

Bullying or Reciprocity? Predominant Pattern of Behavior Between the United States and North Korea

Jan Blinka and Zdeněk Kříž

Structured Abstract

Article type: Research paper

Purpose—This paper aims to uncover whether relations between the United States and North Korea are driven by reciprocal or bullying strategies.

Design/methodology/approach—The primary methodology used is event data analysis. Empirical data are coded and placed on a scale with numerical value, according to which it is possible to determine the existence of reciprocity or bullying and the overall pattern of mutual relations in a given period.

Findings—The empirical findings do not support the premises of the stimulus-response theory, because the actors do not always respond cooperatively to cooperation and confrontationally to confrontation. Instead, they often change the nature of the mutual exchange from cooperation to confrontation and vice-versa.

Practical implications—The states should not expect their counterparts to respond in a reciprocal manner, especially when they strive to establish long-term cooperative relations. When dealing with North Korea, the states should take a firm stance rather than offering positive stimuli, because those tend to be exploited and not reciprocated.

Department of International Relations and European Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 10, Brno 602 00, Czech Republic; telephone: 00420 724 907 819; email: jan.blinka@gmail.com

Department of International Relations and European Studies, Masaryk University, Joštova 10, Brno 602 00, Czech Republic; email: 37415@mail.muni.cz



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Originality/value—This paper tests the stimulus-response theory by the most unlikely case, which is North Korea's behavior toward the United States.

Keywords: bullying, North Korea, reciprocity, South Korea, stimulus-response theory, United States

Introduction

On the Korean peninsula, there has been a formal state of war between the two Korean states since the 1950s. This does not, however, totally impede their political contact and economic cooperation, although it is occasionally interrupted by events that threaten the fragile balance of power on the peninsula and which alarm the international community. The constantly changing sequences of escalatory and de-escalatory events in inter-Korean relations, as well as in North Korea's relations with other relevant actors, raise a logical question of how the international community should respond to this situation. Should it respond to the hostile impulses sent by North Korea and any increasing tension on the Peninsula with confrontation, or should it "turn the other cheek" and respond cooperatively? If we want to find out the answer, it is necessary to examine the underlying logic of the main actors in the region, and that is the aim of this article.

The authors answer the following question: Do the relations between the main actors on the Korean Peninsula, namely North Korea, South Korea, and the United States, follow the premises of stimulus-response theory, and thus are driven by reciprocity, or is the prevailing pattern of behavior among the above-mentioned states instead based on a bullying strategy? First, we analyze dyadic relations between North Korea and the United States, and later, we examine the triangular concatenation by adding the element of South Korea. Bilateral and subsequently trilateral relations are studied by applying the stimulus-response theory during the period from the end of the Cold War until September 2013. The end of the Cold War was chosen because of its significance for the distribution of power and security in the East Asian security complex. The bipolar world order had fallen apart and there had been a major shift in the relations of the actors under our examination, as is described, e.g., by Woo Seong-ji.¹

Stimulus-Response Theory and Bullying

The stimulus-response (or action-reaction) theory derives from behavioral psychology, focusing on individual behavior. According to that theory, most actions of an actor (be it an individual or a state) are a response to stimuli sent by others in a certain environment. States, like individuals, do not exist in a vacuum; they occupy a place in the international system, they interact with other state and non-state actors, and they respond to incoming stimuli. The theory in question has a mono-causal approach to the topic as it examines players and their behavior from only one

analytical point of view, i.e., from the level of states. The states are perceived as “black boxes” into which one cannot look and which react in the same way to the same stimuli regardless of their particular national attributes or the personal characteristics of their leaders. If the premises of stimulus-response theory are true and reciprocity exists, states react cooperatively to cooperative stimuli and confrontationally to confrontational ones. Hence, the main determiner of an actor’s behavior is the counteractor’s actions toward it.²

Because the stimulus-response theory derives from behaviorist psychology, it focuses on empirical and observable relations between actors. In international relations, this means examining declarations, policies, and behavior issued by one actor toward another without paying attention to anything, which we cannot observe, especially at the intrastate level. The only behavioral source which is relevant to this theory is the impulse sent by another actor.

As mentioned above, the core of the theory in question lies in reciprocal behavior, which can be described by the Biblical proverb “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” Robert O. Keohane defines reciprocity as “exchanges of roughly equivalent values in which the actions of each party are contingent on the prior actions of the others in such a way that that good is returned for good, and bad for bad.” The advantage of reciprocity, if played by both actors, is its predictability—each actor can anticipate its opponent’s reaction according to its own actions. Thus, it enables opponents to proceed into the cooperation phase without losing face: if played by both players, the cooperative stimulus will be reciprocated with cooperation.³ Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no danger of conflict escalation—actors respond reciprocally both to cooperative as well as confrontational stimuli that they receive.

There are two ways to play the game according to the stimulus-response theory. The first approach is represented by Robert Axelrod; the second by Russel J. Leng. A player acting according to Axelrod’s logic should start the game with a positive offer of cooperation and consequently adapt his behavior to the opponent’s stimuli. This type of game is called the *tit-for-tat* strategy and it offers a way to avoid being drawn into the most severe threat for the solution of complex security disputes, an escalatory spiral. Yet according to Leng, in reality interactions between states do not start with a cooperative offer, but, on the contrary, by demonstrating determination and a firm attitude combined with an offer for appeasement. This approach is called the *carrot-and-stick* approach and as opposed to Axelrod’s reciprocity, it regards a certain degree of toughness as being necessary.⁴

Even though not all scholars would agree, some prominent academics pair reciprocity with its opposite, inverse response, which Hirshleifer and Coll, in a game-theory context, call a “bully” strategy. Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse studied reciprocity and bullying in the Bosnia conflict,⁵ and Greg Cashman studied these strategies as well.⁶

