

IR Theory and the DPRK

Written by Robert W. Murray

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ROBERT W. MURRAY, APR 10 2013

If one was to rely solely on the reporting of the mass media to comprehend what is going on in North Korea, it would be totally understandable to see droves of people in South Korea, Japan, Guam, Hawaii and the US west coast stockpiling food and water for an impending war and possible nuclear holocaust. To be frank, the coverage of the DPRK's behavior and the prospects for war have been so over-exaggerated that panic is beginning to set in and with each new statement from Kim Jong-un promising the annihilation of the entire planet, more and more questions about just how real the outbreak of war might be increase.

I would argue this is one of the perfect examples of why IR theory, especially realism, still matter in our study of international politics. Much has been made about the apparent death of the "isms" in IR theory and how current students reject their explanatory value. Instead, I have seen blogs, articles, conference panels and presentations about how the next generation of IR scholars want to place emphasis on cross-disciplinary research that pushes beyond the boundaries of the "isms" and gives us a broader understanding of what is happening in the world. Such an account of IR theory, however, demonstrates a poor evaluation of just how complex each of the "isms" actually are. My reading of each theory of, or approach to, international relations requires cross-disciplinary reading and though it has become fashionable to accuse theories like realism or liberalism of being too "simplistic", they and the other schools of thought are typically more nuanced and detailed than they are given credit for.

Beyond the complexities of each theory of IR is the application or empirical value. Some approaches, mostly those in what can be categorized as "critical theories" are not nearly as concerned with empirical testing as problem-solving theories. There is also a distinction to be made within those theories that do purport to test empirically between grand theory and case-study or policy-specific theory. In all, IR theory is a toolbox with which scholars can seek to explain and understand the world around us. I would argue one tool is never going to adequately give us a complete explanation, and so good scholarship should be sophisticated enough to admit the limits or weakness' of an approach. Usually by reading the interpretations of an event or strategy through multiple lenses, one can appreciate just how multifaceted our world can be.

All of this brings me back to the ongoing interpretations of current events in the DPRK. I am astounded at how often throughout the last few weeks I have heard claims that war is likely, and that we have no way of understanding what North Korea might do.

As someone who identifies more with a realist account of international politics, I remain entirely convinced that we are by no means on the verge of war in that region and that, while a leader might be crazy, this does not mean they are irrational. Leader A is bound by the same systemic constraints as Leader B or C, and thus just because we see a new leader trying to appease hardliners internally, I do not believe the DPRK will do anything militarily based on a young or new leader. Neoclassical realists would be able to tell you more about the Foreign Policy Executive of the DPRK and how the characteristics of the state apparatus and the personalities of senior officials may also impact decision-making, but in the end, the assumptions about survival maximization and regional balancing would not change. There have also been questions about threat perception, alliances, institutions, etc and how the DPRK is somehow acting in a way never before seen.

It may seem unusual to the role of theory in a time when experts on Asian politics are going to be the most valuable in

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explaining internal characteristics and regional behaviours, but do not discount the role played by our explanatory models in times such as this. What do you think the assumptions of those commenting on the DPRK or making policy within states are based on? They may not call it IR theory, but we theorists know better...

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Read more from Robert W. Murray's e-IR blog: Power, Security and Self-Help: A Blog of International Reality

About the author:

Robert W. Murray is Vice-President of Research at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and an Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. He holds a Senior Research Fellowship at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies and Research Fellowships at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and University of Alberta's European Union Centre for Excellence. He is the co-editor of *Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Future of Humanitarian Intervention* with Aidan Hehir (Palgrave, 2013), *Into the Eleventh Hour: R2P, Syria and Humanitarianism in Crisis* with Alasdair MacKay (E-International Relations, 2014), and *International Relations and the Arctic: Understanding Policy and Governance* with Anita Dey Nuttall (Cambria, 2014). He is the Editor of the IR Theory and Practice blog on E-IR.