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# International Relations Theory and the Second Korean War

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## Abstract

Ever since the first Korean war in 1950, scholars and policymakers have been predicting a second one, started by an invasion from the North. Whether seen as arising from preventive, preemptive, desperation, or simple aggressive motivations, the predominant perspective in the west sees North

Korea as likely to instigate conflict. Yet for fifty years North Korea has not come close to starting a war. Why were so many scholars so consistently wrong about North Korea's intentions? Social scientists can learn as much from events that did not happen as from those that did. The case of North Korea provides a window with which to examine these theories of conflict initiation, and reveals how the assumptions underlying these theories can become mis-specified. Either scholars misunderstood the initial conditions, or they misunderstood the theory, and I show that scholars have made mistakes in both areas. Social science moves forward from clear statement of a theory, its causal logic, and its predictions. However, just as important is the rigorous assessment of a theory, especially if the predictions fail to materialize. North Korea never had the material capabilities to be a serious contender to the U.S.–ROK alliance, and it quickly fell further behind. The real question has not been whether North Korea would preempt as South Korea caught up, but instead why North Korea might fight as it fell further and further behind. The explanation for a half-century of stability and peace on the Korean peninsula is actually quite simple: deterrence works.

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