arguments, acknowledging limitations and identifying areas for future research.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Engagement versus pressure: foreign policy of former US administrations

There is much scholarly literature on former US administrations' DPRK policy. Critically, it reveals that there is a dichotomy in approaches between engagement and pressure. This debate is well covered and rich in its discussion. As Wertz (2018: 10) summarises, towards North Korea the US has employed a "two-track policy of diplomacy and pressure", often using both engagement and pressure at the same time. Simultaneously, as Khil (1994: 350) observes, this strategy has also alternated between heightened phases of accommodation and confrontation. On January 20, 2021, the Biden administration inherited this long-standing tension in US DPRK policy between engagement and pressure. This review of the literature seeks to contextualise the policies of former US administrations.

Engagement

Within the current literature of US-DPRK engagement approaches, the 1994 Agreed Framework has been the focus of much attention. Marking a critical breakthrough in US-DPRK relations, it served as the first institutionalised mechanism for dialogue between the two nations (Armstrong, 2004: 21). It emerged in response to the first nuclear crisis between the US and North Korea in the early 1990's, in which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) raised concerns about a North Korean nuclear weapons program (Husenícova, 2018: 69-76). Although this crisis was averted following former US President Jimmy Carter's meeting with Kim Il-Sung in Pyongyang, that paved the way for bilateral talks and the signing of the Agreed Framework

in October 1994 (Armstrong, 2004; Husenicova 2018). The Agreed framework involved a freeze on North Korea's nuclear activities at its facilities in Yongbyon and Taechon, in return for a US promise to provide two light-water reactors and create a consortium (the Korean Energy Development Organisation or KEDO) to supply fuel oil as an interim energy resource, it also outlined steps to move towards normalisation of political and economic relations (Armstrong, 2004; Hwang, 2025). Further, under the Clinton administration engagement continued with a significant development in 1999, following former US Secretary of Defence William Perry's policy report, after his visit to Pyongyang, which outlined a forward moving approach to relations. This led to an increase in high-level diplomatic engagement, exemplified by the DPRK's Vice-Marshal Jo Myong-rok visiting President Clinton in Washington, followed by US Secretary of State Madeline Albright meeting Kim Jong-Il in Pyongyang in 2000 (Hwang, 2025: 17-18).

Existing scholarship on US-DPRK engagement has also thoroughly examined the Six-Party Talks. Initiated in August 2003 and involving the United States, China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, the Six-Party Talks (Hwang, 2025: 19-21) served as a critical multilateral forum aiming to attain the Complete, Verifiable and Irrevocable Denuclearisation (CVID) of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. Running intermittently between 2003 to 2008 (Wilson and Kwon, 2018: 221-224) they led to several key agreements, notably the September 2005 and February 2007 Joint Statement's that committed North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons and return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) through a series of steps. (Chanlett-Avery et al. 2018: 10). Although, unravelling due to issues of verification resulting in deadlock in December 2008, Wertz (2018: 10) contends that the talks "outlined the parameters for future negotiations" (Wertz, 2018: 10).

Conversely, Trump's unorthodox direct diplomacy has been extensively covered within the existing literature. Sigal's (2020: 163-182) study intensively examined Trump's unconventional diplomacy with North Korea, detailing Trump and Kim Jong-un's high-profile summitry. This included the first-ever meeting between a US President in office and a North Korean leader in Singapore in 2018, a second in Hanoi 2019 and a third at the Demilitarised Zone in Panmunjom later that year. Pyongyang eventually disengaged from negotiations in 2019, initiating a period of zero communication (Sigal, 2020: 176-177). Further, scholarship, has similarly articulated that Trump's 'maximum engagement' campaign and rhetorical approach represented a departure from conventional practices, as Trump played up his and Kim Jong-un's bromance proclaiming that they "fell in love" (Trump, in Cummings, 2020: 89) after exchanging letters (Sigal 2020; Taim 2024). Howell (2023: 209-214) interprets this approach as a form of political showmanship, emphasising spectacle over conventional diplomacy.

Pressure

Moving away from engagement, existing scholarship also examines US administration's diverse pressure approaches. Howard (2004: 805-828) provides notable analysis examining President Bush's rhetorical construction of North Korea, particularly in his labelling of the regime as part of an 'axis of evil', alongside Iraq and Iran, in his 2002 State of the Union address. Bush's designation of North Korea as a 'rogue state', a sponsor of global terrorism and a possessor of weapons of mass destruction, sought to justify the administration's 'war on terror'. (Howard, 2004: 805-828). Such condemnatory rhetoric has been interpreted by the DPRK as indicative of US 'hostile policy' (Howell, 2023: 36).

Alternatively, whilst not as explicitly damning as Bush's 'axis of evil' label (Howell, 2023: 223) research into escalatory rhetoric under Trump is also well documented. Wertz (2018: 15017) explores Trump's bellicose and vituperative rhetoric both online and offline towards Pyongyang under the administration's 'maximum pressure' campaign. This included personal and emotionally charged insults with Trump nicknaming Kim Jong-un "little rocket man" (Trump, in Wertz, 2018: 16) and inflammatory remarks such as tweeting about the size of his "nuclear button" (Trump, in Cha, 2023: 242). Howell (2023: 196-203) has also investigated Trump's war of words showing Trump's rhetoric do have been characterised by direct threats, warning that North Korea would be "met with fire, fury and frankly power" (Trump, in Howell 2023: 199) as well as having vowed to "totally destroy North Korea" (Trump, in Howell, 2023: 200).

Further, Wertz (2018; 2020) and Chang (2015: 34-55) have produced notable works on the centrality of economic sanctions against the DPRK, illustrating three distinct phases. The first phase dating back to the onset of the Korean War, in which under the Trading with the Enemy Act, the US imposed unilateral trade embargoes against North Korea (Chang, 2015: 36-38). A second phase, was characterised by targeted sanctions under the 'Illicit Activities Initiative'. These designed to cut off income obtained through drug smuggling, currency counterfeiting and money laundering, a sizeable proportion of the country's foreign revenue, following North Korea's nuclear breakout in the 2000's (Wertz 2018: 14-19). Under the third, the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2270, under the Trump administration marked a shift towards a more comprehensive and fast-paced sanctions regime, by completely banning certain exports, almost all of Pyongyang's sources for earning, as well as import restrictions on primary commodities such as fuel. Further, the US implemented the North Korea

Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act (NKSPEA) in 2016 a new focus on secondary sanctions aimed at foreign enablers (Wertz, 2018: 15-19, Wertz, 2020: 3-4).

