

North Korea's Emerging Nuclear State Identity: Discursive Construction and Performative Enactment

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The main goal of this paper is to broaden our perception of North Korea's nuclear weapons program beyond military, economic, and political-diplomatic aspects and to propose a view of the program as a dynamic identity project of and for the North Korean state. Drawing on a poststructuralist approach that theorizes the state as performatively constituted and foreign policy as a political performance central to the production of identity, this paper analyzes North Korea's evolving nuclear state identity on two levels. Firstly, it scrutinizes the discursive construction of this particular identity trait, identifying both the process of exploration as well as the central contextual characteristics of this particular identity trait. Building on these deliberations, the study, secondly, analyzes the performative enactment of this identity construction by scrutinizing some of those iterated foreign policy performances that bring the constructed nuclear state identity into being. As its central argument, the paper holds that to P'yŏngyang, the nuclear weapons program has significance well beyond its military, economic, and political-diplomatic aspects; it has become the most crucial identity project of the North Korean state in the post-Cold War era, ultimately resulting in the emergence of an authoritative nuclear state identity that is still in the process of being explored. This view opens a new perspective on the ongoing nuclear conflict with the international community as a vital performative space in which the DPRK stages its identity politics and continuously explores its identity as a nuclear weapons state.

Key Words: North Korea, nuclear state identity, foreign policy, performativity, poststructuralism

While the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) has long denied developing nuclear weapons, the last decade saw a rapid transformation of the DPRK into a de facto nuclear weapons state. Following its

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first public declaration of being a nuclear power in 2005, North Korea tested nuclear devices in 2006, 2009, 2013, and twice in 2016, respectively. Moreover, in 2012 the DPRK amended its constitution, adding a reference to the DPRK as a “nuclear state” (*haekpoyuguk*) in the preamble. Given its potential impact on the East Asian region and beyond, it is hardly surprising that the DPRK’s nuclear breakout has also attracted the attention of International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) scholars. While the theoretical debate in this context has been dominated by materialist and positivist approaches such as (neo-)realism and (neo-)liberalism (e.g. Cha and Kang 2003; Ballbach 2013), a number of scholars have more recently turned towards post-positivist approaches to help better understand North Korea’s motives and behaviors in the ‘nuclear issue’ (e.g. Kim 2009; Hymans 2008; Pollack 2011). This has broadened the theoretical debate beyond the standard positivist assumption of the North Korean leadership’s nuclear intentions as solely based on cost-benefit calculations, a measured internal response to the external environment. Instead, drawing on constructivist approaches, these authors strongly suggest the importance of moving beyond materialist explanations, arguing that P’yongyang’s decision to go nuclear is instead driven by norms, worldviews, identities and emotions. However, while constructivist authors draw the right conclusion that North Korea views nuclear weapons “as central to its identity” (Pollack 2011, 207), there are problems linked to this approach if viewed from the poststructuralist perspective adopted in this study. Above all, Wendtian constructivism acts on the assumption of pre-given identities, therefore disregarding their discursive nature and the performative-constitutive relationship to foreign policy.¹ As such, important questions regarding the link between North Korea’s nuclear endeavor and the state’s identity and foreign policy remain underexplored. Against this background, this study analyzes North Korea’s avowed nuclear state identity on two levels. Building on previous research on North Korea’s ‘nuclear discourse’ (Ballbach 2014; 2015), it firstly scrutinizes the discursive construction of this par-

¹ For example, Hymans (2006, 205) treats the DPRK’s decision to pursue nuclear weapons as a causal effect of its ‘oppositional-nationalist identity conception,’ which thus constitutes the independent variable. Also problematic is Hyman’s tendency to reduce his understanding of identities to the level of emotions and his juxtaposition of “emotional decision-making” vs. “strategic considerations.” From a poststructuralist view, however, the discursive construction of identities may well encompass both emotional and strategic considerations. Ultimately, conventional constructivists misjudge the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program as a tool that simply counters the fear (e.g. from nuclear attacks by the U.S.), thereby discounting the political functions of danger and the basic poststructuralist assumption that fear and danger are a condition of a state’s very being.

ticular identity trait, assessing both the process of exploration and development as well as its central contextual characteristics. Theorizing the state as performatively constituted and foreign policy as a political performance central to the production of identity, the study, secondly, analyzes the performative enactment of this identity trait by scrutinizing some of those iterated foreign policy performances that bring the constructed nuclear state identity into being.

The resulting argument is fairly simple: To P'yŏngyang, the nuclear weapons program has significance well beyond its military, economic, and political-diplomatic aspects; it has become the most crucial identity project of the North Korean state in the post-Cold War era, ultimately resulting in the emergence of an authoritative nuclear state identity that is still in the process of being explored. As such, the ongoing nuclear conflict with the international community provides a significant performative space in which the DPRK performs its politics of identity and continuously explores and (re-)assures its identity as a nuclear weapons state.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: PERFORMATIVITY, THE STATE AND THE FOREIGN POLICY/ IDENTITY NEXUS

ON THE CONCEPT OF PERFORMATIVITY

Performativity is an interdisciplinary term that is widely used to discuss the capacity of language and gestures to act or consummate an action, or to construct and perform an identity. Most authors working with the concept (e.g. König 2011, 45; Loxley 2007, 1; Volbers 2011, 144) trace its origins to linguistic philosopher John L. Austin. In his pathbreaking book 'How To Do Things With Words' (1962) Austin used the term "performative utterances" to describe situations in which saying something is doing something, rather than simply reporting on or describing reality. Performative utterances thus "simultaneously enforce that what they convey [and thereby] change reality according to the uttered words" (König 2011, 46). As Austin (1962, 60, emphasis in original) himself famously stated: "There is something which is *at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering.*" Austin thus put forth the valuable idea that, in the context of (formal or informal) societal institutions, language, or more precisely, a specific form of 'speech act,' has the power to constitute (a new) reality (König 2011, 47). Starting from these basic considerations in the context of linguistic philosophy, the conceptual debate on performativity spread to a number of further disciplines, ultimately developing into what Uwe Wirth (2002, 10) has described as an

“umbrella term” not only in the field of cultural studies.

