# AMERICA'S REACTION TO ISRAEL AND NORTH KOREA'S POSSESSION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

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**Abstract**
*The Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) which is aimed to constricting the spread of such lethal weapons implies that even with the requisite technology and intelligence, not all countries are allowed to possess nuclear weapons. Only five countries are allowed to have nuclear weapons which are Britain, America, Russia, France and China. These countries enjoy such conditional privileges because they had built and tested their nuclear weapons before 1967 when the treaty came into effect. While Israel has neither confirmed nor denied its nukes, North Korea has been somewhat brazen with its sophisticated nuclear acquisition. Even though America is aware of the nuclear acquisitions of both countries, evidences show that it prefers to be more lenient and accommodative of Israel than North Korea. Using the deductive analysis method and the Constructivist theory as a theoretical framework, this paper sought to investigate America's divergent responses. To achieve this, journal articles and other online sources were utilized. The paper discovers that while America's historically constructed ideas and perceptions about Israel and North Korea have played a significant role in its reaction to their status as nuclear capabilities, the actions and reputation of the two countries have also informed the nature of reactions that they got out of America and the rest of the international community.*
**Keywords**: America, Constructivism, Non-Proliferation, Nuclear Weapons.

## Introduction

A country that is a nuclear capability is one which is able to produce nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are considered the world's most destructive weapons because of their powerful explosions. Nuclear bombs are extremely powerful explosives. Nuclear bombs derive energy by either splitting atomic nuclei or joining the tiny particles inside the atoms together.[1] Little wonder why nuclear bombs are also referred to as atomic bombs. In addition to the disaster they live in their wake, nuclear weapons release enormous radiations which make their impact last longer than the blast. Nuclear weapons have only been used in history during the World War II against Japan. Two bombs dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed a total of 150,000 people.[2] The bomb dropped on Hiroshima produced radiation which lasted many months after the drop. Countries seek to acquire and advance their nuclear weapons for

different reasons, all of which revolve around matters of security concerns.[3] Countries believe that they are better protected and stand a greater chance of deterring aggression by becoming nuclear capabilities. According to the BBC, only nine countries presently have nuclear weapons and they are America, Britain, Russia, France, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and North Korea.[4]

While in theory, any country with the required technology and intelligence can develop nuclear weapons, not all countries are allowed to. This is thanks to the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) which is aimed to constricting the spread of such lethal weapons. 191 states since 1970 have joined the NPT, including the five countries that are allowed to have nuclear weapons which are Britain, America, Russia, France and China.[5] These countries enjoy such privileges because they had built and tested their nuclear weapons before 1967 when the treaty came into effect.[6] Under the agreement, these five countries have to reduce their nuclear weapons and cannot hold on to them forever. Israel has neither confirmed nor denied its nukes, India and Pakistan never joined the NPT and North Korea left the NPT in 2003.[7] A combination of the world's nuclear-armed countries sums up to almost 14,000 nuclear warheads with more that 90% of that belonging to America and Russia alone.[8] North Korea has 15 nuclear warheads, Israel has 80, India has 135, Pakistan has 145, Britain has 215, China has 280, France has 300, America has 6,185 and Russia has 6,850. This makes Russia the country with the most nuclear warheads in the world.[9]

**Israel's Nuclear Program**

Israel's advancement of nuclear technology started at the inception of the state. The Israeli nuclear weapons program was kick started by its founding prime minister; David Ben-Gurion.[10] He opined that the chances of Israel surviving as a new and fiscally poor state would increase if it possessed nuclear weapons to deter potential threats. In 1957, Israel entered into an agreement with France which resulted into an installation of plutonium-based facility by the latter in the former (the city of Dimona to be specific).[11] This nuclear facility was secretly constructed in the Israeli Negev Desert near Dimona in 1958 after Shimon Peres (former Israeli director-general of the Ministry of Defense) entered a technical cooperation and political agreement with France in 1957.[12] Perhaps it would be impossible to explore the development of Israeli nuclear technology without mentioning the efforts of Ernst David Bergmann who was the pioneer Director of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission and the founder of Israel's efforts in developing nuclear weapons.[13]

