CONVERGENCE IN CONFLICT:
REASSESSING VOTE-BASED AFFINITY AND UN VOTING STRATEGY THROUGH
US-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS

by

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Convergence in Conflict: Reassessing Vote-Based Affinity and UN Voting Strategy through US-North Korea Relations

submitted by Daniel Jacinto in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science

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Abstract

The standard measure of voting convergence in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly has been the Affinity of Nations index—or ‘affinity score’. Scholars have generally taken higher levels of affinity as evidence of interest similarity under the assumption that states’ voting positions reflect their underlying policy preferences. However, while this implies that higher affinity should be correlated with interstate cooperation and that lower affinity should be correlated with interstate conflict, records of interstate relations reveal that states in conflict sometimes experience a counterintuitive increase in affinity.

This study re-assesses how we interpret increased voting convergence during periods of conflict. Drawing on literature on political signaling and international organizations, I argue that this phenomenon can be explained by ‘placatory voting’: a purposive use of UN votes to signal benign intentions in periods of tension, as a de-escalation strategy. Using a quantitative analysis of dyadic cooperation scores, I find that patterns consistent with placatory voting—while a minority—are still fairly widespread, with 38.8% of conflict dyads from 1990 to 2004 experiencing increased affinity, and such pattern cases being situated across multiple geographic regions and major international crises. Turning to US-North Korea relations as a primary case study, I also find that while conventional assumptions of affinity fail to consistently explain cycles of conflict and cooperation, placatory voting is both consistent with North Korean foreign policy behaviour and can explain instances of high affinity with the US in 1994, 2002, 2010, and 2016.
Lay Summary

Voting at the United Nations (UN) has typically been seen as a way for countries to express their national interests and preferences within different issue areas. As a result, researchers have interpreted greater voting similarity between countries as an example of these countries having more similar national interests. In contrast to this standard view, this thesis focuses on the phenomenon that countries in conflict—i.e. countries with presumably dissimilar interests—can occasionally be seen to vote more closely with one another at the United Nations despite ongoing tensions. I argue that this phenomenon can be explained by ‘placatory voting’: the idea that countries vote more closely with their adversaries to signal a willingness to de-escalate or minimize further escalation of conflict. In this way, this study seeks to expand our understanding of the various means by which countries communicate their intentions in times of crisis.
Preface

This dissertation is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Daniel Jacinto.
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This thesis is the result of a protracted series of tangentially-related but equally intriguing research questions. What started off as a desire to measure North Korean voting alignment with China morphed into a plan to investigate how North Korea engages with international norms at the UN, and—thanks to one seminar with almost 1000 pages of readings on international organizations—developed further to look at how states use UN votes in the first place (with some North Korea thrown in). Along the way, there have been many individuals to whom I owe my gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION

Affinity scores are a common fixture in International Relations (IR) literature. Proposed by Erik Gartzke, affinity scores measure the degree of voting convergence between two states at the United Nations (UN) and are often used as a proxy for gauging interest similarity. The logic behind this interpretation is fairly straightforward: states’ voting positions reflect their underlying interests and policy preferences; accordingly, the more states’ votes converge, the greater the similarity of their underlying interests. While methodological critiques have been raised against the use and calculation of affinity scores, the direct relationship between states’ latent interests and their expression in voting has remained largely uncontested.

This assumption becomes problematic when comparing affinity scores across time to political and historical records of interstate relations. The assumed relationship between UN votes and state interests would predict that higher affinity should be correlated with interstate cooperation, while lower affinity should be correlated with interstate conflict. Empirically, however, the picture is more complex with affinity between countries sometimes being unexpectedly high during periods of tension or conflict. From 1990 to 2004, as many as 38.8% of country dyads experienced an increase in affinity despite being in conflict. This phenomenon is also present in a number of major international crises. During the first two years of the Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979-1981, US-Iran affinity was higher than at any point in the two countries’ relations following the Islamic Revolution. US-Russian affinity experienced a marked increase in 2014 during the Ukrainian crisis that witnessed the annexation of Crimea. Increased affinity can also be seen between the US and North Korea amid a string of military and nuclear provocations in the years 1994, 2002, 2010, and 2016.
Taking this phenomenon as its starting point, this study re-assesses how we interpret increased voting convergence (as captured in affinity scores) during periods of increased conflict. While existing literature tends to interpret voting convergence as indicative of interest similarity, I argue that voting convergence could occur due to ‘placatory voting’: a purposive use of UN votes to signal benign intentions in periods of tension or conflict, as a means of either de-escalation or minimizing further escalation.

The study proceeds in three parts. First, I provide an overview of the use of affinity scores within the IR literature and, drawing on literature on political signaling and the informational role of international organizations, present the theoretical basis for placatory voting as a de-escalation strategy. Using data from the Virtual Research Associates’ (VRA) 10 Million International Dyadic Events Database, the second section demonstrates the prevalence of cases characterized by a simultaneous increase in tensions and affinity, as well as a brief examination of how placatory voting may explain the affinity patterns seen in the Iran hostage crisis and the Russian annexation of Ukraine. The final section constitutes my primary case study in which I trace the mechanics of placatory voting using examples drawn from US-North Korea relations. Using data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) regarding North Korean military provocations and interstate negotiations, I demonstrate how US-North Korean relations cannot be adequately explained by conventional assumptions of affinity, and illustrate how placatory voting is both consistent with North Korean foreign policy behaviour and can be used to explain instances of high affinity with the US in 1994, 2002, 2010, and 2016.
DETERMINANTS OF VOTING CONVERGENCE: INTEREST SIMILARITY VERSUS STRATEGIC INCENTIVES

Measures of UN Voting Convergence

IR scholars have long used patterns of voting convergence within the UN General Assembly to derive insights into state interests and behaviour. In the 1950s and 1960s, researchers used such voting data to identify bloc voting behaviour (Ball 1951), to analyse the impact of membership expansion on voting alignment (Goodwin 1960), to measure the strength and political orientation of an Asian-African coalition (Triska and Koch 1959), and to investigate the dominant conflict dimensions underlying state voting decisions (Alker Jr. 1964). Many of these early works relied on relatively simple metrics, such as the proportions of instances where states voted with or in opposition to certain states out of the total number of votes in a given period (e.g., Hovet 1960, 49–51; Riggs 1958, 25–26; Lijphart 1963, 909).

