

## MOTIVATIONS BEHIND NORTH KOREA'S QUEST FOR NUCLEAR WEAPONS: DETERRENCE, DEFIANCE, OR A BARGAINING CHIP?

Kuzey Kore'nin Nükleer Silah Arayışının Ardındaki Motivasyonlar: Caydırıcılık mı, Meydan okuma mı, yoksa Pazarlık Kozu mu?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand the motivations behind North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons by focusing on the history of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. North Korea's nuclear threat has become a crucial issue for the past decades. However, North Korea's nuclear adventure has a history of more than half a century. Therefore, to make sense of the North Korean nuclear threat today requires investigating the origin of North Korea's efforts and pursuits of nuclear weapons. This study has discussed the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program by dividing it into three decisive periods: the restructuring, détente and Sino- Soviet split, and the end of Cold War. As a result, it can be said that Korea's motivations for acquiring nuclear weapons vary according to the international conjuncture. Accordingly, while Korea's nuclear motivation is deterrence in the restructuring process, the motivation is to change the status quo during the détente period. With the end of the Cold War, the nuclear program began to be used as a bargaining chip.

**Key Words:** nuclear motivation, North Korea, quest for nuclear weapons deterrence

### ÖZET

Bu makale, Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer silah programının tarihine odaklanarak, Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer silah arayışının ardındaki motivasyonları anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer tehdidi geçtiğimiz on yıllarda önemli bir konu haline gelmiştir. Ne var ki, Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer serüveni yarım yüzyıldan fazla bir geçmişe sahiptir. Dolayısıyla bugün Kuzey Kore nükleer tehdidini anlamlandırmak, Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer silah arayışlarının ve çabalarının çıkış noktasını araştırmayı gerektirir. Bu çalışma, Kuzey Kore'nin nükleer silah programını üç belirleyici döneme ayırarak ele almıştır: yeniden yapılanma, yumuşama ve Çin-Sovyet bölünmesi ve Soğuk Savaş'ın sonu. Sonuç olarak, Kore'nin nükleer silah edinme motivasyonlarının uluslararası konjoktüre göre farklılık gösterdiği söylenebilir. Buna göre Kore'nin nükleer motivasyonu yeniden yapılanma sürecinde caydırıcılık iken, yumuşama döneminde statükoyu değiştirmektir. Soğuk Savaş'ın sona ermesiyle birlikte nükleer program bir pazarlık kozu olarak kullanılmaya başlanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** nükleer motivasyon, Kuzey Kore, nükleer silah arayışı, caydırıcılık

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A researcher who wants to analyze the behaviors and foreign policy of states in the international system primarily seeks to find out the motivations and rationale behind their actions. North Korea is one of the indefinable, complicated, and unpredictable cases because of the abundance of information pollution and the lack of reliable information about the country. This situation complicates the studies on North Korea's nuclear behaviors and ambition. North Korea is almost "the blackest of black boxes" (Cha, 1999). At this point, to shed light on this darkness in North Korea, it is necessary to start by revealing how it has built its own identity based on internal and external security perceptions.

The roots of North Korea's motivation to acquire nuclear weapons go back to the idea that military weakness leads to foreign invasion which is the trace of history in the country as Korea became a member of the international community from a tributary state to China. Moreover, Kim Il-Sung, a guerrilla fighter in Manchuria, witnessed the sudden surrender of the Empire of Japan after the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945 (Kibaroglu, 2004). All these factors gave Kim Il Sung the itch to acquire

nuclear weapons. The lessons learned from the Korean War and the experiences gained during the Cold War have also strengthened Kim Il Sung's desire to acquire nuclear weapons. North Korea has developed nuclear capacity through its own efforts and intermittent foreign assistance. Pyongyang is described as an illiberal and irrational regime and "the world's worst nightmare" continues to develop its nuclear ballistic missiles and nuclear technology. It is also estimated that North Korea exports them to countries that want to have ballistic missile technology.

