Who Takes North Korea Seriously?
U.S. Congress and Policy toward Pyongyang, 2009–2012

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How and why do legislative members weigh in on foreign policy dilemmas? U.S. Congress often seeks to carve out spheres of influence over international relations and yet we know little about why and how some America’s lawmakers take North Korea seriously. This article explores a host of North Korea measures during the 111th and 112th U.S. Congress (2009–2012) and identifies the sources of legislative activism toward Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons threats and atrocious human rights records. Empirical analyses show that a group of congressional members use bill cosponsorship strategies and call on the Obama administration to revamp its policy concerning North Korea. The findings shed light on why lawmakers would bother to introduce such specialized foreign policy bills even if their prospects for becoming law are uncertain.

Keywords: U.S. policy toward North Korea, legislative activism, bill cosponsorship, U.S. Congress, the Obama administration

“Mr. President, this bill establishes for the first time—the first time in at least a generation—a human rights principle toward North Korea. This bill brings into focus a United States Government position on North Korean human right abuses, which are extensive, probably the worst human rights abuses in the world.”

Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS)
(Congressional Record S 9805, September 28, 2004)

Introduction

On November 23, 2010, North Korea fired barrages of artillery onto a South Korean island, Yeonpyeong, the latest in a series of provocations and “the most dangerous moment on the Korean peninsula since the truce ending the Korean War in 1953.”1 The Obama administration was quick to condemn North Korea’s attack and confirm the United States’ commitment to the defense of South Korea.2 And yet, President Obama and his foreign policy team are basically facing the “land of lousy options.”3 Economic sanctions against the reclusive regime have not worked. Even on January 10, 2003, North Korea became the first country ever to withdraw from the international
non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Military options were also off the table, because
launching small-scale airstrikes could risk an all-out war on the Korean peninsula
and make Seoul an immediate target of the North Korean military. Obviously,
“doing nothing” is not an option, yet viable policy alternatives toward Pyongyang
appear to be absent.

The deadly North Korean shelling of a densely populated island in the South also
stunned members of the U.S. Congress. Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell
of Kentucky released a statement saying, “I join the President in his strong condem-
nation of what is sadly just the latest in a long string of hostile actions.” Chair of the
Armed Services Committee, House Democrat Ike Skelton of Missouri condemned
the artillery attacks and commented that “The North Korean regime is more dangerous
than most people realize.” On November 29, Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), chair of the
House Foreign Affairs Committee in a “lame-duck” Congress, introduced the House
Resolution 1735, “criticizing North Korea in the strongest terms for its unprovoked
military attack against South Korea on November 23, 2010.” The resolution secured
33 cosponsors from both sides of the aisle. Just three days later, the Senate approved
the House resolution by unanimous consent. Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA), chair of the
Senate Subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific Affairs and the sponsor of the resolution,
had 14 Democratic senators and 12 Senate Republicans on board as cosponsors.

Anecdotal evidence like this shows that members of the U.S. Congress do intro-
duce, debate, and sometimes pass bills and resolutions over foreign policy dilemmas.
Indeed, the list of America’s legislative responses to North Korea is not in short
supply. Senate Democrats in 1996 rallied behind President Clinton by supporting the
Lieberman (D-CT) amendment to restore funding for the Korean Peninsula Energy
Development Organization (KEDO). Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY), on the
contrary, attempted to cut the KEDO aid in half, without even bothering to split with
his traditional internationalist co-partisans. A resolution proposed by Rep. Ron Paul
(R-TX) in 2003 calling for the withdrawal of American troops in South Korea made
the U.S. allies in East Asia scratching their heads over its seriousness as well as
significance. In 2004, the North Korea Human Rights Act (NKHRA), although having
sailed through U.S. Congress with virtually no opposition, stirred a complex debate
over its policy ramifications on refugees from the Democratic People’s Republic of
Korea (DPRK). Recently, some congressional members urged President Obama to
fill the vacant position of special envoy for North Korean human rights, as they were
critical of the former envoy Jay Lefkowitz for having worked on a part-time basis
during the Bush administration.

In short, military provocations and nuclear proliferations by Pyongyang do invoke
concerns in Washington and some U.S. lawmakers continue to address foreign policy
challenges originating from a small communist regime in the Far East. What is puzzling
then is why and how some congressional members would bother to keep introducing
bills addressing the world’s most reclusive nation. The fact is that the prospects of
such bills on North Korea becoming law are uncertain and Pyongyang’s threats have
yet to constitute major foreign policy agendas in America’s domestic and electoral
politics. Voters and groups do not necessarily weigh in on the North Korea question
when they go to the ballot box or hire lobbyists. It is argue in this paper that when it
comes to thorny foreign policy challenges like North Korea, members of the U.S.
Congress do not necessarily look up their typical electoral or partisan playbook for
their legislative behavior. The context is that presidents have a tough time finding
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any effective tools to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs. Party leadership also provides few partisan cues over the DPRK issues. Then, legislative activism by rank-and-file members often emerges out of ideologies, interests, and expertise to reset the debate over North Korea.

