

1 Introduction

North Korea’s nuclear weapons program constitutes one of the most serious challenges to international security at the dawn of the 21st century. On a global scale, Pyongyang’s development of nuclear arms undermines the nonproliferation regime centering on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). As the international effort to contain the spread of nuclear weapons is already heavily strained by the existence of three nuclear weapon states—Israel, India, and Pakistan—that are not a party to the NPT, North Korea’s continued defiance of the global nonproliferation order gravely challenges the viability of this regime. Furthermore, North Korea’s nuclear weapons program poses a direct proliferation risk in that it raises the threat that the North’s nuclear equipment and materials find their way onto the international nuclear black market. The regime of dictator Kim Jong Il has collaborated with the nuclear smuggling ring of Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan in the past, and more recently Pyongyang is suspected of having provided Syria with a nuclear reactor. Beyond these global challenges, the North Korean nuclear weapons program destabilizes regional security in Northeast Asia. Since Northeast Asian security relations are highly competitive and governed by balance-of-power mechanisms in the absence of effective multilateral institutions, North Korea’s continued development of nuclear arms severely undermines the security of its neighboring countries and troubles the American alliance system undergirding Northeast Asia’s regional security order.

The United States is confronted with these challenges of the North Korean nuclear program in a unique way. America’s role as the world’s sole superpower with interests in every region of the globe gives it an interest in global nonproliferation unlike any other nation. This is because any nuclear armed regional aggressor might force Washington to choose between defending an important interest under the risk of a nuclear attack, or compromising this interest, with the fatal consequence of damaging the United States’ reputation of military preeminence and as a protector of allies and friends. In addition to this global nonproliferation concern, the United States has a vital interest in the security of Northeast Asia. The region as a whole is of critical and, owing to its disproportionate

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share of global growth, continuously increasing importance to the U.S. economy. Besides, Northeast Asia is home to two American treaty allies—Japan and South Korea—which, as the region’s sole non-nuclear-weapon states, are most exposed to strategic instability in Northeast Asia, yet assume an irreplaceable role in furthering U.S. interests in this region and beyond. Driven by this unique combination of global nuclear nonproliferation concerns and apprehensiveness for Northeast Asian security, the United States has a tremendous interest in seeing North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons program and, consequently, has put more effort into this important undertaking than any other nation.

1.1 The Central Research Question

In pursuing the interest of a non-nuclear North Korea, President George W. Bush’s administration followed in sequence two substantially different nonproliferation policies. To be sure, even though qualitative foreign policy changes are not an everyday phenomenon, they occur quite frequently. Yet, usually such policy changes are anticipated well in advance, at least by the experts’ community. What makes the Bush administration’s course reversal toward the North Korean nuclear weapons program exceptional is that it came utterly unexpected and seemed counterintuitive.

Until early October 2006, the Bush administration’s nuclear nonproliferation policy toward North Korea pursued a hard-headed and confrontational approach. Doubting the intention of dictator Kim Jong Il to denuclearize, the Bush administration persistently refused providing North Korea with significant tangible inducements before the Kim regime actually started dismantling its nuclear arms program. While denying incentives, the administration concentrated on ratcheting up the pressure on the North to coerce it into agreeing to a comprehensive denuclearization accord. Notably, despite recurring calls from allies and foes alike for Washington to be more forthcoming, the administration stuck to its tough stance. Vice President Richard B. Cheney, moving to kill a plan in late 2003 to insert some flexibility into U.S. nonproliferation policy toward North Korea, expressed this uncompromising line of the Bush administration most bluntly: “We don’t negotiate with evil, we defeat it.”