Furthermore, there is much literature that discusses the Barack Obama administration's primary pressure policy of 'strategic patience' in which the US refrained from initiating or engaging in talks with North Korea until it provided tangible evidence of its commitment to denuclearisation (Kim, 2016; Hwang, 2025; Chubb, 2017). Maintaining that any policy shift was contingent on North Korea changing its behaviour first (Kim, 2016: 34), critics in the literature have likened this approach to doing nothing (Choi, 2015: 57).

Studies have also examined US reliance on military deterrence, tracing back to the *de facto* end of the Korean War, which began with North Korea's invasion of the South on 25 June 1950 and ended in a ceasefire and armistice agreement on 27 June 1953 (Er, 2025; Howell, 2023). The US became involved in the conflict in part to stop the spread of communism, defending autocratic regimes (DPRK) from communist adversaries (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)). As a result of ROK not being a signatory to the armistice, the subsequent US-ROK Mutual Defence Treaty, led to the permanent stationing of US forces in South Korea and the establishment of a strong security alliance (Er, 2025: 4-5; Howell, 2023: 30-34). Klinger (2020: 16) notes that this defence measure has been maintained through continued deployment of approximately 28,500 troops to South Korea. Scholars have further examined the US-ROK alliance and its tight security cooperation through deployment of an advanced missile defence system, Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), the expansion of joint military exercises under a new war plan 'Operations Plan 5015' and the establishment of a Deterrence Strategy Committee (Chubb 2017; Kim 2017; Cumings 2020).

The principal limitation of the existing scholarly literature is that there is very little on the Biden administration's North Korea policy due to its contemporary nature. Consequently, much of the literature that exists (Klinger 2020; Chung 2020; Trottier, 2021) was published before the completion of Biden's presidential term, and as a result it tends to be predictive or recommendatory. At the time of writing, there is only one scholarly paper that examines the Biden administration's North Korea policy. Taim's (2024: 35-56) study comparatively examines consistency and coherence across the Trump and Biden administration's North Korea policies and their effectiveness. Utilising realist, liberal and constructivist theories Taim (2024: 35-56) aims to explain the underlying factors behind the differences and similarities in these policies. This paper complements Taim's (2024: 35-56) discussion, though it offers a more focused exploration of Biden's approach. This dissertation significantly fills the gap in the current research through providing a thorough analysis of the Biden administration's approach, assessing why the Biden administration took the approach that it did.

1.2 US foreign policy analysis and North Korea

As Schmidt (2018: 7-21) contends, due to diverse factors, explaining US foreign policy is highly complex. As a consequence the importance of International Relations (IR) theories must be recognised in order to understand why states pursue specific policies at certain times.

On the whole, studies analysing US foreign policy have primarily utilised realists and liberal theories. Realist theory stresses that the international system is anarchic and that states are primarily driven by the pursuit of power and security, thus US foreign policy is seen as a

response to balancing threats (Taim, 2024; Kim 2017). In contrast, liberal theory emphasises the role of domestic and international institutions as well as economic interdependence. Liberal perspective suggests that US foreign policy may be influenced by an aspiration to be cooperative, adhere to laws and export ideals (Schmidt 2018; Taim 2024). In light of these dominant approaches, and given the lack of literature that applies a constructivist lens specifically to US policy toward North Korea, this dissertation will utilise a constructivist lens, which is outlined in the following chapter.

Beyond theory, the literature on US policy towards North Korea reveals a pattern of key influences, notably security concerns, geopolitical factors and domestic drivers. The current literature overwhelmingly contends that North Korea's nuclear weapons program is the primary concern in US DPRK policy. As Chung (2017: 779-780) documents, the principle of non-proliferation has been central to US foreign policy since the John F. Kennedy administration, driven by fears of nuclear terrorism, misuse and aggression. Consequently, limiting the growth of nuclear-armed states has been key to US interests. Hyun (2017: 45) and Chubb (2017: 318) support this view that denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula is the US's ultimate policy goal. Further, studies have thoroughly examined geopolitical drivers. Hyun (2017: 45-69) discusses the importance of regional security alliances with South Korea and Japan in order to maintain regional stability. Martin (2008: 118-119) explores the challenges of alliances, noting that the US has to carefully manage diverging strategic perspectives and priorities between Japan and South Korea, despite their shared commitment to the trilateral alliance. Also within the literature domestic politics has been identified to influence US DPRK policy, Taim (2023: 35-56) investigates presidential interpretation and ideological leanings, whilst Cummings (2021: 79-93) has examined policy decisions along partisan lines.

2. Theory and Methodology

2.1 Constructivism

This dissertation adopts a constructivist lens through which to analyse and interpret the rationale behind the Biden administration's North Korea policy. This is highly relevant because, whereas traditional theories have tended to emphasise material factors, this dissertation seeks to understand the role of ideas and identities in guiding US DPRK foreign policy.

The failure of traditional IR theories to predict the end of the Cold War and their difficulty in explaining changes in the international system, created an intellectual space for constructivism. Challenging existing theories, constructivists have emphasised the transformative power of ideas in shaping the structure of world politics (Barnett, 2022: 195-198). Constructivism can be seen as a middle-ground between rationalist approaches (realists and liberals) and interpretivist (postmodernists, poststructuralists, critical and feminist theorists) approaches. It bridges the gap between those who view international relations as a set of exogenously given material facts and those who see international relations as entirely socially constructed (Adler, 1997: 319-323). Critically, constructivism argues that "international reality is socially constructed by cognitive structures that give meaning to the material world" (Adler, 1997: 319). Constructivists posit that material resources, beyond biological necessities, only acquire meaning through the social context in which they are interpreted (Checkel, 1998: 326) and therefore, the existence of these material structures or social facts, depends on the attachment of collective human understanding and discourse to physical reality (Adler, 2013: 121-123).

Although constructivism does not constitute a single, unified perspective (Houghton, 2017: 4), it exhibits core features which I will now define.