Obviously, not all lawmakers do care about North Korea. Over the course of recurring threats by one of the world’s last rigid communist outposts, a specific group of congressional members have regularly led the efforts to “express the sense of Congress.” As Carter and Scott (2009) illustrate, these congressional foreign policy entrepreneurs keep on sponsoring or cosponsoring a series of symbolic or substantive measures related to North Korea. Their agendas range from how to stop North Korea’s nuclear programs to how to promote human rights in the communist country on the Korean peninsula. The end result is that some North Korea bills and resolutions put administrations under pressure to forge and facilitate an American grand strategy toward the world’s last Stalinist state. For better or worse, legislative initiatives regarding North Korea do resonate with foreign policy makers both in Asia and in America.

This paper identifies the sources and processes of U.S. lawmakers who pay regular attention to North Korea. First, an outline is offered of the existing scholarship on congressional foreign policy initiatives and the literature on the U.S.-North Korean relations. The next section explores what constitutes North Korea bills and who are considered as active congressional members over the DPRK issues. Then, a series of testable hypotheses is proposed to examine the reasons behind legislative initiatives through North Korea bill cosponsorship activities during the 111th and 112th U.S. Congress (2009–2012). Empirical findings from the Poisson and logistic regression analyses show that members’ ideology, constituents, and institutional expertise significantly affect cosponsorship activities toward North Korea. Finally, the paper is concluded by considering further research agendas that will explore under what conditions one branch of government goes about checking the foreign policy choices of another.

**Congressional Foreign Policy Initiatives and Bill Cosponsorship Strategies**

A large body of research exists to underscore how the ever-changing foreign policy environment introduces new challenges and opportunities to U.S. Congress and its members. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1973) earlier suggested that the risk of an “imperial presidency” in the aftermath of the Vietnam War could almost threaten the core principle of the constitutional system. Since the 1970s, a “resurgent Congress” has increasingly become an independent player in the making of foreign policy. While many scholars of the executive-legislative relationship have kept track of the “two-presidency” thesis (Wildavsky 1966), some of them confirmed a decline in congressional support of presidential foreign policy power. Recent research has also demonstrated that the Senate often pushes back against popular presidents, as evidenced in the Iran-Contra investigation during the Reagan administration and the rejection of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) in the Clinton era.

In reality, however, U.S. lawmakers rarely see a majority of foreign policy agendas making it to a floor vote. Although constituents, interest groups, and even foreign governments increasingly expect congressional members to take positions on foreign
affairs, the truth is that neither the White House nor party leadership always steps up to the plate by proposing or introducing specific foreign policy agendas. In a gatekeeping Congress, lawmakers do not have enough numbers of specific foreign policy bills that allow for “credit-claiming, advertisement, and position taking.”13 In turn, searching for the alternatives, congressional members tend to look for non-roll call participation strategies and seek to handily express their individual policy preferences and issue positions in the era of globalization.14 Burden (2007, 48) summarizes that “since each member is given just one vote, the only way to register one’s intensity is to become proactive in the pre-vote deliberations.”15

Among others, this article centers on bill cosponsorship as a legislative tool often used by congressional members to carry out their assertive roles regarding foreign affairs. Members of Congress sponsor a bill or join the sponsor in support of a bill. Sponsoring or cosponsoring critical legislative measures for personal, electoral, and partisan purposes has become “an integral part of the legislative process in both houses of Congress” (Campbell 1982, 415).16 The House Resolution 86 during the 95th Congress (1977–1978) completely lifted the ban on limited cosponsors and according to Ornstein, Mann and Malbin (1989), the rule change contributed to the dramatic decrease in the number of House bills introduced.17 Schiller’s (1995) study of committee membership has particularly advanced the notion of congressional policy entrepreneurs through bill sponsorship.18 Through signaling and pledging activities, entrepreneurial congressional members try to build a unique policy reputation among colleagues in chambers. The nature of a two-member delegation in the Senate also leads same-state senators to attempt to build a distinct reputation on their own for electoral coalitions (Schiller 2000).19 Considering bill sponsorship as an individual senator’s policy drive, Schiller (1995, 199) quoted a legislative director as stating that “senators are more likely to introduce bills in terms of committee jurisdiction with the exception of issues that are big in their state.”

Yet, it remains an empirical question how and why lawmakers use bill cosponsorship strategies to take an assertive role in making foreign policy. When it comes to the U.S. Congress pushing against the executive over foreign affairs, Carter and Scott (2009) offer an exceptional research on why some congressional members “choose to lead.” They define congressional foreign policy entrepreneurs as “members of Congress who take the initiative on the foreign policy issues about which they care rather than await action from the administration” (Carter and Scott 2009, 6). Active foreign policy lawmakers take the lead role in identifying and defining a foreign policy response. In addition, addressing the current policy problems, policy entrepreneurs attempt to introduce a new solution to current policy problems. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data, Carter and Scott (2010) analyzed a set of 2,793 cases and over 450 lawmakers associated with entrepreneurial activities.20 This comprehensive analysis of legislative processes and historical trends offers a fresh look at how legislators become active on foreign policy agendas. Yet, the “lesser-known examples of congressional foreign policy impact” did not include the case of North Korea (Carter and Scott 2010, 4).