Israeli scientists, as early as 1948, began to actively survey the Negev Desert for uranium deposits at the command of the Israeli Ministry of Defense.[14] By 1950, low-grade deposits near Beersheba and Sidon was discovered and work began on a low power method of heavy water production.[15] The Weizmann Institute of Science which was established to enhance nuclear research and headed by Dr. Bergmann was visited in 1949 by Francis Perrin, a member of the French Atomic Energy Commission and a friend of Dr. Bergmann.[16] Perrin in turn invited Israeli scientists to the French research facility at Saclay. This gave rise to a joint research effort between both countries.

Although Israel has advanced conventional military capabilities, it has for many decades maintained a policy of opacity.[17] Israel also owns a sizeable arsenal of short and medium range

ballistic and cruise missiles and is "working towards a multi-layered and comprehensive missile defense capability".[18] Many experts generally agree on Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, there is no open consensus to corroborate the extent of Israel's weapons program. Israel is not party to any of the major treaties controlling the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Even though it signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), it did not ratify them.[19]

**North Korea's Nuclear Program**

North Korea's advancement of nuclear weapons has been described as "deliberate, determined and patient". [20] It has one of the largest conventional military forces despite its position on the list of the world's poorest countries. According to the U.S. State Department estimates, it is able to support its military ambitions by dedicating to it nearly a quarter of its gross domestic product (GDP).[21] North Korea has tested a range of different missiles- short, medium, intermediate and intercontinental range; as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles.[22] While it is difficult to ascertain the exact size of North Korea's nuclear stockpile, various estimates by U.S. intelligence officials puts its stockpile between twenty and sixty assembled nuclear weapons.[23] The same estimate revealed in 2018 that Pyongyang has sufficient fissile material (which is the main component of nuclear weapons) for sixty-five weapons and that it produces enough fissile material for twelve additional weapons each year.

In July and November 2017, North Korea tested intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), each able to carry a large nuclear warhead. In a military parade in October 2020, it had a reveal of a new ICBM larger than the Hwasong-15. The Hwasong-15 is believed to be one of the largest road mobile liquid-fueled missiles. In spite of the fact that this missile is yet to be tested and probably never will be, experts posit that it is able to carry multiple nuclear warheads or decoys to confound missile defense systems.[24] With the unprecedented advancement in North Korea's nuclear technology, analysts anticipate that it would only be a matter of time before it fully completes its nuclear force. In Jeffrey Lewis's words, "We're going to have to learn to live with the North Korea's ability to target the United States with nuclear weapons".[25] Between 2006 and 2017, North Korea conducted six nuclear tests. With each test, the nuclear explosives have grown in power.

In November 2017, Kim Jun Un ceased to test its nuclear weapons when it began to pursue warmer relations with South Korea and the United States. While on a presidential visit to North Korea, (a visit that marked the first ever meeting between the seating leaders of both countries), Donald Trump in 2018, broached the subject of denuclearization with Kim. In exchange, Trump consented to provide North Korea with security guarantees and a promise to halt joint military exercises with South Korea. This agreement was however short-lived when in February 2019 at the Hanoi summit, Vietnam, Trump and Kim disagreed over the issue of sanctions relief and denuclearization. North Korea resumed its nuclear weapons testing in May 2019. Observers perceive the tests to be a direct reaction to the turn of events at the Hanoi conference. In March, Trump and Kim sought to resume negotiations but the latter continued its nuclear tests in July, including the launch of a ballistic missile under water in October 2019.

It continued its testing even in 2020.