The reciprocating logic can be associated with liberal views. Liberals view all states as essentially similar, willing to cooperate. Thus, they argue that tough, militaristic actions lead inevitably to confrontational reactions, and that friendly, cooperative

actions can produce further cooperation. If liberals play the game, they will act according to Axelrod's tit-for-tat strategy, showing their opponents a willingness to cooperate and hoping for a similar type of reaction. Conservatives, on the other hand, see democratic states as radically different from authoritarian states and thus they believe that some degree of toughness and firm attitude is necessary in order to produce cooperative action while dealing with non-democracies. Instead of reciprocity, they act according to the bullying strategy.⁷

The bullying strategy is based on the neorealist view describing the international system as an anarchic environment, where one plays a zero-sum game and states must always expect the possibility of war. Positive impulses to cooperate are viewed as signs of weakness and are responded to with exploitation and intensified actions on the part of the opponent. Bullying in this sense means responding to the incoming stimuli with non-reciprocal action, i.e., responding to the cooperation with confrontation. Another way to "bully" others is to use this strategy to increase an opponent's cooperation. If the counteractor is not cooperative enough, the actor can try to make it cooperate by means of force, decisiveness and toughness. The state acting on the grounds of this strategy will respond to all of the opponent's actions which do not meet his demands with ever-tougher actions and threats or punishments.⁸ A problem arises when the actors, having the same level of determination to carry out their threats, bully each other. Both will assume an uncompromising negotiating attitude, which will get tougher and tougher in response to the opponent's lack of cooperation.⁹ This is the way in which bullying might transform itself into confrontational reciprocity, and subsequently escalate into war—as is shown by Leng.¹⁰

What does this mean for practical international relations? If state B in the dyad acts according to reciprocity, the appropriate policy of state A should be a soft-line cooperative approach. Through positive initiatives, both states can create a level of mutual trust and increase the overall level of cooperation between them. If, on the other hand, state B responds inversely and exploits the positive offers made by others, state A should use a tough, firm, hard-line policy to force its opponent into cooperation.

Research Design

To understand the confrontation-cooperation logic in the examined region, it is not sufficient to study only dyadic relations, as other actors can affect the reactions of the primary two participants. As Woo Seong-ji states, the nature of the relation between two actors in a triad influences other existing dyads and, at the same time, is re-influenced by them as well. Therefore, states find themselves in a mutual interconnectedness—the actions of one member has a direct impact on the remaining members of the system.¹¹ Hence, it is much more appropriate to apply triangularity, as the relations between the USA and North Korea are determined by American engagement in the Korean conflict on the side of South Korea.

The relations between the three parties of the triad, namely South Korea, North

Korea and the United States, can be described by a pattern referred to by Dittmer as a stable marriage—two actors related by friendship are oriented against the third part of the triad.¹² In this case, Washington and Seoul formed an alliance against Pyongyang. As the United States and South Korea are allies bound by mutual treaties, their relations are not scrutinized and this text concentrates on the relations between North Korea and the USA, as well as on the trilateral concatenation between all three actors. A triangular response occurs when “the actor changes its behavior toward another regional actor in response to the recent behavior of an outside power.”¹³ If the regional actor responds with triangular reciprocity, it will increase cooperation toward a neighbor in response to cooperation from an outside power. On the other hand, if the regional actor acts according to a triangular bullying strategy, it will cooperate with its neighbor in response to the uncompromised and tough actions of an outside power.¹⁴ In this regard, the United States is approached as an outside actor trying to reward the cooperative behavior of North Korea toward South Korea and punish North Korean confrontational behavior toward its southern neighbor.

The main aim of this paper is to answer the research question of whether the relations between the USA and North Korea follow a reciprocating strategy or a bullying strategy. This research framework proposes two hypotheses—one for dyadic and one for triadic relations—that will be subject to further examination.

H1: North Korea will respond reciprocally to the behavior of the United States, and vice-versa.

H2: North Korea’s behavior toward South Korea will be reciprocal to the stimuli sent by the United States, and vice-versa.

The methodology chosen for this research is an event data analysis, in which the scientist chooses a particular period in which he or she studies the individual actions of selected states toward each other and tries to figure out if they apply a strategy of bullying or of reciprocity.¹⁵

First, we collect empirical data, consisting of series of events, i.e., actions and reactions of particular actors toward each other. It should be noted that each event is both a reaction to previous stimuli, as well as stimuli for future reaction. The data for this research is obtained from the study of primary and secondary sources dealing with the description of relations between the United States, North Korea, and South Korea in the period from the end of the Cold War up until September 2013. The main sources are the policies of individual states, declarations of their representatives, official documents and studies, newspaper articles, news agency articles, press releases, historical-analytical scientific works and studies concentrating on particular topics, such as the Six-Party Talks, economic cooperation, and armed border disputes. To obtain empirical data, no specific time pattern (month, week or day) was selected; events were chosen according to their importance from the neorealist point of view, according to which events related to security have greater impact on mutual relations than, for example, social, cultural and sport events. Thus, we focused primarily on security, political, diplomatic, and economic relations.

The empirical data is subsequently coded and placed on the scale with a numer-

ical value, according to which it is possible to determine the level of confrontation or cooperation in the individual events. Upon examination of the cooperation-confrontation scales presented by Cashman and Goldstein,¹⁶ a more detailed scale was created to better reflect the categories of events that occur between the examined actors. Thus, the scale, ranging from +80 to -80 points with thirty-four categories of events, was developed particularly for the context of the Korean Peninsula and its application to other conflict situations would be rather problematic. On the scale, events are ordered from the most cooperative (“voluntary unification of countries”) to the most conflicting (“use of nuclear weapons”). A lower value is assigned to verbal actions, while political or economic actions are connected to a higher point value. Most points are assigned to military actions, as they affect confrontation and cooperation the most.¹⁷

Thanks to its attributed numerical value, such selected data can be placed on a graph which illustrates the development of confrontation and cooperation for the given dyad and triad in the examined time period. It must be pointed out that both actions and counteractions are always shown in one graph—i.e., not only those led by state A against state B, but also vice-versa. On these grounds, it is possible to determine which pattern of behavior (reciprocity or bullying) prevails between the states, and whether the hypotheses are confirmed or rejected.