Two recent studies on bill cosponsorship also build on the observation that proactive legislators tend to engage in only a small set of issues.21 Burden (2007), trying to reveal the true sources of legislators’ policy preferences, calls for in-depth analyses of “personal roots of representation.” For example, Burden suggests that thanks to Rick Santorum (R-PA), a close colleague in the Senate, Sam Brownback (R-KS) converted to Catholicism and his “personal root of representation” made the
Kansas Republican embrace conservative social issues. According to Burden (2007, 4), leading research on bill cosponsorship, such as Kessler and Krehbiel (1996), Koger (2003), and Schiller (1995) “do not consider the content of sponsorship … but simply explain overall levels of activity.” Echoing Burden, Woon (2009, 30) reiterates the claim that “previous research on legislative entrepreneurship failed to take into account the diversity of issues.” Yet Burden’s attempt to unpack the origins of representatives’ positions has not dealt with “routine legislation such as foreign policy” (Burden 2007, 139). Also, Woon’s (2009) analyses of issue-specific motivations for bill sponsorship only include trade, with many other foreign policy agendas excluded. To investigate this issue-specific foreign policy cosponsorship behavior, this paper directs attention to a key U.S. policy question in the post-Cold War era: How to deal with North Korea.

U.S. Congress and North Korea, 2009–2012

The North Korea question signifies the top priorities and serious challenges facing the U.S. foreign policy making community. Over the past two decades, preventing nuclear proliferation, protecting human rights and religious freedom, and promoting sometimes testy Sino-U.S. relations have emerged as one of the United States’ chief foreign policy priorities. Geopolitical security concerns surrounding East Asian countries are now revolving around the lines of traditional U.S. allies (Japan and South Korea) vis-à-vis reenergized rivals (China and Russia).

The current situation involving North Korea poses a huge challenge for U.S. foreign policy and the dilemmas are across the board: how to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and missile technology exports to the Middle East; how to secure international cooperation for economic and military sanctions; how to protect human rights and political refugees; and even how to press China to be a responsible major power for stability in East Asia. The U.S.-DPRK relationship showcases virtually all of these dimensions and the North Korea problem has become a litmus test for the United States’ leadership as a superpower with few good options.

Figure 1. North Korea Bills and Resolutions in the U.S. Congress, 2009–2012
Dealing with the North Korea challenges, congressional members during the first term of the Obama administration introduced and debated a total of 26 North Korea measures. They covered the periods when North Korea escalated tensions through an artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island and America’s lawmakers endorsed the reauthorization of the North Korea Human Rights Act. The North Korea bills and resolutions address the issues ranging from sanctions against the missile development to condemning hard-labor prison camps to expressing sympathy to the families of those killed by North Korea in the sinking of the Cheonan. Figure 1 describes the topics and corresponding number of DPRK bills and resolutions during the 111th and 112th U.S. Congress (2009–2012).

The top agenda concerning American legislators over North Korea is how to stop the cash-starved regime from further developing and exporting nuclear weapons and missile technologies. Basically, 14 out of 26 North Korea bills and resolutions address security and military issues. This is not surprising given North Korea is a “critical state … whose compliance is essential to the success of an arms-control regime” (Martin 2002, 52). Since the collapse of the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework in 2002, congressional members have continued to take a firm stance against Pyongyang’s military provocations.

The North Korea Sanctions and Nonrecognition Act, for example, repeatedly introduced by Rep. Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), calls for “diplomatic, economic, and military sanctions against the government of North Korea, unless the President certifies that North Korea is no longer engaged in the illegal transfer of missile or nuclear technology, particularly to Iran and Syria” (Congressional Record, H4570, April 21, 2009). Over the sinking of the Cheonan in 2010, both the House through a motion to suspend the rules and the Senate by unanimous consent expressed sympathy to the families of those killed by North Korea and solidarity with South Korea. Other measures also condemned North Korea for its military attack against South Korea and its detainment of a South Korean fishing ship.

Although the House bills and resolutions mostly ended up only referred to the Committee on Foreign affairs and not taken any further, the United States Senate brought up the four critical amendments for an up-or-down vote. The Senate amendments in the 111th Congress (2009–2010) were a direct response to the Kim regime’s launches of three missiles into the sea between North Korea and Japan. North Korea’s missile test came on July 4, 2009 and clearly defied the United Nations Security Council’s resolution after Pyongyang’s nuclear test less than two months ago. Interestingly, two amendments competed for the Senate’s approval: a tougher measure from Kansas conservative Sam Brownback; and a toned-down amendment from Sen. John Kerry (D-MA), the Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee.

Both amendments contain the provision of “expressing the sense of the Senate that the Secretary of State should redesignate North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism.” Yet the Kerry Amendment was a moderated version that requires first “the United States should fully enforce existing sanctions and should explore additional sanctions.” In the end, the Brownback Amendment was not agreed to in the Democratic-controlled Senate on a largely party-line vote of 43 to 54, whereas the modest Kerry Amendment succeeded to attract nine moderate Republican senators across the aisle and passed the chamber by 66 to 31.