After North Korea had conducted its first nuclear weapons test on October 9, 2006, though, the Bush administration, during the following six months, undertook a major redirection of its nonproliferation policy toward the North. Following the effort of the United Nations (UN) Security Council to punish North Ko-

rea for its nuclear test, where the U.S. administration had assumed the leading role as expected, Washington began to soften its posture toward the regime in Pyongyang. The Bush team toned down its pressure on the North and offered the Kim regime tangible inducements for steps far short of dismantling its nuclear program. Moreover, instead of pressing for solving the North Korean nuclear puzzle in one fell swoop, the administration adopted a cooperative step-by-step approach to denuclearization. In short, the Bush administration came to embrace exactly the kind of nonproliferation policy toward North Korea that it had strongly rejected for years. In doing so, the administration proved wrong the community of North Korea watchers, including former Bush administration officials, who had doubted that this administration would ever shift toward an accommodating line given its mistrust in the Kim regime as well as the nuclear test as a provocation that effectively foreclosed softening U.S. policy.5

This study aims at elucidating this sudden and counterintuitive change in the Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea from a confrontational toward a more cooperative line, answering the following central research question:

*Why did the Bush administration alter its nuclear nonproliferation policy toward North Korea in the aftermath of the North Korean nuclear test?*

### 1.2 Competing Explanations and Existing Literature

While this study constitutes the first truly systematic analysis of the reasons for the change in the Bush administration’s nuclear nonproliferation policy toward North Korea after the nuclear test, a small number of knowledgeable scholars and policy experts have already endeavored to elucidate the administration’s sudden change of course toward the North. Their accounts offer three different reasons why the Bush administration decided to redirect its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea in the aftermath of the nuclear test: the security implications of a growing crisis on the Korean Peninsula, U.S. domestic politics, and changing decision-making dynamics within the Bush administration. Notably, most of the scholars and policy experts, who have attempted to elucidate Wash-

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5 For example, David Straub, who had served as the State Department’s Korean desk director during Bush’s first term, declared after the nuclear test that given President Bush’s strong beliefs about the North Korean regime, the administration would most likely stick to its tough course until the end of its term. See David Straub, The Consequences of the North Korean Nuclear Test for U.S.-ROK Relations: An American Perspective, in: Kun Young Park et al., *The North Korean Nuclear Test and the Future of Northeast Asia* (KINU International Colloquium 06-05), Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2006, pp. 79-99 (88-90).
washington’s course reversal, base their explanations on more than one of these causal factors, and some authors even draw on all three reasons, even though those at least concede that they are making best guesses.  

The first factor, which is considered a causal variable for the Bush administration’s shift toward a more accommodating policy, is the security implications of the North Korean nuclear breakout. Authors drawing on this aspect interpret Bush’s course reversal as a rush toward a settlement with North Korea with the aim of containing a security crisis. Former U.S. nonproliferation official Gary Samore thus hypothesizes that Washington altered its policy because U.S. decision makers feared the negative impact of a further escalating North Korean nuclear conflict on Northeast Asian regional security.  

In a similar vein, U.S. scholar and North Korea expert Leon V. Sigal argues that the risk of the North’s unrestrained nuclear armament triggering nuclear weapons ambitions in Japan and South Korea made the Bush administration embrace a more forthcoming posture in the nuclear dispute with North Korea.  

A second reason for the redirection of the Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea is seen in U.S. domestic politics. Proponents of this view regard Washington’s change of course as a rush toward a North Korean nuclear deal that would help President Bush in his troubled domestic position. In this vein, U.S. nuclear expert Joseph Cirincione argues that the Bush administration toned down its policy because it was facing increasing pressure to do so from Democratic lawmakers who had gained in political power with the Democrats’ takeover of Congress in the November 2006 midterm elections.  

Making a slightly different point, New York Times veteran David E. Sanger suggests that with the Iraq war deteriorating and the Republican loss in the midterm elections, President Bush could simply not afford to have an escalating North Korean nuclear crisis turn into yet another domestic political disaster. Instead, Sanger avows, Bush urgently needed a foreign policy success he could sell domestically and, for that reason, changed course and embraced a nuclear

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deal with Pyongyang.\textsuperscript{10} Echoing Sanger’s view, Mike Chinoy, the former long-time Asia correspondent for CNN, hypothesizes that the president’s about-face on North Korea was furthermore driven by legacy considerations, implying that Bush redirected U.S. policy in order to upgrade his presumably miserable scorecard of diplomatic accomplishments through a nuclear accord with the North.\textsuperscript{11}

