BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND INFLUENCE?
MULTILATERALISM AND NORTH KOREAN FOREIGN
POLICY IN THE SIX PARTY TALKS

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ABSTRACT
The main thrust of this paper is an analysis of a generally ignored component of North Korean foreign policy—the realm of multilateralism. Theoretically informed by Neorealist Foreign Policy Theory and building on a conception of multilateralism as a strategic foreign policy phenomenon, this essay strives to discern the specific conditions and underlying motives that drive the DPRK’s decision to refer to—or reject—multilateralism as a means of its foreign policy. Using North Korea’s seemingly erratic foreign policy vis-à-vis the Six Party Talks as a case, the analysis suggests that whether the DPRK opts for cooperation or non-cooperation in a given situation depends heavily on the degree to which it considers itself threatened: when it perceives its security to be immediately threatened, it pursues an autonomy-seeking policy, whereas it will pursue an influence-seeking policy (within institutions) if its security is perceived to be less threatened. This suggests a highly instrumental understanding of multilateralism, which is either strategically adopted or rejected to achieve the DPRK’s alterable foreign policy goals of influence and autonomy.

Key words: North Korea, multilateralism, foreign policy, Six Party Talks, Neorealist Foreign Policy Theory

1 INTRODUCTION: NORTH KOREA—THE MULTILATERALIST’S NIGHTMARE?

The third nuclear test carried out by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) on 12 February 2013 and the subsequent aggravation of the security situation on the Korean peninsula were only the latest reminders of the formidable challenge posed by the nuclear crisis. Among other developments, the recent escalation of this persistent conflict has led to a renewed debate on the possibility for a resumption
of the stalled Six Party Talks (SPT). Established in 2003 and in abeyance since 2008, this multilateral format represents the latest diplomatic effort to date to engage the DPRK in a stable regional negotiation framework and thus to address what is widely considered to be one of the most pressing security challenges within Northeast Asia (NEA) in its present political existence. Yet, when the DPRK’s regional post-Cold War foreign and security policy is analysed, the realm of multilateralism is largely ignored. At first glance, this seems hardly surprising given both the low level of institutionalisation in NEA—an area Paul Evans (2007) provocingly labelled an ‘anti-region’ with regard to multilateral security cooperation—and the sceptical stance of the DPRK vis-à-vis this form of cooperation. There is no doubt that, in common with other states in the region, the DPRK has traditionally been rather dismissive about the prospect of engaging in multilateral security structures in NEA. Uttering that the time is not (yet) ripe for the states in the region to adopt this form of cooperation and voicing concern that such initiatives might be directed against it, it time and again rejected proposals that called for the initiation of a multilateral security dialogue within NEA. For instance, it opposed the establishment of a CSCE-modelled consultation process that was repeatedly suggested by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze (Chung 2004) and rejected the proposals both of former South Korean President Roh Tae-woo, who called for a Consultative Conference for Peace in Northeast Asia (Mack and Kerr 1995), and of former US Secretary of State James Baker, who proposed a two-plus-four mechanism to deal with the tensions on the Korean peninsula (Baker 1991). Despite this doubting posture, however, the more recent post-Cold War reality saw increasing DPRK participation in regional multilateral security structures, from the Northeast Asian Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) (from 1993/2002)\(^1\) and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (since 1994) on the Track-II level, to the Four Party Talks (1997–99) and the Six Party Talks (from 2003) on the Track-I level. This increasing participation notwithstanding, most scholars still seem to agree on the assumption that the DPRK holds a solely negative view of engaging in multilateral security structures in NEA. For example, George Friedman (2006) maintains that the DPRK raises serious questions about the ‘limits of multilateralism’, and Paul Evans

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\(^1\) North Korean representatives attended the founding meeting of the NEACD in 1993 and participated on a more regular basis from 2002.