During the 112th Congress (2011–2012), the senior senator from Massachusetts once again played the role of putting a lid on some anti-North Korea action advocated
by a conservative colleague. The storyline of U.S.-DPRK relations in 2012 was quite similar with the previous Congress. In response to the failed rocket launch by the new leader Kim Jong Un in April 2012, Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ) proposed an amendment to cut off U.S. food aid to North Korea. The foreign policy hawk was among the critics who earlier in February accused the Obama administration of too naively promising some 240,000 tons of food aid to North Korea under the title II of the Food for Peace Act after Pyongyang agreed to halt nuclear and missile tests.

The amendment from the Arizona Republican, however, failed to attract a single across-the-aisle vote and was killed by the Democratic majority in the upper chamber. On the contrary, the Kerry-Lugar Amendment deferred to presidential leadership over the matter of food aid and demanded President Obama’s grant of a national interest waiver. Once again, the moderate voices on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee secured the consensus votes on the floor (59 to 40) to continue food aid to North Korea. And yet, the Obama administration in an election year ultimately decided to withhold 240,000 tons of food, as the incumbent president sought to beef up his foreign policy credentials, largely thanks to the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011.

Other policy agendas that are appealing to members of Congress include human rights promotion, refugee protection, and democracy in North Korea (eight bills and resolutions). As Kang (2010) points out, for the executive branch, human rights issues have admittedly had to take a back seat to the nuclear crisis. Nevertheless, some lawmakers on Capitol Hill have paid special attention to North Korea’s atrocious human rights record. They have called for North Korea to allow Korean-Americans’ reunions with their family members in the North, to close down hard-labor prison camps, to stop torturing refugees, and to release two American journalists on humanitarian grounds. In particular, the North Korea Human Rights Act (NKHRA), enacted for the first time during the 108th U.S. Congress (2003–2004), got reauthorized in 2012, as Rep. Ros-Lehtinen sponsored and 28 lawmakers cosponsored the bill. Back in 2004, Rep. Leach (R-IA) sponsored a path-breaking bill to promote human rights conditions in North Korea and the lower chamber passed the North Korean Human Rights Act, with the Senate’s unanimous approval.

Then, which members of the U.S. Congress take North Korea more seriously than others? Based on the number of sponsorships and cosponsorships in both chambers, Sen. Brownback of Kansas, Rep. Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, and Rep. Royce of California led the field between 2009 and 2012. Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas is arguably the most active member agitating for the issues of North Korea human rights and refugees. A convert to Catholicism in 2002, Sen. Brownback has often joined with some of the most liberal senators on a variety of subjects, such as “helping sex-trafficking victims, suffering Sudanese, and women’s rights in Afghanistan.” This dedicated conservative and presidential hopeful in 2008 also presents a fairly steadfast record of the DPRK’s human rights abuses. Since his early days as a freshman senator in the 106th Congress (1999–2000), Brownback has sponsored numerous DPRK-related bills, including the North Korea Accountability Act of 2009 and the North Korean Refugee Adoption Act of 2010. The Kansas conservative even broke with the Bush administration in 2008 over the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis by placing a hold on the confirmation of a new U.S. ambassador to South Korea for months.

In the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) has been the most active legislator on North Korean issues. The Republican lawmaker of
Cuban descent was the author of the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2008 and 2012, and served as a ranking Republican (111th Congress) and the Chair (112th Congress) of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. In 2008, the Florida foreign policy conservative also sharply criticized the Bush administration’s decision to remove North Korea from a list of state sponsors of terrorism. The next most active supporter of North Korea-related work in the lower chamber is Rep. Ed Royce, who represents the 40th congressional district in California, with Asians and Latinos constituting the majority. In fact, one of the largest Korean-American communities in the nation is located in Orange County, a part of Congressman Royce’s district. Rep. Royce was the ranking Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade in the 111th Congress (2009–2010). The co-chair of the Korea Caucus during the 111th Congress heads up the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee in the 113th Congress (2013–2014).32

Two more conservative members have also been energetic over the question of North Korea. A senior Republican from New Jersey, Rep. Chris Smith, has firmly established his policy leadership surrounding the issue of human rights around the globe. Smith comes from a racially diverse district and is a prominent member of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (McCormick and Mitchell 2007, 588) who “wears his Catholicism on both sleeves and even has a priest on his staff.”33 Religious belief and commitment to human rights have made Rep. Smith one of the leading voices in the House over the issues of China and Tibet as well. Lampton (2002, 336) suggests that “Smith is a master at using congressional hearings to advance his cause.”34 And, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher of California, one of the most colorful and conservative members of Congress, represents the beach communities of Huntington Beach and Costa Mesa.35 Another high-profile critic of the Chinese government, the California Republican has also aggressively introduced and joined congressional efforts to promote human rights conditions in North Korea.

Testing Hypotheses: The Statistical Models

This section provides empirical analyses of lawmakers’ motivations behind bill cosponsorship in the House and Senate that deal with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Indeed, when it comes down to the impacts of individual lawmakers’ personal interests on representation and lawmaking, Burden (2007, 14) raises the issue against the traditional assumption that “legislators either work only on behalf of their constituents or as foot soldiers for their political parties.” Echoing Burden’s critique and building on the notion of congressional foreign policy entrepreneurs, this paper investigates why members of Congress would bother to introduce specialized North Korea bills, resolutions, and amendments.