More recently, scholars have developed more sophisticated measures of voting convergence between states, the most common of which is the United Nations affinity score proposed by Gartzke (1998). In their original form, affinity scores were generated as a rank-order correlation between two states’ recorded votes for a given year using Spearman’s ρ. These produced a correlation coefficient ranging from -1 to 1 where higher values represent higher voting affinity—representing greater interest similarity—between two countries. Critiques over whether correlation coefficients such as Spearman’s ρ or Kendall’s τb[^1] accurately capture interest similarity as opposed to mere association led to the adoption and standard use of Signorino and Ritter (1999, 126–27)’s similarity or S-score, calculated as:

[^1]: Bueno de Mesquita 1975.
\[
S(p^i, p^j) = 1 - \frac{2d(p^i, p^j)}{d_{\text{max}}}
\]

where \(p^i\) corresponds to state \(i\)’s policy portfolio, \(p^j\) corresponds to state \(j\)’s policy portfolio, \(d(p^i, p^j)\) is the distance metric between each country’s policy portfolio,\(^2\) and \(d_{\text{max}}\) is the maximum distance between the two points in the policy space. While this formula was designed to account for multiple possible inputs such as alliance portfolios, trade data, or UN voting records, calculations of affinity as a measure of interest similarity have tended to use exclusively UN General Assembly voting data. Re-expressed in terms of UN votes, the \(S\)-score formula is defined as:

\[
S_{ab} = 1 - \frac{\sum |Y_{av} - Y_{bv}|}{V}
\]

where \(v\) indicates a specific roll-call from \(v = 1, \ldots V\), \(Y_{av}\) (\(Y_{bv}\)) indicates country \(a\)’s (\(b\)’s) vote for roll-call vote \(v\) and can take the values 1 (yes), 2 (abstain), and 3 (no), and \(V\) refers to the total number of votes for a given period. This formula generates an \(S\) score ranging from -1 to 1, with 1 indicating perfect vote convergence and -1 indicating perfect vote divergence (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017, 433).

**Voting Convergence as an Index of Interest Similarity**

Voting convergence at the UN General Assembly, as captured by affinity scores, has largely been interpreted as arising from interest similarity, with the votes themselves seen as direct reflections of states’ underlying interests. As Gartzke notes, this assumption stems from the idea that the costs nations incur for revealing their preferences in the General Assembly are lower than the costs of engaging in disputes arising from uncertainty over others actors’

\(^2\) Calculated as \(d(x, y) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} |x_i - y_i|\)
motives. (Gartzke 1998, 15) Furthermore, Bearce and Bondanella (2007, 710–11) suggest that the structure of the General Assembly is conducive to votes that are accurate expressions of state preferences: the non-binding nature of GA resolutions provides states with more freedom to vote according to their interests, and the GA’s broad mandate allows for a more complete picture of a state’s interests across a variety of issue areas.

This interpretation underpins much of how affinity scores have been used within the literature. For example, scholars have used affinity scores as a proxy for measuring the impact of shared interests on democratic peace and incidence of conflict (Gartzke 1998; 2000; Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006), public perceptions of foreign states (Nelson and Carlson 2012), designations of states as status quo or revisionist powers (Johnston 2003), susceptibility to terrorist attacks (Dreher and Gassebner 2008), and the duration of anti-terrorist conflict (Bapat 2011). Meanwhile, other scholars have attempted to explain affinity score patterns in terms of how political ideology of state leaders (Hanania 2019), processes of international socialization through joint membership in intergovernmental organizations (Bearce and Bondanella 2007), markets and economic development (Mousseau 2003), and election to non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council affect interest similarity (Lai and Lefler 2017). Affinity scores have also been used to control for the effects of interest similarity, for example, when studying the effect of information transparency on willingness to initiate interstate conflict (Bell 2013), as well as whether Anglophone countries are more willing to join US-led military coalitions (Vucetic 2010).

Despite its prevalence, some scholars have levelled critiques against the use of affinity scores. To date, however, these have been largely on methodological grounds. One critique is that the standard S-score algorithm tends to overstate similarity compared to other metrics such
as Scott’s π or Cohen’s κ. While this poses a major concern when the S-score algorithm is applied to alliance portfolios with a high number of ‘no alliance’ dyads (Häge 2011, 300; Bennett and Rupert 2003, 371–72; Sweeney and Keshk 2005, 173–74), vote-based affinity scores are less vulnerable to this phenomenon of ‘zero inflation’ given their exclusion of generally unanimous procedural votes. A second critique, posed by Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017, 433), is that affinity scores are heavily influenced by agenda shifts from year to year. If a highly divisive issue between two states with otherwise similar preferences disproportionately appears on the voting agenda in a given year, the affinity score for that particular dyad-year will be lower than what it would otherwise have been. The same is true in the other direction, where an overrepresentation of a generally agreeable issue between states with otherwise divergent preferences would result in an artificially higher affinity score. As a result, Bailey et al. suggest an alternative spatial model that accommodates agenda shifts by allowing for variance in cut points between positions from one vote to the next and by weighting each vote according to how much it distinguishes between states with different ideal points.\(^3\)

Notably, however, these critiques do not challenge the underlying assumption that General Assembly votes accurately reflect state preferences—an assumption which, if taken at face value, leads us to counterintuitively interpret increases in affinity score during times of conflict (including the ones noted in the Introduction) as solely indicative of interest similarity.

**Voting Convergence as a Signaling Strategy**

An alternative interpretation of voting convergence can be derived from the long-standing recognition that political bargaining and strategy affect states’ behaviour within the UN.

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\(^3\) For examples of works using this spatial model of affinity, see: Adhikari 2019; Gaibulloev and Sandler 2019; Flores and Nooruddin 2009; Davis, Fuchs, and Johnson 2019.
Writing on US influence over the UN, Riggs (1958, 1) characterized the General Assembly as “a forum where states and groups of states seek influence, prestige, political advantage, or whatever other values may be at stake,” where one can find “the interplay of varied personalities, the importunings of special interests, cooperation in log rolling, fervent lip service to cherished values, and the oratorical play to the gallery.” Similarly, Goodwin (1960, 185) noted that even the appearance of a unified international consensus “is not usually a mere passing coincidence of attitudes but the end result of a long process of practically uninterrupt ed informal contacts and formal negotiations.”

If we view the General Assembly as an arena of strategic interaction between states, it follows that voting is a strategic act, subject to the pushes and pulls of competing incentives, rather than an undiluted expression of interest. While shared interests may certainly play a role, they are not the sole determinant of voting behaviour. For example, several scholars have found that the prospect of political or economic benefits often leads to more cohesive voting patterns. Hurwitz (1975, 236) suggests that a short-lived uptick in voting convergence among Western European states prior to the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957 can be attributed to immediate post-war fears of a communist threat or an effort to secure membership in the proposed regional bloc. Johansson-Nogués (2004, 80–81) attributes the sudden alignment of Central and Eastern European countries’ votes with those of EU members after the Cold War to a desire for aid, trade, and EU membership, as well as an attempt to shore up domestic legitimacy for new political administrations distancing themselves from their communist predecessors. Beyond Europe, Iida (1988)’s study of the Group of 77 at the General Assembly found that voting convergence among these countries could be explained in terms of
reciprocal coordination: Iida argues that strategic cooperation with broader group interests at the General Assembly yielded interactional benefits with specific G77 members in other venues.