2.1.1 Rules and Norms

Although acknowledging material structures in shaping the behaviour of actors, constructivists focus more on social structures, such as norms, values and shared understandings (Fierke, 2024: 190-208). Norms refer to collective understandings that are rooted in social practices and continually reproduced by those who interpret and engage in their production and functioning (Adler, 1997: 327-328). Norms not only have a regulative effect on actors, but they also constitute their identities and interests. They guide actors' behaviour due to what March and Olsen term the "logic of appropriateness" (1998: 951), where actors actions are often determined by what is deemed appropriate or accepted in a given context. Within this logic, actions are seen as rule-based, shaped by social rules and the actor's understanding of their identity or role in the situation (March and Olsen 1998: 951-952). As, norms supply actors with understandings of their interests therefore, they do not simply constrain and regulate behaviour, they constitute identities. (Checkel, 1998: 326). Therefore, "intersubjective beliefs about the social and natural world...define actors, their situations and the[ir] possibilities of action" (Farrell, 2002: 49). Furthermore, as outlined by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 887-897), norms develop through a distinct three stage process or norm 'life cycle'. The first stage, norm emergence, is driven by the persuasion of norm entrepreneurs who frame issues to convince states to adopt new norms. This is followed by a norm cascade, where a 'tipping point' of state adoption is reached as norm leaders begin to socialise other states through mechanisms like institutionalisation. States then adopt these norms for reasons of legitimation, reputation and

conformity pressures. Finally, norm internalisation occurs when norms become taken for granted, adhered to out of habit and institutionalisation. However, the completion of this 'life cycle' is not inevitable or guaranteed (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 887-897).

2.1.2 Identities and interests

Second, actors identities which are "relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self" (Wendt, 1992: 397) constitute their interests. Unlike neorealists and neoliberals who contend that states' identities and interests are exogenously given and fixed, materially defined by an environment of anarchy, constructivists maintain that interests are not predetermined but defined through the process of social interaction (Wendt, 1992: 397-398). Wendt (1992: 404- 407) illustrates this through discussion of two actors Alter and Ego. When meeting for the first time, one actor makes a gesture which the other must interpret to determine their intent, particularly regarding threat. Through a process of socialisation Alter and Ego signal, interpret and respond to each other's actions, gradually generating intersubjective meanings and shared expectations about each other's future behaviour. Repeated long enough, 'reciprocal typification's' create conceptions of 'self' and 'other' (Wendt, 1992: 404- 407). Thus, constructivist's argue that actors do not possess a portfolio of fixed interests independent of the social context instead they "define their interests in the process of defining situations" (Wendt, 1992: 398). Also, as articulated by Weldes (1999: 97-199) national interests are shaped through articulation, whereby existing linguistic and cultural resources are combined to generate context-specific representations of states. These ideas are rooted in the security imaginary, which provides a framework for understanding threats, allowing particular representations to be associated with states.

2.1.3 Agents and structures

Finally, agents and structures are mutually constituted (Checkel, 1998: 326). Structures help define the identities and interests of agents, and at the same time the discursive practices of agents shape, reproduce and transform those structures (Fierke, 2024: 194). This illustrates an ontology of mutual constitution, where neither agents nor structures are fixed, rather, both are altered and only exist through reciprocal interactions (Checkel, 1998: 326). Structures influence agents and in turn agents influence structures. Foundational scholar Onuf's (2013: 1) deliberately titled *World of Our Making*, illustrates this two-way relationship.

In seeking to uncover the logic behind the Biden administration's North Korea policy, I draw valuable aspects of constructivist theory above to advance conclusions.

2.2 Methods

I conducted qualitative, desk-based documentary analysis to carry out my research. Documentary analysis, defined by Bowen (2009: 27) as a "systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic", is an iterative process of examining and interpreting data. This approach allows the researcher to elicit meaning, develop understanding, and ultimately discover insights pertinent to the research question (Merriam, 1998: 118). The documentary data used for this study was taken from a four-year period spanning the Biden presidency from 20 January 2021 to 20 January 2025. Primary documents this dissertation used comprised of archival records from the Biden White House, US

Department of State, the US Department of Defense and Congressional Record websites that included policy documents, bills, statements and releases, speeches and remarks as well as press briefings. Whilst secondary documents, consisted of newspaper articles. Relevant documents were found by searching for those which included the terms 'North Korea'/'DPRK'. I then screened them for relevance, so documents that were selected covered or discussed key events in length, such as summits between US and ROK leaders. I recognise the limitation of potential selection bias, as document relevance was based on my own judgement.

Document analysis was chosen due to its strong applicability to qualitative research, particularly for intensive studies that provide rich descriptions of a single phenomenon (Bowen, 2009: 29), such as the Biden administration's approach to North Korea. This method supported the production of "detailed, text-based answers [which] allow[ed] for a 'thick' description and in-depth analysis, rather than broad, numerical generalisations" (Vromen, 2010: 249). Further, it allowed for a broad coverage, encompassing multiple events and many contexts (Yin, 2009: 102). Due to their official provenance, government documents provided an invaluable source of textual data, ensuring high validity and reliability (Mackieson, Shlonsky and Connolly, 2019: 965-980). A limitation of this document analysis was that I was constrained by what was available, as access sometimes was deliberately withheld (Yin, 2010: 102), such as the Biden administration's North Korea Policy Review in April 2021. Although this primary source was not retrievable, I was able to rely on secondary documents discussing its contents.

Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or 'themes' within qualitative data" (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297) was then applied to my data set. I chose thematic analysis due to its flexibility in being able to accommodate any size of data

set (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297). Having reviewed my documents I converted them to Word format and then coded them for analysis. First, I familiarised myself with the data sets content through repeated reading, making initial notes identifying potential points of interest. Having done this, I generated initial codes by systematically identifying and labelling sections of data that appeared relevant to the research question. Through, thorough word-by-word analysis I utilised both descriptive and interpretative coding to analyse the data, addressing both explicit content and underlying meanings. Next, I reviewed the coded data, clustering together codes that shared conceptual similarities to form broader overarching themes and subthemes that captured meaningful patterns within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 60-69). The themes this dissertation identified were, a post-Trump recalibration of US DPRK policy, security through alliances and normative leadership.

Further, an inductive approach to data analysis was adopted in order to minimise potential bias, allowing “the data to speak for itself” (Mackieson, Shlonsky and Connolly, 2019: 973).