The dependent variable is the number of North Korea bill (co)sponsorships by individual members in both houses during the 111th and 112th U.S. Congress (2009–2012). Following the approach adopted by Rosenson et al. (2009)’s case study of pro-Israel bill cosponsorships, this paper finds this count dependent variable signifying that the greater the number of cosponsorships, the more active a legislator is over the North Korea question. As the dependent variable is event count data and shows no significant evidence of over-dispersion ($G^2 = .00, p > .10$), a Poisson regression model is run to test what determines the level of congressional activism
toward North Korea. At its heart, this section explores the dynamics underlying members’ decisions on whether to sign onto the North Korea bills and resolutions as a (co)sponsor. Several hypotheses are presented along three dimensions: member characteristics, constituency characteristics, and institutional characteristics.

The Member Hypothesis

As Shepsle (1992) succinctly puts it: “Congress is a ‘They,’ not an ‘It,’” and individual lawmakers weigh in on different policy agendas. In other words, not all legislators actively join the efforts to prevent North Korea’s nuclear threats. Some members feel much more disturbed and determined than others over human rights abuses and promotions in one of the most secluded societies in the world. The first dimension of member hypothesis, following Burden’s (2007) analysis of members’ personal background and policy behavior, addresses lawmakers’ religious affiliation and their reactions to North Korea. The foreign policy literature has increasingly identified the role of religious attachments by the elites and the electorate in shaping their policy engagements. In accordance with the conventional findings, religious conservatives and Catholic members are hypothesized to be more active toward North Korea issues than other lawmakers.

Another widely known determinant for congressional foreign policy making is members’ ideology. Numerous studies have identified the impacts of lawmakers’ ideological stance on their voting choices in the realm of international relations. To see whether a hawkish and interventionist member is more actively sponsoring and cosponsoring North Korea measures than a foreign policy dove, I use the foreign policy conservative score rating by the National Journal. Then, what is also noticeable about the impacts of individual lawmakers’ ideology on U.S. foreign policy in the post–Cold War period is the emergence of a so-called “ends-against-the-middle” coalition. The traditional liberal-conservative ideological dichotomy, in the context of “pluralistic” and “cross-cutting” voting dynamics, sometimes gives way to an unholy coalition of extreme ideologues. These members with strong ideological convictions have strategically pushed for their common policy interests, such as opposing free trade with China (Nokken 2003), passing climate change legislation (Busby 2008) and comprehensive immigration reform (Gimpel and Edwards 1999). These “strange bedfellows” also seem to have a high stake in securing a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and promoting higher standards of human rights. For instance, when Senator Brownback introduced a concurrent resolution regarding North Korean refugees, the conservative darling from Kansas secured a single cosponsor from the other side of the aisle and the ideological spectrum, Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts. Thus, the stronger the ideological conviction a member holds, the more likely it is that he or she will join North Korean measures as a cosponsor. To test this hypothesis, absolute values of DW-NOMINATE scores, like in Nokken’s analysis (2003), are used. Also, the literature on cosponsorship reveals that junior members, more often than senior lawmakers, are more likely to sign on to bills and resolutions. As Hibbing (1991) suggests, backbenchers are at a legislative career stage requiring more publicity on policy positions. Seniority is hypothesized as having a negative effect on legislators’ cosponsorship activities regarding North Korea.
Hypothesis 1: The religious conservatives and Catholic members tend to join North Korean measures as a cosponsor.

Hypothesis 2: Foreign policy hawks are more actively (co)sponsoring North Korea bills than doves.

Hypothesis 3: The stronger the ideological conviction a member holds, the more likely it is that he or she will join North Korean measures as a cosponsor.

Hypothesis 4: Junior members will be more likely to sign on to North Korea-related bills and resolutions than seniors.

The Constituency Hypothesis

Members of Congress claim credit by taking positions on issues. Mayhew (1974) earlier suggested that electoral connections could lead legislators to care more about standing firm on the right side, rather than switching into a winning coalition. With respect to foreign policy and position taking, Mayhew (2000, 15) also notes that “For any stretch of American history, no one could write an adequate account of foreign policy without reckoning with MCs who took notable stands.” In short, positions in tune with constituents will be rewarded, whereas votes that are seen as out of touch will haunt incumbents, who are still “running scared” of being “out-of-touch, out-of-office.”

When it comes to congressional activism toward foreign policy under the pressure of the constituency, Smith (2000) has identified some ethnic groups as a critical source of “foreign attachments” to countries including Greece, Armenia, Cuba, India, and Israel. Likewise, it is hypothesized that the larger the Korean population in congressional district or state, the more likely senators and representatives are likely to (co)sponsor North Korea bills and resolutions. The 2010 U.S. Census data are used to figure out the percentage of Korean population in each state and congressional district.

Hypothesis 5: The larger the Korean population in his or her state or district, the more likely members of Congress is to cosponsor North Korea-related bills and resolutions.