In line with this strategic interpretation, I suggest that increased voting convergence during conflict can be explained by states choosing to vote more closely with another state (or group of states) as a de-escalation strategy during periods of increased tensions or conflict—a strategy I call ‘placatory voting’. Underlying this strategy is the idea that UN voting can play a communicative role in signaling benign intentions to other states, particularly where more overt signs of willingness to cooperate may be seen as politically undesirable. Audience cost theory posits that states face a degree of ‘lock-in’ as a result of the domestic costs of backing down from conflict: as a result, states who otherwise are incentivized to de-escalate may find themselves in a situation of greater tensions or direct conflict (Fearon 1994). Using UN votes as a signaling mechanism, states can discreetly convey an openness to de-escalate or at the very least limit further escalation without subjecting themselves to the full backlash of public opinion. The change in voting patterns may vary depending on the state’s intended outcome. On one level, placatory voting can be used to limit contestation to a given issue area, with the placating state voting more closely with the target state on all other issues. On another level, it can be used to demonstrate a break in escalation and openness to dialogue, with the placating state voting more closely with the target state after having engaged in provocations. In either case, the general pattern is that in response to an increase in tensions or conflict, a state will vote more closely with its adversaries in some or all issue areas (captured as an increase in affinity score) to signal a willingness to de-escalate, or at the very least not escalate further.

There are several reasons why UN votes could operate as a promising signaling method towards other states. First, a vast majority of states already have access to UN voting as a
communication medium. Most member states have permanent representation at the UN, removing the need to establish a new venue for interacting with other states.

Second, countries have been seen to pay attention to voting patterns at the UN. As demonstrated in vote-buying literature, there is substantial evidence that allocations of foreign aid have been linked to UN voting patterns both at the General Assembly and the Security Council (Kuziemko and Werker 2006; Vreeland and Dreher 2014; Alexander and Rooney 2019; Chiou, Hug, and Høyland 2020) As noted by Carter and Stone (2015, 2), the US State Department in particular takes explicit consideration of UN voting patterns in its aid disbursement policy. This fixation on UN voting was evident in a 2017 vote on a General Assembly resolution criticizing the US’ recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, with former ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley threatening that the US would be “taking names” of countries voting in favour (Hansler 2017). The results of this attention are twofold: it demonstrates that states would in theory be capable of perceiving signals sent via voting patterns, and imparts an element of political cost in the act of voting, making signals sent through voting potentially more credible.

Finally, UN votes are fairly discreet in the eyes of the domestic public and thus less susceptible to generating domestic audience costs relative to other signaling options. As McManus and Yarhi-Milo (2017, 702, 708–10) note, states have a number of policy options to signal their intentions to other states, each of which is likely to vary in terms of how much audience cost they generate. On one hand, there are ‘frontstage’ signals, actions that are “highly visible to the public domestically and abroad” and that “receive widespread press coverage because they have public ceremonial aspects and/or are the subject of intragovernment debate.” On the other hand, states can also send ‘offstage’ signals, actions that are “less likely to enter the
public’s awareness and more likely to be observed by the intended audience only.” General Assembly voting can be seen as an offstage signal in the sense that the mass public—the primary source of audience costs—is not likely to be preoccupied with the specifics of their country’s international voting behaviour, and thus would not generate the same degree of audience costs that other signs of de-escalation would.4

The notion of placatory voting presents a relatively under-explored area in the literature of strategic signaling in international relations, which tends to take the ‘threat-making’ component of crisis bargaining as its primary focus rather than how and when states concede or de-escalate tensions.5 There are, nonetheless, some scholars who have looked at the how the logic of signaling can be applied to conveying a willingness to cooperate. Kydd (2000), for instance, translates the language of costly signaling to actions of reassurance, claiming cooperation and trustworthiness—in contrast to the expansive literature on threats and resolve—can also be demonstrated through costly signals. Montgomery (2006, 158), meanwhile, suggests the states can credibly demonstrate reassurance by engaging in actions that increase their vulnerability to their adversaries.

While none of these texts examine signaling via UN General Assembly voting specifically, other scholars have demonstrated that international organizations can also be used to convey benign intentions, particularly with regards to major coercive action. Thompson (2006), for example, argues that major powers channel coercive actions through international organizations to signal their willingness to be constrained, bolstering their credibility not just to foreign publics, but also to leaders of third party states who may be apprehensive of such coercive action. Coleman (2007, 49) argues that the approval of peace enforcement operations by

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4 For a similar argument, see Bearce and Cook 2018.
5 See, for instance, Fearon 1994; Trager 2015.
an international organization can signal the operation’s compliance with generally accepted rules of the international system; this in turn can signal—at least in the eyes of an international audience—the leading state’s benign commitment to the international society to which they see themselves belonging. Such signals play a substantial role in enhancing the legitimacy of coercive actions in the eyes of domestic and foreign public actors (Voeten 2005; Fang 2008; Chapman 2009; Bearce and Cook 2018).

This discussion is not to say that placatory voting would occur under all instances of increased tensions or conflict. Whether states opt for a placatory voting strategy depends on the diplomatic capacity of the states involved, the political necessity of an offstage signaling strategy, and the extent of conflict. In terms of capacity, both states must have fairly robust, independent diplomatic capabilities. For the placating state, this means the state must be able to conduct its own independent foreign policy rather than base its votes entirely on those of its closest allies, as well have enough foreign policy leeway to be able to change its votes. For the placated state, this refers to having the diplomatic capacity to monitor and track the foreign policy positions of states it deems politically important. This suggests that smaller or middle powers are more likely to play the role of the placating state, while major powers are more likely to be play the role of the placated state.

In terms of political necessity, placatory voting is more likely to be practiced where both states are faced with a clear incentive to avoid conflict, but where overt signs of acquiescence or backing down are politically undesirable for at least one of the states, necessitating an offstage signaling strategy. The incentive for de-escalation on both sides—for instance, due to unfavourable domestic political conditions, economic hardship, or international reputational concerns—provides the incentive for the placating state to engage in placatory voting while also
providing some expectation that the placated state would respond positively to such signaling. In cases where high anticipated audience costs for the placating state would rule out more standard forms of conflict management (such as bilateral or multilateral negotiations, or mediation by international organizations or a third-party state) the more discreet placatory voting strategy becomes a more appealing policy option.

Finally, placatory voting is not likely to be practiced equally across all levels of conflict. At extremely low levels of conflict, states might not face enough of an incentive to warrant a placating strategy, resulting in a situation where states simply ‘agree to disagree’ with minimal risk of escalation.\(^6\) Meanwhile, at extremely high levels of conflict, states may be too locked into their opposing policy positions that the inevitability of conflict precludes any benefit from attempts at de-escalation. This suggests that placatory voting as a de-escalation strategy would be a more viable option at lower or moderate levels of conflict that are just enough to create a reasonable incentive to ease tensions while keeping the door open to discreet and informal efforts at de-escalation.

