

[H-Diplo Article Review 772 on “The Importance of Status: The US-ROK Alliance Cohesion and the First Korean Nuclear Crisis, 1993-4.”](#)

Discussion published by George Fujii on Wednesday, June 6, 2018

2018

H-Diplo

 [@HDiplo](#)

Article Review

No. 772

6 June 2018

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

James Jungbok Lee. “The Importance of Status: The US-ROK Alliance Cohesion and the First Korean Nuclear Crisis, 1993-4.” *The International History Review* 40:2 (April 2018): 315-357.

URL: <http://tiny.cc/AR772>

Review by **Galen Jackson**, University of Texas-Austin

I

n a fascinating article on the 1993-1994 crisis over North Korea's nuclear program, James Jungbok Lee makes an important contribution to the growing debate among international relations scholars about the role that a state's concerns about its relative status plays in shaping its foreign policy decisions. Specifically, Lee argues—and here he is posing a challenge to scholars of a 'realist' bent—that South Korea's behavior during this period simply cannot be understood in power political terms. In fact, he convincingly shows, Seoul's approach was at certain times driven by its insistence that the United States recognize it as a player of equal status in the diplomacy, even when that insistence jeopardized its core security interests as they related to the North Korean nuclear question. In making his case, Lee has shown that scholars' increased attention to the role of status is largely justified. At the same time, his article leaves unanswered some key questions and, in broad terms, does not necessarily refute the notion that international politics is to "be understood in essentially realist terms" (337).

At its most basic level, the debate Lee is engaging in his article centers on the fundamental question of how power political considerations shape states' foreign policy choices. For realists, of course, the answer is essentially straightforward—although other factors certainly come into play, states are above all concerned with safeguarding their security in an anarchic international system. Consequently, they tend to base their decisions on strategic considerations, especially when major security interests are at stake.^[1] Many scholars, however, claim that this view is overly simplistic because it ignores the importance states attach to their perceived status in the international system. Borrowing concepts from the field of psychology, such as social identity theory, these analysts assert that concerns over status explain why great powers have in certain key cases pursued policies that do not necessarily align with their power political interests.^[2] This work has highlighted just how significant this factor can be in influencing international politics. It now seems clear, as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger—who is widely regarded as a practitioner of Realpolitik—once wrote about the Soviet Union, that states' "relentless insistence on status" and desire to "be treated as an equal" can be an important variable in this area.^[3]

Most realists, however, would admit that the pressures generated by international anarchy are not solely what explain state behavior. Even people like Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, and Stephen Walt—three of the most prominent realist scholars in the field—all acknowledge that factors like domestic politics may at times come into play in significant ways.^[4] Likewise, "neoclassical realists" view the interaction between the incentives created by the structure of the international system and state level variables as critical to understanding foreign policy decision-making.^[5]

The real question, then, is really *how much* these sorts of factors shape foreign policy on issues of critical importance to a state's national security. Even when a country's core interests are at stake, can they nevertheless take precedence over the sorts of considerations that realists emphasize? In particular, can a state's preoccupation with its perceived status cause its leaders to disregard even strong strategic incentives?

Put simply, Lee's answer to those questions is "yes," and in making that argument, his article has some major strengths. For starters, Lee is addressing an important topic, one whose relevance to today should be quite obvious. In addition, he brings an impressive array of methodological tools to bear, combining regional expertise in the politics and security of East Asia; language skills; historical analysis; knowledge of nuclear issues; and international relations theory. Likewise, the article's focus sheds light on the South Korean role in these negotiations, an important part of the story that has nonetheless hitherto received inadequate attention.

More importantly, Lee makes an original argument that South Korean leaders' focus on gaining U.S. recognition of their country's status as an equal in the negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program explains a number of their decisions that do not seem to fit within a realist framework. Particularly after the country began making serious strides toward democratization, he claims, top officials in Seoul held a deep conviction "that the ROK [Republic of Korea] should no longer be taken for granted as a subservient client state that unquestioningly followed US policies." Especially when it came to the nuclear issue, "the South Koreans believed that they had the prerogative to take the driver's seat in negotiating with the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea]—a *status marker* that had to be acknowledged by the United States in order for their newly claimed status to be legitimized" (322, emphasis Lee's).

And, importantly, Lee claims that Seoul's concerns in this area ultimately had a significant impact on the way in which the diplomacy of this whole issue ran its course. Not only, he writes, did they cause "a rift in the US-ROK alliance," but they "also to a large extent inhibit[ed] a successful resolution of the nuclear crisis" (337). That conclusion is all the more striking because, given the stakes involved for South Korea, one would think that its political leadership would have been quite willing to ignore concerns about status for the sake of preventing Pyongyang from going nuclear. In other words, the crisis represents a "most likely case" (319) for realist theory, as well as a "deviant case" (338) in which major power political priorities took a backseat to considerations of status. In short, even though the South Koreans had a clear strategic interest in seeing the negotiations succeed, whenever they felt the Americans were failing to grant them their deserved status by taking the lead role in the diplomacy, they simply "could not prevent pride and emotions from getting the better of rationality in [their] decision-making" (331).

Lee's article undoubtedly represents a significant scholarly contribution, but in the final analysis, certain doubts remain regarding some of its key conclusions. The North Koreans are largely absent from his account and one wonders whether Lee's portrayal of Pyongyang's willingness to reach an agreement is perhaps overly rosy. In addition, the great majority of primary documents Lee cites are *American* records, which at times makes it difficult to discern what *South Korea's* objectives really were. Although this might be the best evidence currently available to researchers—particularly since Lee is writing about relatively recent events—many questions remain unanswered about what was driving Seoul's policies throughout the crisis.