North Korea has been rumored to possess other weapons of mass destruction such as chemical weapons including sulfur mustard, chlorine, phosgene, sarin, and VX nerve agents.[26] It is also rumored to have between 2,500 and 5,000 tons of chemical weapons. In addition to these, North Korea is also believed to have biological weapons even though in 1987 it became party to the Biological Weapons Convention and in 1988 it consented to the Geneva Protocol, forbidding the use of asphyxiating, poisonous and other gases in warfare.[27] The Biological Weapons Convention is a treaty that bans the production, development, stockpiling and acquisition of biological weapons. North Korea is alleged to be capable of creating (and perhaps weaponize) pathogens including anthrax, smallpox, and plague.

**America's Reaction to Israel's Nuclear Program**

The American government first caught wind of Israel's secret nuclear program at Dimona during mid-summer 1960.[28] In the last months of the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the US government found out that Israel had been building a secret nuclear reactor near Dimona in Negev Desert, all with French assistance.[29] This knowledge brought on a number of reactions such as apprehension, concerns about regional stability and nuclear proliferation and annoyance as the Israeli government continued to boycott the US questions about Dimona. On one of such occasions, the Israeli government replied to the US questions about the construction site by saying that it would be a textile factory.[30]

Many westerners (America in particular) argue that Israel's weapons are morally and historically defensible unlike those of other countries like Iran and North Korea. Each time America shoots a disapproving look at 'belligerent' states like Iran and North Korea for seeking to advance their nuclear technology, they tend to shift the attention and focus to Israel whom even though is yet to admit to possessing nuclear weapons has not denied the accusations either As a matter of fact, Joe Cirincione, the president of the nuclear non-proliferation-focused Ploughshares Fund admitted to a Washington Post reporter that, "it is impossible to give a nuclear policy talk in the Middle East without having the questions focus almost entirely on Israel".[31] Apparently America has gotten so much grief for its preferential acceptance of Israel's war heads and not North Korea's. In defense of America's position on the subject, Robert Satloff, the executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy said, "Israel has never given any reason to doubt its solely defensive nature…Israel has never brandished its capabilities to exert regional influence, cow its adversaries or threaten its neighbors".[32]

According to the Washington post, the narrative behind America's acceptance of Israel's nuclear weapons is more surprising than many are aware of. In its opinion, the single greatest reason for America's acceptance of Israeli nuclear weapons may very well be timing.[33] After the detonation of the world's first nuclear weapon by the United States in 1945 and the havoc it wrought, most of the world agreed that nuclear proliferation was not to be handled with kid gloves. By 1970, most of the world agreed to the Non-Proliferation Treaty forbidding new countries from developing nuclear weapons. The 25-year window between 1945 and 1970 allowed the major world powers (France, Britain, China and the Soviet Union) to develop

nuclear weapons; the world powers and one Country-Israel.[34] One can therefore argued that the fact that Israel seized the opportunity at the time the major world powers did earned it a free pass in the eye of the west.

Perhaps it is worthy of note that the United States has not always been as accepting of Israel's nuclear program as it is today. Israel in the 1950s was nothing like it is today; it was poor and not a close political and military ally of the United States as it is today. It had to devise means of surviving and matching up with the wealthy and highly advanced nations of the world that were dominating the nuclear space. When in 1960 Israeli nuclear facility was found out by America, Israel insisted that the facility was strictly for peaceful purposes and was not in the least interested in acquiring nuclear weapons. For years they stone walled the American backed inspectors sent to check out the facility. With time the United States discovered the full extent of the program and fought even harder to shut it down. In Ciricione's words, "the U.S. tried to stop Israel from getting nuclear weapons and to stop France from giving Israel the technology and material it needed to make them…we failed".[35]
Perhaps the 1967 war heralded a turning point for both the United States and Israel. Even though Israeli troops won the second large-scale Arab-Israeli war, they were convinced that they could lose next time.[36] And so for the next five years they sought to better fortify themselves. First, in 1968, Israel secretly developed its own nuclear weapon and in September the following year, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir took a White House meeting with President Nixon.[37] Even though the happenings during the meeting are not public knowledge, US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger was caught on record mentioning to President Nixon at a later time that "during your private discussions with Golda Meir you emphasized that our primary concern was that Israel make no visible introduction of nuclear weapons or undertake a nuclear test program".[38] The meeting has therefore been recognized as the start of Israel's unofficial policy of refusal to publicly admit or test its nuclear program for which the US would tolerate its existence in exchange. America's resolve also earned it a much needed ally in the Middle East during the Cold War. In Satloff's words, "essentially the bargain has been that Israel keeps its nuclear deterrent deep in the basement and Washington keeps its critique locked in the closet".[39]The 1973 Arab-Israeli further cemented the arrangement between the US and Israel. A surprise attack on Yom Kippur by the Egyptian and Syrian forces caused the Israeli leaders to fear for the complete overrun of the country. It was a joint effort of the US and Israel that assured the latter victory in the war.