In short, voting convergence, typically measured in terms of affinity scores, has often been used by IR scholars as a proxy for interest similarity between states. However, this dominant understanding is unable to account for instances where increases in conflict or tensions are accompanied by relatively higher affinity. Viewing UN voting as a strategic act, the notion of placatory voting provides a theoretically plausible alternative for interpreting this phenomenon, centering on the idea that states purposefully use UN voting to signal benign intentions as a de-escalation strategy.

\(^6\) Sechser 2018, for instance, suggests that states may opt not to challenge external threats when the risk of future aggression is low.
PLACATORY VOTING IN PRACTICE: AN OVERVIEW

Having examined the theoretical plausibility of the placatory voting strategy, the next step is to determine whether this phenomenon can be observed empirically. Voting patterns consistent with placatory voting are not uncommon in UN General Assembly. To demonstrate this, I use the King and Lowe (2008)’s VRA 10 Million International Dyadic Events Dataset to identify instances of international conflict. Each event in the dataset constitutes a policy action taken by one country towards another during the years 1990 to 2004. These events are identified by machine from the Reuters Business Briefing and categorized according to the Integrated Data for Events Analysis (IDEA) event typology. Based on their categorization, each event is then assigned a score measuring how cooperative or conflictual the action is towards the target state, based on a scale devised by Goldstein (1992). Negative values are associated with conflictual behaviour, while positive values are associated with cooperative behaviour. These Goldstein cooperation scores range from -10 (corresponding to a military attack, the most extreme form of conflict) to 8.3 (corresponding to the extending of military assistance, the most extreme form of cooperation).

For each directed country dyad, I derive a yearly conflict intensity index by taking the sum of the Goldstein scores for foreign policy actions taken by one state towards the other, divided by the total number of that state’s recorded foreign policy actions within a year. The resulting conflict intensity score measures the average level of cooperation or conflict per action taken by one state towards the other within a given year, with a range identical to that of the base Goldstein scores of -10 to 8.3. Because these conflict intensity scores are directed, this method produces two scores for any pair of states: one measuring state A’s average level of conflict or cooperation per action towards state B, and another measuring state B’s average level of conflict
or cooperation per action towards state A. I define conflict dyad-years as those in which both directed conflict intensity scores are negative (i.e. where actions taken by either state towards the other are on balance conflictual); this results in a stricter criterion for conflict than taking the average of the two scores.\(^7\)

Based on this definition, I identify 698 conflict dyad-years in the VRA dataset from 1991 to 2004.\(^8\) For each conflict dyad-year, I used Signorino and Ritter’s S-score algorithm to calculate the affinity score between the two countries based on UN General Assembly voting records compiled by Voeten (2013). I also calculated the change in both affinity and average conflict intensity relative to the previous year. Of these 698 conflict dyad-years, 271 (38.83\%) were characterized by an increase in affinity despite an increase in conflict, constituting cases where potential voting may have occurred. Table 1 shows the number of dyads matching the placatory voting pattern out of the total number of conflict dyads per year.

---

\(^7\) For an alternate measure of dyadic cooperation based on the same dataset, see Sullivan, Tessman, and Li 2011, 275–94. I refrain from using this method as it does not account for the frequency of targeted foreign policy actions. \(^8\) As data for change in affinity and conflict intensity cannot be generated for dyads in the year 1990, the earliest year in the VRA dataset, these dyads have been excluded.
While instances of increased affinity accompanied by an increase in conflict intensity relative to the previous year constitute a minority of cases, they do appear fairly regularly, in some years accounting for over half of the conflict dyads.

Figure 1 plots change in affinity against change in conflict intensity among the pattern cases. In terms of the magnitude of these shifts, most changes in affinity among these pattern cases were modest: the average change in affinity for these was 0.082 ($\sigma = 0.099$) or an increase of roughly 4% of the total affinity score range. Meanwhile, the average change in conflict intensity was -2.941 ($\sigma = 1.919$) or approximately 16% of the total conflict intensity scale range.
Of the 271 pattern cases, 253 (93.3%) experienced modest changes of less than 0.2 or 10% of the range of the affinity scale. Nonetheless, 18 cases experienced increases in affinity greater than 0.2 while also experiencing increases in conflict intensity. These cases are identified in Table 2.

Table 2 - Conflict Dyads with Increases in Affinity Greater than 10%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dyad</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Conflict Intensity</th>
<th>Δ Affinity</th>
<th>Δ Conflict Intensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina-United Kingdom</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-3.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq-Israel</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>-6.2</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-1.785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia-Denmark</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>-4.933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>-0.522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium-Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>0.667</td>
<td>-1.293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Republic of the Congo-Rwanda</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>-3.7</td>
<td>0.844</td>
<td>-1.739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom-Spain</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>-1.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom-Sudan</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-3.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom-Russia</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>0.308</td>
<td>-2.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran-Tajikistan</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-8</td>
<td>0.278</td>
<td>-8.125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom-Iran</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-3.4</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>-3.936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Republic of the Congo-Angola</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>0.451</td>
<td>-1.925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia-Australia</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td>-2.867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia-North Korea</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>-9.6</td>
<td>0.206</td>
<td>-10.467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan-Pakistan</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>0.225</td>
<td>-0.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan-Uzbekistan</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
<td>0.497</td>
<td>-2.283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia-Afghanistan</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>0.347</td>
<td>-0.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France-Rwanda</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>-5.7</td>
<td>0.229</td>
<td>-8.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Several observations can be made about this subset of potential cases, some of which are consistent with the scope conditions for placatory voting in the previous section. First, the average change in affinity for this subgroup is disproportionately large at 0.360, corresponding to 18\% of the total affinity score range. Second, while some cases are characterized by fairly high conflict intensity such as Iran and Tajikistan in 1996, and Russia and North Korea in 1998, the majority of these cases are characterized by low to moderate levels of conflict, with an average conflict intensity of -3.4. The majority of cases also cluster at the lower end of the change in conflict intensity scale, from approximately -1 to -4, suggesting a more gradual increase in conflict. Third, many of the dyads include at least one relatively powerful state: half of the dyads include major powers such as the UK, Russia, and France, while a further three dyads include regional powers such as Israel, Iran, and Australia. Finally, a few of these cases do appear to coincide with significant international events, suggesting that placatory voting may be present in major international conflicts. For instance, the 1993 Croatia-Bosnia and Herzegovina dyad appears to take place during the Yugoslav Wars and in particular during the Croat-Bosniak War. The 1995 dyad between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then the Republic of Zaire) coincides with regional tensions in the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide and precipitating the First Congo War. The 1997 dyad between Cambodia and Australia may be capturing international diplomatic fallout as a result of the Cambodian coup d’état led by Hun Sen.