This paper aims to scrutinize the origins of North Korea's motivation to quest for nuclear weapons. In doing so, the study argues that three important historical processes have had a decisive influence on North Korea's nuclear weapons motivation: Post- Korean War, the detente, and post- Cold War. It has been founded that the starting point of Korea's quest for nuclear weapons is nuclear deterrence. In the late 1970s, acquiring nuclear weapons has seen as a way of challenging the status quo. Since the end of the Cold War, it has become a bargaining tool as well as a deterrence.

## 2. LESSONS FROM THE KOREAN WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION PROCESS

The Korean War, which started on 25 June 1950 and ended on 27 July 1953, was a major battleground of the Cold War. The Korean War transformed Asia into the most important non-European area of the international system during the Cold War. The War has represented a remarkable change in Asian politics of two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) whose vital interests were not at stake in Asia and has also been the main motivation for North Korea to find its Korean identity in the post-war reconstruction process. It exposed North Korea's vulnerability at two points: the US nuclear threat and the lessons learned from its allies (Soviets and China).

Although it seems unlikely for the US to use nuclear weapons against a defenseless enemy after the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, some influential American officials stated that an atomic bomb could be used in Korea during the Korean War. General Douglas MacArthur stated his support for dropping the atomic bomb in Korea at a secret conference on July 17, 1950, where he planned to destroy North Korea and prevent any Chinese or Soviet intervention (Cumings, 1983). Moreover, MacArthur frequently conducted lobbied activities for dropping the bomb after the Chinese entered the war in November 1950. MacArthur, who defended the nuclear destruction of Korea, said in an interview that he could simply end the Korean War in ten days by dropping 30 to 50 atomic bombs on Manchuria (The New York Times, 1964). Another most influential American who supported the use of atomic bombs in Korea was Dwight D. Eisenhower, the NATO Commander-in-Chief at the time and who would become the US President in 1953. However, after China entered the war in November 1950, the US President Truman rejected the possibility of using nuclear weapons. Although it did not implement, the US rhetoric of using nuclear weapons in Korea revealed North Korea's vulnerability and the necessity of developing its nuclear weapons against the permanent threat of US occupation.

North Korea's vulnerability in the Korean War resulted not only from the US nuclear threat but also from the lessons it learned from the behavior of its allies. The experience of the Korean War taught Korean officials a lesson in the danger of acquiescing to stronger allies and confronted them with the fact that their ability to fulfill their duty to their homeland depended on decisions based on the national interests of the Soviets and China. The Soviets did not offer significant support to Korea when the war began. Bruce Cumings states that after the outbreak of the conflict, there was no increase in military shipments from the Soviets to Korea, but contrarily there was a decrease. Moreover, Stalin ordered the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Jacob Malik, not to attend the Security Council meeting that dealt with the Korean issue. Cumings argues that the leading motive behind Stalin's decision was to weaken Mao and thus make him obey the Soviets by pitting US-Chinese troops against each other at the expense of leaving the Pyongyang regime alone to the threat of American military power (Cumings, 1997). On the other hand, China's involvement in the Korean War was directly related to self-interests. Thus, the Korean War showed that North Korea could not rely on its allies to ensure its survival.

The Korean War also led Korean Communists to question the main belief that national liberation would come through revolution as part of the worldwide communist movement led by the Soviet Union. All these lessons that North Korea learned during the war were clearly expressed in the "Juche" ideology, which emphasized self-reliance in politics (chaju), economy (charip), and defense (chawi) during the restructuring process. Juche was developed as a new road for the Korean revolution. Juche idea is based on the belief that Korea's liberation can only be entrusted to the Koreans, even if economic and military resources of the

allies are used. Thus, North Korea started to receive assistance from both the Soviets and the communist bloc countries of Eastern Europe during the restructuring process (Weathersby, 2008).

The Korean War ended with a ceasefire, not any treaty, and US forces continue to exist in South Korea. These forces appear to be a credible deterrent force that guarantees the US entry into a possible second Korean War. In addition to military forces, there are also many tactical nuclear weapons held in South Korea by US forces. The United States has a nuclear mine near the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea that can be detonated by remote control in case of an invasion by North Korean forces (Bello, 1983). Under these conditions, Kim Il Sung, a leader of North Korea, used his country's front-line position against American imperialism and demanded economic and military aid from all bloc states. On the other hand, Il Sung perceived the nuclear presence of the US in the region as a ground preparation that would turn the status quo on the Korean Peninsula in favor of South Korea. Thus, considering the idea that no superpower patron was reliable in defense, he sought to acquire nuclear technology.

