

The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the DPRK Nuclear Issue

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Abstract

This study reflects the impact on the North Korean nuclear issue by analysing the Russo-Ukrainian war. At the international level, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has changed the geopolitical landscape of the world, leading to increased strategic autonomy for some developing countries. At the regional level, the conflict has led the Six-Party Talks countries to revise their foreign and defence policies, complicating the regional situation, while at the DPRK level, the conflict has strengthened the DPRK's determination to develop nuclear weapons and strengthen its relations with Russia. In terms of the future direction of the nuclear issue, the DPRK's strategic goal of survival among the major powers makes the outbreak of nuclear war in the peninsula less likely.

Keywords

Russia-Ukraine War, DPRK Nuclear Issue, Korean Peninsula Situation

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the nuclear issue in the 1990s, it has been a major factor in determining inter-Korean relations and maintaining security and stability in Northeast Asia, and has also influenced the policies and military strategies of China, the United States, Russia and Japan towards North and South Korea (Yong, 2022). This article is based on the background of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In this context, this paper discusses the implications and prospects for the DPRK nuclear issue at the international, regional and national levels.

2. Background of the DPRK Nuclear Issue

After the end of the Korean War, the then Supreme Leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung, stated in a private meeting that North Korea should have the same wea-

pons as other countries, including nuclear weapons (Choe, 2023). During the Cold War, the Soviet Union secretly assisted North Korea in nuclear weapons development to counter the US-South Korea alliance until the 1990s, when the US suspected North Korea of nuclear weapons development through reconnaissance satellites and the North Korean nuclear crisis erupted. On 10 January 2003, the North Korean government issued a statement announcing another withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, but at the same time North Korea stated that it had no intention of developing nuclear weapons and the North Korean nuclear crisis officially broke out. In August 2003, China brokered the Six-Party Talks between North Korea, South Korea, the US, Russia and Japan in Beijing to address the DPRK's nuclear crisis, establishing the principle of a peaceful resolution of the DPRK nuclear issue through negotiations.

3. Theoretical Foundation

In the late 1970s, the global power structure underwent major changes, with the fragmentation of power and the growing trend towards political multipolarity and the decline of hegemony, so that traditional realist theories could not be adapted to the new situation, hence the gradual emergence of neo-realist theories. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the North Korean nuclear issue coincided with this new period of change in the global power structure. This study will adopt the neo-realist theory of international relations and explain the rationality of neo-realism for the study of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Aggressive Realism and the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

Morgenthau (1948) states that the most effective technique for managing power is parity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several countries from the former Eastern Bloc joined NATO, but requests from Western European countries to join Ukraine and Georgia have been rejected in order to avoid conflict with Russia. Brown (2008) submits that the rejection of the proposals submitted by Ukraine and Georgia for NATO membership at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest maintained a degree of security parity in Eastern Europe. However, this security parity was gradually disrupted by the outbreak of the Crimean crisis in 2014. Levy (1981) proposes that offensive realism argues that a state's periodic demonstration of a willingness to go to war, while doing more harm than good in the short term, helps to enhance credibility and therefore has enormous benefits, and furthermore, that a credible threat of conquest serves as a motivation to change the national interests of the target state so that states opposed to the threatening state ally with it. NATO is a threat to Russia's national security and is conducting military operations against Ukraine in order to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO in alliance with it. It is clear that Russia's attack on Ukraine was not in pursuit of the survival advocated by classical realism; Russia annexed four eastern Ukrainian states as a military-strategic buffer zone from NATO's

sphere of influence to ensure national security. Offensive realism is therefore applicable to the analysis of the causes and effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

4. The Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on the DPRK Nuclear Issue

The outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has affected the landscape of the world today, and has equally affected the course of the nuclear issue. This chapter will discuss the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on the DPRK nuclear issue at three levels: international, regional and DPRK domestic policy.