Instances of increased affinity in the midst of major conflict can also be observed both before and after the coverage of the VRA dataset. The Iran hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981, shortly after the Iranian Revolution, marks one of these instances. On November 4, 1979, a crowd of several hundred student protestors gathered at the US embassy in Tehran and seized
control of the building, taking sixty-five American citizens hostage. Despite multiple negotiation attempts, considerations of military responses, and an attempted rescue operation, the hostages were not released by Iran until a US-Iran agreement signed on January 19, 1981. In the meantime, the US imposed economic sanctions on Iran and severed diplomatic relations with the country (Houghton 2009).

While a proper comparison of voting patterns prior to 1979 is not possible given the regime change in Iran shortly before the hostage crisis, the two countries nonetheless appeared to maintain a relatively high level of affinity during the crisis period as compared to the post-crisis period as shown in Figure 2.

*Figure 2 - US-Iran Affinity, 1979-1989*

For the years 1979 and 1980, US-Iran affinity was -0.236 and -0.253 respectively. This is compared to an average affinity of -0.486 in the decade following the crisis, and an average affinity of -0.507 for the entirety of US-Iran relations following the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

It is possible to triangulate which of the two states was responsible for the change in voting patterns by comparing each state’s affinity with their closest allies around the time of
tensions or conflict. I identify each state’s closest allies as the ten states with which the state shares the smallest difference in policy ideal points\(^9\) in a ten-year period surrounding the given conflict year. All else being equal, we can expect to see a temporary decrease in affinity between the state engaging in placatory voting and its closest allies simultaneous to an increase in affinity with the state being ‘placated’. Figure 3 plots affinity between Iran and the US, as well as the average yearly affinity scores between Iran and its closest allies; Figure 4 plots affinity between Iran and the US, as well as the average affinity scores between the US and its closest allies.\(^{10}\)

\[\text{Figure 3 - Affinity Comparison, Iran-Allies vs. Iran-USA, 1979-1989}\]

\[^9\text{Data on country ideal points taken from Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017.}\]

\[^{10}\text{Iran’s closest allies for the years 1979 to 1989 include Albania, Kuwait, Vanuatu, Tanzania, Burundi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Guyana, and Guinea-Bissau. The US’ closest voting allies for the years 1974 to 1984 include the UK, Israel, West Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, South Africa, Canada, Italy, and the Netherlands. While the year range in identifying these allies for the US included the five years before and after the hostage crisis (allowing for a better sample of US allies before and after the hostage crisis), the year range for Iran attempts to more accurately determine Iran’s closest allies post-revolution and as a result are based on the 10 years following the hostage crisis.}\]
There is a substantively small but fairly consistent negative relationship between US-Iran affinity and Iran’s affinity with its voting allies. This is particularly noticeable in the years immediately following the hostage crisis where a decrease in affinity with the US is accompanied by an increase in affinity with Iran’s voting allies, suggestive of a temporary voting strategy in the years 1979 and 1980. By contrast, the trendlines mapping US affinity with its voting partners and US affinity with Iran appear to move in parallel to each other: the lack of significant motion towards one side or the other suggests no targeted vote-shifting behaviour was taken on the part of the US.

Complementing the patterns in affinity score, the political context for both countries also lends itself to the use of placatory voting. On the one hand, Iran—having just overthrown the US-backed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and established Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as its supreme leader—likely faced incentives to de-escalate in order to mitigate the risk of increased tensions or conflict to the fledgling regime. However, given strong domestic anti-American
sentiment, releasing the American hostages likely would have generated high audience costs for the Iranian leadership, creating the need for a more subdued attempt at de-escalation. As for the US, faced with the 1979 oil crisis and having only emerged from the Vietnam War years prior, the country would likely have been hesitant to commit itself to another potentially costly conflict, and would thus likely be more receptive to Iranian attempts to signal willingness to de-escalate. As such, US-Iran relations during the 1979-1981 Iranian hostage crisis appear fairly consistent with the expected patterns of placatory voting.

A second potential case for placatory voting outside the VRA dataset would be US-Russian relations during the 2014 Ukraine Crisis. On March 16, 2014, following a month of violent unrest in Ukraine resulting in the removal of President Viktor Yanukovych and a series of pro-Russia protests across the Crimean Peninsula, the Ukrainian Crimean government held a referendum on Crimea’s autonomy with over 97% in favour of secession from Ukraine. Two days later, the Russian Federation formally annexed the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol (Rosefielde 2017, 46–47). The annexation was met with substantial international outcry and censure at various international organizations. The US in particular took immediate action, issuing an executive order to place sanctions on a number of Russian and Ukrainian figures involved in the annexation, as well as sponsoring a draft resolution calling for the restoration and recognition of Ukrainian sovereignty, first at the UN Security Council and later at the General Assembly (Myers and Baker 2014; UN General Assembly 2014) Yet similar to the Iranian hostage crisis, affinity between the US and Russia in the year of the crisis was counterintuitively higher than conventional interpretations of voting convergence would suggest, as shown in Figure 5.
In 2014, US-Russian affinity stood at -0.260, an increase from the previous year’s score of -0.344. Again, it is possible to identify vote shifting behaviour by examining each state’s affinity with their respective allies. Figure 6 plots affinity between Russia and the US as well as the average yearly affinity scores between Russia and its closest allies in the five years prior to and following the annexation of Crimea, while figure 7 plots affinity between the US and Russia, as well as the average affinity scores between the US and its closest allies.\footnote{From 2009 to 2019, Russia’s closest allies were China, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Zimbabwe, Armenia, Equatorial Guinea, Burundi, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Cuba. The US’ closest voting allies during the same period included Israel, Micronesia, Canada, Palau, Marshall Islands, the UK, Australia, France, Nauru, and the Czech Republic.}
Between 2013 and 2014 the increase in Russia’s affinity with the US is accompanied by a decrease in affinity with its voting allies, suggesting a temporary movement towards the US and
away from its allies. This negative relationship persists until 2015, the year following the annexation. Meanwhile, no such pattern of relative motion can be seen when comparing US affinity with Russia as opposed to with its allies, suggesting Russia had undertaken the shift in voting behaviour.

While the case of US-Russian relations did not represent active state-to-state conflict, it nonetheless constituted a period of relatively high tension between a US committed to Western European security and an increasingly assertive post-Cold War Russia, during which there may have existed incentives on either side for de-escalation. On the US end, 2014 marked a midterm election year for the Obama administration, placing the spotlight on the administration’s crisis management ability. On the Russian end, faced with domestic pro-Ukraine unrest and international sanctions, the Putin administration would have sought to minimize the extent of the international fallout while attempting to manage its internal political situation post-annexation.