In its quest to acquire nuclear weapons, North Korea's first act was to apply for aid to the Soviets. A group of North Koreans attended the nuclear power plant conference in Moscow and went to the Joint Institute for Nuclear Research in Dubna for training. In 1959, the USSR and North Korea signed a formal treaty that included the development of a nuclear research center in Korea, cooperation for nuclear research, and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In addition, the USSR supplied a small experimental nuclear reactor to Korea (Clemens Jr., 2010). The Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center, whose construction began in 1961 and was completed in 1964, is a power plant. Thus, the first step was taken to acquire nuclear weapons. At this point, it should be underlined that the motivation behind North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons in the reconstruction process is deterrence. The lessons learned from the behavior of its allies and the security dilemma created by the US military presence in the region are the main reasons for the quest for nuclear weapons as a deterrent tool.

### 3. THE SINO- SOVIET SPLIT AND THE DETENTE

In the early 1960s, Khrushchev's destalinization, peaceful coexistence, and nonproliferation policies caused to erode Soviet relations with China and North Korea. Soviet cut down economic aid to North Korea in 1962, and the Soviet withdrawal in the Cuban Missile Crisis led to a deepening of the Sino-Soviet split. All these developments coincided with the revised Mutual Security Treaty between the US and Japan in 1960 and the normalized Japan-South Korea relationship under the guarantor of the US. This situation reiterated in its historical memory the idea that North Korea cannot rely on any of its allies in national defense. It also revealed once again the importance of military self-defense (Szalontai, 2005).

Kim Il Sung criticized the US-Japan revised treaty for reviving Japanese revisionism. Moreover, in Pyongyang's eyes, this treaty strengthened the possibility of Japan's re-emergence as a dominant regional power that could threaten North Korea's security. Under these conditions, North Korea tried to benefit from both sides by maintaining a neutral position in the Sino-Soviet split and increasing its nuclear quest for national self-confidence (Park, 1983).

In the Sino-Soviet split, the Korean regime avoided taking an extreme pro-Chinese stance and adopted a moderate approach towards the Soviets. However, Moscow's signing of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with Washington and London in 1963 was perceived as a kind of nuclear non-proliferation treaty by the Chinese and North Korean administrations. North Korea described this treaty as an American conspiracy and refused to sign it. The Pyongyang regime advocated the idea that all socialist countries should acquire nuclear technology (Haggard, 1965). As the Sino-Soviet conflict deepened in 1963, the Soviets were suspicious of North Korea's efforts to learn about nuclear weapons and atomic energy. Indeed, Korea was not rich in uranium ore, and the processing of this ore was quite expensive for the Koreans. According to Soviet experts, Pyongyang's statement that it wanted to develop uranium ore on a large scale was an indication that North Korea would supply these ores to China. Therefore, in Moscow's eyes, helping North Korea with nuclear weapons meant helping a separatist China. Because of these reasons, it is seen that the Soviet military and economic aid to Korea decreased in this period.

Although Soviet aid was cut off in 1959 with the outbreak of the Sino-Soviet split and thousands of Soviet experts withdrew from China in 1960, China tested its nuclear bomb in 1964. North Korea has turned its direction towards China. In his letter to Mao, Kim Il Sung asked for Chinese assistance in developing a parallel nuclear program. According to him, China and North Korea were brother countries that fought and died together on the battlefield. Therefore, they should also have shared secrets about the atom. Mao

rejected this offer because it was unnecessary for North Korea, as a small country, to have a nuclear bomb, and that the program was too expensive (Oberdorfer, 1997).