A third explanation offered to explain the post-nuclear-test change in U.S. nonproliferation policy toward North Korea draws on the decision-making dynamics within the Bush administration. Authors subscribing to this view interpret the administration’s policy shift toward a more accommodating North Korea policy as the result of personnel changes, which had crumbled the power of hardliners on the Bush team and thereby led to an ascendance of the pragmatic voices in the administration’s decision-making on North Korea. Interestingly, the foremost advocates of this reading of the policy change are former Bush administration officials from both the hard-line and the pragmatists’ camps. Charles L. Pritchard, Bush’s pragmatic former special envoy for negotiations with North Korea, suggests that the resigning of three senior North Korea hawks, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, UN Ambassador Bolton, and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control Joseph, in late 2006 and early 2007, respectively, freed the policy-making process from their hard-line influence, thus precipitating a more moderate course.\textsuperscript{12} Representing the group of hawks, John R. Bolton likewise assumes that these personnel changes critically eroded the hard-line bulwark within the Bush administration against a compromising North Korea policy so that the proponents of a more forthcoming course could finally prevail.\textsuperscript{13}

This thesis does not agree with any of these three explanations for the post-nuclear-test redirection of the Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea. In doing so, the study’s critique of these accounts is of a fundamental nature: None of the above-mentioned authors provides robust evidence for his argument or scrutinizes the assumptions underlying his causal claims. Taking on the task of testing the arguments of these authors, this thesis refutes all existing accounts of Bush’s policy shift toward North Korea—and it offers an alternative explanation: The Bush administration altered its nuclear nonproliferation policy toward North Korea toward a cooperative course because after

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The nuclear test, it perceived fundamentally improved prospects for fruitful co-operation on North Korea’s denuclearization.

Beyond refuting the existing explanations for the change in the Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward the North, this study contributes to the small body of existing political science literature on U.S. policy toward North Korea. This literature consists of two major strands. The first strand comprises studies focusing exclusively on U.S. policy in the North Korean nuclear conflict. These accounts fall into three groups. The first group consists of theory-driven analyses and evaluations of U.S. nonproliferation strategy.\textsuperscript{14} The second group comprises works examining in much detail the development of U.S. nonproliferation policy and U.S.-North Korean nuclear negotiations, dealing with either the so-called first North Korean nuclear crisis that was settled with the U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework in 1994\textsuperscript{15} or the ongoing so-called second North Korean nuclear crisis and the efforts to resolve it through the six-party talks.\textsuperscript{16} The third group of accounts is more policy-oriented as they contain a sizable prescriptive component suggesting ways and means which might allow for a cooperative and sustainable solution of the North Korean nuclear question.\textsuperscript{17} Within this first strand of literature, this thesis contributes primarily to the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Michael O’Hanlon/Mike Mochizuki, \textit{Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal With a Nuclear North Korea}, New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003; Charles L. Pritchard, \textit{Failed Diplomacy}.
\end{itemize}
second-group studies that aim to explain U.S. policy development in a detailed manner. Indeed, the thesis adds the first systematic case study of the post-nuclear-test shift in the Bush administration’s policy to the accounts in this group. Besides, this study makes a smaller contribution to the first-group works, which deal with U.S. strategy, by elucidating the Bush team’s strategy in its final two years in office.

The second major strand of political science literature on U.S. North Korea policy focuses on U.S. policy toward the North in its entirety as part of the triangular relationship between the United States, its North Korean adversary, and its South Korean ally. Works within this second strand of literature also falls into three groups. The first group of accounts examines in detail U.S. policy development within this trilateral context. Studies in the second group deal with U.S.-South Korean alliance coordination toward North Korea and the repercussions of U.S. North Korea policy on the alliance as well as inter-Korean relations. The third group comprises works on cognitive aspects, focusing on national identities within the triangular relationship and belief systems underlying U.S. policy toward North Korea as well as South Korea. This thesis connects to groups two and three by touching on the impact of inter-Korean ties on U.S. North Korea policy and on beliefs guiding U.S. policy. However, it does not add new knowledge to these two literatures.