Within the social sciences, the concept of performativity was particularly made prominent by Judith Butler (1990; 1993). From a theoretical perspective, Butler’s rendering of the concept is crucial, for she contests the notion of a gender-fixed identity and explains how identity is located not in the body, but within the acts that individuals perform and repeat in their social context. Butler therefore locates the performative in the repeated, public and “active performance (*Aufführung*) and staging (*Inszenierung*) of gender” (Volbers 2011, 145). This reflects a crucial expansion of the concept of performativity, which, in Butler’s discussion, does not describe a characterization of speech acts, but a constitutive component of social praxis. This perspective takes into account specific social categories and attributions as products and effects of performative staging practices (*Aufführungspraxis*), which constitutes a renewed and stabilizing re-inscription of those particular cultural codes that are manifested by those practices. The main point here is that the performative act—be it textual or material—unfolds an independent effect (Volbers 2011, 146). The idea that the gendered identity of the body is performatively constituted therefore implies an understanding of the concept as something ‘executed’ as opposed to something merely ‘possessed.’ Rejecting the idea of the body as a pre-existing, blank slate devoid of value on which gender is inscribed, Butler (1990, 136) argues that the gendered identity of the body has “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.” The implications of this assumption for the further discussion in this study are crucial, for that Butler rejects the assumption of gender as a stable identity and instead understands gender as

“an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts”; an identity achieved “not [through] a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition” (Butler 1990, 136, 140-141, 145, italics in original).

Put differently, performances of identity become meaningful and asserting only to the extent that they are repeated(ly performed) (Butler 1993, 12), and performativity thus becomes “the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration” (Butler 1993, 20). This visibly demarks the concept of performativity from that of the performance. As Searle (1989, 536, emphasis in original) aptly puts it: “though every utterance is indeed a *performance*, only a very restricted class are *performatives*.” For instance, a North Korean official giving a general statement on North Korea’s nuclear strategy may be an element of the state’s nuclear discourse and the speech itself may constitute a political performance, but it is not

performative as long as there are no manifest political consequences and practices linked to it that create a 'new reality.'

THE STATE AND THE FOREIGN POLICY/IDENTITY NEXUS

A number of critical IR/FPA scholars have linked Butler's performative conception of gender to the subject of the sovereign nation-state. Arguing that the (identity of the) state can be similarly conceptualized than any other subject, these (mostly poststructuralist) authors postulate that sovereign nation-states are not essentialized, pre-given subjects, but subjects in process and as such are "the ontological effect of practices which are performatively enacted" (Weber 1998, 78). As David Campbell (1998, 9-13) puts it in reference to Judith Butler, in this formulation the state has no natural or self-evident ontological status or foundation and, thus, no (pre-discursive) identity prior to or apart from the ensemble of spatial and temporal (disciplinary and exclusionary) enframing practices which establish identity and fix difference and hence bring the state into being. The state, understood as a discursively produced structural/structuring effect, thus relies on constant acts of performativity, on a set of state-making practices to produce 'the effect of the state.' As such, what we conceive of as the state is neither simply present nor is it ever finished as an entity, but it is (and has to be) always in a process of becoming, in the process of being constituted (Devetak 1995, 32; Weber 1998, 78). National states must be permanently reproduced, as suspending its practices of representation would mean "to expose its lack of pre-discursive foundations; stasis would be death" (Campbell 1998, 12).

This understanding of the state as performatively constituted leads to a particular view on the nature of foreign policy. Rejecting the conventional taken-for-granted assumption of foreign policy as internally mediated responses of (pre-given) states oriented toward the external world, poststructuralists understand foreign policy as the means through which a particular mode of subjectivity is (re-)produced (Campbell 1998, x; see also Laffey 2000). As a vital political practice that contributes to the 'making of the state' by differentiating it from others and 'making foreign' certain actors and events, foreign policy constitutes a "boundary-producing political performance" central to the (re-)production of the state and identity in whose name it operates (Ashley 1987; Campbell 1998). At this point, the close link between foreign policy and identity suggested by poststructuralists becomes evident. Identity, from a poststructuralist view, is a representational practice through which certain articulations of foreign policies are made possible to begin with (i.e. performances of Self and Other). At the same time, these foreign policies simultaneously reassure the identity at stake (Bormann 2008, 6). In this formulation, identity and foreign policy thus do not

have a causal effect on each other, but are linked in a constitutive and performative relationship (e.g. Hansen 2011, 177). Because identities do not exist in a pre-discursive realm and, thus, have no existence independently of the foreign policies that produce them, identity cannot be conceptualized in rationalist epistemological terms as an independent variable against which to measure (foreign policy) behavior (Hansen 2006, 27): neither do identities cause foreign policies, nor do foreign policies cause identities. Rather, identities are both a product of and a justification for foreign policies. This is to argue that while decision-makers have recourse to certain identities or material interests in their representations of foreign policy, it is also through their formulation of foreign policy that ideas, identities, and material interests are produced and reproduced (Hansen 2006, 1).

THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY IN NORTH KOREA

North Korea's nuclear state identity is constructed in and expressed through a set of particular domestic and foreign political (as well as cultural and social) discourses, more prominent examples being the discourse of the Diplomatic War (Ballbach 2014; 2015) or the Military-First discourse (Jeon 2009). Given the totalitarian structure of the DPRK's political system, it is hardly overstated to describe these discourses as highly hegemonic. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, they are a result and expression of North Korea's totalitarian power conditions (*Herrschaftszustände*), in which power relations are rigid and blocked, alternative opportunities for actions and ranges for free choice are heavily restricted, and a durable asymmetry is established. However, this fact does not discard the value of analyzing North Korean discourses. On the contrary, it reaffirms the necessity to do so, as it is *within* these discourses that such identity traits as the nuclear state identity are constructed. This section first provides an overview of the emergence and development of the nuclear state identity construction within North Korea's post-Cold War political discourse, and, secondly, discusses two main characteristics of this discursive construction, namely, the writing of Self and Other, and the constructions of threat and danger.

EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE "NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY" CONSTRUCTION

While the history of North Korea's nuclear endeavors reaches back to the 1950s, the emergence of the nuclear state identity is innately linked to the challenges of

the post-Cold War era; a time in which the very self-conception of the DPRK as a strong and autonomous state had to be reassured. The construction of a nuclear state identity was a vital element of this reassurance project. In this context, the self-proclaimed status as a nuclear power has, in a relatively short period of time, become a vital, if not the most important element of North Korea's post-Cold War state identity - one with significant political consequences. As will be discussed in this section, however, this particular identity trait was all but fixed following the emergence of a first international crisis over North Korea's nuclear weapons program in the early 1990s. Rather, it gradually evolved ever since and it is still in the process of being explored.

THE EMERGENCE OF A NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

All throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, North Korea continuously asserted not to possess and, in fact, not striving to possess nuclear weapons, linking its nuclear program directly to the country's pressing energy needs. The Iraq War in 2003 not only constituted a turning point in the DPRK's overall foreign policy and security strategy, but also had a profound influence on the construction of its post-Cold War state identity. It was in this context that North Korean texts first claimed that P'yŏngyang has the 'natural right' to produce nuclear weapons in order to protect the state and nation against what is described as the hostile U.S. policy aimed at stifling the DPRK (e.g. Institute for the Reunification of the Fatherland 2003; see also Chun 2004; Kim 2014). Similarly, a KCNA report held that the key lesson drawn by the DPRK from the Iraq War was that "[o]nly tremendous military deterrent force, powerful enough to decisively beat back an attack supported by any ultra-modern weapons, can avert a war and protect the security of the country and the nation" (KCNA 2003a). While this formulation constituted a visible departure from the previous line of reasoning, both North Korean politicians and media texts followed the official policy line, which has been to neither confirm nor deny any accusations about the status of its nuclear program. This resulted in conflicting statements regarding the status of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program between 2003 and 2005. While a senior representative of the DPRK's foreign ministry allegedly claimed in 2003 that North Korea would already possess nuclear weapons (Washington Post 2003; KCNA 2003b), it was only in February 2005 that North Korea publically declared to have successfully developed nuclear weapons, its rhetoric now alluding from building to bolstering its nuclear deterrent (Hayes and Bruce 2011).

THE NUCLEAR BREAKOUT

The first nuclear test in October 2006 was a significant turning point in the

DPRK's construction of a nuclear state identity and the subsequent modes of representations used to reframe itself in terms of a nuclear weapons state. A statement issued by the DPRK's Foreign Ministry (KCNA 2006a) shortly before the first nuclear test provides a good example of how the leadership in P'yŏngyang now began to more comprehensively explore its identity in terms of a nuclear weapons state, while at the same time using those discursive patterns to legitimize its nuclear endeavor. Engaging both the domestic audience and the international community, the text particularly stresses the victimhood/defense dualism. That is, it emphasizes the intimate link between the vulnerability of the DPRK as a victim and target of U.S. threat, and an understanding of its nuclear weapons program as an indispensable 'protection racket' for North Korea's sovereignty and security. In other words, North Korea's nuclear state identity presupposes that its sovereignty is supremely threatened and that the nuclear weapons program constitutes a legitimate (defensive) measure to protect not only the security of the DPRK, but peace and stability of the whole region.

"A people without reliable war deterrent are bound to meet a tragic death and the sovereignty of their country is bound to be wantonly infringed upon. (...) The DPRK's nuclear weapons will serve as reliable war deterrent for protecting the supreme interests of the state and the security of the Korean nation from the U.S. threat of aggression and averting a new war and firmly safeguarding peace and stability on the Korean peninsula under any circumstances. The DPRK will always sincerely implement its international commitment in the field of nuclear non-proliferation as a responsible nuclear weapons state" (Ibid.).