North Korea, whose request for help was rejected by Mao, found the solution by applying to East Germany. North Korea's request from East Germany is to make a very detailed agreement, such as providing the necessary equipment from the German side for nuclear power plant construction, sharing experiences in operating nuclear reactors, and making exchanges between scientists. However, East Germany responded that it could enter such cooperation provided that the Soviets and other communist countries with which it cooperated approved (Clemens Jr., 2010).

Brezhnev's policy of re-establishing unity in the communist bloc offered North Korea the opportunity to re-establish economic and military ties with the Soviets and Eastern European countries and to receive Soviet military aid again. In 1965, South Korea-Japan relations normalized, then Seoul received economic and military aid from Japan. South Korea increased international recognition by sending troops in the Vietnam War, and in return, the US rewarded her with economic and military aid. All of these were the underlying reasons for North Korea's improving relations with the Soviets. Although North Korea made a series of economic, military, and technological aid agreements with the Soviets in the last three years of the 1960s, it did not compromise its independent line on nuclear weapons. In 1968, the United States and the Soviets drafted the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and opened it for signature by all UN member states. It has strained relations between the Soviets and North Korea. North Korea has refused to sign the NPT by advocating small countries could use atomic energy for peaceful purposes. This treaty should not undermine this desire of small countries, and large countries with nuclear capabilities should have guaranteed it (Szalontai, 1960).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, China and the Soviets entered periods of detente with the United States. North Korea's strategic allies approached their traditional enemies through arms control negotiations, agreements, and mutual visits, replacing political considerations with economic ones. During this period, North Korea tried to get maximum benefit of the new international environment by preserving its ideological foundations. On the one hand, while trying to reduce its dependence on China and the Soviets, on the other hand, with the thought that American troops could leave the South, it developed its relations with the non-communist third world and South Korea and drew a picture of a period of détente.

During the detente period, it can be said that North Korea camouflaged its aggressive words and actions with its attempts to adapt to the new international environment and a peaceful profile. China and the Soviets have tried to ensure that North Korea's words and actions do not harm its relations with the United States. In other words, both countries made more economic, military, and technological commitments to contain North Korea. However, more commitments have led North Korea to take actions that indicate if it acquires nuclear weapons, it can use them to provoke a nuclear war. Pyongyang's interest in acquiring nuclear energy intensified in the 1970s with the rise in oil prices and the USSR's raising the price of oil to customer countries. India's first nuclear test in 1974 showed that a poor country could develop nuclear weapons with materials collected from remote areas. It also created the perception that India would accept as a de facto nuclear weapons state. The example of India triggered the idea of "Why shouldn't we be the next de facto nuclear state?" in North Korea.

By 1975, US-China relations declined before they could mature. Moreover, the Soviet military construction and policies in the region, in response to the perception of decline created by the US defeat in Vietnam, led the US to question the Soviets' peaceful coexistence policy. In parallel with these developments, Kim Il Sung believed that a reunification like in Vietnam could take place in Korea under his rule. Details regarding this intention of Kim Il Sung are seen in the report of the Hungarian Ambassador to Korea Janos Taraba to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry on 30 July 1975. Taraba reported that China was wary of a second Korean War, but Kim Il Sung saw military force as an option. According to Kim Il Sung, peaceful reunification was not possible, and the North would not be indifferent if a revolution sparked in the South (Schaefer, 1973). In 1976, the Hungarian Foreign Minister met with the North Korean delegate. Thilstvân Garajszk, after meeting with the Korean delegates, stated that the North Koreans do not believe that a peaceful reunification will take place and that they are preparing for a nuclear war. If a war breaks out in Korea, it will no longer be a conventional war but a nuclear war. According to Garajszk, North Korea was ready for this war and had moved its important factories, airports, ports, and military facilities underground against this possibility (Szalontai, 1976).

To sum up, the motivation of North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons in the late 1970s was to turn the status quo in its favor by taking advantage of the new dynamics of the international environment. To this end, in 1976, North Korea requested the Soviets to build a nuclear power plant, but the USSR refused to



deliver a nuclear power plant to North Korea in the current five years. Then North Korea turned its route to Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries. However, these countries, like the Soviet Union, described North Korea as an unreliable, costly, and intriguing ally.