When analyzing the occurrence of reciprocity, it is important to realize that there are at least two understandings of “reciprocity” in the relations between the states. This fact is, however, seldom pointed out by other authors. We can distinguish between *overall reciprocity* and *singular reciprocity*.

Overall reciprocity is the reciprocity which exists (or does not exist) among states throughout the entire period under examination. We can identify its presence by evaluating the general trends of curves which represent the mutual actions of the two actors displayed on one graph. If overall reciprocity exists, the curves follow the same pattern—they increase and decrease on the cooperation-confrontation scale with roughly equivalent values. This indicates that neither of the actors let themselves be bullied by the other on a long-term basis.

However, problems with reciprocity arise when judging its presence in single dyads of action and counteraction. As described in the part of this article that focuses on stimulus-response theory, reciprocity is based on an assumption that actors respond to incoming stimuli by reacting in kind, i.e., they respond cooperatively to cooperative behavior and confrontationally to confrontation. On this basis, Axelrod formed his tit-for-tat strategy, which opens the game with a positive offer to cooperation hoping for a reciprocal response from the opponent. If this reciprocal logic was followed and the premises of stimulus-response theory about the actors reacting only to incoming stimuli were correct, the level of cooperation would stay at least roughly the same or would even rise after the first collaborative step was initiated, without further divergence to confrontation. We call this second version of reciprocity, *singular reciprocity*.

Points	Categories of events
80	voluntary unification of countries
70	establishing strategic alliances
60	high-level meetings
50	signing agreements and treaties
45	giving economic and food assistance, establishing economic cooperation
40	nuclear program termination
38	allowing inspections, military means withdrawal, propaganda restriction
35	lifting economic sanctions
33	visits of ministers, special ambassadors
30	dialogues, negotiations
25	cultural, economic and sports visits
23	cancelling pulling out of the NPT
20	policy declarations (official verbal support of policy)
10	verbal declarations of intentions (mild verbal support)
5	apologizing, hotline restoration, industrial complex re-opening, termination of mil. exercises
0	neutral or minor events
-10	neutral or minor events
-15	verbal disagreement with opponent's actions
-20	policy aimed against the opponent
-23	termination of negotiations, cancelling dialogues
-25	interrupting all contact at the highest level
-27	expelling international inspectors
-30	restoration of military exercises
-35	military exercises and transfer of military vehicles, demonstration of power
-38	passing resolutions and sanctions
-40	cutting off economic and food assistance
-43	launching/restarting the nuclear program
-45	breaking treaties and cease-fires
-50	military acts of an unarmed character
-53	restricted armed conflicts
-55	missile testing
-60	nuclear testing
-70	armed conflicts of a greater extent
-80	open war
	use of nuclear weapons

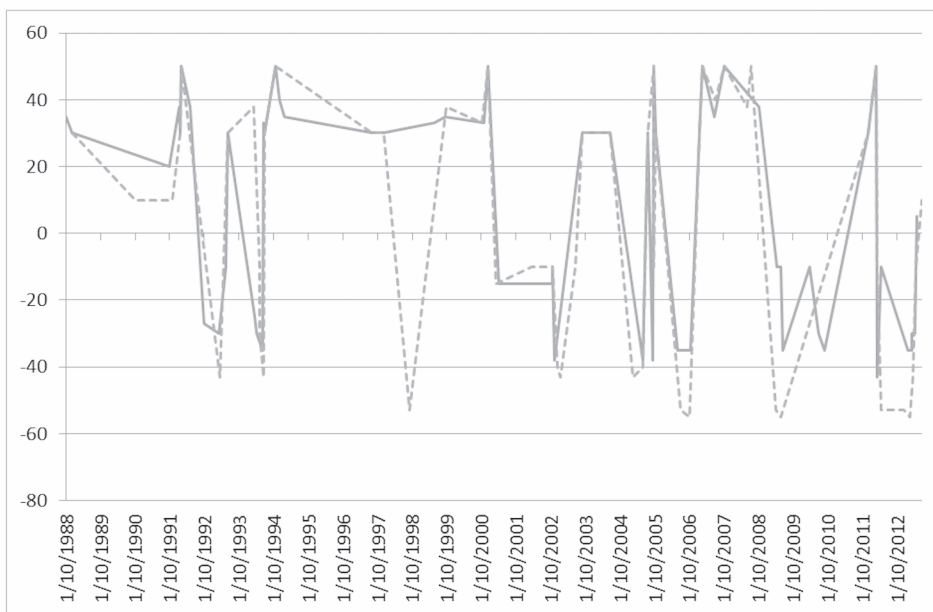
Table 1: Data coding categories

Events and Their Coding¹⁸

Bilateral Relations

The relations between the United States and North Korea were broken down into 106 actions and reactions and also included actions connected to the United Nations (UN) and its agencies, as North Korea perceives the UN as a tool of American unilateralism and imperialism. As seen from Pyongyang, Washington had a great impact on the origin and development of the UN system and, by means of permanent membership in the Security Council, it is able to influence world events for its benefit. Hence, actions connected to the UN, the Security Council, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were included in the relations with the

United States. The Six-Party Talks were dealt with in the same way, because they focused on North Korea's nuclear program aimed against its archenemy, the United States. Therefore, U.S.–North Korea relations also comprise multilateral events, in which Washington is only one of the parties; this is caused by the perception of these events by North Korean leadership. Graph 1.1 presents the bilateral relations.



Graph 1.1: U.S. actions (solid line) against North Korea (dotted line) and vice-versa. Source: authors.

The following narrative section does not explicitly mention all 106 events, which were recorded between the United States and North Korea. For the sake of simplicity, it focuses mostly on the peaks of the graph, and thus describes only extreme situations on both cooperative and confrontational ends of the curves. The same approach is applied when dealing with trilateral relations below.