In summary, while it is beyond the limitations of this thesis to definitively conclude whether placatory voting is responsible for the observed conflict and voting patterns within all these cases, the above discussion shows that the pattern we expect to be associated with such a voting strategy—an increase in affinity corresponding to an increase in conflictual relations—does appear with some regularity, and may be present amid significant international conflicts across multiple regions and periods in recent history.
CASE STUDY: US-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS

US-North Korea relations provide an interesting case study for testing the placatory voting hypothesis given the recurring cycles of conflict and cooperation between the two states. In some instances, conflict consisted of simple name-calling, for instance, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un calling US President Donald Trump a ‘dotard’ (Berlinger and Ullah 2017) and the latter granting Kim the epithet of ‘Little Rocket Man’ in a tweet (@realDonaldTrump, November 30, 2017). In other instances, conflict has manifested in more severe threats to international security as in North Korea’s withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, and its string of nuclear and ballistic missile tests in spite of international sanctions. Yet there have also been periods of significant détente between the two countries, most recently in the historic first US-North Korea leaders’ summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018 (BBC News 2018) and two subsequent summits in Hanoi in February 2019 (BBC News 2019) and jointly with South Korean President Moon Jae-in at the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea in June 2019 (S. M. Kim and Denyer 2019). As such, US-North Korea relations provide a degree of variation with which one can test the placatory voting hypothesis against the dominant assumption that UN voting convergence is indicative of interest similarity. The first half of this section will provide an overview of the patterns observed in US-North Korea affinity and how these run counter to what conventional assumptions of affinity would predict. The second half will argue that the placatory voting hypothesis helps to explain some of these inconsistencies through an examination of four instances of relatively higher affinity between the two states in 1994, 2002, 2010, and 2016.
Patterns in US-North Korea Affinity

To determine how patterns in US-North Korea affinity compare with the respective country’s political and historical record, I rely on the UN General Assembly voting data compiled by Erik Voeten, containing all roll-call votes in the UN General Assembly from 1946-2018 (Voeten 2013). I identify roll-call votes where both the US and North Korea voted and use these to calculate yearly affinity scores from North Korea’s admission into the UN in 1991 to 2018 with Signorino and Ritter’s S-score formula. These scores are listed in Table 3 and plotted over time in Figure 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Affinity (S)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Affinity (S)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Affinity (S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>-0.56364</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>-0.67742</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>-0.61538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>-0.59091</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>-0.57471</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>-0.65882</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>-0.57627</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>-0.64384</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>-0.71429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>-0.49153</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>-0.74026</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>-0.63514</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>-0.57813</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>-0.625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-0.57377</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>-0.72152</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>-0.51724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>-0.59677</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>-0.73418</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>-0.58824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>-0.60938</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>-0.68354</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>-0.66667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>-0.65217</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-0.67647</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>-0.64912</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>-0.57692</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8 - US-DPRK Affinity (S-Scores), 1991-2018
The mean affinity score for this period is -0.63, indicating that on balance, the US and North Korea tend to vote against one another more often than they vote together. Nonetheless, periods of relatively higher affinity scores can be observed in 1994, 2002, 2010, and 2016; conversely, periods of relatively lower affinity scores can be observed in 2004-2005, 2013, and 2018.

As discussed above, the conventional assumption underlying affinity scores is that periods of high affinity correspond to periods of high interest similarity, which we can expect to see in the form of cooperation. Yet when compared to the historical and political record, the four years of higher affinity score actually appear to coincide with major disruptions in US-North Korean relations, particularly over the latter’s nuclear and military provocations. On June 13, 1994 North Korea announced its withdrawal from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), twenty years after it first joined (International Atomic Energy Agency n.d.). While the US-DPRK Agreed Framework—stipulating a freeze on North Korean nuclear reactors in exchange for security and energy supply assurances from the international community—was signed four months later in October 1994, this deal later collapsed in April 2002 when the US refused to certify North Korea’s compliance with the agreement. North Korea also admitted to running a clandestine uranium enrichment program in October 2002 (Kerr 2002). 2010 witnessed major military provocations by North Korea such as the torpedoing in March of the ROKS Cheonan, a South Korean navy corvette, and the artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, just south of the UN-mandated Northern Limit Line in November, raising concerns for the US given its defense treaty with the South (BBC News 2010a; BBC News 2010b). As well, that same month North Korea revealed an advanced uranium enrichment facility in violation of UN Security Council resolutions restricting the country’s nuclear program to American nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker (CNN 2010). Finally, in January 2016, North Korea claimed to have conducted
its first ever test of a hydrogen bomb as part of its fourth nuclear weapons test, followed a month later by the launching of a long-range rocket which South Korean intelligence asserted should be treated as a ballistic missile test (BBC News 2016a; BBC News 2016b). Each of these years witnessed major signs of conflictual behaviour, calling into question the assumption that higher affinity scores correlate with periods of greater interest convergence and, by extension, cooperation.

Looking at periods of lower affinity, conventional assumptions behind affinity scores would lead us to expect periods of lower affinity to correspond with periods of interest divergence in the form of non-cooperation or conflict. When compared to the historical record, the year 2004 saw few setbacks that would be indicative of strong interest divergence between the US and North Korea; in fact, cooperation was actively ongoing during this time with North Korea welcoming American nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker on a monitoring visit during which North Korean Vice Minister Kim Gye Gwan indicated his country’s desire to resume its participation in the Six Party Talks (Hecker 2004). The following year did witness barriers to active cooperation: in September 2005, the US began investigating a number of banks with connections to North Korea and conducting freezes on North Korean assets (Simpson and Solomon 2005). Despite this, Six Party Talks negotiations were ongoing with a joint statement issued the same month, noting North Korea’s commitment to abandoning nuclear weapons and returning to the NPT (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2005). Of all the years of low affinity, 2013 marked the clearest case of interest divergence between the two countries in North Korea’s sentencing of Korean-American pastor and missionary Kenneth Bae to fifteen years of hard labour as a potential bargaining chip for concessions with the US. However, the year 2018 once more detracts from the conventional assumption as it was a major year of US-North Korean
collaboration, most notably with the first historic US-North Korean leader’s summit held on Sentosa Island in Singapore, as mentioned above.

Records of interstate negotiations (as a proxy for interest convergence and cooperation) and provocations (as a proxy for interest divergence and non-cooperation) further refute the standard assumptions behind affinity. I use data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) *Beyond Parallel* database on both US-DPRK negotiations (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2018a) and military provocations (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2018b) to compare the frequency of these events under periods of relatively higher affinity and periods of relatively lower affinity. Figure 9 shows the frequency of negotiations per year from 1991 to 2018 with years of higher affinity indicated in blue, and years of lower affinity indicated in red.