I then applied the theoretical framework of constructivism as outlined in the theory section of this chapter to draw conclusions, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the Biden administration’s rationale. Secondary sources, including pre-existing literature on US DPRK foreign policy was also utilised to both augment and corroborate my analysis. Whilst I acknowledge the influence of personal bias when selecting themes, as “it is impossible to be purely inductive as we always bring something to the data when we analyse it” (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 58), these themes allow me to visualise patterns within and across the data (Braun and Clarke, 2017: 297). This research does not attempt to evaluate the desirability or effectiveness of the Biden administration’s North Korea policy, rather this research aims to analyse why the Biden administration took the approach that it did.

3. Recalibrating US DPRK policy post-Trump

This chapter summarises and analyses the findings of my first theme, exploring how the Biden administration's North Korea approach was informed by an intentional recalibration post-Trump.

Following conclusion of the US's North Korea Policy Review in May 2021 the Biden administration revealed it would adopt a "calibrated, practical approach that [was] open to and [would] explore diplomacy with the DPRK" (White House, 2021a: 3). Although, lacking in specifics the administration's foreign policy towards the DPRK that followed, was characterised, by a "view [that] diplomacy and engagement [was] fundamental to any DPRK strategy" (CSISa, 2024: 1). Throughout Biden's presidency the administration made repeated overtures to initiate dialogue through reaching out through diplomatic channels and publicly expressing a willingness to engage albeit without offering concessions "anywhere, anytime, without preconditions" (US Department of State, 2021: 15) with North Korea.

3.1 Learning from past failures

Findings

In formulating its policy towards North Korea, the Biden administration has drawn on the lessons of former US administrations, consciously moving away from the extremes of past approaches. According to the White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, the administration's approach does "not focus on achieving a grand bargain, nor [does] it rely on strategic patience"

(The White House, 2021a: 3). This has been reiterated by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who noted that “doing nothing for nothing or trying to-- get everything for everything” (ABC News, 2021: 5) hadn’t worked, illustrating the administration’s purposeful departure from both Obama and Trump’s North Korea approaches. The administration has also acknowledged the challenges of pursuing nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. President Biden recognised that the administration were “under no illusions...none whatsoever” (The White House, 2021b: 12) as to how difficult it was and that “the past four administrations ha[d] not achieved... [the] incredibly difficult objective” (The White House, 2021b: 12). This pragmatic recognition illustrates the administration’s understanding of what has and hasn’t worked, underscoring the administration’s adoption of a more realistic strategy or “calibrated, practical approach” (The White House, 2021a: 3).

Analysis

Behind the Biden administration’s approach to North Korea is a practical reflection of past failures. The Biden administration has consciously distanced itself from approaches it has framed as extreme and unsuccessful. Obama’s ‘strategic patience’ which effectively renounced engagement and Trump’s ‘maximum engagement’ which involved high-profile personal engagement (Cummings, 2020: 79-91). Therefore, it can be seen that the Biden administration has sought to pursue a middle ground. From a constructivist perspective, the administration’s approach to diplomacy is both shaped by norms of engagement and by lessons learned from past administrations. As Howard (2004: 825) aptly states “[t]he administration cannot make something from nothing-it must start from the realm of existing rules of meaning” (Howard, 2004: 825). Therefore, the reasoning behind the administration’s approach to engage in

repeated outreach to start diplomatic talks with North Korea aligns with a constructivist perspective that sees the US having become entangled in game of nuclear negotiations with North Korea, born out of the 1994 Agreed Framework (Howard, 2004: 813-814). Despite its collapse, the framework has set a precedent for US-DPRK engagement, establishing a set of rules and common language for addressing nuclear issues on the Korean peninsula as well as for normalising US-DPRK relations and renewing North-South dialogue (Howard, 2004: 813-822). In this instance, the Agreed Framework can be perceived as a “first encounter” (Wendt, 1999: 329) between the US and North Korea shifting relations from their minimal and predominately hostile contact since the Korean War Armistice to an engagement approach. This continues to shape US actions, reflecting the “logic of the existing game” (Howard, 2004: 821), where engagement has remained the default option in handling North Korea nuclear issues. Therefore, the Biden administration’s repeated emphasis on openness to dialogues can be viewed as grounded in a continuation of institutionalised engagement, reflecting a commitment to diplomacy that avoids the under-engagement and over-engagement of the two previous administrations. Therefore, behind the Biden administrations readiness to engage with North Korea, is an approach grounded in a norm of past diplomatic engagement that shifts away from extremes with a pragmatic acknowledgment of what hasn’t worked.

3.2 Rejecting Trump’s personal diplomacy

Findings

The Biden administration has repeatedly outlined their North Korea policy approach in direct repudiation of the former Trump administration, specifically in relation to Trump’s unorthodox

personal engagement with Kim Jong-un. The Biden administration has emphasised avoiding “trying to-- get everything for everything” (ABC News, 2021: 5) criticising Trump’s attempt of an all for all exchange. In President Biden’s first US-South Korea summit with President Moon-Jae, in May 2021, Biden clearly stated, “what I would not do is I would not do what had been done in the recent past. I would not give him [Kim Jong-un] all that he’s looking for” (White House, 2021b: 13). This illustrates a deliberate departure from Trump’s approach through criticising him for legitimising dictator Kim Jong-un without receiving anything in return. The Biden administration instead emphasised to “seek serious and substantial diplomatic breakthroughs with the DPRK” (The White House, 2023a: 2) discrediting Trump through portraying diplomacy as a serious long-term endeavour. This stance was reinforced when asked during his visit to Seoul in May 2022, whether he had a message for Kim Jong-un, Biden succinctly replied “Hello. Period.” (Biden, in BBC, 2022). Biden’s two-word response illustrates his disinterest in personal diplomacy, a direct rejection of the former Presidents irresponsible leader-to-leader engagement and a desire to be different.