The examined period of American–North Korean relations started with a series of cooperative acts that were initiated in 1988 by U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Much like relations with South Korea, Pyongyang responded reciprocally, even though its reactions were lower on the cooperative scale than U.S. actions; up until the signing of agreements with the IAEA in 1992, their reactions had been strictly verbal. The cooperation stage ended with the declaration by Seoul and Washington on the resumption of the 1993 military manoeuvres, Team Spirit. Pyongyang interrupted cooperation with the IAEA and declared its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). After a series of bilateral negotiations, North Korea returned to the NPT and allowed the continuation of IAEA's inspections of its nuclear facilities. However, the inspections ended in 1994 when the issue of the

North Korean nuclear program was raised in the Security Council. The crisis culminated with the mobilization of North Korea's population, the redeployment of American military technology, and North Korea's second withdrawal from the NPT.

The de-escalation of tensions and increased cooperation began after former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's visit to Pyongyang in which he laid the foundations of the *Agreed Framework*. After a series of bilateral negotiations, the agreement was signed in October 1994. The United States started sending food supplies and partially lifted economic sanctions; North Korea stopped its nuclear program and cooperated with the USA, South Korea and China in Four-Party Talks. Although Pyongyang tested long-missile rockets in 1998, Washington did not respond reciprocally and the Security Council did not deal with the matter either. The following year, U.S. President Bill Clinton even lifted economic sanctions further, to which North Korea responded with a voluntary moratorium on missile testing. Mutual relations continued to develop by means of summits, culminating in the visit by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in Pyongyang in October 2000.

The period of cooperation lasted until the inauguration of U.S. President George W. Bush. This was the start of the confrontational stage—the Bush administration saw North Korea as an enemy and its nuclear program as a threat, and this was reflected in official declarations and government policies. U.S.–North Korean relations particularly deteriorated after October 2002, when Washington accused Pyongyang of developing a uranium enrichment program. Even though the North Korean regime denied the accusation, Washington stopped its oil supplies, to which North Korea reacted by restarting its nuclear facilities. Hence, the *Agreed Framework* was officially put to rest.

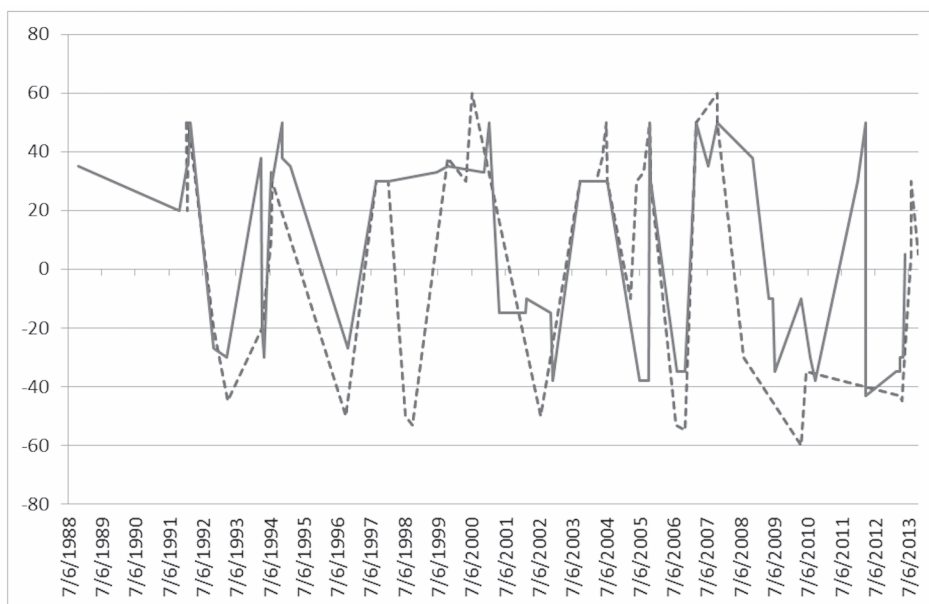
In June 2003, Pyongyang announced its intention to extend its nuclear deterrent. This stimulated increased U.S. diplomatic activity and consequently led to the Six-Party Talks. After three rounds, these talks produced no results and were the only sign of cooperation since the start of the Bush presidency. U.S.–North Korea relations deteriorated once again in the first half of 2005, when Pyongyang announced it had produced a nuclear weapon and pulled out of the NPT. It later ended the moratorium on missile testing and finally renewed works in the Yongbyon nuclear complex. Washington responded not only by freezing the assets of some companies linked to the North Korean nuclear program, but also by taking a more constructive approach toward Six-Party Talks. This led to the *Joint Declaration*, signed in September 2005. Even despite this progress toward cooperation, relations escalated in the first half of 2006. This was caused by the North Korean missile and nuclear facilities tests and subsequent Security Council resolutions.

The cooperation stage did not start until the early 2007 when bilateral and multilateral negotiations leading to the *Beijing Agreement* took place. The specific impacts of the agreement were that the United States released the frozen assets and North Korea disassembled Yongbyon. Despite slipping behind the time schedule, the North Koreans presented a detailed description of their nuclear program in June 2008 in order to satisfy the condition for taking their country off of the American list of states supporting terrorism.

North Korea's missile and nuclear facilities testing, begun in April 2009, initiated another confrontational stage. This one lasted, with the exception of one attempt at resuming long-term cooperation, until June 2013. In reaction to Pyongyang's missile and nuclear testing, the Security Council passed several resolutions and the United States expanded its sanctions. U.S.–North Korean discussions in the beginning of 2012 resulted in the *Leap Day Agreement*, yet it did not persist long—its legal force was ended by the North Korean missile test only several days after its signing. Pyongyang continued with its confrontational stance, as it tested missiles two more times in March 2012, conducted a nuclear test in February 2013, and later that year cancelled the ceasefire with the United States and cut off the hotline with South Korea, against which it also declared war. The crisis, as well as the examined period, ended with Pyongyang's proposal to resume bilateral talks with Washington in June 2013.