4.1. At the International Level, the Russian-Ukraine War Is Reshaping the World Order That the DPRK Nuclear Issue Is Embedded in

The Russia-Ukraine war, whose ground battlefield is in Ukraine but whose battle lines are all over the world, is not only a contest between Russia and the United States in the European region, but also between the North and the South, and is a continuation of the Cold War mentality, [Poast \(2022\)](#) argues that the Russian-Ukrainian war seems to be well explained by realism in terms of its motives, the pursuit of national interests over higher ideals and the tendency of the state to check the aggressor when a threat is received. For Russia, Ukraine's accession to NATO and its expansion to the east is the greatest threat to its own security and that of its allies, hence the joint military action against Ukraine with Belarus and the diplomatic and material support of North Korea, Iran and other countries. On the contrary, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a provocation to the security of Western countries and democratic societies, so it is necessary to jointly sanction Russia and its supporters. As a result, ideological antagonisms similar to those of the Cold War are once again taking shape and intensifying in today's world. North and South Korea have different socio-political systems and the continuation of the Cold War mentality has exacerbated the antagonism between the two countries.

What's more, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has objectively inspired a sense of strategic autonomy in Third World Countries and regions. Report to [RFE \(2022\)](#) the US, UK, Canada and EU have launched several rounds of sanctions against Russia in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, report to [Share America \(2022\)](#), by mid-2022, more than 40 countries had announced strong sanctions and export controls against Russia, forming a united front against Russian aggression, but many countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have remained neutral and have not participated in the sanctions. Of the more than 190 member states of the United Nations, more than 140 are not participating in the sanctions against Russia. This shows that some developing countries no longer follow the US baton and that the world's plates, which had been tied up with US hegemony as the glue, have been violently banged. The sense of strategic autonomy of a group of middle powers shifted from an implicit subconscious to an explicit political aspiration. For the future resolution of the

North Korean nuclear issue, it can be speculated that South Korea is likely to exercise its own sense of strategic autonomy and reduce US intervention in the affairs of the Korean peninsula.

In addition, The Russian-Ukrainian conflict will be an important variable driving the reshaping of the geopolitical landscape. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has opened the curtain of global disorder and given rise to new geopolitical relations. In Data friendly space's analysis of the Ukraine crisis (2023), it is stated that even if the conflict ends, a series of crises will continue to fester, not only because of the irreconcilable conflicts between the US, Russia, Europe and Ukraine, but also because, after repeated battles, all parties are unwilling to seek their own position in the established situation. After the struggle and reflection, Russia will once again engage in deep multi-win cooperation with Europe, and Russia and Ukraine will eventually connect once again with their "incessant and troubled" national emotions and cultural ties. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict will serve as a warning to North and South Korea that "war cannot solve problems", thus avoiding a war over the nuclear issue.

4.2. At the Regional Level

As the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has changed the world's geopolitical landscape, it has caused the countries in the region involved in the DPRK nuclear issue to adapt their foreign and defence policies to the current international situation, which has indirectly influenced the future course of the DPRK nuclear issue. This chapter will discuss the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on the countries in East Asia and the US and Russia, the two global powers who have been deeply and actively involved in the regional issues since WWII.