As the previous statement explicates, the narratives of victimhood/threat and the narrative of defense are paralleled by an attempted to project an image of the DPRK as a responsible nuclear weapons state, a state that possesses this weapon legitimately and abides by international non-proliferation obligations. To that end, the text both ensures that its nuclear tests are conducted "under the condition where safety is firmly guaranteed," and that the "DPRK will never use nuclear weapons first [and] strictly prohibit any threat of nuclear weapons and nuclear transfer" (Ibid.).

"The successful nuclear test in the DPRK was an exercise of its independent and legitimate right as a sovereign state as it was a positive defensive countermeasure to protect the sovereignty, life and security of the people from the escalated threat of nuclear war and pressure from the US. The DPRK was compelled to legitimately pull out of the NPT as a result of its relevant provision and manufacturing

of nuclear weapons after undergoing the most fair transparent processes, as the US seriously encroached upon the supreme security of the DPRK and the fundamental interests of the Korean nation under the pretext of the nuclear issue" (KCNA 2006c).

Following the October 2006 nuclear test, North Korean texts emphasized the importance of the nuclear status ever more. Not only did the nuclear test reassure the DPRK's self-perception as a militarily strong state, the possession of nuclear weapons was now designated a unique event in national history. For example, in the New Year's special editorial on January 1, 2007, North Korea's emerging nuclear state identity was constructed by emphasizing "national history" and "national strength," arguing that the possession of nuclear weapons constitutes "an auspicious event in our national history, and a realization of our people's centuries-long desire to have a national strength no one could dare challenge" (Rodong Sinmun 2007, quoted in Nam 2012, 186). However, at this particular stage of development the texts also repeatedly emphasize that the ultimate goal of the DPRK would remain the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, thus still leaving considerable room for political maneuvering.

CONSTRUCTING EXCEPTIONALISM

While the scripting of the nuclear discourse before 2006 (and maybe even until 2008) suggests that it was still possible to reverse the DPRK's full nuclear breakout, in the critical few years since 2008 "the identity of the top leadership in North Korea was fused with the image of a strong nuclear state" (Hayes and Bruce 2011) in the country's internal and external propaganda. During this particular period, North Korea significantly altered the rendering of its nuclear status, which now (at least officially) was decoupled from its relations to the U.S. (Ibid.). Accentuating this reversal of strategy, a DPRK spokesman explained that even if the diplomatic relations between the two countries would be normalized, "the DPRK's status as a nuclear weapons state will remain unchanged as long as it is exposed even to the slightest U.S. nuclear threat" (KCNA 2009). He further opined that "[i]t is the reality on the Korean Peninsula that we can live without normalizing the relations with the U.S. but not without nuclear deterrent" (Ibid.).

While P'yŏngyang still attempted to project an image of the DPRK as a responsible nuclear weapons state, it now also increasingly emphasized the DPRK's role as an exceptional one among nuclear weapons states. This dual representation is the essence of its "Nuclear Posture" statement, issued in April 2010 (KCNA 2010). While reaffirming its promise to be a responsible nuclear power, the memorandum explicitly states that the DPRK is not bound by the Non-Proliferation

Treaty (NPT) and by international law. As Hayes and Bruce (2011) aptly point out, North Korea now did no longer to seek to obtain international recognition and legitimacy by stressing to use this capacity only for deterrence and by reassuring its neighbors and the nuclear weapons states in the region. Rather, a close reading of the DPRK's nuclear discourse suggests that it became a source of pride to those in power to stress that the DPRK stands outside all legal frameworks governing nuclear weapons, simultaneously emphasizing its autonomy and attributing a self-declared nuclear outlaw status to itself (Hayes 2012). As a DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated, North Korea "does not want anybody to recognize it as a nuclear weapons state nor feels any need to be done so. It is just satisfied with the pride and self-esteem that it is capable of reliably defending the sovereignty of the country and the security of the nation with its own nuclear weapons" (Korean Central Broadcasting Station, May 24, 2010, quoted in Hayes and Bruce 2011). Similarly, a statement issued by the powerful National Defence Commission (NDC) claims that the DPRK's status as a nuclear power would not depend on "whether others recognize it or not" (KCNA 2013e).

THE NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY AND THE LEGACY OF KIM JONG IL

Just after his death in late 2011, the Rodong Sinmun (2011) issued the essay "On the Revolutionary Legacy of Kim Jong Il," which holds that North Korea had been "dignified as a nuclear power" thanks only to the deceased supreme leader. The essay not only links North Korea's nuclear weapons status to the historical revolutionary struggle of the state and its people, but it evidently designates the status as a nuclear weapons state as Kim Jong Il's single most important achievement. During the 5th Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) in 2012, North Korea amended its constitution, thereby constitutionally codifying its self-proclaimed status as a nuclear weapons state. The new preamble asserts that Kim Jong Il turned the DPRK "into a politically and ideologically powerful state that is invincible, a nuclear state [*haekpoyuguk*], and a militarily powerful state that is indomitable; and paved a brilliant main road in building a powerful state [*kangsönggukka*]." In this construction, Kim Jong Il's legacy became fused with the status as a nuclear weapons state. In fact, in North Korea's contemporary political discourses it is only Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese struggle that occupies a more important place in North Korea's national history (e.g., KCNA 2013a). This equation, therefore, has important political ramifications, as it suggests that the road to denuclearize the DPRK will be a long, slow, and potentially costly one. This is because a complete rejection of the nuclear weapons state status bears the risk of being interpreted as questioning (the legacy of) Kim Jong Il. Against this background, it seems increasingly unlikely that the nuclear weapons status is up