The US-Israeli agreement has endured since the time of Nixon for more than forty years and Israel's military capabilities have since waxed stronger. Scholars are beginning to wonder if the old has run its course and if Israel should consider making its nuclear arsenal public. The only contending nation with Israel in the Middle East is Iran. Scholars have posited that Iran's nuclear ambitions may very well be driven by Israel's nuclear program seeing that the latter's position as the sole-nuclear armed state in the Middle East is an aberration. Regardless of the acceptance of every US president from Nixon to Obama, America is still unsatisfied with weapons of mass destruction 'roaming free' in the Middle East. "We are not okay with Israel having nuclear weapons, but US policy makers recognize that there is not much we can do about it in the short-term", Cirincione said.[40]

**America's Reaction to North Korea's Nuclear Program**

The first infrastructure for nuclear weapons program in North Korea was built under its founding president, Kim Il Sung. This led to the first of many US-North Korean nuclear crises in the early 1990s. The crisis was neutralized in 1994 when the Clinton administration finalized the Agreed Framework with North Korea; a deal which cut short a program which may by now have produced enough plutonium for scores of nuclear bombs.[41] Kim Il Sung died in 1994 shortly after the Agreement and his son, Kim Jong Il who took the mantle of leadership, decided on an alternative source of nuclear bomb-a gas centrifuge project which would produce enriched uranium.[42] North Korea's admittance to furthering a clandestine uranium enrichment program in 2002 after allegations by a US State Department official kick-started the second North Korean nuclear crisis.[43] After the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002, North Korea announced in January 2003 that it was no longer a part of the NPT and once again began to vigorously engage its nuclear facilities.

In August 2003, America once again made a diplomatic effort to deter North Korea-the Six-Party Talks. [44] The Six-Party Talks involved China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States. The talks yielded much desired results in 2005 when North Korea vowed to abandon all of its nuclear weapons and its nuclear program and return to the NPT. Those talks however broke down in 2009 after North Korea launched its rocket.[45] Pyongyang has since made it clear that it no longer wishes to revisit such talks neither does it wish to be bound by their agreements despite the fact that it has been invited by the other five members to renew its commitment to its 2005 denuclearization pledge.

In defiance of the international community, North Korea has continued to amass weapons of mass destruction. In July 2017, North Korea successfully tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile and in September (same year) it tested a thermonuclear weapon. [46] With the failure of diplomatic measures, America has resorted to more stringent measures to deter North Korea. The US has imposed unilateral sanctions on North Korea, restricting more economic activities than the UN sanctions. These sanctions were primarily designed to stall North Korea's development of missile and nuclear technology. In addition, the US has imposed sanctions on banks, companies and private individuals (especially in China and Russia) that have supported its nuclear program. On a number of occasions, the US has partially lifted its sanctions on North Korea with Pyongyang's promise to cease its nuclear program and dismantle parts of its facilities.[47] North Korea has however constantly reneged on its promises.

