Motivation
Exploring International Security: Reality Motivates

By Kelly Cheng

Motivation to engage in research develops under many settings. Academic curiosities become research interests as they flourish in classes, dorms and student organizations. As a research idea grows, academic programs can often match a student’s motivations with the tools required for in-depth research.

Sophomore Jon Phua and Senior Paul Yoo share a fascination with international security. Stanford’s CISAC (Center for International Security and Cooperation) has supported their intellectual pursuits. CISAC, where faculty and students conduct groundbreaking political science research, focuses on policymaking in the security arena. The range of expertise at CISAC provides a multitude of research opportunities for undergraduates, and its honors program, open to all majors, assists those who are completing theses.

In the following, Jon and Paul share how their common interest led both of them to CISAC.

Q: How are you engaging in undergraduate research?
Paul: I am currently writing my thesis on North Korea’s negotiating behaviors. By analyzing, coding, and weighing event data from 1990-2005, I hope to find whether North Korea has been acting as a “madman” state, implementing coercive bargaining, or engaging in a tit-for-tat strategy vis-à-vis the United States. These three theories have been utilized to describe North Korea’s behavior in various scholarly journals, columns, and books, but each theory has very different implications. Thus by thoroughly analyzing North Korea’s interactions with the United States in a fifteen-year time span (from the first nuclear crisis to the September Agreement of 2005), I hope to generate an accurate picture of North Korea’s negotiation behaviors that may illuminate the U.S.’s best response.

Jon: As Professor Jeremy Weinstein’s Research Assistant at CISAC, I’ve been helping him construct a new dataset on violent incidents during Sierra Leone’s nine-year civil war. It’s been interesting to see how Professor Weinstein formulates and tests broad hypotheses (for example, rebel-perpetrated violence tends to occur more when rebel groups recruit members from resource-rich areas, because they tend to be in the movement for their own short-term gain).

Q: Where did you find the motivation to pursue your research?
Paul: I had been living in Santa Cruz, Bolivia when the September 11th attacks occurred. I skipped class all day to watch CNN clips of the attacks. But I did not understand the incredible impact the attacks would have within the United States, perhaps because a surge of anti-Americanism had begun to spread across Bolivia. Although the whole system of real politik had shifted in a single day, and America was suddenly faced with new enemies, the idea of terrorism felt distant from me. Shortly after September 11th, however, a newly built police station near my home was hit by a car bomb. I was shocked. I passed that station every day on my way to school, and any of my friends and family members could have been a victim. That day I understood the shift that had taken place on September 11th, and realized I wanted to understand why the world had changed.

I pursued political science at Stanford taking classes that dealt
with international security issues (Technology in National Security; Strategy, War, and Politics; International Security in a Changing World). After my sophomore year, I decided to work at the Peace and Disarmament division at a South Korean think tank/civil society group called People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD). That summer I worked extensively on the North Korean nuclear issue with other researchers, but was often perplexed by North Korea's inconsistent negotiation tactics. When I came back to Stanford, I realized that CISAC would offer the perfect opportunity to explore this interest further. If we can understand how exactly North Korea is engaging the United States and what its motivations are, we may discover how we can influence its future behavior in order to provide for a safer, more stable, and peaceful region in East Asia.

**Jon:** Some Political Science and IR [International Relations] classes which I’ve taken are held in the CISAC building as opposed to the Political Science building. These classes take advantage of visiting professors working at CISAC, who give seminars on their research. I thought it was an interesting place, so I wanted to find work opportunities, which led me to Professor Weinstein. I’m also trying to figure out if I enjoy research. That’s a pretty big factor in your decision to go to grad school—and it’s important to see whether you enjoy doing research at this level.

I didn’t specifically have a previous interest in Sierra Leone, but definitely had one in political science. I’ve taken an Introductory Seminar with Professor David Laitin, in the Political Science department, whose primary area of research is Africa, so that class definitely contributed to my interest Professor Weinstein’s work. Seminars are a great avenue to get to know professors and do research.

**Q:** What is involved in your methodology?

**Paul:** I collected data primarily by compiling events involving North Korea, the US, and relevant third parties two aggregate sources: the World News Digest and the Nuclear Threat Initiative Chronology. These events were reported in international newspapers, and help eliminate nationalistic bias. I then coded the events according to a scale developed by the Conflict and Peace Data Bank (COPDAB – originally designed by Edward E. Azar from the Center for International Development and Conflict Management). The events were structured to show when North Korea and the United States cooperated or reneged on agreements, and were then assigned weights to account for the intensity and frequency of one nation’s actions toward the other.

**Jon:** My role as a research assistant has involved combing through a huge online document archive and extracting the information found in verbose news reports. Professor Weinstein also considers surveys of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone. For my analysis, I use Excel to create graphs that illustrate trends in large datasets. I then figure out how to transform the enormous amounts of data to extract specific information. The challenges in my research involve creating a clear dataset that doesn't duplicate variables and maintaining consistency in really low-level details. For example, if a news report says “several people were killed,” I have to decide what number to code in my data.

**Q:** Where are you finding support for your research?

**Paul:** My primary thesis advisor is Kenneth Schultz from the Political Science Department, but I have also benefited from the immense resources at CISAC. I feel very privileged to have such a dedicated group of advisors that are always willing to provide time for honors students. The CISAC honors program also very prudently assigns internal deadlines for honors students, which has kept me from procrastinating (for the most part). In terms of funding, I hope to apply for a Spring Quarterly Grant from the URP in order to conduct critical interviews with key policymakers.

**Q:** How else could an undergraduate researcher use CISAC as a resource?

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- Paul Yoo
Jon: The Center has public science and technology and social science seminars every week, focusing on some aspect of international security that can be studied using these disciplines. It's really interesting just to pop by to see different professors at the top of their field discussing their latest work. You can talk to them afterwards and they can provide useful input regarding your research. A large proportion of the research fellows and professors at CISAC attend these seminars too, so it's an easy way to meet these faculty members. This type of interaction can help students fine-tune their research questions.

Q: What fascinates or challenges you most in your research?
Paul: I’ve learned that even a “fuzzy” topic can be scrutinized with a very structured methodology (it almost feels like I’m conducting an experiment). On the flip side however, I’ve found that a qualitative method has helped me explain subtleties otherwise difficult to capture. For instance, my research has shown that the United States has often been the first to renege on agreements with North Korea and that North Korea has often created crises in response to the perceived defection. This phenomena has best been explained in my thesis with qualitative evidence which I believe has strengthened my argument overall.

Jon: It’s been very hard work, but it’s pretty fascinating to see the actual methodologies political scientists will use to test their hypotheses. CISAC has lots of resources and it’s a cool place to work—lots of interesting social science and applied science seminars on security issues, with great scholars presenting really cutting-edge material.

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