In terms of substance, some of the evidence Lee presents could be read as indicating practical differences between the South Koreans and Americans over how to approach the North Korean nuclear question most effectively, rather than demonstrating an obsession with status on Seoul's part. It is, after all, quite common for smaller states to fear the possibility that great powers will make deals at the expense of their interests.^[6] As Lee points out, this seems to have been a genuine concern of South Korean President Kim Young-sam, who, to quote Lee, said in an interview at the time that because the United States viewed the negotiations "through the prism of its global strategies, it may at many times unwittingly act contrary to the ROK's national interests" (356 n. 248). Such anxieties would have been all the more pronounced because South Korea might have felt, quite naturally, that Washington's desire to reach a deal with the North could undercut its privileged relationship with the United States. One ROK official, Lee notes, commented after American and North Korean negotiators emerged from a round of talks that Seoul felt as if Washington was "committing adultery," but it is unclear whether that sort of sentiment indicates a concern over status or, instead, a worry that, in its quest to get an agreement on the nuclear question, the Americans might be willing to downgrade its alliance with the South. Finally, based on Lee's evidence it seems possible that the ROK leadership was primarily concerned that U.S. negotiators were simply giving away too much. Indeed, Lee points to a number of occasions on which South Korean officials expressed such sentiments (328, 334-335, 353 n. 227, 354 n. 232, 354 n. 234), with President Kim even complaining at one point that the U.S. approach was tantamount to rewarding a "misbehaving child" (329).

More fundamentally, the story Lee tells would not necessarily be confusing to a realist. To be sure, he convincingly details several points in the crisis where South Korean behavior departed from that standard. In broad perspective, however, one wonders just how significant the status factor was. Had Seoul's concerns on that issue been adequately addressed, would things have turned out much differently?

In the end, after all, the negotiations were basically successful—at least temporarily—with the parties announcing the so-called Agreed Framework in October 1994. Lee provides

some compelling evidence that South Korean diplomacy might have delayed this achievement, but it is unclear whether the effect of the status factor represented a major roadblock in a broad strategic perspective. In fact, Lee seems to suggest that the United States could have prevented the process from being drawn out even to the extent that it was by showing a greater willingness to press its ally harder. And Washington's initial reluctance to pursue that policy, according to Lee, had less to do with South Korea's ability to resist American pressure—he explicitly rules that explanation out (318-319)—than it did with President Bill Clinton's domestic political calculations (346 n. 135, 348 n. 156, 350 n. 191, 354 n. 230, 356 n. 248). Once the White House overcame that reluctance, Washington was effectively able to get Seoul on board with the agreement. Moreover, Lee implies that when push came to shove, the South Koreans were basically willing to go along with the Americans when their core security interests were at stake. For example, when the North Koreans threatened in early 1993 to withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty, President Kim, although unenthusiastic about the prospect of bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang, acquiesced. He was, Lee writes, “perfectly aware that from the security standpoint, the US-DPRK negotiations were indispensable for putting out the immediate fire.... [R]ationality dictated that it support the US-DPRK talks” (325-326).

So it seems that this story, as Lee tells it, is perhaps not as problematic for realism as he suggests. The negotiation was extremely complex and, given the stakes involved for South Korean security, it was probably inevitable that Seoul would not be in lockstep with Washington throughout the process. Status undoubtedly played an important role here, but ultimately the United States—the stronger party in the partnership—was more or less able to get its way, as most realists would probably expect. This case, as Lee writes, certainly cannot be understood “in *purely* power political terms,” (338, emphasis mine) but in a very broad sense power realities played arguably the dominant role in the outcome.

These points notwithstanding, Lee's article represents terrific scholarship. While status does not necessarily explain the key elements of the diplomatic outcome of the 1993-1994 North Korean nuclear negotiations, Lee demonstrates that it influenced South Korea's decision-making calculus in important ways throughout the process. The debate over the relative importance of status and geopolitical considerations is bound to continue. Lee's research has, without question, moved that debate forward and in a productive direction.

Galen Jackson is a postdoctoral fellow in the Clements Center for National Security at the University of Texas-Austin. He received his Ph.D. in political science from UCLA in 2016. His research interests include international security, American foreign policy, Middle East politics, and nuclear security. His work has been published in *Security Studies*, *International Security*, and the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. He is currently working on a project that examines the superpower diplomacy of the Arab-Israeli conflict between the June 1967 war and the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

© 2018 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Notes

[1] For examples of major works on realism, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

[2] For some of the best work that has been done in this area, see Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," *International Security* 34:4 (2010): 63-95; Michelle Murray, "Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition before the First World War," *Security Studies* 19:4 (2010): 656-688; and Joslyn Barnhart, "Status Competition and Territorial Aggression: Evidence from the Scramble for Africa," *Security Studies* 25:3 (2016): 385-419.

[3] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 231.

[4] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007). Waltz is also careful to distinguish between "a theory of international politics" and "a theory of foreign policy." See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 121.

[5] On neoclassical realism, see Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51:1 (1998): 144-172. It is worth noting, however, that other scholars claim this work violates core "realist" assumptions. For example, see Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24:2 (1999): 5-55.

[6] In my own research, which frequently deals with U.S.-Israeli relations, this is a common theme. One Israeli official, for example, recounted in his memoir a deep fear that American and Soviet officials might be "closeted away cooking up deals," with the results of their negotiations to be announced "as a *fait accompli*." See Yitzhak Rabin, *The Rabin Memoirs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 205.