1.3 Methodology and Sources

In order to answer the central research question of the thesis—Why did the Bush administration alter its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea after the North’s nuclear test?—the study will employ a “before-after” research design. To account for discrepancies between the requirements of this before-after method and the realities of the examined case, the thesis will use the method of “process-tracing.”

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The thesis employs a before-after design because this method permits the study to reach strong causal conclusions through a control of variables, despite the fact that it constitutes a single-case study. A before-after research design divides a single longitudinal case neatly into two sub-cases. To explain the difference between them in the observed outcome, this method looks for other possibly relevant differences between the two sub-cases without analyzing their causal impact. Thus, before-after comparisons follow the logic of John Stuart Mill’s “method of difference” that different outcomes among several cases can only be caused by factors that vary across the cases. The strength of the before-after comparison stems from the fact that the two sub-cases, as they are derived from a single case, resemble each other very closely, so that most relevant factors are controlled for and can, therefore, be dismissed as potential causal variables. If this elimination process reduces the candidate causal factors to a single variable, the before-after method achieves—notably with a single-case study—the ideal of a “controlled comparison,” that is, a comparison of two or more cases that are similar in every respect but one. Such a comparison is the functional equivalent of a scientific experiment and, hence, permits valid causal inference: A different outcome on the dependent variable can be logically connected to the single varying factor without analyzing the causal process itself.

An application of the before-after design to the case of the post-nuclear-test shift in the Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea is problematic, however, because the realities of the case do not meet the strict requirements of this method. For a before-after comparison to allow for causal inference, only one factor can vary across the two sub-cases. This condition is not fulfilled in the case of the shift in U.S. nonproliferation policy toward North Korea after the nuclear test. This is because the transition from sub-case one to sub-case two—which might be called the Bush administration’s “old” and “new” nonproliferation policies toward North Korea, respectively—extended over a period, during which more than one significant factor changed. Consequently, a comparison provides for several potential causal variables. This makes it impossible for the before-after method to draw definitive causal conclusions based on Mill’s method of difference, because a before-after comparison looks only at the presence of relevant factors and, hence, cannot ascertain the respective causal values of several potential explanatory variables.

This impediment for the thesis to reach precise causal conclusions can be overcome, though, by complementing the before-after method with what Alex-


ander L. George and Andrew Bennett call the method of “process-tracing.” Process-tracing aims at identifying the causal process between the potential independent variables and the outcome of the dependent variable. To discover this process, it is necessary to track in detail all causal pathways that might account for the outcome in a particular case. Combining a before-after comparison, which looks only at the presence of relevant variables, with this detailed within-case analysis of process-tracing allows for a relaxation of the restrictive condition necessary for drawing precise causal conclusions through the before-after method alone. Since process-tracing can determine the respective explanatory values of different candidate causal variables, a combination of this method and before-after comparison permits strong and definitive causal conclusions even if more than one relevant factor varies across the two sub-cases.

The thesis employs before-after comparison and process-tracing in this complementary manner. In doing so, the study utilizes the before-after method to diminish the number of potential causal variables for the shift in U.S. policy by dismissing, following Mill’s method of difference, factors that do not vary across the sub-cases.

In order to compare the two sub-cases, however, they must first be clearly separated from each other. As noted above, the redirection of U.S. policy did not occur at one particular point in time but extended over a longer period. This situation divides the single longitudinal case—the Bush administration’s changing nonproliferation policy toward North Korea—into two stable sub-cases—the “old” and the “new” U.S. policy—and a period, during which the “new” policy was taking shape, but was not yet “completed.” As U.S. policy during this transition period was characterized by a departure from the “old” policy, however, the thesis will treat it as part of the “new” U.S. policy, so that the period during which the “new” policy was pursued comprises a developing phase and a stable phase (see figure 1.1). As regards the point that separates this re-defined phase of the “new” policy from the period of the “old” policy, the study faces the problem that the point in time when the “new” U.S. policy was set in motion is unknown. Consequently, it must be assumed. In that regard, the thesis will draw on the North Korean nuclear test on October 9, 2006, as former U.S. officials familiar with the decisions have declared that the redirection of the administration’s policy was initiated within days after the test. With this choice, the study assumes that the change toward the “new” policy began with the nuclear test. Significantly, the thesis does not presume that the test caused the shift in U.S. policy; only that the policy prior to the nuclear event differed significantly from U.S. policy after the test. Accordingly, the Bush administration’s nonproliferation

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23 Alexander L. George/Andrew Bennett, Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, pp. 205-232.

tion policy toward North Korea before the nuclear test will be regarded as the “old” policy, whereas the policy subsequent to the test will be considered the “new” policy.