Trilateral Relations

In total, 135 trilateral actions and reactions were observed and plotted on the cooperative-confrontational scale and on a graph. Graph 2 depicts North Korean actions against South Korea, which are supposed to be the determinant of American actions against North Korea. The trilateral hypothesis supposes that a linkage exists between all three actors—the United States reciprocates if North Korea carries out actions against its southern neighbor.



Graph 2: American actions (solid line) against North Korea and North Korean behavior (dotted line) toward South Korea. Source: authors.

From 1988 to October 1992, there was a period of cooperation between the examined states initiated by South Korea and the United States. North Korea reacted to their actions reciprocally, even though it only “counterbalanced them”; it did not initiate cooperative action.

The confrontational stage started with announcing the resumption of U.S.–South Korea military exercises in October 1992 and lasted up until President Carter’s visit to Pyongyang in June 1994. Then North Korea improved its relations both with South Korea, with which it had agreed to hold the first summit of the heads of state, and with the United States, with which it had signed the *Agreed Framework*. For this behavior, Pyongyang was rewarded with suspended military exercises and released sanctions.

In 1996, a North Korean submarine crashed off the South Korean coast, to which Seoul responded by resuming the Team Spirit manoeuvres. This did not, however, put the Four-Party Talks, under the auspices of the United States, at risk. Similarly, the armed incident near the city of Sokcho and the 1998 missile testing did not have a negative impact on the reconciliation policies of the United States and South Korea—neither of the actors responded to the North Korean actions reciprocally; on the contrary, Seoul went on with the *Sunshine Policy* and Washington lifted economic sanctions. Thus, the situation on the peninsula did not escalate; quite the reverse, a period of cooperation followed, resulting in the first top-level inter-Korean summit and diplomatic exchange between Pyongyang and Washington.

The cooperative stage was over with President Bush’s inauguration, and the period of confrontation started in January 2002. Pyongyang responded to Washington’s strong declarations and change of policies with tough rhetoric and a minor armed conflict with South Korea. The reciprocating pattern re-occurred and tensions increased. Nevertheless, inter-Korean relations were cooperative in comparison with the relations between North Korea and the United States. South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun went on with the reconciliation policy of his predecessor Kim Dae-jung and this led to the signing of the *Inter-Korean Maritime Agreement* in June 2004 and to the second Korean summit of the heads of state in 2007. South Korea only temporarily diverged from this pattern of behavior in its response to the North Korean nuclear test from October 2006; otherwise, it had acted in the same style as was launched by Kim Dae-jung in 1998 up until President Lee Myung-bak’s election in 2008.

Pyongyang’s relations with Washington were strikingly different—they escalated with North Korea’s withdrawal from the NPT in 2003, the resumption of works in Yongbyon in 2005 and the nuclear and missile testing in 2006. Multilateral negotiations took place between these events in which the other actors tried to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem, yet with no success.

Inter-Korean relations deteriorated after President Lee came to power in 2008. His policy toward his northern neighbor was not as conciliatory as his predecessors’. This was understood by North Korea as an act of hostility. However, the improvement of relations with the United States going on at that time can only be regarded as a temporary deviation from the conflict pattern intensified by the 2009 missile

and nuclear facility testing as well as the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling Yeonpyeong Island in the following year. Those events had a deteriorating effect on inter-Korean relations as well.

Even though Washington and Seoul tried to initiate cooperation, they failed to maintain it long-term due to Pyongyang's behavior—e.g., the 2012 *Leap Day Agreement* was annulled only several days after it had been reached. The interconnectedness of U.S.–North Korea–South Korea relations can be aptly illustrated by the 2013 Korean crisis in which North Korea escalated tensions with the remaining two actors of the triad—*inter alia*, it broke the ceasefire with the USA as well as the non-aggression pacts with the South. Subsequently, Pyongyang improved the relations with both actors in the summer of 2013, and the crisis ended.

Data Analysis and Discussion

As mentioned above in the section about research design, we have to distinguish two versions of reciprocity—overall reciprocity and singular reciprocity. The occurrence of both will be examined in the graphs representing bilateral as well as trilateral relations between the chosen actors. Let us first focus on overall reciprocity.

Overall reciprocity tells us about the nature of actors' relationships during the whole period under examination. Interactions between North Korea and the United States are shown in Graph 1.1. In a major part of the examined period, bilateral relations appear to have had a great degree of overall reciprocity—the curves for actions and reactions follow the same pattern and responses tend to have roughly equivalent values. Despite this, the actions of Pyongyang were more hostile, whilst Washington was sending impulses that were slightly more cooperative. Bullying was limited to isolated cases and was never present in the long-term—when one of the states changed the nature of mutual exchange, the other reciprocated in the same manner.

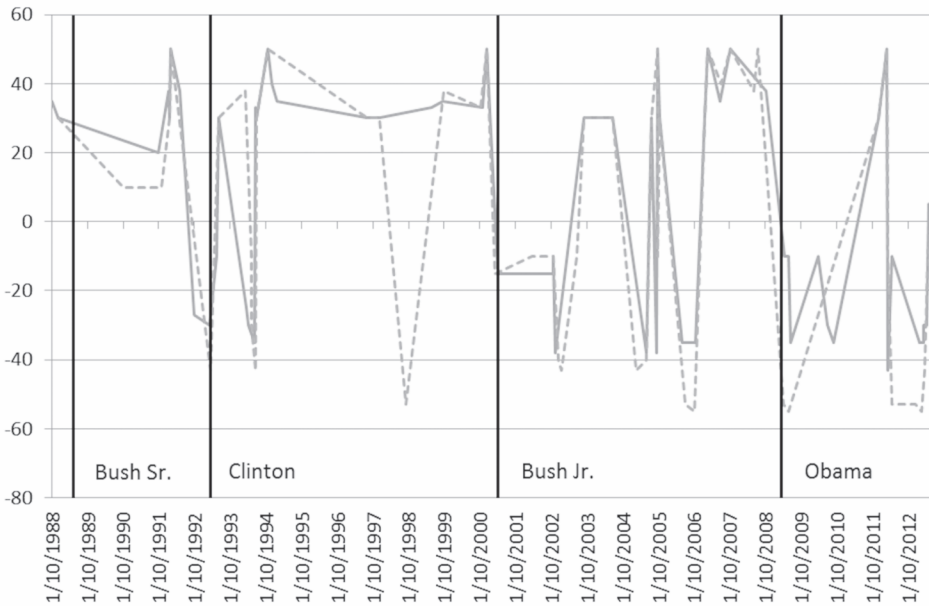
When analyzing the relations between North Korea and the United States from the point of view of overall reciprocity, we can divide the examined period into three main parts. The first takes place between 1988 and 1994 and is characterized by alternating cooperation and confrontation, with a high degree of overall reciprocity. Changes in the confrontation-cooperation pattern were initiated by both the United States and North Korea. Acting according to Axelrod's *tit-for-tat* strategy, Washington launched the relations in the examined period with cooperative offers to which Pyongyang replied in the same spirit, even though its reactions did not reach such value as American stimuli did. On the other hand, Washington was not as confrontational as Pyongyang. We can also find those characteristics during the third period under examination.