for negotiations any more - or at least that the price would be very high. As is stated in an editorial of the *Rodong Sinmun*, “[i]f the D.P.R.K. sits at a table with the U.S., it has to be a dialogue between nuclear weapon states, not one side forcing the other to dismantle nuclear weapons” (KCNA 2013b). This assessment can also be identified in one of the most prolific texts produced in this recent stage of the development of the nuclear state identity: the article “Nuke and Peace” [*haekkwa p’yoŋghwa*], originally published in the *Rodong Sinmun* (2013; see also KCNA 2013c, 2013d). The editorial represents an authoritative text on North Korea’s nuclear politics and shows how state ideology and identity relates to these policies. The underlying message of the text is unambiguous: North Korea is now a nuclear state, a unique member of the nuclear club whose nuclear status is non-negotiable. Additionally, the text also touches upon the altered (self-proclaimed) status of the DPRK on the international stage now that it is in possession of nuclear weapons, once again positioning itself as a leader of smaller nations that equally faces the threat of “big powers.” While North Korea’s leadership has sought such a role for itself as early as the 1960s, it now seems to become once again important to the state’s self-image at home (Hayes and Bruce 2011).

THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ‘NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY’ CONSTRUCTION

As any identity construction, North Korea’s nuclear state identity is highly complex. While any debate of the characteristics of this particular identity trait thus remains necessarily incomplete, it is very well possible to identify some of the basic characteristics of this discursive construction. In the following section, two particularly important discursive characteristics of the nuclear state identity are addressed: the writing of Self and Other, and the construction of threats and dangers.²

THE NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY AND THE WRITING OF SELF AND OTHER

According to poststructuralists, identity is established in relation to a series of socially recognized differences that are essential to its being (Connolly 1991, 64). As identity is viewed as discursively constituted, foreign policy discourses serve to inscribe boundaries by demarcating ‘inside’ from ‘outside,’ ‘Self’ from ‘Other,’ ‘domestic’ from ‘foreign’ - and it is re-inscribed when the distinction is “ambiguous and in need of differentiation” (Campbell 1998, 113).³ As discussed

²The following section draws on Ballbach (2015).

above, foreign policy is an important practice of differentiation to demark those boundaries between the inside and the outside that distinguish the identity in whose name they operate from counter-identities.⁴ Seen from this theoretical perspective it is apparent that the discursive construction of the nuclear state identity in the DPRK is permeated with constructions of Self and Other(s), with the boundary produced between the DPRK and the U.S. being particularly significant. In fact, the nuclear state identity construction simultaneously essentializes 'North Korean-ness' as the binary opposite of 'U.S.-ness' and enumerates the character of each realm by arguing that the Self is inherently good, moral and military strong, while the U.S. Other is constructed as an evil, amoral and foreign enemy (see Ballbach 2015, 147-153). Those figurations of difference based upon hierarchical orders are an essential element of the North Korean nuclear state identity. In this context, Campbell (1998, 73) correctly notes that "the social space of inside/outside is both made possible by and helps constitute a moral space of superior/inferior, which can be animated in terms of any number of figurations of higher/lower."

THE NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY AND THE WRITING OF THREAT AND (IN-) SECURITY

Inherently related to the writing of Self and Other is a second integral characteristic of the articulation of the DPRK's nuclear state identity: the discursive construction of (in-)security and threat, exemplified by numerous statements and speeches that describe the DPRK's very existence as being existentially threatened by the hostile policies of foreign forces. While often disregarded by observers as mere rhetoric, such representations of threat are vitally important to the construction of North Korea's nuclear state identity for a number of reasons.⁵

³ Poststructuralism's relational conception of identity implies that identity is always given meaning through (reference to) something it is not: to speak of the Self as 'moral' is to constitute another identity or set of identities - the Other/s - as 'amoral.' The Other is thus "an ontological necessity in that it is only through its constitution that the Self becomes a meaningful subject" (Hansen 2007, 4).

⁴ As these differentiations are the subject to a particular hierarchical order, through its political discourses the state creates idealized pictures of Self and Other with which the national is hailed and the foreign or undesirable is differentiated. The representation of the Other as immoral, for instance, is not only a necessity to understand the Self as moral, "but it furthermore manifests a hierarchical and undesirable meaning of otherness upon which policies are formulated, legitimized and institutionalized (the disciplining part)" (Bormann 2008, 14).

Above all, discourses of danger establish inside/outside boundaries by providing the North Korean state and people with a sense of who and what 'they' are by contrasting who or what 'they' are not and what 'they' have to fear. As "[d]anger is not an objective condition" (Campbell 1998, 1-2), the North Korean state deliberately produces discourses of insecurity that name someone or something as dangerous, thus normalizing the perception of the U.S. (and other outside forces) as something the state and people should fear. This is, of course, not to suggest that there are no actual dangers and military risks involved in the relations between North Korea and the outside world. However, at least equally important is the fact that the historically contingent and intentional construction of public threats continue to surround virtually all official rhetoric about North Korea's standing in the world, which, in turn, normalize and institutionalize public anxieties (Ryang 2012). The main point here is that, as dangers do not exist independently of perception, what is perceived as a threat to the DPRK is therefore a result of interpretation - and these interpretations must not always correspond to the realities of the actual risk of harm. North Korea's nuclear discourse thus does not just designate or identify a pre-existing threat for the Self against which the state protects it; by naming something as a danger, this discourses co-constitutes and re-creates the threat in itself, and they inform governmental practices and actions accordingly (Ballbach 2015, 154). What is particularly important in this regard is the fact that this process of constructing insecurities is paralleled by presenting the North Korean state as the (only) apposite solution to deal with this uncertainty (Alvarez 2006, 75). Hence, in the discursive construction of the nuclear state identity, representations of danger are an essential instrument of the North Korean state to legitimize the political practices that are said to counter those threats and thus secure the inside, i.e. the development of nuclear weapons. Constructions of threat thus constitute an integral part of the discursive construction of the nuclear state identity, as they are a necessity of the state for the constant (re-)production of danger rather than the state's mere response to danger (Campbell 1998, 12, 13). We can assess, therefore, that the manifestation of the North Korean nuclear state identity is at least partially constructed by a discourse rooted in threat, danger and fear, and the construction of this threat is