First, the US and Russia are both readjusting their policies toward regional states, especially China and North Korea due to geopolitical and ideological considerations. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the United States considered that Russia had launched a military operation against Ukraine on its own, in violation of international law, a violation of democratic societies and a threat to the security of its European allies, and that it must come together to sanction Russia, destroy its economy and force it to stop its aggressive behaviour. According to a fact sheet on sanctions against Russia and Belarus released by the [White House \(2022\)](#), the United States, in consultation with allies and partners, is imposing additional economic costs on Russia and Belarus in response to President Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine. The US will act to hold Belarus responsible for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, weaken Russia's defence sector and its military for years to come, target Russia's most important source of wealth, and ban Russian airlines from US airspace. Therefore, South Korea, as an ally of the US in Asia, has joined the camp of sanctions against Russia, further consolidating US-South Korea relations, which has intensified the emergence of a new Cold War pattern in Northeast Asia, where the US, Japan and South Korea are pitted against China, Russia and North Korea, exacerbating regional tensions.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the fear and trepidation of the United States and its allies towards some such as China and North Korea. Leonard (2022) argues that this war both highlights and deepens the fundamental global divide of the day—the conflict between developed democracies committed to the existing international order and the nascent Eurasian authoritarian unity bloc—Russia and China; The Russo-Ukrainian war has shattered false expectations that engagement with Russia and China would lead to the liberalisation of these countries. Putin's invasion of Ukraine offers a "historic opportunity" to regroup and reload in an era of intense competition between democracies "not only with Russia but also with China", the argument goes, and the liberal coalition does not fail to take advantage of the current opportunity to build a strong military force to defend itself against pressure and aggression from dictators. The strategic goal of the United States is to build an international coalition of democracies and to confront Russia and China with appropriate military preparedness to defend against aggression by these countries. The United States will have to take additional measures in the Asia-Pacific region to defend itself against possible future incursions by China, Russia and North Korea against its allies, which will measure force greater unity between China, Russia and North Korea and within the US, Japanese and South Korean camps, further complicating the situation in the peninsula region.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has left Russia under international sanctions and isolation, and in order to keep the war going and the domestic economy operating, Russia has had to increase its cooperation and trade with China and North Korea. Glaser (2022) points out that the impact of post-war Russian foreign policy on international politics is evident. Russia's policy orientation would shift towards the Asian continent as Russia would be isolated from the West and the Euro-Atlantic world. Greater Eurasia transcends the former and post-Soviet regions and is a continent-wide vision that promotes political and economic cooperation between states and countries from the Atlantic to the Pacific, including China, India, Pakistan and Vietnam. This will force Russia to move closer to the attitude of China and North Korea from its original neutral attitude on the future nuclear issue.

The Russo-Ukrainian war has also forced a shift in Russia's foreign policy to strengthen relations with North Korea. Choo (2019) notes that Russia's policy shifts in recent years are likely to affect its relations with North Korea, and most importantly, North Korea may welcome this change in world politics as it finds a new bloc, which it previously lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition, Frank (2022) notes that Russia could use North Korea as a political tool against the US and its regional allies, and in addition to vetoing UN Security Council resolutions on sanctions against North Korea, Russia may try to use North Korea more aggressively in East Asia to challenge US missile defence systems and intelligence facilities in South Korea and Japan that are deployed close to Russia's strategic assets in the Far East, while North Korea's demands that the

US withdraw its troops from South Korea or cancel joint US-South Korea military exercises would receive more support than ever from Moscow. This makes it more difficult to denuclearize in North Korea.

Second, China's role in the North Korean nuclear issue after Russia's invasion of Ukraine seems more crucial. However, its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war would to some extent hold back its cooperation with the US on this issue while further emboldening North Korea and Russia.

Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the US has been trying to use NATO and the creation of a coalition of liberal democracies to counterbalance Russia and China, and has acted frequently on the Taiwan Strait, which will force China and Russia to work more closely together (Shin, 2022). The common anti-US and strategic objectives of China and Russia have led to increased cooperation. The two countries are also converging in their positions and aspirations for future negotiations on the North Korean nuclear issue. They have been working together to create a multi-polar world and trying to establish a balance between the multi-regional order. At the bilateral level, the two countries maintain strategic cooperation and are committed to the rise of Greater Eurasia on the basis of the Sino-Russian agreement (Lukin, 2020).