Second, a reconciliatory period started with the negotiating and signing of the *Agreed Framework* in 1994 and lasted until 2001. It was typified by cooperation and stability; this pattern was only interrupted by North Korea's missile test in 1998, to which neither Washington nor the Security Council undertook any reciprocal steps.

The reason why the U.S. did not reciprocate can be found in President Clinton’s mild North Korean policy based on positive offers and aimed at increased cooperation. If the reciprocity was not completely followed, it was due to one of the actor’s internal decisions; however, this is out of the scope of stimulus-response theory and it in fact contradicts one of its main premises—that the only determinant of a state’s action is the incoming external stimuli.

A change in the level of cooperation occurred after the inauguration of President Bush, who perceived North Korea as a threat, calling it a member of the “Axis of Evil” and accusing it of sponsoring terrorism. Pyongyang perceived this as confrontational and responded to it reciprocally. North Korean–American relations in the period from 2001 to 2013 exhibited a great degree of overall reciprocity, both to positive and negative stimuli. If the impulse toward escalation came from the United States, North Korea responded with more hostile actions. On the other hand, American reactions to Pyongyang’s confrontational stimuli never reached the same level of hostility. The United States did not let itself be trapped in an escalatory spiral and responded to confrontation much more moderately. Hence, the situation never escalated into an open conflict. The Bush administration and the administration of his successor Barack Obama tried to mitigate the tension via multi- and bilateral negotiations, yet apart from the period from 2007 to 2009, they failed to achieve a longer period of stability and cooperation.

Much like North Korea’s relations with South Korea, in a majority of cases the positive stimuli came from the United States. Washington was interested in a peaceful solution to the Korean problem, so it initiated changes from confrontation to



Graph 1.2: American actions (solid line) against North Korea (dotted line) with the American presidents’ administration. Source: authors.

cooperation. This stance, however, did not preclude its occasional hostile stimuli, which ended cooperative exchanges, and to which Pyongyang responded with increased hostility. On the contrary, North Korea frequently escalated relations, mostly through nuclear and missile tests, the number of which had grown since Pyongyang's withdrawal from the 2005 moratorium on missile testing. All but one of the observed missile and nuclear tests took place in President Bush's second term and under President Obama's administration. While Clinton's approach to North Korea differed substantially, with its distinct inclination toward cooperation and the mitigation of tensions, it sometimes overlooked North Korean provocative behavior. The policies of subsequent American presidents were much more based on reciprocity without unconditional positive offers. They followed Leng's *carrot-and-stick* strategy, which sees a certain degree of tough attitude and determination as necessary.

Graph 1.2 shows U.S.–North Korea relations with individual American presidential administrations highlighted. Although the level of overall reciprocity was high during the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, it can be stated that the level of cooperation was highest (and thus the level of conflict was the lowest) during Clinton's administration. The only disruption was the 1998 North Korean missile test, to which neither the USA nor the Security Council responded with hostility. President Bush also managed to establish cooperation with North Korea several times with the longest cooperative period from 2007 to 2009. President Obama acted in a similar way and his approach produced results very similar to Bush's—relations swung from cooperation to hostility and vice-versa.

Graph 1.2 also shows that the highest degree of overall reciprocity falls under George W. Bush's administration, when the curves almost totally overlapped in both cooperative and confrontational values. Bush's North Korean policy was openly based on strict reciprocity and made some demands of Pyongyang (for example, dismantling nuclear facilities) as a precondition to Washington's positive moves, and at the same time, punished North Korea's hostile behavior.

Graph 2 describes trilateral relations between the United States, North Korea, and South Korea in the following way: Pyongyang's actions against Seoul are in dotted line and Washington's reactions to Pyongyang are in solid line. This graph shall serve as a basis to reject or confirm the trilateral hypotheses, according to which American behavior toward North Korea is dependent on North Korea's actions aimed at its southern neighbor. Hence, our aim is to decide whether such interconnectedness exists or not. Even though the correlation of actions is not as high as in the case of dyadic U.S.–North Korean relations, the graph clearly shows a great interconnectedness of individual actions as well as a clear overall reciprocal pattern in the trilateral form. Trilateral linkage can be seen for example in the years 1988–1992, when all countries cooperated thanks to the positive offers of Seoul and Washington; or during the subsequent period of confrontation, which escalated into the so-called first Korean crisis in 1994.

The divergence from overall reciprocity occurred in 1998, when the United States did not give a negative response to either North Korea's missile testing or its

submarine incident. If we search for the reasons why both the United States and South Korea did not respond to Pyongyang's provocations reciprocally, we can find them in Presidents Clinton's and Kim Dae-jung's North Korean policies, thus inside of black boxes, where stimulus-response theory does not want to look.