Analysis

A deliberate rejection of the former Trump administration’s ‘maximum engagement’ has informed the Biden administration’s pursuit of institutionalised diplomacy and alliance building. Drawing on constructivist understanding that states’ interests are influenced by their constructed identities, leaders play a critical role in interpreting and shaping state identity, thereby redefining state interests (Wendt, 1992: 396-403). Biden’s understanding of US identity as tied closely to the preservation of liberal democratic norms and multilateral cooperation (Singh, 2024: 17-39) directly contrasts with Trump’s ‘America First’ interpretation of US identity

which privileged power maximisation, upended norms and embraced traditional foes (Singh, 2024: 17-39). Thus Biden's diplomatic approach can be understood as an attempt to re-orientate the US to a more traditional, norm-driven foreign policy position. The administration's deliberate redefinition of US foreign policy is evident in its repudiation of personal diplomacy. President Biden's blunt "Hello. Period." (Biden, in BBC, 2022) exemplifies the administration's refusal to engage in unconventional engagement like his predecessor, instead reaffirming an approach to diplomacy rooted in institutional procedure and alignment with allies. Aligning with constructivism, this reflects an effort to repair the US's identity through a return to serious and credible foreign policy. This recalibration is underscored by Biden's central message throughout his Presidency that "America is back" (The White House, 2022: 13).

Furthermore, interpreted through March and Olsen's (1998: 943-969) logic of appropriateness. The Biden administration has perceived Trump's unprecedented direct diplomatic engagement as inappropriate or unacceptable within the established norms of US foreign policy. The administration's criticism paired with emphasis on "serious" (The White House, 2023a: 2) engagement, illustrates an attempt to restore US credibility through what it perceives as appropriate forms of engagement. Thus rather than using diplomacy as a transactional tool for "photo-ops" and "vanity projects" (Biden in Klingner, 2020: 12) the administration repositions diplomacy as a long-term normative process. Viewed from a constructivist perspective the Biden administration not only repudiates Trump's approach but also reaffirms its conception of US identity as a responsible actor that refrains from legitimising North Korea through treating it as an equal partner. This has ultimately shaped the Biden administration's approach as one that will not engage diplomatically for show.

3.3 Engagement with caution

Findings

Although the Biden administration has expressed a willingness to engage diplomatically without preconditions, it has refrained from advancing concessions or initiatives to incentivise North Korea to re-engage (Bose, 2021). This is identified to be driven by a perception that North Korea is an insincere and unreliable partner for negotiation. As noted in the North Korea Policy Oversight Act of 2022, the Biden administration perceives North Korea to exploit diplomatic engagements for strategic gain. “The North Korean regime has a record of failing to live up to its diplomatic commitments, rejecting good faith efforts by United States and international negotiators, and leveraging talks to extract concessions” (Congress, 2022: 3). Further, President Biden has repeatedly questioned Kim Jong-un’s sincerity, stating that direct engagement would depend on whether “he was sincere and whether it was serious.” (White House, 2022: 10) and suggesting that under the Trump administration, Kim Jong-un appeared to be “more serious about what he wasn’t at all serious about” (White House, 2021b: 13). This highlights an inherent scepticism regarding North Korea’s intentions. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, has reiterated this stating “We’re waiting to see if Pyongyang actually wants to engage. The ball’s in their court.” (Blinken, ABC News, 2021: 7) and “we’re prepared to do the-- do the diplomacy. The question is, is North Korea?” (Blinken, ABC News, 2021: 7). Such comments illustrate a ‘wait and see’ approach that implicitly expects inaction or ill intention from North Korea.

Analysis

Motivating the Biden administration's reluctance to provide concessions to back up its own diplomatic olive branch is the administration's understanding of North Korea as an unreliable negotiation partner. This aligns with the constructivist understanding that states learn expectations about each other's future behaviour through repeated reciprocal interactions. Overtime, this reciprocal play leads states to the development of relatively stable habits of cooperation or defection (Wendt, 1992: 391-425). It can be illustrated that North Korea's habits of defection, such as not adhering to its diplomatic commitments, dismissing sincere attempts by negotiators, and exploiting talks to secure concessions (Congress, 2022: 3), has led to the US to perceive North Korea as an insincere negotiation partner. This is consistent with Howell (2023: 51-84) who utilises a framework of 'strategic delinquency', to demonstrate that for North Korea "bad behaviour pays" (Howell, 2023: 255) and thus defection continues to benefit North Korea. Through former interactions of repeated disappointments with North Korea, the Biden administration has developed a particular identity of the country as inherently unreliable. Ultimately, this can be seen to have led to the US refusing to offer unilateral concessions, perceiving them as counterproductive or likely to be exploited. Therefore, according to constructivist reasoning, the Biden administration's cautious policy can be understood as a practical understanding of the DPRK's history of unreliability and insincerity.

This is further illuminated by the Biden administration comprising of seasoned diplomats. For example, Wendy Sherman, Deputy Secretary of State who under the Clinton administration served as North Korea Policy Coordinator during negotiations for the Agreed Framework as well as Sung Kim, the United States Special Envoy for the DPRK, who worked on the Six-Party Talks under the Bush and Obama administrations (Howell, 2023: 250-252). It can be argued that their prior experience of North Korea failing to live up to diplomatic commitments and exploiting US-

DPRK agreements in the form of the Agreed Framework and Six-Party Talks has led to a more measured approach to diplomacy. This was similarly iterated in Kim's (2016: 39-40) study who highlighted the Obama administration's perception of North Korea as a negotiation partner as an insincere one due to its pattern of breaking agreements overtime.

Arguably, the Biden administration's approach to North Korea can be interpreted as quiet in the sense that it has not proactively pushed engagement further. Critics have claimed that this has made "the Biden administration appear engaged on North Korea while placing the onus on Pyongyang" (Richey, 2021: 3). However, interpreted through the lens of constructivism which emphasises mutual constitution, where identities and interests are interdependent (Checkel, 1998: 325-328) North Korea's behaviour has been critical in forming US North Korea policy. Therefore, Pyongyang's full disengagement from dialogue with the US following the breakdown of the working-level Stockholm talks in 2019 under the Trump administration (Sigal, 2020: 176-181) can, paired with the Biden administration's perception of North Korea as insincere, be seen to stop diplomatic efforts being pushed further. As Er (2025: 5) aptly states it "takes two to tango" (Er, 2025: 5) engagement is indeed a two-way process.

3.4 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has identified that the Biden administration's North Korea policy is driven by a deliberate recalibration following the Trump administration. It finds that, more than just a rejection of Trump's transactional approach of a grand bargain, the administration's approach illustrates a broader constructivist effort to reassert its identity and reconstruct US DPRK policy as pragmatic, normative, and credible. Drawing on diplomatic norms and informed by lessons

of past failed engagement, the Biden administration has adopted an approach that is open to dialogue but unwilling to offer concessions. This approach, whilst notably quieter in contrast to Trump, is derived from a logic of appropriateness and long-term diplomacy, rather than showy, short-term summitry.