The Russo-Ukrainian war has also strengthened China's voice on the North Korean nuclear issue, and China's position will be even more decisive in determining the success or failure of the international community's sanctions against North Korea. Of the currently unknown consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, perhaps the most important is the position that China will take on sanctions against North Korea. The seriousness of China's commitment to imposing sanctions on North Korea has been frequently discussed over the past few years. However, Beijing, like Moscow, has so far not openly and formally disregarded and violated UNSC sanctions. This restraint is likely to be maintained for the time being, as China will not see the need to be unnecessarily exposed to international criticism now that international and US attention is focused on Russia. However, it is feared that the foreign policy of biding one's time, as Deng Xiaoping called it, will never continue. Predictions of an end to this policy have become frequent, especially since Xi Jinping became China's leader. It is therefore not difficult to imagine Beijing's strategists deciding that, with international attention focused elsewhere, now might be a good time to take the next step. If this were the case, Beijing would openly support Russia in its confrontation with the US, criticise Washington's imperial ambitions and efforts to destabilise East Asia, and abandon its tacit support for sanctions against North Korea (Frank, 2022).

4.3. Japan and South Korea Would Stand and Cooperate with the West More Closely Both Economically and Militarily in the Overall International Relations and Specifically on the North Korea Nuclear Issue

The Russia-Ukraine war has prompted Japan to accelerate the revision of its na-

tional security strategy and increase defence spending. The Russian-Ukrainian war is the first major war involving a European power in this century. Japanese security analysts agree that the Russian-Ukrainian war will affect the post-World War II international order and produce sweeping changes in world history, and with the roots of the international order shaken by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the international community now stands at a historic crossroads, and Japan cannot stand idly by (Katsumi, 2022). In addition, Japan has had to revise its national security strategy and increase defence spending due to territorial disputes with Russia over the four northern islands (known in Russia as the South Kuril Islands), as well as with China over the Senkaku Islands (known in China as the Diaoyu Islands) and fear of North Korea's nuclear deterrence. In April 2022, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party submitted a proposal to Prime Minister Fumio Kishida urging the Japanese government to acquire a counter-attack capability when it revises its national security strategy later this year; in addition, Japanese diplomats tend to be highly cautious about Russia's position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. This is linked to the history of territorial disputes between Japan and Russia over the Northern Territories and the Senkaku Islands dispute with China. Japanese politicians are also concerned about the Taiwan-China issue and North Korea's nuclear weapons capability, as these security threats affect the entire East Asian region, including Japan (Katsumi, 2022).

The Russian-Ukrainian war has had a huge impact on Japan's domestic economy, and Japan has had to increase trade with the US and NATO camp countries to stabilise its domestic economy, which will leave Japan's foreign policy at the mercy of the major powers. Japanese multinational companies suffered huge economic losses as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the war led to a significant devaluation of the yen, which would have reduced the value of Japanese labour, and the Russo-Ukrainian war could have led to the collapse of the international division of labour system that Japanese companies had benefited from for many years, creating serious economic and security dilemmas for Japan. In addition, the huge gap between Japanese politics and public support for the continued defence of Ukraine from Russian attack and Japan's status as a major economic power suggests that the influence of Japanese politics and diplomacy on G7 and US policy will increase (Hirohito, 2022).

The Russian-Ukrainian war poses a double challenge to South Korea's diplomacy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine poses a dual challenge to South Korean diplomacy. The immediate challenge is that South Korea needs to develop an effective near-term diplomatic response to the invasion, in line with US and European practice, that effectively meets the expectations of the South Korean public and as an ally. The second and more important geopolitical challenge is to ensure that Russia's revisionist challenge to the status quo—the challenge of a state with nuclear weapons wishing to modify or eliminate existing national borders—will set a precedent for North Korea, another state with nuclear weapons that harbours revisionist geopolitical ambitions for South Korea's northern bor-

der (Snyder, 2022). The military aggression of nuclear-armed Russia against non-nuclear Ukraine has prompted South Korea to want to develop nuclear weapons to defend itself against the nuclear threat from North Korea. Recently South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol said for the first time that South Korea would consider building its own nuclear weapons or asking the US to redeploy them on the Korean peninsula if the nuclear threat from North Korea increases. North Korea's violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the recent increase in the number of missile test launches has already caused great psychological fear among the South Korean public, and South Korea needs to deploy nuclear weapons to defend itself against North Korea's nuclear deterrent; if Seoul builds nuclear weapons, it could trigger a regional arms race, making the hope of North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons remote (Choe, 2023).