⁵ Discourses of danger are important to the DPRK to maintain self/other boundaries and enforce unity on the domestic scene, to construct fear and (re-)produce anxiety, to maintain quiescence and de-legitimize dissent, to elevate the status of security actors, to provide the North Korean authorities with the resources and the legitimacy to divert scarce resources to particular ideologically driven projects or national efforts or to distract the public from more complex and pressing social ills (such as the economic and social crises) (Ballbach 2015, 153-155).

integral in constituting and disciplining the North Korean nuclear state identity as practiced through its foreign policy; it co-constitutes the practices of the DPRK's nuclear endeavor and makes them appear reasonable and appropriate. In this sense, threats and dangers are both indispensable and functional to North Korea's political life (Jackson 2005, 156). It is very possible that without the overwhelming 'reality' of the U.S. threat, the massive efforts and expenditures that go along with the nuclear endeavor would be impossible to sustain. Jean Delumeau's (quoted in Campbell 1998, 80) argument, namely, that while danger can be and indeed often is experienced negatively, it may also be a creative force, "a call into being" that provides access to the world, seems to hold particularly true for North Korea. The political consequences of such constructions are obvious, and the challenge for the international community is formidable. Ultimately, one must ask how we can negotiate away a threat with a country that deems the related dangers as vital to its very existence?

PERFORMING THE NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY

Theorizing identity as performative leads to the assumption that North Korea's nuclear state identity relies on constant performativity in order to become meaningful. This section therefore discusses the connections of this discursive identity construction with the articulation of North Korean foreign and security policy. How, it is asked, is this particular identity trait performatively enacted, or, more precisely, how do the identifications of the nuclear state identity construction discussed in the previous section connect to the formulation of North Korean foreign and security policy in the context of the 'nuclear issue'? In order to begin answering this very complex question, two particular instances of the performative enactment of North Korea's nuclear state identity are addressed in this section: the DPRK's repeated nuclear tests, and the issuance of vital foreign and security policy doctrines in April 2010 and April 2013, respectively.

PERFORMING A SPECTACLE:

NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR TESTS AS PERFORMATIVE ENACTMENTS OF THE NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY

North Korea's (thus far) five nuclear tests - on October 9, 2006, on May 25, 2009, on February 12, 2013, and on January 6 and September 9, 2016 - indisputably are the most vivid examples of the DPRK's performative enactment of its nuclear state identity. As the discursive construction of a nuclear weapons state identity necessitates performative enactment in order to become fully meaningful, the

nuclear tests serve as the materialization of an identity trait that, until October 2006, was explored only on the discursive level. While observers mostly limit their debate on the questions of technological success or failure, on the consequences of the tests for the international relations in Northeast Asia, or on the future of the NPT, among others, most ignore what may be called the 'performative significance' of the tests. From this perspective, the DPRK's repeated nuclear tests are about much more than technological and military development, as important as those are. Rather, from a performative perspective the significance of the repeated tests is located in the very act of materializing its (discursively constructed) nuclear state identity through the theatrical staging of foreign policy. At this point, Kwon and Chung's (2012) discussion of the theater state concept is crucial. According to these authors, North Korea has turned into modern theater state, a state directed towards the performance of ritual and spectacle in order to execute power on the domestic scene. It is argued elsewhere (Ballbach 2014) that this perspective is equally relevant to help better understand North Korean foreign policy. The expression of the theatre state - both domestically and internally - is the spectacle, which manifests itself in rituals, technologies, social formations, arguments, speeches, photographs, maps and cultural productions (cf. Medlicott 2005). Seen from this perspective, the nuclear tests are intentionally designed as spectacles and constitute a central element in the theatrical staging of foreign policy by the international theater state that is North Korea. They are a performative enactment of North Korea's nuclear state identity. For instance, following its first nuclear test in October 2006, a foreign ministry spokesperson termed it "inevitable to *physically demonstrate* the North's nuclear capacity in order to protect its national sovereignty and existence" (KCNA 2006b, emphasis added). Similarly, the "Memorandum of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs - The Korean Peninsula and Nuclear Weapons" issued on April 21, 2010, states that only by conducting nuclear tests

the state of nuclear imbalance in Northeast Asia where nuclear weapons and nuclear umbrellas were packed and where only the DPRK remained as a nuclear vacuum zone was brought to an end. By the deterrence effect provided by the Republic's possession of nuclear weapons, the danger of the outbreak of a war has noticeably reduced. This is precisely the effort made on the current stage to remove the nuclear threat *not through pleas only in words but by actively deterring the United States' nuclear weapons with our nuclear weapons* (KCNA 2010, emphasis added).