4. Security through alliances

This chapter will explore my second theme, summarising and analysing the Biden administration's reinvigoration of its regional alliances.

Characterising the Biden administration's North Korea policy is its prioritisation of alliances with ROK and Japan. In April 2023, the US-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) was formed, which aimed to deepen extended deterrence cooperation by facilitating high-level discussions on nuclear and strategic planning, giving Seoul a greater, more equal say in US decision making (US Department of State, 2025). Additionally, under Biden, the administration worked to build and institutionalise trilateral ties between US-ROK-Japan. This effort culminated in the historic Camp David Summit in August 2023, where President Biden, President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida normalised areas of trilateral security cooperation (The White House, 2024). Leading to the promotion of trilateral interoperability through the operationalisation of an early warning system to share real-time data on missiles launches by the DPRK, enhanced defence exchanges and trilateral military exercises (The White House, 2024).

4.1 Reaffirming alliances

Findings

The Biden administration has consistently and visibly reaffirmed US commitments to its key alliances, particularly South Korea and Japan, positioning itself as a reliable defender of allies and regional security. At the Camp David Summit, President Biden assured that "America's

commitment to both countries [was] ironclad” (The White House, 2023b: 1), demonstrating the unwavering nature of US-ROK and US-Japan alliances. This is further evidenced by the administration’s statement that their “mutual defense treaty is ironclad, and that includes our commitment to extended deterrence, and — and that includes the nuclear threat and — the nuclear deterrent” (The White House, 2023a: 2). The administration claims that US security commitments regarding the US’s nuclear deterrent and interoperability between its allies, “reassures our allies and partners in the region” (US Department of State, 2024: 3) illustrating a visible commitment to regional stability and security.

Analysis

The Biden administration sees its alliance centred North Korea policy, particularly its credible reaffirmation of its commitments to allies in Northeast Asia, notably with South Korea and Japan, as strengthening deterrence against the North Korean threat. From a constructivist perspective, the Biden administration’s unequivocally committed approach is rooted in the US’s identity as a global leader and protector of liberal democracies. As Wendt (1992: 397-398) articulates states hold particular role-specific understandings of self, and these “[i]dentities are the basis of interests” (Wendt, 1992: 398). The US’s identity as a security guarantor in Asia has undeniably driven the administration’s alliance approach towards North Korea. This particular identity has derived from US’s ‘hub-and-spokes’ bilateral alliance system of security pacts, established following the Korean War (Zhang, 2018: 238-254). Although originally utilised to contain the spread of communism, post-Cold War, successive US administrations have repurposed it to maintain regional hegemony through ensuring security guarantees and encouraging military relationships (Zhang, 2018: 238-254). Thus, the Biden administration’s

alliance approach and effort to reaffirm US commitments updates and reasserts a set of norms and the US's long standing identity and role of protector in the region. Furthermore, the administration's repeated public assurance of "ironclad" (The White House, 2023a: 2) commitments to its allies can through a constructivist lens, be seen as a performative act that serves to reproduce and reinforce the US's identity as a dependable ally and security guarantor.

Critically, the Biden administration's efforts to reaffirm alliances can be viewed as significant in the wake of the Trump administration whose foreign policy disrupted alliance norms. The Biden administration's approach therefore can also be viewed as part of a broader identity repair process, reasserting the US's normative role as a dependable security partner. This aligns with Su (2024: 29), who argues that the Biden administration has sought to repair relationships in order to restore its image and unite allies, leading to a more credible deterrence posture. Overall, it can be illustrated that through reassuring its alliances the Biden administration recalibrates post-Trump to a more traditional foreign policy posture centered on "alliance leadership against predatory revisionist states" (Deudney and Mesiser, 2018: 36).

4.2 Stronger with allies

Findings

The Biden administration views its allies of South Korea and Japan as critical in strengthening the US's position against the threat posed by North Korea. At the 2023 Camp David Summit, President Biden stated that "America is strong with our allies and our alliances" (The White

House, 2023b: 8), illustrating the administration's belief that through these partnerships the strength of the US is enhanced. This is further emphasised when Biden referred to the trilateral relationship as "a strength that — quite frankly, that increases all the — three of our strengths" (The White House, 2023b: 8). The Biden administration frames that their collective strength offers a more credible deterrent, with Secretary of State Anthony Blinken affirming that the alliance "serves as a deterrent against anyone who would want to do the unthinkable and try to take on this great alliance" (US Department of State, 2024: 17). Together, these examples connote that the Biden administration perceives its alliances as critical to US strength and security.

Analysis

The Biden administration's North Korea approach centered on reinvigorating its alliances with South Korea and Japan, is identified as driven by the belief that strengthening these ties enhances defence and deterrence measures against the DPRK. Interpreted through a constructivist lens this strength is not only material but derived from shared meanings, identities and practices. Drawing on Adler et al.'s (2024: 1-13) notion of 'communities of practice', in which actors through a domain of background knowledge become bound by means of shared practices, values and mutual engagement. The US-ROK-Japan trilateral alliance can be perceived as socially constituted. This alliance has been sustained and strengthened through repeated engagement and shared practices. This is exemplified by the Biden administration's institutionalisation of ties with South Korea and Japan through regularised leader and minister level meetings and a commitment to consult allies, initiated at the 2023 Camp David Summit (The White House, 2023b: 1-3). Ultimately, this repeated

cooperation has reinforced collective identity, strengthened the normative foundations of the alliance and enhanced the credibility of their security and deterrence through moral and normative opposition. In line with Aguiar (2023: 56) it is advantageous these states mobilise through trilateral arrangements as upholding shared democratic ideologies in spite of animosities is critical in fulfilling strategic interests to deter North Korea. Overall, the Biden administration's regional partnerships align with constructivist understandings that stress the importance of shared meanings.

