
Are policy makers captive to their theoretical perspectives?

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Introduction

In the school of international relations, there are three dominant theoretical perspectives—Liberalism, Realism and Marxism, that attempt to explain the complexities of the world we live in. According to Dunne and Schmidt, ‘...from 1939 to the present, leading theorists and policy makers have continued to view the world through realist lens...’.¹ This reinforces Alagappa’s views² that East Asian states are realist in outlook because of their experience with colonialism. Nevertheless, to guide political actions in a complex situation, frameworks are essential. For instance, for North Korea and China, one would often refer to policy frameworks such as ‘One China’ policy, ‘zero sum’ game and ‘axis of evil’. To a large extent, the frameworks are organising mechanisms and derivatives of one’s theoretical perspective. Therefore, is the claim that policy makers need frameworks to make sense of the world but are often held captive to a particular theoretical perspective that blinds them to what they should or need to do to protect their national interest, a credible one? I would argue not. In fact the claim is contentious. Theoretically, it assumes that a particular theory, in this case realism, is able to explain all international relations. At the conceptual level, it suggests an agent-centric view that policy makers’ perspectives are largely impervious to the effects of structural forces e.g. domestic economic problems and external threat. On the strategic plane, the claim disregards the effect of transnational forces such as globalisation on a state’s ability to protect its national interests. Last but not least, one cannot determine the notion of being ‘blind’ as the outcome of alternate options will never be known. Therefore, I would contend that realism as a theory is not encompassing; policy makers’ perspectives and their behaviour are continually being shaped by ideological and structural forces within a complex political space. Globalisation is increasingly negating the ability of the policy makers to protect the state’s national interests especially with regards to the primacy of military might as a principal element of power in the context of realism.

Definitions and scope

As my arguments are drawn from the developments in North Korea and China from the Cold War to the present, it is important to highlight the distinction between traditional and neo-realism and liberalism. The traditional realist views security as the derivative of power whilst the neo-realist places security under the structural theory of balance of power. Therefore, for the traditional realist, national security is often the main driving force in one’s foreign policies and military power is the predominant means to protect its national interests. Notwithstanding the differences, realism³ is commonly identified with three core values: statism, survival and self-help. On the other hand, liberalism argues for progress. To a liberal, the realist’s view of the anarchic world is therefore a dangerous one to adopt. With regards to the term ‘policy makers’, I have used it interchangeably with the ruling government/state for the belief that state decisions are generally made in a collective manner, even for communist states.

North Korea—A vicious cycle

The Korean War ended in a stalemate in 1953. To the North, the situation was essentially seen as a ‘zero-sum’ game, albeit implicitly. This view still persists today. North Korea’s foreign policies⁴ are clearly of the traditional realist template emphasising two elements of national security: regime survival and territorial sovereignty.⁵ Externally, views on North Korea are generally negative. Its policy makers are perceived to be trapped by an out-of-the-world perspective that explains its irrationality. Descriptions such as a nation of ‘paranoid survivalist’⁶ are common. In my opinion, such views are simplistic and one-sided. There is a need to examine the impact of the developments, within and outside North Korea, on North Korea’s perspective.

From 1953 to the 1980s, two major developments: shrinking allies’ support and failing economy were central to shaping and reinforcing North Korea’s ‘zero-sum’ framework. During the Korean War, the Soviet Union and China were the principal allies in support of North Korea. From 1960 to the 1980s, aid from the Soviet Union and China diminished as a result of the Sino–Soviet split. When China attacked Vietnam in the late 1970s, North Korea viewed the episode as Soviet failure to protect its client state. By the 1990s, Soviet aid had fallen from \$260 million to zero. The situation was further aggravated by North Korea’s autarky economy that was increasingly grinding to a halt. By 1992, the GNP of South Korea was more than 20 times that of the North.⁷ Understandably, these circumstances reinforced the notion of ‘zero-sum’ game. North Korea saw military build-up as the principle means to arrest the reducing security guarantee in order to protect its national interests. Further to this, developments in South Korea did not present any comfort to the North either.