The Party and Committee Hypothesis

In contemporary American party politics, the Republican Party is arguably perceived to be strong on national security, when compared to the Democratic Party. Accordingly, congressional Republicans are hypothesized to press the Pyongyang regime more actively than Democrats to comply with the norm of nuclear non-proliferation. This hypothesis tests whether the GOP actually “owns” the issue of North Korea, in Petrocik’s (1996) terms. Committee membership is also critical. It seems natural that, if a member is sitting on the Foreign Affairs Committee or Armed Services Committee, he or she is more likely than a member of another committee to engage with North Korean issues. Particularly, the subcommittees dealing with matters of nuclear threats, international terrorism, and human rights abuses tend to attract across the aisle members who are interested in foreign affairs. The variable is coded “1” for members of the Foreign Affairs or Armed Services Committees, and “0” otherwise.
Hypothesis 6: Republican members will engage more actively with North Korean measures than Democrats.

Hypothesis 7: If a member is sitting on the Foreign Affairs Committee or Armed Services Committee, he or she is more likely than a member of another committee to cosponsor North Korean issues.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the Poisson regression analyses regarding motivations behind North Korea cosponsorships in the U.S. Congress from 2009 through 2012. First, when it comes to members’ religion and North Korea, faith did not necessarily facilitate cosponsorship activities concerning North Korea, except for the 111th House where religious conservatives registered statistically significant cosponsorship activities. Legislators being a Catholic or not seem to make no difference, either. In addition, despite some anecdotal evidence of “strange bedfellows” on North Korea, no lawmakers were found with extreme ideologies showing any consistent patterns of foreign policy entrepreneurship through active cosponsorships.

With respect to the constituency influences, what is interesting is that the impact of Korean constituents on foreign policy activism toward North Korea was solidly significant only in the House, not in the Senate. From 2009 through 2012, the House members from a district with a higher portion of Koreans more enthusiastically sponsored or cosponsored measures addressing North Korea’s security threats and human rights abuses. On the contrary, one could not explain senators’ cosponsorship behavior through the number of Korean voters in their states. This makes sense, given that electoral connection with the ethnic constituency through bill cosponsorship seems to work better for a smaller district than a larger state.

Foreign policy entrepreneurship also seems to be swayed by the foreign policy environment. Foreign policy hawks showed their strong interest in North Korea cosponsorship only in the 111th U.S. Congress, not in the 112th U.S. Congress. The launch of long-range missiles, the capture and detention of two American female journalists, and the sinking of the Cheonan all occurred during the first two years of the Obama administration and fired up statistically significant activities of cosponsorship by foreign policy conservatives. In fact, history shows that six of the past nine presidents had to deal with international crises during their first year in the White House. The relatively stable period of the 112th U.S. Congress (2011–2012), on the contrary, did not make it any easier for hawks to become activists over North Korea.

Finally, it is confirmed that the Foreign Relations Committee in both chambers was the leading institution in legislative politics concerning the North Korea debate. This is hardly surprising, as most of the leading players in the North Korea debate are members of the Foreign Affairs Committee in both chambers, such as Ros-Lehtinen, Royce, Brownback, Lugar, and Kerry. Interestingly, the fewer options the administrations could find and the less likely military sanctions were to work, the more active the Foreign Affairs Committee members would become. In addition, cosponsorship enthusiasm seems to be not very apparent among lawmakers sitting on the Armed Services Committee. One plausible explanation is that diplomatic
efforts like the Six-Party Talks, economic sanctions, and human rights agendas are under the jurisdiction of the Foreign Affairs Committee, not the Armed Services panel.

The Senate amendments in 2009 and 2012 offer a great opportunity to examine whether voting decisions differ from cosponsorship behaviors on North Korea. The upper-chamber amendments during the 111th and 112th U.S. Congress had to do with whether North Korea should be relisted as a state sponsor of terrorism and whether the executive branch should stop food aid to Pyongyang. Two things stand out: First, religious affiliations, seniority, Korean population, and committee membership do not affect senators’ roll-call votes on the four amendments one way or another. In other words, electoral connections (Mayhew 1974), personal roots of representation (Burden 2007), and institutional expertise (Krehbiel 1998) do not matter much for senators’ North Korea decisions.51

Second, a game changer is senators’ ideology on foreign affairs and overall

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<tr>
<td>Korean Population</td>
<td>.229*** (.047)</td>
<td>.668 (4.76)</td>
<td>.172*** (.056)</td>
<td>-.279 (.175)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs Committee</td>
<td>1.847*** (.159)</td>
<td>.875*** (.340)</td>
<td>1.891*** (.197)</td>
<td>1.109 (1.603)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Services Committee</td>
<td>.426** (.215)</td>
<td>.562* (.333)</td>
<td>.152 (.317)</td>
<td>-.2017 (5208.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.063*** (.256)</td>
<td>-2.408*** (.665)</td>
<td>-2.706*** (.333)</td>
<td>352.14 (256.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 421 90 429 100
χ2 182.41 17.7 126.72 13.8
Pseudo R2 .22 .10 .20 .51