4.3 Democracies versus autocracies

Findings

The Biden administration has repeatedly emphasised that its alliance focused North Korea approach is grounded not only in shared security interests but also in common democratic values. At the 2023 Camp David summit the US-ROK-Japan trilateral alliance was portrayed to “bolster the rules-based international order and play key roles to enhance regional security and prosperity based on our shared values of freedom, human rights, and rule of law” (The White House, 2023b: 3-4). Illustrating alliances to be built on a shared commitment to uphold liberal democratic principles. The Biden administration has consistently positioned North Korea within a broader ideological divide and contest between democracies and autocracies, notably alongside Russia and China. In reference to DPRK-Russia cooperation, Senior Director for Indo-Pacific Affairs Mira Rapp-Hooper noted that “this is an area where we and like-minded nations will continue to look to take action” (CSISa, 2024: 5), connoting the necessity that democratic allies must coordinate a response against autocratic threats. This rhetoric of framing US foreign

policy in terms of ideological differences was made explicitly through President Biden's assertion that "[t]here's still a contest between autocracies and democracies, and we're the leading democracy in the world" (The White House, 2023b: 14).

Analysis

The Biden administration's alliance approach towards countering the North Korean threat, is framed by the administration as part of a broader ideological contest between democracies and autocracies. The administration's emphasis on its US-ROK and US-Japan alliances as based on a commitment to shared democratic principles, aligns with a constructivist approach that proposes the central role of shared values (Fierke, 2024: 190-208). Through, grouping North Korea along with other autocracies like Russia, the US constructs a binary and moral dichotomy between democratic and non-democratic nations, "a moralized us-versus-them vision" (Cha, 2024: 247) simultaneously positioning itself and its democratic allies as defenders of the "rules-based international order" (The White House, 2023b: 3). Through the Biden administration's repeated juxtaposition of "like-minded" (CSISa, 2024: 5) states with shared democratic values against those without, the administration reinforces a moral boundary between states. In explaining why the US behaves differently when interacting with other liberal democracies as opposed to non-democracies, constructivism posits that this is due to actors identities and interests being derived endogenously through social interaction (Wendt, 1998: 394). By emphasising the need for a coordinated response amongst like-minded allies, the Biden administration aligns their policy with constructivist views that perceives states actions as products of shared identities (Onuf, 1998: 77) drawing regional partners in on the grounds of shared democratic values.

2.4 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has demonstrated that the Biden administration's reinvigoration of alliances with ROK and Japan, is firmly rooted in the critical belief that value-based alliances are fundamental to collective security against North Korea. This approach forms part of a broader constructivist effort to reaffirm the US's identity and role as a dependable security partner and protector of regional stability, particularly following abandonment during the Trump administration's 'America First' foreign policy.

5. Normative Leadership

This chapter focuses on my third theme, the Biden administration's focus on upholding the international rules-based order. Summarising and analysing my findings it explores the US's characterisation of North Korea as a challenger to this order.

Throughout the Biden administration existing sanctions against North Korea were maintained. From 2022 the administration designated several bilateral sanctions towards North Korea's conducting illicit cryptocurrency and cyber related activities, weapons procurement and transfers to Russia and China and those facilitating fuel trade (CRS, 2024: 2). Further, in response to numerous missile tests at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) the US drafted resolutions to impose tougher sanctions on North Korea, including measures to ban tobacco and reduce oil exports (Nichols, 2022), although China and Russia have repeatedly vetoed these US-led efforts (AFPI, 2022: 17).

5. 1 Denuclearisation as the ultimate goal

Findings

The Biden administration has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to the Complete Verifiable Irreversible Denuclearisation (CVID) of the Korean peninsula as its primary goal. This is articulated in the administration's National Defense Strategy that states that "[w]ith respect to reducing or eliminating the threat from North Korea, our goal remains the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" (US Department of Defense, 2022: 18).

Similarly, government officials have reiterated the administration's uncompromising position with Senior Director for East Asia and Oceania Mira Rapp Hooper stating that "the United States remains committed to the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" (CSISa 2024: 5) and President Biden exclaiming "our ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." (The White House, 2021b: 2). Repetition of the administration's clear position on denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula indicates that it is central to the Biden administration's North Korea approach.

Analysis

The rationale behind both the Biden administration's engagement and pressure policies lies in its effort to uphold US identity as a normative leader in the international system. This is evident in the administration's central pursuit of CVID of the Korean Peninsula, which aligns with US commitments to global nuclear non-proliferation norms (Howell, 2023: 51-61). Rather, than solely being a strategic response to North Korea's nuclear threat, the administration's focus on CVID reaffirms the US's commitment to upholding the normative order. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 891) state norms "are a standard of appropriate behaviour" and therefore to be seen as legitimate and responsible members of the international community, states must conform to norms of international society (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 887-897). Through advocating for CVID, the Biden administration positions itself as a normative leader and custodian of the Global Nuclear Order (GNO). The US self-conception of this identity, dates back to its hegemonic position post-1945 which helped create the GNO, centring it around nuclear non-proliferation, institutionalising it in treaties such as the NPT as well as creating a hierarchy between states recognised as legal and non-legal nuclear weapon states (Howell, 2023: 51-61).

Therefore, the Biden administration's pursuit of CVID of the Korean Peninsula can be illustrated as driven by an effort to uphold and reinforce US identity as leader of this normative order, preserving the socially constructed hierarchy between states within it. Further, drawing on the constructivist concept of norm entrepreneurs, as actors who actively build and promote norms, persuading others to adopt behaviours that they constitute as appropriate and desirable (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 887-917). The Biden administration can be perceived to uphold the US's role as a norm entrepreneur in its commitment to advance global standards of appropriate behaviour. Overall, placing CVID of the Korean Peninsula at the centre of their North Korea policy, reflects a strategic effort to preserve a hierarchal normative nuclear order and reinforce the US's leadership within it.

5.2 US Rhetoric: North Korea as a delinquent 'other'

Findings

The Biden administration, across its official documents, has consistently framed the DPRK as a defier of global norms and dangerous threat to the international community. US officials and legislation have portrayed North Korea's continued disregard for international law. Ambassador Sung Kim, characterised North Korea as "brazenly... flouting the international rules-based order" (US Department of State, 2022: 3). Whilst the North Korea Policy Oversight Act of 2022 described North Korea as having "flagrantly defied the international community" (Congress, 2022: 2). Repeated condemnation has framed North Korea's defiance of international standards as unacceptable. Informally, the North Korean government has been labelled a "rogue regime" (Congress, 2022: 2), and a "bully" (Blinken, US Department of State,

2024: 10). Negative rhetorical framing can also be seen through National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stating it “remains the same menace it has been for many years, across many administrations” (The White House, 2025: 5). Further, central to the administration’s framing is the construction of North Korea as a threat to US and global security. In its National Defence Strategy, the DPRK is designated as a “threat” (US Department of Defense, 2022: 5) citing its nuclear and missile capability as threatening the “U.S. homeland, deployed U.S. forces, and the Republic of Korea and Japan” (US Department of Defense 2022: 5). The Biden administration affirms the importance of its defensive policies through rhetorically constructing the DPRK as a threatening adversary resultant of their illicit development of nuclear and ballistic missiles.

