Reflecting on a Career Researching Climate Change and Security in North Korea

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BENJAMIN HABIB, APR 6 2023

The invitation to write this piece came at an auspicious moment as I pack up my office and get ready to bid farewell to the ivory tower of academia. This article is my pause for reflection on my way out the door, looking back on the work that I'm most proud of in researching the nexus between climate change, human security and governance in North Korea. When I began this research in the mid-2000s there were only a handful of scholars pursuing this line of inquiry. Most of the attention of those studying North Korea and Korean Peninsula security was focused on the DPRKs nuclear weapons program, which is where my PhD research started out too. My scholarly interest in climate change began as a parallel research project with my PhD thesis, combining my deep passion for environmentalism and concern about climate change with my country of interest, North Korea. Given the well-known fragility of North Korea's agricultural sector and the country's permanent state of food insecurity, coming only a decade after the calamitous "Arduous March" famine (1994–1998), I was astounded that more researchers hadn't explored the environment as an important aspect of the food insecurity and state fragility equation.

Climate change as 'the' security threat from North Korea

One of my goals with this research has been to discourage the more hawkish of policy-makers from bumbling into a totally avoidable conflict through misplaced ideological and rhetorical machismo, and a devotion to the obvious fiction that North Korea can be compelled to denuclearise. I contend that the more pressing security threat emanating from North Korea is country's vulnerability to climate change-related environmental shocks, with flow-on consequences for the food system and domestic political stability. This seems the more likely pathway for dynamic political change in the DPRK, more so than a military confrontation across the DMZ.

In 2007, I began working on a research paper titled "Climate Change and regime perpetuation in North Korea," which was later published in the journal *Asian Survey*. Given that the Kim regime had barely survived the Arduous March famine and with climate change looming large as an emerging threat, I wanted to understand the potential state fragility risk in the event of another acute food crisis. My analysis suggested the potential for a "threat multiplier cascade" where another Arduous March-like food crisis could lead to a similar breakdown of the DPRK state, this time precipitated by North Korea's low resilience to repeated environmental shocks.

In 2023, climate change is already affecting North Korea's vulnerable population in many ways. Extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts, are becoming more frequent and intense, damaging crops, and infrastructure, and causing displacement of people. In addition to extreme weather events, rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns also have long-term effects on water availability, agricultural productivity and thus food insecurity.

Climate change doesn't cause security risks, but it does catalyse conditions in which those risks potentially become more likely. Looking back at the Arduous March, we know it was a man-made catastrophe caused by the convergence of many variables. The agricultural sector was a key vulnerability then and remains a weak spot in the North Korean state today, in dynamic interaction with other fragilities and criminalities of the Kim regime. As I argued in my article "Balance of Incentives: Why North Korea Interacts with the UN Framework Convention on Climate

Change," this is one of the key attractions of the UNFCCC to the Kim regime.

On this basis, I suggest a role for the international community to re-establish and bolster efforts to reduce the likelihood of an acute food shock, by stop-gapping potential threat multiplier cascades from emerging at this weak spot in the food system to. A more resilient food system in North Korea reduces the potential for hard security flow-on impacts for regional states. This approach requires policymakers to re-frame how they conceive of Korean Peninsula security. Climate change is THE meta force shaping all politics, security, and the economy for the foreseeable future, and we need to incorporate this into our thinking in all theatres of international security.

My positionality as a neurodivergent researcher of North Korea

I can't separate my approach to research from my own positionality as an #actuallyautistic[*] researcher. The challenges I've faced due to my unique neurology as an International Relations academic—challenges around social interaction, communication, networking, and engaging with bureaucratic process—led me away from the more traditional approaches to scholarship favoured by neurotypical colleagues.