*Figure 9 - Frequency of US-DPRK Negotiations, 1991-2018*

Conventional assumptions about affinity would hold that during periods of higher affinity, we should expect to see more bilateral negotiations between the two countries as an expression of greater interest convergence. However, aside from 1994, we fail to observe this trend: in fact, during the higher affinity years of 2010 and 2016, no negotiations took place between the two
states. On the other end of the spectrum, conventional assumptions would lead us to expect fewer bilateral negotiations between the two countries during periods of relatively lower affinity, which again does not appear to be the case with a number of negotiations taking place in 2004, 2005, and 2018. Overall, there does not appear to be a clear correlation between affinity scores and the frequency of negotiations.

North Korean military provocations also yield little support for conventional assumptions underlying affinity. Under these, we would expect to see a relationship between higher affinity and fewer provocations, while we would expect lower affinity scores to be correlated with more provocations. Figure 10 shows the frequency of North Korean provocations by year from 1991 to 2018 with years of higher affinity indicated in blue, and years of lower affinity indicated in red.

![Figure 10 - Frequency of DPRK Provocations, 1991-2018](image)

While we see generally low numbers of provocations in the years 1994, 2002, and 2010, the frequencies of provocations during these years are not substantially different from the years preceding and following them. We also see a disproportionately high number of provocations in 2016 despite that year having the second-highest affinity score in the entire timeframe ($S_{2016} = -$)
0.52). As for the years of lower affinity, the divergence from the conventional understanding of affinity is markedly more distinct: the years 2004 and 2005 each witnessed two military provocations—the same number as the high-affinity year in 2002—despite having the two lowest affinity scores in the given timespan ($S_{2004} = -0.74$, $S_{2005} = -0.75$). Overall, when comparing the historical and political record to patterns observed in US-North Korean affinity, there appears to be little consistent support for the notion that higher affinity scores are correlated with greater interest similarity in the form of cooperation, and that lower affinity scores are correlated with lower interest similarity in the form of tensions or conflict.

As discussed in the first section, one critique of affinity is that agenda shifts from year to year may distort the relationship between interest similarity and voting convergence by over- or under-representing certain issue areas. However, examining the distribution of different issue areas on the voting agenda during higher and lower affinity years between the US and North Korea, there does not appear to be strong evidence that agenda shifts can be solely responsible for the shifts in affinity described above. Voeten’s UN General Assembly roll-call vote dataset codes each recorded vote into six issue areas: votes related to conflict in the Middle East, particularly regarding Palestine; votes related to nuclear weapons and nuclear material; votes related to arms control and disarmament; votes related to colonialism and decolonization; votes related to human rights; and votes related to economic development. Figure 11 compares the average number of votes per issue area during higher affinity years and lower affinity years, as well as the average number of votes per issue area during non-peak years; votes that were not coded into any of these six issue areas are included as ‘other’.
On balance, although some variation is present, there does not appear to be any major difference in the number of votes in each issue area when comparing years of higher affinity and lower affinity. Even the ‘other’ category, which saw the greatest difference in average votes between higher affinity and lower affinity years, only differed by an average of 3.5 votes, which alone would be unable to account for the degree of change in affinity examined above.\textsuperscript{12} Given the relative consistency in issue area coverage, it does not appear that agenda shifts can fully explain the patterns in affinity between the US and North Korea.

\textsuperscript{12} The average affinity between the US and North Korea during higher affinity years is -0.540, while the average during lower affinity years is -0.718, resulting in an average difference of 0.178 between higher and lower affinity years. On average, the US and North Korea both participate in 72 votes in a year. Assuming a hypothetical year with 72 votes, an increase of 3.5 convergent votes due to agenda shifts would yield an increase in affinity of only 0.097.
Placatory Voting in US-North Korea Relations

The placatory voting hypothesis offers a promising explanation for the patterns observed in US-North Korean affinity. From the outset, this is supported by voting records showing that North Korea has consistently shifted away from its allies during periods of higher affinity with the US. Figure 12 compares North Korea-US affinity with North Korea’s average affinity with its ten closest allies during the period from 1991 to 2018, while Figure 13 shows the comparison between US affinity with its allies and with North Korea from 1991 to 2018.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) From 1991 to 2018, North Korea’s closest allies consisted of Iran, Sudan, Vietnam, Cuba, Libya, Syria, Myanmar, Indonesia, Somalia, and Yemen. The US’ closest allies for the same period included Israel, the UK, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, France, Canada, Marshall Islands, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands.
During each of the years of relatively higher affinity (marked by the dashed vertical lines), the increase in North Korea’s affinity with the US is consistently accompanied by a simultaneous decrease in affinity with its closest voting allies. Meanwhile, this pattern is less consistent when examining the US case: aside from 2010, US affinity with its allies tends to either increase or remain relatively constant as its affinity with North Korea increases. This suggests that changes in affinity between the two states can largely be attributed to vote-shifting behaviour by North Korea.

The timing of these instances of vote-shifting is consistent with previous research on when North Korea typically begins to display signs of backing down. One interpretation, argued by Yongho Kim (2010, 120–21), is that North Korea tends to refrain from further provocations when faced with immediate threats to the ruling Kim family. Using diplomatic statements and events data from the Conflict and Peace Databank (COPDAB), he finds that North Korea expresses a higher degree of conciliatory behaviour when the US signals a greater willingness to
respond militarily to North Korean provocations, for example, when the US dispatches stealth bombers to the Korean peninsula. Another interpretation, argued by Pacheco Pardo (2014, 23), is that North Korea’s primary objective is the normalization of relations with the US: when its provocations appear to impede that goal, North Korea decides to pull back. This was the case following the August 1976 axe murder incident at the Joint Security Area in the Korean Demilitarized Zone when the US responded by dispatching an aircraft carrier group to the region. Under either interpretation, North Korea backpedals on its provocative behaviour when the US responds aggressively—typically in a military fashion.

The US responded to North Korean provocations in precisely this manner during each of the higher affinity years. Following North Korea’s withdrawal from the IAEA in 1994, the Clinton administration responded by requesting the UN to impose sanctions on North Korea, increasing cooperation with its regional allies of South Korea and Japan, and by efforts to reinforce its military presence, for instance, by dispatching the *USS Independence* to waters surrounding the Korean peninsula (Y. Kim 2010, 94–95). The collapse of the Agreed Framework and revelation of a hidden uranium enrichment facility in 2002 coincided with US preparations for its invasion in Iraq—which President George W. Bush had also included alongside North Korea in his ‘axis of evil’—raising fears of a similar invasion of North Korea (Pacheco Pardo 2014, 48). In 2010, following an international investigation’s conclusion that North Korea was responsible for the torpedoing of the *ROKS Cheonan*, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the prospects of enhancing US-South Korean joint military posturing in response to the torpedoing, and noted the US government was actively reviewing its policies related to North Korea for possible adjustments (U.S. Department of State 2010). The same day, the Pentagon also announced two new joint military exercises with South Korea on anti-submarine and
maritime interdiction operations (Daniel 2010). In 2016, following North Korea’s fourth nuclear test and several missile and rocket launches, the US and South Korea began discussing the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system; the two countries officially agreed to its deployment in South Korea in July (BBC News 2016c).