America's first set of sanctions on North Korea were imposed in 2016. The law authorized the president to sanction anyone involved in proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.[48] The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act was passed in 2017 and it imposed further sanctions on North Korea (Iran and Russia as well), prohibiting certain assistance to foreign governments that help North Korea.[49] Former American President, Donald Trump, in his first year, sanctioned the U.S. Treasury Department to block foreign businesses or individuals that engender trading activities with North Korea.[50] Analysts believe the reason for

the heightening of the sanctions is to subvert Pyongyang's sanction-evasion tactics and force Kim back to the negotiating table. In addition, Trump declared in November 2017 that he would return North Korea to the list of state sponsors of terrorism; a list it has been on from 1988 to 2008.[51]

**Constructivist Theory Explained**

Nicholas Onuf coined the term 'constructivism' in 1989 and introduced the approach to International Relations.[52] The theory of constructivism is concerned with how the social and political world works. Constructivists emphasize the social dimensions of international relations i.e. social values and norms. Alexander Wendt established the foundations of Constructivism. He disagrees with Classical Theories (Realism, Liberalism & Marxism). He does not agree with realists who believe that states are always in a state of war because anarchy exists. Neither does he agree with Liberals who believe that states always cooperate because anarchy exists. He argues instead that anarchy is manufactured by states and not pre-established fact i.e anarchy is what states make of it. In fact, he wrote an article with the exact title "Anarchy is what states make of it" at the end of the Cold War to explain the evolution of bipolar system after the World War II. Wendt insists that states behave how they want to behave and that anarchy is a condition that is produced by states themselves, not nature. Contrary to what realists posit that state behavior is static (i.e. states are always preparing for war to protect themselves) and liberals who posit that state behavior is dynamic (i.e. all states cooperate for mutual benefit); constructivists believe that state behavior can be different at different times based on their perceptions.

According to constructivism, the behavior of states is not driven by tangible things but by ideas, norms, values, traditions etc. which a state upholds. To the constructivist, reality is not absolute but subjective and it is important to understand perception. . For example, North Korea sees the possession of nukes as necessary for its preservation, while other countries in the region do not share the same perception. To them, facing the same situation, one state may respond aggressively while another may go the way of cooperation. For instance, the U.S. considers the Arab Spring as a wave of democratization while Russia considers it a wave of instability in the region. Constructivists believe that reality is constructed; what is rational for one state can be irrational for another. Constructivism upholds that there is no fixed national interest; states have different interests at different times for different reasons. At a time, it can be to maximize power, at another time, it may be to increase economic gains, at another time, it may be to increase cooperation. All of these are based on changing realities as constructed by each state.

**America's Reactions Explained in the Context of the Constructivist Theory**

As evident from the foregoing discussions, America's position on the nuclear capabilities of North Korea and Israel is disparate. The crux of this paper is to attempt an explanation for the divergent reaction on the U.S.'s part using the constructivist theory. The central idea behind the constructivist theory is that important aspects of international relations are historically and socially constructed rather than the supposition that they are based on inevitable consequences of human nature. In light of this, the differing reactions to North Korea and Israel's nuclear ambition can be traced to the social idea America has historically constructed about each of the nations. While America and the west generally argue that Israel's weapons

are morally and historically defensible unlike those of other countries like Iran, they are not as amiable when North Korea is concerned.

Not only has America refused to turn a blind eye to North Korea's nuclear program, it has seized every opportunity to shut it down and extend sanctions to countries, organizations and private individuals that have aided and abetted its nuclear expedition. For Israel on the other hand, Saloff says it "has never given any reason to doubt its solely defensive nature…Israel has never brandished its capabilities to exert regional influence, cow its adversaries or threaten its neighbors". This is a testament to the fact that America is willing to continue to handle Israel's nuclear weapons progress with kid gloves. Perhaps what baffles the international community about this stance is that according to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, neither Israel nor North Korea should possess nuclear technology since they are not part of the five major world powers- Britain, America, France, China and Russia. Therefore, keen observers of international relations expect that whatever will be deemed good for the goose should equally be deemed fit for the gander i.e. quid pro quo. That if America has decided to take it upon itself to expose and oppose countries developing nuclear technology and amassing weapons of mass destruction, it should extend equal treatment to all defaulting countries. Evidently, this has not been the case. This, according to constructivists, is attributable to the fact that reality is not absolute but subjective and the importance of understanding perception as responsible differing state reactions to similar issues. To them, facing the same situation, one state may respond aggressively while another may go the way of cooperation. The series of actions and reactions between America, North Korea and Israel is a classic example.