Borrowing from Naoko Shimazu (2014, 231), we may argue that the nuclear test

was an event that became meaningful by the very act of staging it, because it confers a set of symbolic meanings and materializes the nuclear state identity.⁶ From this perspective, North Korea's nuclear test was an event that drew attention to itself because of the heightened sense of perceived importance attached to it by contemporaries who create information about it and disseminate it - a process that involves a certain amount of evaluative recognition. As such, North Korea's repeated nuclear tests were made significant both by the very enactment of North Korea's nuclear state identity and the reaction to the respective performances.

This point is immediately linked to another important question regarding the staging of nuclear tests, namely the question of spectators. As every theatrical staging requires spectators, identifying the audience for which a 'play' is staged is important. In fact, a constitutive public (*konstitutive Öffentlichkeit*) of performative enactments is a basic characteristic of the performative. As Volbers (2011, 146) states, performatives only take full effect if they are perceived and apprehended by others. In fact, to Judith Butler, the publicity of performative acts is a crucial precondition, as the 'stylization of the body' is at the center of the performances. With regard to the DPRK's nuclear tests it is apparent that those repeated performative acts were staged both for the internal and external audiences. Internally, every nuclear test is accompanied by televised and staged images that also provide excellent material for the state's powerful propaganda apparatus. As such, the North Korean discourse is not limited to the realm of foreign policy discourses, but it permeates the everyday in North Korea, for instance in the form of cultural productions. To the external spectators, the televised images of North Korea's repeated missile and nuclear tests aim at portraying power and prowess, repeatedly proving to the outside world the DPRK's military strength and its membership in the very exclusive nuclear club.

INSTITUTIONALIZING IDENTITY: ENACTING THE NUCLEAR STATE IDENTITY THROUGH SPECIFIC FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY DOCTRINES

A second example of the performative enactment of the nuclear state identity is the institutionalization of the main elements of this identity trait into authoritative foreign and security policy doctrines. As these doctrines are influential artic-

⁶ There are a number of different aspects that play into the theatricality and symbolism of the nuclear tests, beginning with the dates on which they have been conducted. For instance, the third test was staged on February 12 (2013), the exact day on which U.S. President Barack Obama gave his important and itself highly symbolic State of the Union address.

ulations of North Korean intent and practice in the specific field of the nuclear issue, they are important instances of North Korean foreign and security policy. Targeting both the domestic audience and the international community, these documents furnish identity and security narratives and they are, therefore, “performative, constituting a particular order and its corresponding subjects” (Wibben 2011, 39). Hence, these doctrines maintain a mutually constitutive relation with identity, for they articulate statecraft and thereby reify identity (Wadley 2010, 44). The reading of identity from the respective foreign and security policy documents, therefore, lays bare the contents of what is actually enacted by these practices. This is to argue that the identity traits (of Self and Other) and the constructions of threat that are characteristic for the nuclear state identity construction come into being through the foreign and security practice of the DPRK, as articulated in the particular doctrine documents and their products. In fact, in the past years, Kim Jong Un undertook several important steps to institutionalize and elevate the DPRK’s nuclear status by revising the country’s constitution, passing new laws, and establishing new government organizations with the mandate to advance the nuclear weapons program. While many aspects of the internal process of policy formulation with regard to the nuclear issues are informal and, as such, are not openly traceable, the available security doctrines are all the more significant.

On April 21, 2010, and thus almost concurrently with Obama’s Nuclear Posture Review, the DPRK issued its first in-depth statement of nuclear doctrine, the “Memorandum of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs - The Korean Peninsula and Nuclear Weapons.” (KCNA 2010). In this statement, North Korea immediately links its own denuclearization not only to the comprehensive denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, but also to the necessity of global denuclearization as well as to the establishment of “a solid peace regime on the Korean peninsula.” Rephrasing the narrative of defense and once again stressing that the DPRK is not bound by the NPT and by international law, the statement reads that

[t]he mission of the nuclear forces of the DPRK is to deter and repel aggression and attack against the country and the nation until the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the world is realized. The DPRK is invariably maintaining the policy not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states or threaten them with nuclear weapons as long as they do not join the act of invading or attacking us in conspiracy with nuclear weapons states” (Ibid.).

This statement sheds some light on North Korean’s perception of how it understands the deterrence dynamic on the peninsula. North Korea sees its nuclear

capability as a deterrent against an attempt to overthrow the regime through an invasion. As the April doctrine puts it, “no nation in the world has been exposed to the nuclear threat so directly and for so long as the Koreans” (Ibid.). In short, it appears the objective of this Memorandum is to present North Korea’s nuclear weapon status to the rest of the world as an irrefutable and justifiable fact, using the language and rationales traditionally used by most of the other nuclear weapon states. As such North Korea is now saying that it will keep nuclear weapons until “they are eliminated from the peninsula and the rest of the world” (Ibid.).

At the fifth session of the 12th SPA, held on April 13, 2012, the DPRK amended the constitution, adding a reference to the DPRK as a “nuclear state” (haekpoyuguk) in the preamble.⁷ Given that the constitution provides one of the most basic texts for any country, the constitutional codification of the DPRK as a nuclear power is a powerful performative act that enshrines identity. The respective part of the revised preamble reads as follows:

“In the face of the collapse of the world socialist system and the vicious offensive of the imperialist allied forces to stifle the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Comrade Kim Jong Il administered Songun politics; thus he safeguarded with honour the achievements of socialism which are the precious legacy of Comrade Kim Il Sung, developed the DPRK into an invincible politico-ideological power, a nuclear state [haekpoyuguk, literally a state with nuclear capability] and an unchallengeable military power, and opened a broad avenue for the building of a thriving nation [kangsŏnggukka].”