Besides a strong US presence, South Korean troops were forward deployed and participated in bilateral exercise under Exercise *Team Spirit*⁸ with the Americans on a regular basis. There was also political rhetoric calling for pre-emptive strike⁹ against the North on more than one occasion. By any account, these developments did present a real threat to the North, reinforced its realist perspective and aggravated the ‘zero-sum’ game mentality to a point where North Korea saw waging of terrorism as a low cost, low risk option to destabilise the South in order to safeguard its own survival in the 1980s. Therefore, is North Korea blinded to what it should or needs to do to protect its national interests as a result of its realist perspective?

I would argue not. Politically, North Korea’s insistence to deal with US and Japan¹⁰ to safeguard its security and economic interests reflects a high level of sophistication and awareness of the realpolitik at play.¹¹ Unfortunately, the US’s war on terror in the Gulf¹² has placed North Korea as the next possible target further reinforcing North Korea’s traditional realist view and its sense of vulnerability. Strategically, North Korea sees little choice except to go nuclear to pit itself against another nuclear power.¹³ In this light, North Korea I would contend is not blinded to options that are needed to protect its national interests. Unfortunately, structural forces of realpolitik do not encourage it to be anything other than a traditional realist. Notwithstanding, North Korea is still largely able to protect its national interests, albeit in a narrow realist sense, via hard power.¹⁴

China—Turning over a new leaf ?

In stark contrast with North Korea, China’s policy makers are not held captive to their realist perspective that would blind them to what they should or need to do to protect their national interests. However, in doing so, they are also increasingly constrained in their ability to protect their national interests by hard power.

Until the late 1970s, China was clearly a traditional realist. It focused on regime survival and national sovereignty as key national interests encapsulated in Mao's United Front Strategy.¹⁵ In the early 1980s, the Four Modernisations Programme took priority in China's national agenda to arrest its backward economy. The main reason being by the late 1970s, China's economy¹⁶ was stagnating compared to the USSR and the US. The PRC understood the need to open its market and implement structural reforms to its centralised economy despite the fact that such reforms would introduce liberal forces that would undermine PRC's control.¹⁷ Interestingly, these reforms were also introduced at a time where the tension was still running high from the Cold War. From a political security perspective, this makes little sense unless a deeper shift has taken place in its ruling party. If this shift to a more liberal China is significant, it is also reversible. The fact that external views range from 'a benign power' to 'strategic competitor'¹⁸ highlights the uncertainty as to how China would behave in the future especially in the light of the Tiananmen incident and the straits missile crisis in 1989 and 1996 respectively. This draws to the issue of whether or not China can continue to rely on hard power i.e. on the military to protect its national interest.

Critics of China's policies such as Rahman¹⁹ who maintains the notion of 'the Chinese threat' with regards to China's use of its hard power to achieve its ends, often have played down the forces that have fundamentally shaped China, its national interests²⁰ and its conduct since the 1980s. As a result of China's 'open door' policy to embrace globalisation, most of the people in China have embraced capitalist market and lost confidence in the socialist economy.²¹ Globalisation breeds greater trade interdependence and inflow of liberal ideas. Today, up to 80 per cent of China's foreign investment²² comes from Taiwan. To cope with rising aspirations, China has perforce adopted a more pluralistic, diverse set of interests '...to represent the best interest of the people...'.²³ Paradoxically, in an effort to sustain the regime's legitimacy, China has also been constrained by the utility of its hard power to protect its national interests in order to retain its international standing. Gradually, China has to come to terms with the notion of 'soft power' as a viable alternative means to protect its interests. Its commission to hold the Olympic Games in 2008 is a perfect illustration that China is adapting well to this new form of power.