#### **4. REAGAN'S GEOGRAPHIC (HORIZONTAL) ESCALATION POLICY AND NORTH KOREA'S VULNERABILITY**

In the 1980s, Japan increased its military expenditures in line with the US's demands for burden-sharing and declared South Korea vital to itself. In addition to this, the US participation in naval exercises in the Pacific caused Kim Il Sung to focus on the resurgent Japanese militarism and American imperialism. With the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, the process of restoring American power began. Reagan's doctrine of rollback foresees an escalation against the Soviets and communism in general, from limited to all-out nuclear war. This doctrine has caused concern in North Korea, the only communist regime in which most of its territory was "occupied" in the post-war period. This doctrine targets not only the Soviets but also their allies. American supremacy is being tried to be restored with the doctrine.

According to Reagan, if the enemy launched an attack in any part of the world, the United States would launch counterattacks in other regions of his choosing. According to this doctrine, known as horizontal escalation (or geographic escalation), the United States could respond to an attack in the Persian Gulf by provoking the Korean Peninsula. In addition to the geographic escalation, Reagan's declaration in November 1983 of South Korea as a vital US interest required preparation for any possibility of military intervention in North Korea. North Korea also perceived the US invasion of Grenada in 1983 as an early warning sign. Kim Il Sung was afraid to experience a similar operation to Grenada. In his view, Reagan could launch a North Korean invasion just like in Grenada and overthrow his government in a couple of weeks. According to Korea, as the US perceives even a small spice island as a threat, it may eventually come to North Korea's turn. The Korean regime was aware that without an effective deterrent it would not be able to cope with the strength of the American military (Young, 2017).

Reagan's rigid anti-communist policy, the US' joint military exercises with South Korea on the peninsula, and the US officials' statements that the US will respond to a conventional North Korean attack with tactical nuclear weapons have once again revealed the importance of nuclear weapons and military priority for North Korea. In addition to the fear of nuclear attack caused by the US, there were a series of worrying developments that North Korea considers as the revival of Japanese militarism. These developments in Japan and the US forced North Korea to establish a new strategic relationship with Moscow. The North Korean regime opened a second nuclear power plant in Yongbyon in 1980, before Soviet aid, and this plant reached 4 megawatts of production in 1986. The thing is, the North Koreans have learned how to build Scuds by their efforts by reverse engineering, that is, by taking them apart piece by piece and then putting them back together (Clements Jr., 2010). In the 1980s, North Korea's motivation to acquire nuclear seems to have been deterrence.

#### **5. RETHINKING NUCLEAR POLICY AFTER THE COLD WAR: NORMALIZE OR NUCLEARIZE?**

The early 1990s witnessed a North Korean foreign policy trying to keep up with the changing geopolitical conditions. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in 1989 did not herald the disappearance of one of the protagonists of the Cold War phenomenon, which has guided world politics for only half a century, and the end of an era. At the same time, it was a sign of new beginnings for North Korea to deal with several economic and political problems. Because it had isolated by losing the assurances of its Cold War allies. Kim Il Sung realized that North Korea had to change its security environment for the tensions that could increase on the Peninsula.

In the face of changing conditions, North Korea focused its foreign policy on its relations with the United States on the assumption that it could survive only under the guarantee of the United States for its national security. Until the 1990s, in Pyongyang's eyes, the United States was the central actor in shaping its political mythology and national strategy. Indeed, the United States was not only the main actor in the division of Korea, but also the main obstacle to its reunification. By the 1990s, ironically, in North Korea's strategic calculations, the United States was positioned as a potential alternative security guarantor, economic lifeboat, and grantor. This shift is a new stance from weakness and vulnerability. Indeed, North Korea was more concerned about its survival in changing conditions and less concerned with defeating



South Korea. North Korea has sought to normalize relations with the United States and its allies (Oh & Hassig, 2000).

North Korea opened direct diplomatic dialogue with the United States, and a series of meetings took place at the embassy level. Pyongyang is trying to end its diplomatic isolation with normalization talks with Japan. In parallel with the decisions taken in line with the changing security environment, North Korea has also sought reconciliation with South Korea. In 1992, the Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was signed between the two Koreas. According to the declaration, neither side will use, test, or manufacture nuclear weapons. Moreover, the parties will not engage in uranium enrichment activities. In the same year, North Korea signed a comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency and accepted IAEA inspectors.