![Figure 1.1 Periods of the Bush Administration’s Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy toward North Korea](image)

Though it is treated as a part of the larger period of the “new” policy, the phase during which the Bush administration’s “new” policy was taking shape is important from a methodological point of view, because this is the phase in which the relevant variables changed compared to the period of the “old” policy. Consequently, when looking for candidate causal variables for the redirection of Bush’s North Korea policy, the before-after comparison needs to contrast only this developing phase of the “new” policy—as opposed to both phases of the “new” policy—with the period of the “old” policy. This key phase stretched over six months, beginning with the nuclear test on October 9, 2006 as the assumed starting point for the U.S. course shift and ending with the “completion” of the “new” policy in late March 2007.

A before-after comparison of the phase during which the “new” policy of the Bush administration was taking shape with the period of the “old” U.S. policy yields that four significant variables changed visibly, or can be expected to have shifted: the U.S. threat perception regarding the North Korean nuclear arms program; Washington’s view of the chances for a cooperative solution within the six-party talks; President Bush’s appraisal of the domestic politics of his North Korea policy; and the composition of Bush’s foreign policy team as regards North Korea hardliners. These four potential independent variables provide the following hypotheses for the thesis:

**H1:** The Bush administration altered its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea because after the North Korean nuclear test, it perceived the implications of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program for the security of the United States as significantly more threatening than before the test.
H2: The Bush administration shifted its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea toward a more accommodating and cooperative course because following the North Korean nuclear test, it regarded the prospects for six-party cooperation as significantly improved compared to the pre-test period.

H3: The Bush administration altered its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea because after the nuclear test, the administration’s decision makers came to believe that a policy change would enhance their domestic political power, or that a continuation of the policy would endanger their domestic power.

H4: The Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea underwent a change because several senior proponents of a confrontational policy toward North Korea left the Bush team in the aftermath of the nuclear test, thereby shifting the dynamics of the administration’s internal decision-making toward a more accommodating nonproliferation policy toward North Korea.

Having distilled these four potential causal factors through before-after comparison, the thesis needs to ascertain the respective explanatory values of the four candidate independent variables to achieve definitive causal conclusions. For this purpose, the study tests the causal pathways provided by the hypotheses through process-tracing. Significantly, as with the before-after method, the process-tracing needs to scrutinize only the period of the Bush administration’s “old” U.S. policy and the developing phase of the “new” U.S. policy. It is not necessary to include the stable phase of the “new” policy into the causal analysis of the shift in the administration’s policy.

In order to test hypotheses one through three, the thesis needs to determine the development and the causal value of the Bush administration’s assessments as regards the security implications of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, the prospects for cooperation at the six-party talks, and the domestic politics of U.S. North Korea policy. Thus, following its before-after logic, the study addresses three questions for each of these three potential causal variables: first, the Bush team’s view of the issue before the nuclear test; second, the administration’s perception of the same aspect after the test; and third, the causal impact of the before-after development of the Bush administration’s assessment on the policy change. The thesis accomplishes these tasks through a thorough examination of the North Korea-related declarations, statements, and other communications of the Bush administration’s senior decision makers. The interpretation of these communications is balanced with a comprehensive analysis of the different facets of the administration’s operative nonproliferation policy toward the
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North. To scrutinize hypothesis three, which addresses U.S. domestic politics, the thesis furthermore needs to explore congressional attitudes toward the Bush administration’s North Korea policy. To this end, the study examines North Korea-related statements and legislative activities of U.S. lawmakers.