Analysis

Understood through a constructivist lens, the logic behind the Biden administration’s continued sanctions and deterrence stem from the identity the US has constructed for North Korea as a dangerous defier of international norms. As identified in the findings, the Biden administration’s repeated construction of North Korea as a “rogue” (Congress, 2022: 2), a “menace” (The White House, 2025: 6) and a violator of international norms, has actively produced and reinforced a particular interpretation of North Korea as a dangerous, delinquent ‘other’. The administration’s framing does more than just describe behaviour, it has actively produced meaning and shaped identity. As articulated by Weldes (1999: 97-119) national interest and meaning are produced through the process of articulation, whereby existing linguistic and cultural resources are combined and recombined to generate context-specific representations of states. These ideas are grounded in security imaginary, which give a background for understanding threats, enabling particular representations to become attached

to states (Weldes, 1999: 97-119). In the US security imaginary, North Korea can be seen as discursively attached to negative, threatening meanings, thereby defining US interests and thus driving the Biden administration's policies. As Wendt (1995: 73) observes threat perception is derived from social meanings as opposed to material capabilities, thus "500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons" (Wendt, 1995: 73). Further, as constructivism shows, identity is not self-referential but inherently relational, emerging from differentiation of self and others (Wendt, 1992: 397). In juxtaposing itself with North Korea as a norm breaker, the US derives its identity as a norm adherent and guardian of global norms. This binary identity reinforces US self-image as a normative leader rationalising the use of sanctions and deterrence against a norm defier.

Critically, it can be seen that the Biden administration has avoided personal demonisation of Kim Jong-un, unlike President Trump who referred to Kim Jong-un as "little rocket man" (Trump, in Wertz, 2018: 16). Arguably, the Biden administration's language is more institutional as opposed to emotional, focusing on North Korea's behaviour of defying international law instead of personal attacks. Although, the Biden administration has failed to move beyond the 'rogue state' rhetorical framework constructed by Bush (Cha, 2024: 324-326), continuing to share the same discursive constructions as previous administrations, albeit more emotionally restrained. As Kyle (2001: 239-242) contends this rhetorical portrayal of North Korea as a norm violator and threatening 'other', has consequently helped to rationalise US military hegemony as necessary. This logic is highlighted in the administrations National Defense Strategy, which labels North Korea as a direct threat. By framing North Korea as a threat, the Biden administration's policies are perceived as justified actions to defend global security and international norms. Further, as Hagström and Lundström (2019: 101-103) contend these

recurrent constructions of North Korea as a delinquent help to fortify the US's identity a responsible global actor. This constructivist explanation illustrates the US's interest in having an ontological security or stable identity, through continually reproducing North Korea as a threatening 'other' it defines itself as a normative leader. Ultimately, the Biden administration's use of sanctions and military measures consistent with prior administration's, can be seen due to a specific view of North Korea having become deeply entrenched in the fabric of American politics and society (Taim, 2024: 41), that the Biden administration has chosen to uphold. Therefore, US foreign policy towards North Korea has become considerably consistent and predictable. Overall, through sustained rhetorical constructions of the DPRK as a rogue violator of international norms, the US constructs and legitimates its interests in removing the North Korean threat.

5.3 Concluding thoughts

The Biden administration's North Korea approach illustrates an effort to reinforce the US's role as a leader advocating for a rules-based system. The administration's emphasis on CVID aligns with global non-proliferation norms and positions the US as a custodian of the rules-based system. Rhetorical construction of North Korea as a repeated norm violator, simultaneously functions to legitimise the Biden administration's policies, particularly in its pursuit of CVID.

6. Conclusion

The principal aim of this dissertation was to analyse what the Biden administration's approach to North Korea was and the rationale behind it. Through a constructivist lens, my findings show that behind the Biden administration's North Korea approach is a fundamental desire to restore the US's role as a pragmatic, principled actor, particularly following the Trump's dramatic alternations in policy. The key themes that emerged were a deliberate and pragmatic recalibration of diplomacy in repudiation of Trump's legitimisation of Kim Jong-un, the reinvigoration of alliances as a means to reaffirm values-based identities, and the reinforcement of the US's role in upholding rules-based international order. Across all three identified themes, the Biden administration has consistently emphasised conventional long-term stability over short-term theatrics. This has involved adopting a quieter diplomatic approach, re-grounding US policy in traditional value-based alliances, and committing to upholding norms of appropriateness. This research has therefore critically provided a contribution that extends the limited scope of literature on the Biden administration's foreign policy towards North Korea. These findings were significant in that they are imperative to understanding how contemporary US DPRK foreign policy is formulated. Further, my findings detailed the Biden administration's adoption of a dual-track approach that combined principled pressure, through sustained sanctions and alliance deterrence, with calibrated diplomacy, characterised by openness to dialogue without offering concessions. These findings do align with the existing literature on former US administration's that highlights a dichotomy between engagement and pressure in US policy towards North Korea (Wertz, 2018; Khil, 1994).

I should stress that in its analysis my study has primarily utilised a constructivist lens to enhance my findings, thus understandings could be deepened through a triangulation of alternative theories. A further, limitation of this research is its reliance on publicly available documentary data, which presents only the official narrative, potentially concealing underlying motivations, biases and the full complexity of the policy making process. In terms of future research, several avenues remain open. One direction would be to evaluate the effectiveness of the Biden administration's policies, considering ongoing provocations. Additionally, comparative studies between Biden and subsequent or preceding administrations could yield valuable insights into the evolution of US North Korea policy. This dissertation is significant in that it examined US North Korea policy during a time of heightened tensions, providing valuable insight into contemporary US DPRK relations and the formulation of US foreign policy.

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