The preamble is as much about Kim Jong Il’s achievements as it is about the nuclear question per se. The amended preamble eulogizes Kim Jong Il as a “patriot without parallel who exalted the dignity of our people and our national power to supreme status.” As was already discussed above, North Korea’s political discourse fused its nuclear state identity with the legacy of Kim Jong Il, and this discursive construction was materialized by enshrining it into one of the most prolific texts of any country, the constitution. As such, P’yŏngyang’s decision to list itself as a nuclear state sends a clear message to both internal and external spectators: the DPRK has no intention of giving up its nuclear program.

⁷ The original (Korean) text of the constitution can be accessed here: <http://www.naenara.com.kp/ko/great/constitution.php?1>. An English translation can be found at: <http://www.naenara.com.kp/en/great/constitution.php?1>.

The seventh session of the 12th SPA, held on March 31, 2013, codified the development of nuclear weapons in the DPRK into law by adopting the “DPRK Law on Developing Space,” the SPA Decision “On Setting Up the DPRK State Space Development Bureau” and the “DPRK Law on Consolidating the Position of Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense” (*Choson Sinbo* 2013). On April 1, 2013 it was revealed that an ordinance of the Supreme People’s Assembly of the DPRK had been promulgated. The text states that only by developing “an independent and just nuclear force” has the DPRK “put an end to the distress-torn history in which it was subject to outside forces’ [oesē] aggression and interference and could emerge a socialist power of Chuch’e which no one dares provoke.” It continues to stress that “[t]he DPRK is a full-fledged nuclear weapons state capable of beating back any aggressor troops at one strike, firmly defending the socialist system and providing a sure guarantee for the happy life of the people.” The law addresses ten steps through which “to consolidate the position of the nuclear weapons state,” repeating both the narrative of defense and deterrence against U.S. threat and the stipulation of the DPRK as a responsible nuclear power. Most importantly, however, is the fact that the document is inherently linked to political practice by particular actors and institutions that are ordered to “take thorough practical steps for implementing this ordinance.” To that end, the DPRK General Bureau for Atomic Energy was upgraded into the full-fledged Ministry of Nuclear Power Industry, in accordance with the SPA Presidium Degree No. 3111. Moreover, when North Korea announced its fifth nuclear test in September 2016, the missile was delivered by the DPRK’s “Nuclear Weapons Institute,” a previously unknown institution. According to a press release from North Korea’s embassy in Russia, this decision reflects the DPRK’s “confidence regarding the basic completion of nuclear weapons development.”

As these examples demonstrate, the performativity of North Korea’s nuclear state identity refers to all those practices that materialize the identity constructions that endow a particular meaning to this specific identity construction. Hence, the representations of the inherently threatened, yet militarily and morally strong Self, the narrative of defense and deterrence, and the notions of a responsible nuclear power with a unique status are all among those aspects that are performatively enacted and, as such, have become manifested in a set of particular foreign and security documents.

CONCLUSION

North Korea’s nuclear endeavor is among the most pressing challenges of

Northeast Asia's regional political order. As such, it is hardly surprising that the issue has received widespread attention among concerned scholars. However, in this academic discourse, questions of identity, and how it interrelates to the DPRK's foreign policy, are all too often overlooked. Yet, incorporating the identity dimension is crucial to understand fully North Korea's motives and behavior in the nuclear issue because, to the DPRK, the nuclear program holds significance well beyond the political-diplomatic, economic, and even military realm. The nuclear weapons program has become the DPRK's single most important identity project in the post-Cold War era, and the subsequent conflict over this program with (parts of) the international community provides a crucial performative space to North Korea where the ongoing construction of a nuclear state identity is further explored and the politics of identity are performed. In this process, a particular identity trait emerged, labeled here as the nuclear state identity.

This particular identity trait was scrutinized on two levels, namely, the discursive level, and the level of performative enactment/ materialization. The article firstly traced the emergence and development of this identity trait in North Korean post-Cold War era foreign policy discourses, arguing that this particular identity trait was not constituted and materialized through a single founding act. Rather, North Korea's nuclear state identity was gradually brought into being by the citational practices of performativity. As such, North Korea's nuclear program comes into effect and is potentiated as an acceptable and appropriate measure for defending the threatened Self against specifically identified Other(s) - primarily the U.S. - within the framework and scope of specific foreign policy discourses. Within this discursive framework, the construction of the nuclear state identity emerged as one of the most significant identity traits of North Korea's state identity in the post-Cold War era. The study then analyzed two main characteristics of the nuclear state identity construction, namely, the writing of Self and Other, and the construction of threats and dangers as vital elements of this particular identity construction. Moving from the discursive level of the nuclear state identity to its actual materialization, the study proceeded with an analysis of the performative enactment of this particular identity trait. In this context, two examples of this performative enactment were discussed, namely, the repeated nuclear tests, and two vital security doctrines as particular instances of the performative enactment of the nuclear state identity. These doctrines are important, for they codified particular (discursive) identifications concerned with the DPRK's nuclear state status, which then serve as a frame of reference for the DPRK's foreign and security policies.

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