4.4. In Terms of Russia-Ukraine War's Impacts on the DPRK

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war has affected not only the world landscape but also the foreign policy of the countries surrounding the Korean peninsula, and likewise the attitude and initiatives of North Korea on the issue of denuclearization.

The Russo-Ukrainian war provided the DPRK with new ideas on the use of nuclear weapons. As North Korea conducts a new round of intense tests of powerful weapons—and threatens pre-emptive nuclear strikes on Washington and Seoul—it may take its cue from the heated rhetoric of the leader of a member of the UN Security Council that possesses nuclear weapons: Russia's Vladimir Putin. With Putin suggesting that the use of tactical nuclear weapons could reverse the frightening prospect of battlefield setbacks in Ukraine, there are fears that this normalisation of the nuclear threat is encouraging North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to put the finishing touches on his unfinished nuclear programme (Klug, 2022).

A Russo-Ukrainian war would reinforce North Korea's view that nuclear weapons are vital to the country's survival. Despite the different historical and political contexts of Ukraine and the DPRK, certain similarities can be found. Looking at the different scenarios, the war in Ukraine offers several lessons for the DPRK. While some of the scenarios are hypothetical, it is important to consider the DPRK's perspective and its possible future actions. The DPRK's paranoia about military threats from potential enemies may have increased further after seeing Ukraine, a non-nuclear weapon state, invaded by Russia, a major military power with nuclear weapons. Many believe that if Ukraine possessed nuclear weapons or successfully joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), it would not have been invaded by Russia. While Ukraine has sought full military support, such as the involvement of US or NATO troops, the West has focused on imposing harsh economic sanctions on Russia and supplying Ukraine with weapons only. This response is largely designed to avoid a direct military conflict, which could lead to a third world war between nuclear-armed states (Lee, 2022).

The Russo-Ukrainian war could change DPRK's policy toward China and influence the direction of Pyongyang's foreign policy. Lee (2022) notes that despite the improvement in relations between North Korea and China, their strategic priorities and interests may differ in the future. From Pyongyang's perspective, if Beijing needs to use the nuclear issue as a bargaining chip against Washington in order to reap rewards on Chinese priority issues such as Taiwan, China may decide to cooperate with the US on the nuclear issue. Such a development would pose a major challenge to Pyongyang, as it could no longer rely on Beijing as an ally. Indeed, China actively participated in a series of sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the United States against North Korea's nuclear programme following the country's nuclear tests in 2013, 2016 and 2017. Such concerns could prompt North Korea to use this period of war to bolster its military and nuclear capabilities, strengthen its ties with Russia and reduce its dependence on China. While this strategy may be short-lived, it depends on how the war in Ukraine ends.

In order for North Korea to continue its nuclear programme and gain the support of some countries, it is clear that Russia is of course the strongest partner of North Korea at the moment for China, which will use the nuclear issue as a bargaining chip and negotiate with the US over the Taiwan issue, and North Korea does not want Russia to lose this war. Kyiv Independent News (2023) report that the DPRK government intends to send up to 500 soldiers or police officers to the Russian-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions to "participate in reconstruction work". Meanwhile, Holland (2022) reports the White House as saying that the Wagner Group, a private Russian military company, has received a shipment of weapons from North Korea to help strengthen Russia's military in Ukraine.

5. Discussion on the Future Development of the North Korean Nuclear Issue

Two different voices have emerged on the future course of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula in the face of the aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian war. On the one hand, the periodic demonstration of a state's willingness to go to war, as suggested by the theory of offensive realism, does more harm than good in the short term but contributes to credibility and therefore has enormous benefits; moreover, a credible threat of conquest can serve as an incentive to change the national interests of the target state and bring about an alliance with states that oppose the threatening state. The DPRK may vigorously develop nuclear weapons and possibly launch a nuclear war to realise its long-held political aspiration of reunifying the peninsula and to ward off threats from the US, Japan and South Korea. North Korea's nuclear expansion would thus force South Korea and Japan to develop and deploy nuclear weapons, turning North Korea's denuclearisation plans into a shambles (Lee, 2022).