Inspired by the work of British geographer Peter Atkins, who argued that politics, economy and ideology are coded into the development of North Korea's landscapes, I developed an approach to "reading the landscape" in analysing the nexus between environment, human security and governance in the DPRK. For me, this became a pattern language through which I could interpret events and trends in the DPRK. I based this pattern language on principles from ecology and complex systems learned in the Permaculture movement, as well as insights from the fields of political geography and political ecology. My capacity for recognising complex patterns and relationships through this approach drew on my attributes as a neurodivergent researcher and became my unique contribution to North Korea studies.

Indeed, neurodivergent researchers in International Relations bring unique attributes, perspectives and experiences to our research. For example, because of our intensified sensory sensitivity, we can display a heightened attention to detail and be able to recognise complex patterns and connections. We bring a deep capacity for creativity and thinking outside the box in developing innovative methods for studying complex problems. This is of value in the context of North Korea studies, where traditional research methods have limitations due to well-understood political and logistical constraints. Sometimes it takes a neurodivergent mind to climb above the politicisation of North Korea studies and the entrenched groupthink of the national security blob.

Future directions for researching North Korea and climate change

What if the academic researchers and policymakers approached the DPRK through the lens of the UN Framework Convention on Climate change and engaged with North Korea as a "least developed country" (LDC), as opposed to attempting to strategically corner North Korea as a nuclear pariah? Viewing North Korea as an LDC opens up new research opportunities that can help us better understand the country's vulnerabilities and challenges, as well as offering opportunities to take the heat out of the regional security dilemma. Some of these research opportunities include:

First, exploring the impacts of climate change for North Korea: As an LDC, North Korea is particularly vulnerable to the economic consequences of climate change impacts. Researchers can work to better understand the economic consequences of these impacts and identify strategies for building resilience and adaptation. A complex systems analysis suggests that addressing these challenges requires a more holistic and adaptive approach to governance that takes into account the interconnections between climate change, food security, human security, and governance. This approach could encourage policymakers to move beyond purely instrumental thinking to recognise the process of engagement and collaboration as a peace-building end in and of itself.

Second, examining North Korea's efforts to adapt to climate change and the relationship between climate change and human security: While North Korea has made efforts to address climate change and its impacts, the government's adaptation strategies rely on its only real policy lever of mobilising large numbers of people for

unskilled labour. Researchers can help to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts and explore opportunities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing where the international community, via provisions articulated under Article 11 of the Paris Agreement, can share more effective adaptation strategies with the DPRK based on common interest.

Third, remote sensing and GIS analysis: Remote sensing and geographic information system (GIS) analysis can be used to identify areas of vulnerability to climate change, as well as to track changes in land use and vegetation cover related to agricultural productivity and the impacts of environmental shocks.

Fourth, investigating the role of international cooperation in addressing climate change in North Korea: International cooperation is critical for addressing climate change, but the political tensions between North Korea and other countries have made it difficult to engage in meaningful collaboration. Researchers can identify convergences of interest and barriers to cooperation, and explore opportunities for substantive confidence-building. Denuclearisation engagement has failed in the absence of mutual interests; however climate mitigation and adaptation represent a more fruitful pathway for confidence-building measures and relationship-building in the larger game.

Fifth, exploring the potential for sustainable development in North Korea: As an LDC, North Korea has significant development needs, but also has the potential for sustainable development that can help to address climate change and improve human well-being. Research can help to identify the opportunities and challenges for sustainable development in North Korea, particularly around agriculture, reforestation, energy system transition, and built environments.

I walk away from academia knowing I made a small but meaningful contribution in bringing the environment into focus in North Korea studies. It heartens me that there's a growing number of established and emerging scholars doing excellent research in this area. I urge those colleagues to remember that their research is no longer niche. In the Anthropocene, all politics is climate change politics.

About the author:

Benjamin Habib is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at La Trobe University. His research and teaching interests including the political economy of North Korea's nuclear program, East Asian security, and the international politics of climate change. He has published articles in international journals including Pacific Affairs, Asian Survey, The Pacific Review, and Energy Policy. You can read his blog here, and follow him on Twitter at @DrBenjaminHabib.