Note: **p<.05, ***p<.01; Cell entries are Poisson regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; the dependent variable is a count of the number of cosponsorship activities by congressional members in the House and Senate during the 111th and 112th Congresses (2009–2012).
ideological extremity. Particularly, foreign policy conservatives never failed to take their hawkish line in North Korea’s security and humanitarian issues. In all four models, foreign policy ideology shows significant impacts. For instance, stalwart interventionists such as senators McCain (R-AZ), Lieberman (ID-CT), and Graham (R-SC), often referred to as the “three amigos,” consistently voted for hardline proposals and rejected watered-down amendments. And, contrary to the case of cosponsorship activities, extreme ideologies are statistically significant in determining senators’ solid positions toward the North Korea amendments. One needs to be cautious, however, in evaluating senators’ ideological influence on their vote choices, as ideology and party appear increasingly inseparable in the era of polarized politics.52 Figure 2 shows

### Table 2. Logit Analysis of Senate Amendments on North Korea in 2009 and 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brownback Amendment 2009</th>
<th>Kerry Amendment 2009</th>
<th>Kyl Amendment 2012</th>
<th>Kerry Amendment 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>.130</td>
<td>-4.220</td>
<td>-.183</td>
<td>-.419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.413)</td>
<td>(2.751)</td>
<td>(1.037)</td>
<td>(1.292)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Conservatives</td>
<td>-1.407</td>
<td>2.069</td>
<td>-.688</td>
<td>-1.546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.636)</td>
<td>(1.688)</td>
<td>(1.143)</td>
<td>(1.371)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Policy Hawks</td>
<td>.114***</td>
<td>-.169***</td>
<td>.114***</td>
<td>-.125***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.030)</td>
<td>(.062)</td>
<td>(.028)</td>
<td>(.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95.9%</td>
<td>-94.9%</td>
<td>98.6%</td>
<td>-99.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme Ideology</td>
<td>2.856</td>
<td>-4.040***</td>
<td>6.452**</td>
<td>-1.381***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.656)</td>
<td>(1.675)</td>
<td>(2.771)</td>
<td>(.502)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-84%</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>99.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Chamber</td>
<td>-0.049</td>
<td>-.164</td>
<td>-.018</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
<td>(.104)</td>
<td>(.036)</td>
<td>(.039)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean Population</td>
<td>-5.509</td>
<td>-2.411</td>
<td>-2.900</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3.679)</td>
<td>(2.242)</td>
<td>(2.209)</td>
<td>(1.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs Committee</td>
<td>-2.913</td>
<td>.255</td>
<td>-1.035</td>
<td>.518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.826)</td>
<td>(1.492)</td>
<td>(1.402)</td>
<td>(1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed Services Committee</td>
<td>2.844</td>
<td>-2.561</td>
<td>.575</td>
<td>.046</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.789)</td>
<td>(1.955)</td>
<td>(.876)</td>
<td>(1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.937</td>
<td>2.793***</td>
<td>-7.669***</td>
<td>1.251***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.418)</td>
<td>(1.145)</td>
<td>(2.242)</td>
<td>(3.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N                  | 90                       | 90                    | 100                 | 100                  |
Percent correctly predicted | 94.4%                    | 95.6%                 | 92.0%               | 95.0%                |
Pseudo R²          | .77                      | .81                   | .69                 | .77                  |

*Note: **p < .05, ***p < .01; Standard errors are given in parentheses. Italicized numbers reflect the percentage point change in the predicted probability of voting for the amendment when a relevant independent variable moves from minimum to maximum values, while holding all other variables at baseline values (continuous variables are held at mean values and dichotomous variables are held at zero.*
the partisan breakdown surrounding the Senate amendments on the communist regime. While Democratic senators were highly united in their opposition to the Republican amendments, some moderate GOP senators broke with their party and supported the moderate Kerry Amendments. Republican senators Lugar, Collins, Snowe, and Murkowski consistently joined the chair of the foreign affairs panel.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although North Korea appears to be “the world’s most self-referential political system and America’s longest-running political-military adversary” (Pollack 2003, 15), the administrations have been largely reactive against the Pyongyang regime. In other words, North Korea normally takes a back seat, until either provoked by North Korea missiles or pressed by congressional members on Capitol Hill. Obviously, the absence of direct political and electoral consequences out of “winners versus losers” in domestic politics partly explains why the North Korea issues draw little attention in the American political theatre. It is thus hardly surprising that the notion of “benign negligence” has long been a crucial part of U.S. strategy toward the DPRK.

Yet, what is also true is that a specific group of congressional members have consistently taken North Korea issues seriously. Speaking of a specific policy issue since the end of the Cold War, a zero-sum exclusive approach to “high politics” of
national security has no longer been the only game in town. Key constituents and attentive groups increasingly care about global terrorism, human rights abuses, religious freedom, border security, nuclear proliferations, trade, and job outsourcing overseas. This complex set of foreign policy agendas and preferences by voters and donors has led members to reevaluate their congressional behavior. Thus, a growing number of members sign on to North Korea bills and resolutions and yet most extant studies have not systematically examined foreign policy cosponsorship motivations. I sought to fill a gap in the literature on congressional foreign policy entrepreneurs, bill cosponsorship activities and the making of U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea.