A combination of North Korea’s domestic political ideals coupled with an unfavourable economic environment could explain why North Korea opted for a strategy of discreet vote-signaling rather than more overt conciliatory behaviour in these instances. One major facet of North Korean juch’e ideology (often translated as ‘self-reliance’) is its opposition to external interference, stemming from anti-imperialist sentiment against Japan in the early 20th century and later evolving into entrenched values of political, economic, and military independence—even from its major socialist allies. As argued by Han S. Park (2010, 90–94), the development of a strongly nationalist juch’e ideology acted as a source of legitimation for the North Korean regime, used to castigate the close ties between the much wealthier South Korea and the US. Furthermore, as Frank (2010, 32) notes, North Korea’s generally aggressive stance towards the US—particularly its nuclearization and calls for equal status with other nuclear powers—has also served as a way to make up for the performative failures of the North Korean state in terms of welfare and economic wellbeing. This creates a strong incentive for the North Korean elite to refrain from exhibiting any signs of acquiescence to the demands of the international community where possible.

The need to convey a sense of self-reliance becomes especially prominent during times of economic crisis, where failure for the state to deliver constitutes a black mark on the legitimacy of the ruling Kim family. The country also appears to be aware of this risk: when forced to resort to an aid deal during the famine of the mid-1990s, North Korea omitted any mention of food aid
from South Korea when announcing its receipt of external assistance (Noland 2011, 8). As a result, North Korea faces a dilemma in which dire economic straits create a reliance on external assistance, but turning to external assistance by adopting a conciliatory stance—especially while in crisis—yields massive political cost. Placatory voting offers a potential, albeit not perfect, way out by discreetly easing tensions enough that seeking economic reprieve becomes politically acceptable.

This pattern is consistent with how the above-mentioned years of high affinity relate to North Korean trade. While data on North Korean bilateral trade is sparse given it does not voluntarily report its trade figures to international monitoring agencies, it is possible to reconstruct estimates based on figures reported by its trading partners. Figure 14 plots the reconstructed figures for the value of North Korea’s net exports based on UN Comtrade data against years of higher US-North Korean affinity.
As expected, periods of higher affinity have tended to immediately follow decreases in the value of North Korean bilateral trade, which could in part be attributed to the imposition of bilateral and multilateral sanctions in response to North Korean provocations. The fact that higher affinity coincides with these drops seems to suggest a conscious attempt by North Korea to signal benign intentions by aligning its votes more closely either with the US—the spearhead of the international sanctions regime against North Korea—presumably with the intent to minimize the international economic backlash towards its actions and ameliorate its economic position.

In summary, the above analysis reveals several insights for understanding voting convergence and the prospect of the placatory voting hypothesis in the context of US-North Korea relations. First, the lack of a consistent relationship between periods of higher and lower affinity and other ways of capturing interest convergence or divergence (such as negotiations and provocations) casts doubt on whether conventional understandings of voting convergence as a reflection of interest convergence can accurately explain patterns in US-North Korean affinity.
Furthermore, the consistency in voting issues covered across the years examined suggest that agenda shifts did not appear to play a major role in the variations in affinity between the two states. Instead, placatory voting provides a plausible explanation for the patterns in US-North Korean affinity that is consistent not only with observable shifts in both countries’ voting patterns, but also with expectations of North Korean foreign policy behaviour.
CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the utility of dyadic affinity scores and voting convergence more broadly as a measure of state interest similarity. Conventional understandings of affinity scores yield potentially misleading conclusions about state interest convergence. At its core, this is a function of affinity scores’ inability to account for when states’ interests do not necessarily match voting behaviour. While their use in the literature has assumed an equivalency between voting convergence and interest similarity, their calculation fundamentally relies on states’ voting patterns which themselves are an outcome of multiple factors—only one of which are state interests. The placatory voting hypothesis brings some of these factors back in, providing a strategic explanation for the occasional mismatch between affinity score changes and periods of conflict or tension between states. Under this hypothesis, states use their votes as a means of delivering discreet signals of benign intentions when more overt signals of de-escalation may be politically costly.

This study yields implications for two key areas. First, the findings suggests a limit to the extent we can infer states’ interests from their voting behaviour. Substantively, the findings serve as a reminder that votes themselves are political and strategic acts that constitute one of many policy options for engaging with other states. This presents a more complex picture of UN voting strategy than one built solely on the expression of latent state interests. Methodologically, it suggests that affinity scores—and perhaps by extension, other measures of interest similarity that still rely on UN voting such as the one or two-dimensional spatial ideal-point models proposed by Bailey et al.\textsuperscript{14}—must be accompanied by careful contextualization and must be viewed at face value: not as a measure of interest, but strictly as a measure of voting convergence.

\textsuperscript{14} See Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017; Bailey and Voeten 2018.
Second, this study constitutes a plausibility probe for the argument that UN voting can operate as a signaling method, extending existing research on political signals as understood in the IR literature. On one front, the placatory voting hypothesis reiterates that states are capable of signaling not only threats, but also a willingness to cooperate or pull back: signals can be used not only to throw down the gauntlets, but also to extend an olive branch. On another front, the placatory voting hypothesis expands the range of forms of these signals can take, arguing that less conspicuous acts such as routine UN voting can still be formulated into a credible signal.

This study faced several limitations largely related to data availability that could be expanded in future research. While the VRA dataset covering 1990 to 2004 provides an initial estimate of how often conflict dyads experience an increase in affinity, a dataset with a broader time coverage would provide a more accurate estimate for how often this phenomenon occurs. Practical limitations also prevented a more thorough qualitative investigation into the different cases. Primary source evidence in the form of diplomatic archival research, as well as interviews with relevant policy practitioners—particularly in the North Korea case study—would be indispensable for testing the placatory voting hypothesis, although were infeasible due to the limitations of the research project.

Finally, as an exploratory work, this study also opens the field to further examination of UN votes as diplomatic signals. Future research could examine whether audience cost theory is the only plausible mechanism for placatory voting: vote-signaling as a response to communication barriers, or even as a symbolic or expressive act provide alternative explanations with insights into interstate communicative behaviour. As well, further investigation could be directed into when states turn to placatory voting as opposed to overt de-escalation or even resorting to outright conflict, with implications on when states use certain types of signals, and
when they can expect them to work. Future work could also examine how the relationship between states—i.e. whether states are allies or adversaries, whether there exists a certain power dynamic between the states, etc.—affects the propensity to turn to certain forms of signaling. Ultimately, this study and new lines of research stemming from it serve seek to expand our insights into the complex means in which states communicate and interact in times of conflict and tension.
Bibliography


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