Claiming that the departures of certain U.S. officials played a role in the shift of the Bush administration’s policy, hypothesis four does not concern perceptions. Testing this assertion rather demands a reconstruction of the decision-making leading to the redirection of the administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea. To reach before-after causal conclusions on the policy impact of the personnel changes, the thesis tracks in detail the development of U.S. policy after the nuclear test and complements the picture with insiders’ accounts of the decision-making process.

The data record poses a major challenge for the thesis to accomplish these research tasks. Like every policy-related work on a current topic, the thesis cannot draw on internal governmental documents due to the blocking period for these files. Besides, this study cannot make use of the administration itself as a source of information on the motives for the policy change, because the Bush administration vehemently denies that its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea changed at all following the nuclear test, and the Bush White House apparently instructed all members of the administration to adhere to this official line. Hence, as the Bush administration was still in office when this manuscript was being completed, acting U.S. officials were not available for interviews going beyond the well-known official U.S. position toward the North. Furthermore, the academic expert literature on the study topic is utterly limited. Under these constraints, the thesis relies heavily on investigative press accounts to balance the public statements of U.S. decision makers toward the press and the Congress. However, the study can also draw on a number of interviews the author conducted in May and June 2008 with former Bush administration officials closely involved in North Korea policy, including officials, who worked for the administration at the time of the post-nuclear-test change in U.S. nonproliferation policy toward North Korea. These interviews were semi-standardized. To inspire openness on behalf of the respondents, the interviews were conducted off-the-record, and the interviewees were assured that their anonymity would be preserved in case they did not want sensitive information to be attributed explicitly to them.

Presuming that this thesis will not be read before the end of President George W. Bush’s second term in office, the author has shifted from present perfect to simple past when referring to the Bush administration’s “new” nonproliferation policy toward North Korea, which was pursued during President Bush’s final two years in office.
Given the constraints on available data, this thesis cannot provide a final and definite answer to the question of why the Bush administration altered its non-proliferation policy toward North Korea in the aftermath of the nuclear test. Its empirical results inevitably run the risk of becoming obsolete through future studies that can draw on internal governmental documents or on personal accounts of the most senior members of the Bush team, especially of President Bush himself. Accordingly, this thesis can only serve as a starting point for the systematic analysis of the reasons for the Bush administration’s sudden change of policy toward North Korea, and its contribution will have to be measured against all future findings and insights.

1.4 The Structure of the Thesis

Before the study turns to answering the central research question, it thoroughly lays the groundwork for the causal analysis. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical foundations of the causal claims underlying the four hypotheses listed above. Afterwards, chapter 3 introduces the levels of analysis which a rigorous examination of U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy toward North Korea needs to address, and illuminates in a brief historical review how the predecessors of President George W. Bush have approached the North Korea nuclear question. Concluding the first part of the thesis, chapter 4 undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the post-nuclear-test shift in the Bush administration’s nonproliferation policy toward North Korea as the dependent variable, comparing in detail the Bush team’s “old” and “new” policies.

The second part of the thesis encompasses the actual causal analysis. Chapters 5 to 8 test one hypothesis each for why the Bush administration altered its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea following the nuclear test. Chapter 5 thus examines if the administration’s assessment of the implications of the North Korean nuclear weapons program for the security of the United States caused the shift in U.S. policy. Subsequently, chapter 6 studies whether the U.S. administration’s appraisal of the prospects for accomplishing a cooperative solution of the North Korean nuclear problem at the six-party talks made Washington tone down its policy toward the North. Afterwards, chapter 7 explores if the domestic politics of the Bush administration’s nuclear nonproliferation policy toward North Korea motivated Bush’s course reversal toward Pyongyang. Finally, chapter 8 analyzes in detail whether the departures of Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, and Robert Joseph precipitated the Bush administration’s redirection of its nonproliferation policy toward North Korea.

The third and final part of the thesis comprises the concluding chapter. This chapter 9 recapitulates the results of the causal investigation and explores the
implications of the empirical findings for both the domain of theory and the world of policy.