Constructivists believe that reality is constructed; what is rational for one state can be irrational for another. Following the constructivist line of thought, there is no way for America, the west or the international community to know for certain whether or not nuclear weapons would be safer in Israel's hands or in North Korea's. What America chooses to be its rationality is not necessarily the complete picture. America perceives nuclear weapons in the hands of North Korea to be threatening to the region and international community at large. There is no gainsaying the fact that America is sticking to its perceived image of North Korea as a belligerent state and a ticking time bomb that cannot be trusted with weapons of mass destruction. Israel on the other hand is perceived by the United States as a much more stable state capable of handling the responsibilities of a nuclear capability state. Since neither of the countries have actually put their neighboring countries in physical danger, there is no evidence to confirm America's fears.

Having established that America's actions and reactions can be understood in line of the constructivist theory, it proves inadequate to explain the whole of the interactions between the three nations. According to the constructivist, America's acceptance of Israel and reprimand of North Korea as far as nuclear program is concerned is solely a function of its perception and constructed ideas about both countries. Perhaps that is not entirely true. Available literature points to the fact that America equally disapproved of Israel's nuclear program activities at its inception in the mid-1950s. In Ciricione's words, "the U.S. tried to stop Israel from getting nuclear weapons and to stop France from giving Israel the technology and material it needed

to make them…we failed". This clearly shows that America's inability to seize Israeli nuclear program was not for lack of trying. The meeting in September 1969 between Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir and President Nixon where a 'silent' agreement was reached that Israel would not publicly admit to or test its nuclear program for which in exchange, the US would tolerate its existence shows that Israel demonstrated good faith and the fact that it has kept to that 'gentleman's' agreement for more than 40 years, reveals to America and the international community at large that it can be trusted.

North Korea on the other hand has been historically notorious for reneging on its promises. It deviated from the 1994 Agreed Framework in 2002 and again in 2005, it left the Six Party Talks negotiation after promising to suspend its nuclear program. Those talks however broke down in 2009 after North Korea launched its rocket. North Korea has since made it clear that it no longer wishes to revisit such talks neither does it wish to be bound by their agreements despite the fact that it has been invited by the other five members to renew its commitment to its 2005 denuclearization pledge. In addition, North Korea continues to publicly test its nuclear weapons, almost daring America and the international community to do their worst. Clearly, North Korea has continually proven itself to be unreliable and unstable (both qualities unfitting for a nuclear capability state). Israel on the other hand has continued to prove agreeable and cooperative, making it a more attractive nuclear capability state option. It is dutiful to add that the reputation of North Korea's leader, Kim Jun Un, an authoritative ruthless leader, makes it all the more difficult for America to trust North Korea with weapons of mass destruction.

Suffice it to say that America's tolerance of Israel's nuclear program is just that-tolerance. America is as displeased at the thought of Israel's nuclear program as it is with that of North Korea. Referring to Cirincione's words "we are not okay with Israel having nuclear weapons, but US policy makers recognize that there is not much we can do about it in the short-term". This goes to show that America's end game is to rid both countries of their nuclear capabilities even though it seems to be more tolerating of Israel for obvious reasons.

**Conclusion**

This paper has traced the evolution of the North Korean and Israeli nuclear programs, America's reaction to them and whether or not the constructivist theory satisfactorily explains the range of reactions. This paper has found that while the constructivist theory offers an explanation for the range of reactions, it does not explain the whole of the reactions and the reasons behind them. While America's historically constructed ideas and perceptions about Israel and North Korea have played a significant role in its reaction to their status as nuclear capabilities, the actions and reputation of the two countries have also informed the nature of reactions that they got out of America and the rest of the international community.

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