Although North Korea displayed a collaborative profile in terms of its intentions and capabilities in the first years of the 1990s, just as it did during the detente period of the Cold War, it continued to pursue its nuclear activities. In 1990, North Korea successfully tested the Hwasong6, improved version of the Hwasong-5, and started full-scale production after the test in 1990. In these years, it is seen that the nuclear motivation of North Korea was for commercial rather than military purposes. It is claimed that Pyongyang sold approximately 540 Nodongs to Middle Eastern countries between 1985 and 2000 (Suh, 2002). While the Pyongyang regime obtained some of the foreign capital it needed by selling nuclear weapons, it also realized that the threat of nuclear proliferation provided some concessions and incentives from the US and its allies (Byman & Lind, 2010).

Although North Korea's nuclear weapons program appeared to be paradoxical with its policy of reconciliation, nuclear weapons served as a bargaining tool for Korea and an effective insurance policy for the regime's survival. These weapons are exactly what the North Korean regime needs to offset the negative effects of increasing its relationship with capitalist countries. Nuclear weapons also draw Korea's powerful rivals to the bargaining table. Normalization relations with the US and its allies weaken the Juche ideology in North Korea. North Korea's nuclear option was a diplomatic catalyzation to overcome its vulnerability and to avoid geopolitical pushback. Nuclear weapons would strengthen national and international legitimacy while providing North Korea with a deterrent against external threats. In connection with the Juche ideology, it would act as a deterrent by protecting the homeland from the occupation of imperialist nations and would ensure national legitimacy by quelling the growing discontent of the North Korean people with the Kim Il Sung regime. Besides, it would increase the international legitimacy of the government. The North Korean regime believes that once a country becomes a nuclear power, it would be treated with dignity. Thus, hostile nations would deal with a nuclear power prudently, both diplomatically and militarily (Kim, 1994).

## 6. CONCLUSION

"North Koreans cannot be trusted!" The phrase is frequently cited in the literature as a common view expressed in response to North Korea's apparent nuclear and missile programs. This point of view underlies the criticisms leveled at the strategy of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through engagement with Pyongyang. On the other hand, there are optimistic views on North Korea's nuclear program. Accordingly, Pyongyang's nuclear program does not aim for the nuclear destruction of the United States or its allies. The nuclear program is the result of Pyongyang's deeply internalized fears of perceiving the US military presence and its allies in the region as an existential security threat.

In today's world, North Korea is seen as one of the most serious threats to Asian and world security. Understanding North Korea's nuclear duel today requires exploring its nuclear motivations. This study, which aims to investigate the motivations behind North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons, has shown that Korea's nuclear motivations have varied periodically according to the international conjuncture. The starting point of Korea's quest for nuclear weapons is the existential threat posed by the American military presence in the region. Therefore, the motivation in the reconstruction process after the Korean War is deterrence. The change in the regional conjuncture caused by the detente period and Sino- Soviet split in the 1970s shifted Korea's nuclear motivation to challenge the status quo. Although North Korea tried to normalize after the Cold War by establishing relations based on assurance and reciprocity with the United States and its allies, it maintained its traditional and asymmetrical military capabilities in a way that continued to pose a threat to its neighbors in the region. Korea's diplomatic normalization and

nuclearization policy, which seems contradictory but also overlaps within the framework of the Juche ideology, has created an escalation cycle that has continued for 30 years. In this cycle, which is sometimes regarded as a strategic deception, North Korea first engages in negotiations to convince its enemies of its intentions and capabilities, receives economic aid in return, and then ends the negotiations by claiming that the others do not comply with the joint declarations. This situation clearly shows that after the Cold War, North Korea's nuclear weapons motivation turned into a political bargain. North Korea's nuclear motivation is to bring its opponents to the negotiating table, thereby obtaining some concessions that will increase her expectations and satisfaction with the status quo.

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