On the other hand, the new South Korean President Yoon Seok-yeol's hardline policy towards North Korea may stimulate the North to react by starting an

arms race in East Asia. Yoon Seok-yeol does not seem to realise that the conditions for his success are not yet in place. Instead, his goals and methods seem less driven by current political realities than by ideology and a clear dividing line with the Moon Jae-in government. Whether intentional or not, such policies have the potential to fuel a rapidly evolving arms race in East Asia (Staar, 2022).

However, there are also scholars who are optimistic about the development of denuclearisation in North Korea. Kim (2022) sees no comparison between Ukraine and South Korea. Ukraine is not a member of NATO, nor is it an ally of the United States. The presence of allied forces on the Korean peninsula is in itself a strong guarantee against war. South Korea is not concerned about not having an ally to help defend against an invasion. The crisis in Ukraine will not undermine the unity of the US alliance, which will seek a more future-oriented relationship by strengthening extended deterrence and expanding the scope of military cooperation. Such a response could influence the DPRK's calculation of the utility of high-profile provocations: higher costs and lower returns, thus prompting the DPRK to lower its diplomatic posture and maintain the status quo in the situation on the peninsula. Moreover, the fundamentals governing relations on the peninsula remain stable, despite the existence of tensions that heighten the risk of more deadly outbreaks. The joint US-South Korean containment and deterrence of North Korea has proved effective for decades and this seems unlikely to change. China never wants to see the situation in its eastern region deteriorate, let alone when it is involved in the fight against COVID-19, and Chinese President Xi Jinping appears poised for an unprecedented third term later this year. Given Moscow's standoff with the Western powers over Ukraine, Pyongyang cannot lift UN sanctions on its own, despite the staunch support it receives from China and Russia. The main risk for the foreseeable future, then, is not war or structural changes affecting the relationship between war and peace on the peninsula, as North Korea's long-term goal is a distant long-cherished dream of reunification with South Korea on its own terms, but its immediate focus is on survival rather than in the pursuit of a bitter confrontation (Green, 2022).

6. Conclusion

The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the DPRK nuclear issue has changed the current international landscape at the international level, bringing democracies closer together and intensifying the rivalry between the Eastern and Western camps, while also contributing to the formation of a new geopolitical landscape and a sense of strategic autonomy for most Third World countries. At the regional level, the Russo-Ukrainian war has prompted the US to strengthen solidarity with its allies and rearrange its strategic deployment in the Asia-Pacific region; it has prompted Russia to strengthen its relations with North Korea and become more supportive of the North Korean perspective in the negotiations on the nuclear issue; it has prompted China to strengthen its cooperation with Rus-

sia and enhance its own voice on the nuclear issue; it has prompted Japan to speed up the revision of its national security strategy and reduce its international status due to its increased economic dependence on the US and Europe; and it has prompted South Korea to change its foreign policy and prepare to deploy nuclear weapons to defend itself against future nuclear threats from North Korea. At the level of North Korea's domestic policy, the Russo-Ukrainian war would provide new ideas for the use of nuclear weapons by the DPRK, reinforce its notion of nuclear possession and change its relations with China, thus making the DPRK's plans for denuclearisation a moot point.

While many scholars are pessimistic about the future development of the North Korean nuclear issue, believing that a Russo-Ukrainian war would increase tensions on the Korean peninsula, leading to an arms race and possibly war due to the nuclear threat, others are optimistic that the current problems on the Korean peninsula cannot be compared to the crisis in Ukraine. The current military deployment on the Korean peninsula is sufficient to deal with future threats from the DPRK, which will not take further drastic action due to its own national strategic and economic considerations, thus avoiding the outbreak of a nuclear war on the peninsula.

In short, war cannot solve problems, and differences between countries need to be resolved through dialogue and negotiation, and the future of the DPRK nuclear issue will develop in an orderly and positive direction.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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