After the inauguration of President Bush, the United States changed the course from cooperation to confrontation. North Korea reciprocated and adopted this behavior into its relations with the South. In the following years, the relations between the three countries underwent a series of improvements and re-deteriorations. Trilateral interconnectedness is also evident from the events of 2007—after the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006, the United States took the diplomatic offensive, which resulted in the signing of the *Beijing Agreement* and a series of cooperative steps, one of which was also the second inter-Korean summit. However, after the sinking of the South Korean ship Cheonan by a North Korean torpedo in 2010, relations between the three countries worsened. The United States condemned the North Korean act as aggression against South Korea and went on to increase economic sanctions. Thus, it confirmed its alliance with Seoul, as well as the interconnectedness of its actions with the actions on the Korean peninsula.

The Korean Crisis in the first half of 2013 is another example, which illustrates the existence of trilateral concatenation. In December 2012, Pyongyang carried out a missile test, to which the Security Council responded by passing a resolution; this situation re-occurred in late February and early March of following year with the only difference being that North Korea tested a nuclear device rather than missiles. The situation culminated with an annual U.S.–South Korea military exercise during which Pyongyang broke the ceasefire agreement with Washington, declared a state of war with Seoul and, among other things, also closed down the industrial complex in Kaesong.

The above-mentioned examples clearly show that improvement or deterioration of North Korea's relations with one actor tends to have an impact on its relations with the third actor. In other words, if there is an increase in cooperation or confrontation in one dyad, it often occurs in the other as well. This supports Woo's former findings.¹⁹

This thorough examination of bilateral and trilateral relations shows us that overall reciprocity exists between given states. They tend to reciprocate the nature of impulses coming to them, which excludes the existence of long-term bullying. In other words, if one actor changes the nature of the relationship from cooperation to confrontation or vice-versa, the other tends to reciprocate, not allowing itself to be bullied over a longer period of time.

Now let's focus on the second version of reciprocity, which we call singular reciprocity. Its occurrence can be judged from single dyads of action and counteraction. As stimulus-response theory states, each action must be treated as both a reaction to previous stimulus, and a stimulus itself. If the premises of stimulus-response theory are correct, the actor should always respond to incoming stimuli with an act of the same nature—i.e., respond cooperatively to cooperation and confrontationally to confrontation. The foundation of reciprocity lies in the monocausal presumption

that the only cause for one's behavior is the reaction to impulses sent by other players. Other, for example internal, influences are excluded. What is not observable does not fall within the interest of stimulus-response theory. If this reciprocal logic is true, the nature of the mutual exchange should not change once it is established, and the level of cooperation or confrontation should also stay at least roughly the same.

When looking at the graphs, we see that during some periods, actions were reciprocated with reactions of the same kind. As shown on graph 1.1, such a phenomenon was recorded in U.S.–North Korea relations during the Clinton administration and during the years 2006–2008, when the states engaged in collaborative exchanges. However, we rarely see longer periods of cooperation or confrontation among the actors; the graphs predominantly show rapid and sudden changes in the cooperation/confrontation pattern. When simplified, it almost seems that after each exchange of collaborative actions, the pattern changes toward confrontation, and later on, to cooperation again. Nevertheless, those variations contradict the main premises of reciprocity, which is a response of the same kind. If the states act according to the stimulus-response theory, the collaborative relations, which were established in both the bilateral and trilateral forms in the beginning of 1990's, would persist during the whole period under examination. However, all actors changed the nature of mutual exchange many times. This contradicts not only the existence of singular reciprocity, but also the monocausal premise that incoming stimuli is the only thing that influences state behavior. Unsurprisingly, we found one such influence in the changes of political leadership in the United States. As shown on graph 1.2, different approaches of American presidents produced different stimuli as well as responses to North Korea's behavior. Thus, contrary to the premises of stimulus-response theory, the pattern of interactions has been influenced by state's internal decisions, which partially explains why singular reciprocity was not present.

To sum up, the interpretation of the graphs reveal interesting findings—they confirm the existence of overall reciprocity, as the curves followed the same pattern during the whole period under examination, and as none of the actors allowed itself to be bullied over a long period of time. However, the presence of singular reciprocity, which is, according to the authors, more important from the stimulus-response theory point of view, was not confirmed.

In this stage, it is possible to decide about the validity or invalidity of the two hypotheses, one for the dyadic and the other for the trilateral relations. Relations between the United States and North Korea are described in hypothesis *H1* and its validity can be decided on the grounds of the empirical data shown in Graph 1.1. Even though the existence of so-called overall reciprocity was confirmed, the presence of singular reciprocity was rejected. It clearly demonstrates that the states did not follow the premises of the stimulus-response theory and thus North Korea did not reciprocate the behavior modeled by the United States and vice-versa. From this we can deduce that the dyadic hypothesis was not confirmed.

The same logic can be applied to the second hypothesis, *H2*. It stems from the

belief that the United States is an outside actor in the events taking place on the Korean peninsula and it aims to shape relations between the remaining actors by adapting its actions according to how Pyongyang treats Seoul. Washington either rewards North Korea for its cooperative behavior or punishes it for increasing confrontation. In trilateral relations, we confirmed the existence of overall reciprocity; singular reciprocity was not present in many action-reaction dyads, however. This leads us to the conclusion that hypothesis *H2* is not valid either. These findings have important implications not only to the theoretical background of reciprocity, but also to its practical application in the relations among given actors.

Theoretically, the study of bilateral and trilateral relations among key actors in the Korean Peninsula security complex revealed that the states have not acted according to the premises of reciprocity. The empirical findings disconfirm the validity of stimulus-response theory, which postulates that states should treat their counterparts in the way they want to be treated by them. Apparently, other influences determine the responses to incoming stimuli, but this is beyond the scope of stimulus-response theory, which we have to hold invalid for the examined case. Thus, the theory in question did not pass the test in the most unlikely case.