Also, in light of congressional behavior toward foreign policy dilemmas, the Darfur genocide debate on Capitol Hill illustrates a case in point. Uscinski et al. (2009) suggest that a usual set of members’ voting incentives, such as reelection motivation or party influence, would not clarify why some members are attentive and others are not. Likewise, when it comes to America’s response to North Korea, voters and parties are undoubtedly in favor of a nuclear-free and democratic North Korea, but largely ambiguous about what any administration actually can and practically should do. Indeed, North Korea represents a typical case where disagreements over foreign policy goals and objectives virtually do not exist in the context of domestic partisan politics.

Rosenson et al. (2009, 87) raise a similar point in their recent study of the U.S. Senate over Israeli policy and suggest that “In real terms, the conflict in Congress is over how to define “pro-Israel,” given that most members support Israel in a general sense.” In short, even though the stakes are high, it is hard to find any competing or conflicting interests surrounding the DPRK’s problems. The American public and political leaders readily agree to oppose nuclear weapons developed by an unpredictable dictator like Kim Jong Un and no one denies how valuable it is to promote human rights and religious freedom under the authoritarian regime in Pyongyang. Not surprisingly, a rare moment of bipartisan consensus has quickly developed to press for China to tighten the screws on North Korea.

With a focus on individual members of the U.S. Congress, this paper has identified some legislators who have emerged as policy entrepreneurs on North Korea issues. The Korean population in congressional districts unquestionably has something to do with the active cosponsorship behavior, and North Korea turns out to be critical for religious conservatives who deeply care about political refugees and human rights protection. Conservative senators, through their conservative foreign policy credentials, made North Korean nuclear weapons a top priority challenging the Obama administration. A leadership position in the House Foreign Affairs Committee made a Cuban-American congresswoman the leading advocate over the North Korea debate. And, being a co-chair of the Korea Caucus in the U.S. Congress led one California conservative to work closely with government officials from South Korea.

Speaking of the South, it is also found that one of the key constituencies for congressional members caring about the North is the South Korean government. Interestingly enough, many foreign governments and diplomats lobby to gain influence in Washington. The South Korean government is no different. On the South Korean government lobby for resolutions against the North, Tiron (2009) reports that “While resolutions of this nature are mostly symbolic, they carry diplomatic implications. For South Korea a resolution means that the U.S. Congress will be on the record
condemning North Korea, while seeking protections for South Korea.”58 With domestic opponents and foreign rivals largely missing in lobbying competitions, the impact of a foreign government on members of U.S. Congress might take a different spin. For future research, comprehensive and empirical analyses should be conducted on foreign government lobbying as an untold story of American foreign policy toward East Asia.

Notes
20. Ralph G. Carter and James M. Scott, “Understanding Congressional Foreign Policy Innovators: Mapping Entrepreneurs and Their Strategies,” Social Science Journal 47,
no. 2 (June 2010): 418–38.


26. The George W. Bush administration removed North Korea from a list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2008, with Pyongyang agreeing to resume disabling a plutonium plant and allow for some nuclear inspections.

27. In 2011, the Republican-controlled House by voice vote agreed to the Royce Amendment that would prohibit the provision of funding under the Food for Peace Act to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.


29. The formal title of the bill is “Ambassador James R. Lilley and Congressman Stephen J. Solarz North Korea Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2012.”


35. Rohrabacher’s DW-NOMINATE score during the 111th U.S. Congress (2009–2010) was 0.855, making him one of the most conservative members in the House. For DW-NOMINATE score, see http://voteview.com.

36. J. Scott Long, and Jeremy Freese, Regressional Models for Categorical Dependent Variables Using Stata, 2nd edition (College Station, TX: Stata Press, 2006).


39. Based on Rosenson et al., I identified the following affiliations as religious conservatives: Baptist, Christian, Evangelical, Community of Christ, Christian Scientist, Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, Seventh-Day Adventist, Christian Reformed, Nazarene, and United Church of Christ.


50. A recent study, testing the so-called “Biden Hypothesis” in the course of American political history, finds that old Republican presidents tend to be especially vulnerable to foreign crises early in their term. See Bak Daehee and Glenn Palmer, “Testing the Biden Hypotheses: Leader Tenure, Age, and International Conflict,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 6, no. 3 (2010): 257–73.


Notes on Contributor

Seo Jungkun is an assistant professor at Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea, where he is teaching American politics, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Executive-Legislative Relations. Prior to Kyung Hee University, he also taught at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington from 2007 through 2012. He is the author and co-author of articles published in Political Science Quarterly, American Politics Research, Party Politics, Journal of American Studies, Journal of Legislative Studies, and Asian Perspective. His research interests include the linkages between international relations and domestic politics as well as American foreign policy toward China and North Korea. He received Ph.D. and M.A. in Government from the University of Texas at Austin and B.A. in Political Science from Seoul National University. Dr. Seo won the Best Paper Award (Foreign Policy Section) in the American Political Science Association (APSA) Conference (September 2–5, 2010: Washington, D.C.).