Conclusion

Indeed, the notion that policy makers are often being held captive to a particular perspective is perhaps too simplistic. Foremost, one cannot adopt an agent-centric approach to explain a state's policies and practices. Policy makers' perspectives are continually shaped by many forces, domestic and international, in a complex political space. Tension or security dilemmas will increase when this interaction process changes or reinforces a perspective that results in behaviour that challenges international norms, as in the case of North Korea. Therefore, a shift in one's perspective is very possible. In the case of China, the impetus for the shift is largely internally driven. From a theoretical argument, this is where realism fails to see the connection between state behaviour and the internal characteristics of states. Notwithstanding, a shift in perspective is also not irreversible which explains the uncertainty towards China today. Next, realism being state-centric focused cannot explain the process of globalisation. The ability to protect states' national interests by traditional 'hard power' is buckling under the weight of globalisation as China has experienced. Although 'soft power' may be an alternate means, its effectiveness is difficult to quantify. In the end, this leaves us with a paradox among the realist states in East Asia: to survive they perforce should embrace globalisation and yet that inevitably would undermine their ability to protect their national interests via hard power. Does this also mean the end of realism?

Endnotes

1. Tim Dunne, and Brian Schmidt, 'Realism' in John Baylis and Steve Smith (ed.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford University Press, Second Edition, 2001, pp. 142.
2. Muthiah Alagappa, *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideological Influences*, Stanford University Press, California, 1998, pp. 10–27.
3. John Baylis and Steve Smith (ed.), 'Introduction', *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford University Press, Second Edition, 2001, pp. 144.
4. David Kang, 'North Korea: Deterrence through Danger' in Muthiah Alagappa, *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideological Influences*, Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 234–236.
5. The emphasis of North Korea's national interests on military reflects Hans Morgenthau's concept of national interest.
6. Edward A. Olsen, 'The Arms Race on the Korean Peninsula', *Asian Survey* 26, No. 8, 1986, pp. 851–67.
7. Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies 1995.
8. Exercise *Team Spirit* was discontinued in late 1990s.
9. Kang, op. cit., pp. 258.
10. Currently, the three way talks have expanded to six-party talks to include China, Japan and Russia.
11. Robert Karniol, 'Rational "Rogue"', *Janes Defense Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 2, 2002, pp. 22–25.
12. '...this is a declaration of war and announcement of a nuclear war against us...' was reported in DPRK Party's newspaper *Nodong Sinmun*. Yossef Bodansky, 'The War of Terrorism According to Kim Jong-Il', *Defense and Foreign Affairs Strategy Policy*, Vol. 31, No. -1-2, 2003, pp. 4–8.
13. As Andrew Mack notes, 'From the North Korean perspective, the reasons for not going nuclear is outweighed by the perception of a growing strategic need for nuclear weapons', Andrew Mack, 'North Korea and the Bomb', *Foreign Policy*, No. 83 (Summer), 1991, pp. 87–104.
14. Joseph Nye, 'The American Colossus', in *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Super Power Can't Go It Alone*, Oxford, 2002, pp. 1–17.
15. XinB Wu, 'China: Security Practice of a Modernising and Ascending Power Terror' in Muthiah Alagappa, *Asian Security Practice: Material and Ideological Influences*, 1998, pp. 118–112.
16. In 1974, China's GNP hovered at US\$3.7bn against USSR's GNP of US\$12.8bn and US's GNP of US\$25.1bn. Source: Alan Wolfe, *American's Impasse*, South End Press, Boston, pp. 164.
17. Wu, op. cit., pp. 133.
18. Lanxing Xiang, 'Washington's Misguided China Policy', *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Autumn 2001, pp. 7–23.
19. Chris Rahman, 'Defending Taiwan, and Why It Matters', *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2001, Vol. LIV, No. 4, pp. 69–87.
20. Like North Korea, China's national interests took on the Han Morgenthau's concept of national interest until the 1990s which saw China adopting a more pluralistic, diverse set of interests under Jiang Zemin's theory of 'Three Represents' stipulating the need to represent the *best* interest of the people.
21. Wu, op. cit., pp. 133.
22. *ibid.*, pp. 153.
23. Xiang, op. cit., pp. 7–23.

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