From an international relations point of view, we can state that North Korea did not automatically reciprocate positive offers sent to it by other actors. On the contrary, it very often changed the nature of the mutual exchange toward confrontation, which we may see as a bullying behavior. Pyongyang tends to “use” incoming positive stimuli, but subsequently initiate hostile actions in response. More generally, our findings imply that states do not always act reciprocally and they should not expect reciprocal behavior from their counterparts. Reciprocal behavior and the monocausal nature of inter-state exchange should not be taken as a given. Placing this in a liberal-conservative context, the findings support conservative premises according to which democracies should apply a firm, uncompromising attitude when dealing with authoritarian regimes instead of offering positive stimuli for cooperation.

Now it is possible to decide about the answer to the research question, which was whether the relations between the examined states are driven by reciprocity, and thus supporting the premises of stimulus-response theory, or whether they employ a bullying strategy. As the existence of singular reciprocity in many of action-reaction dyads was not confirmed, we can conclude that the relations are not driven by reciprocity. Even though long-term bullying was not confirmed, as all players adjusted their behavior to the changes in cooperation/confrontation pattern, from the analysis of singular reciprocity we may conclude that bullying was present, especially on the side of North Korea. Pyongyang initiated most of the hostile actions, which came in response to both negative and positive stimuli from the United States and South Korea. As those two allies often changed the exchange toward cooperation, North Korea did not, and instead responded in a hostile manner in the next round of the game.

How can we explain such behavior from North Korea? Leng postulates “compliance with an influence attempt will be forthcoming if the inducements employed

by the influencer are credible and if the punishments or rewards to be imposed outweigh the target's expected gains from noncompliance."²⁰ In other words, the actor will respond in compliance with incoming stimuli only if he gains more (or loses less) compared to his noncompliance, thus cooperation among actors occurs when more future benefits are expected through cooperation than through non-cooperation. When we evaluate North Korea's behavior during the examined period from this point of view, we see that only during the Clinton administration was there a longer stage when the benefits of cooperation were high enough to motivate Pyongyang to cooperate. There can be multiple explanations for that, but one of them might be found in North Korea's internal economic and humanitarian crisis, which hit the country after the end of the Cold War and subsequent series of natural disasters in the first half of the 1990's. Since the beginning of the Bush administration in 2001, when the peak of the internal crisis was over, North Korea has been pursuing non-cooperative and sometimes even hostile actions toward its opponents, not reacting reciprocally on many positive incentives. As long as Pyongyang expects to gain enough future benefits through non-cooperation and nuclear program development, they are likely to employ bullying instead of reciprocity as the main strategy.

Conclusion

This paper tested the premises of the stimulus-response theory on one of the most unlikely cases: the relations among key actors in the Korean Peninsula security complex. We have studied the existence of reciprocity in the bilateral relations between the United States and North Korea as well as the trilateral relations between the United States, North Korea, and South Korea in a series of events in the period from the end of Cold War until mid-2013.

From the theoretical and methodological points of view, it must be pointed out that we distinguish two versions of reciprocity. This is rarely done by other authors. *Overall reciprocity* tells us about the general trend of mutual exchange during the whole period under examination. If this kind of reciprocity exists, the actors' actions and reactions tend to follow the same pattern—they increase and decrease on the cooperation-confrontation scale with roughly equivalent values. The second version of reciprocity, *singular reciprocity*, reveals whether the actors reciprocate the incoming stimuli with an action of the same kind. If this kind of reciprocity exists, the actors respond cooperatively to cooperative stimuli and confrontationally to confrontational stimuli without changing the nature of the exchange. The occurrence of singular reciprocity is much more important for the validity of the stimulus-response theory, because it is derived directly from one of its main presumptions.

The event data analysis has revealed two important findings. Overall reciprocity exists in both bilateral and trilateral relations. When one actor initiates a change in the confrontation/cooperation pattern, the others tend to reciprocate that change, so they do not allow themselves to be bullied on a long-term basis. However, as stimulus-response theory states, such a change in the confrontation/cooperation

pattern should never occur, as the actor should always reciprocate the nature of the incoming stimuli. In other words, if cooperation (or confrontation) is once established, it should continue to grow or hold steady for the entire period under examination. This is not the case of the relations between the United States, North Korea, and South Korea, as singular reciprocity does not exist among them. Analysis of single action-reaction dyads shows us that the actors deliberately change the nature of mutual exchange based on other influences, not on incoming stimuli only. They do not always react cooperatively to cooperation and confrontationally to confrontation.

Due to the above-mentioned findings, we had to reject the hypotheses about the reciprocal nature of bilateral and trilateral relations between the examined actors, and thus the stimulus-response theory is invalid for our case. This has both theoretical as well as practical implications. Theoretically, the stimulus-response theory did not pass the test by the most unlikely case and thus, it does not hold empirical validity. From the point of view of practical international politics, states should not expect other states to automatically respond positively to their positive offers. On the contrary, our findings show that positive stimuli sent toward North Korea do not trigger long-term periods of cooperation, as Pyongyang often tends to change the nature of relations to confrontation. It seems that when dealing with North Korea, conservative views on international relations are more valid than liberal ones. Thus, instead of offering positive stimuli, democracies should apply a firm and uncompromising approach. This could “bully” North Korea into cooperation and bring about desired outcomes.

Notes

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17. Due to its length, the list of events could not be included in this article, but is available upon request.

18. The article describing bilateral and trilateral events is based on thorough examination of a wide range of primary and secondary sources. Due to its length, a complete bibliography cannot be included in this article, however among the main sources were following works:

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20. Leng & Wheeler, "Influence Strategies, Success, and War," p. 658.

Biographical Statements

Jan Blinka is a Ph.D. candidate in international relations at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. He is interested in the development and dynamics of regional conflicts, specifically those in East Asia and the Caucasus region. He focuses on security relations between major actors on the Korean peninsula, and on political development in North Korea and combines his research with practical experiences in diplomacy and the NGO sector.

Zdeněk Kříž is an associate professor in the Department of International Relations and European Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. He specializes in the history of international relations, international security organization, the security policy of Germany and the Czech Republic, civilian control and democratic control of the army and the history of war. He is the author of three monographs, more than thirty articles, and studies at home and abroad.