North Korea and diversion: A quantitative analysis (1997–2011)

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ABSTRACT

In this research I propose that the concept of diversionary theory provides at least a partial explanation for North Korea’s conflict activities. I examine and analyze the country’s data on diplomatic and military activities from 1997 to 2011 and argue that North Korea’s domestic conditions influence its willingness to engage in external conflict. I also examine the impact of such external influences as UN sanctions, leadership changes in the region, national capacities of the US, South Korea and Japan, and strategic military exercises on DPRK-initiated conflicts. This study provides insight into the activities of this reclusive state and also demonstrates useful techniques that can be applied to analyze other similarly closed nations. The findings suggest that there are identified links between internal conditions and the Kim regime’s aggressive actions between 1997 and 2011 in support of the diversionary argument. Concurrently, there is less evidence that North Korea’s hostile diplomatic and military activities are based on external pressures.

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1. Introduction

North Korea presents a unique dilemma for the security of East Asia (and the international community) as both a poverty-stricken nation and a nuclear-armed state. The North Korean government routinely uses both diplomatic threats and armed force to advance its agenda, but the Kim regime’s closed nature makes empirical research on its actions difficult. Scholars rarely attempt to analyze the actions of North Korea using systematic methods, and most available research on this state consists of qualitative or policy-driven studies. Yet data is available that potentially helps understand why the ruling Kim regime routinely uses conflict actions to achieve national and foreign policy goals. By analyzing data between 1997 and 2011, I found that North Korea’s use of hostile foreign policy was influenced by internal conditions faced by the Kim regime which supported diversionary theory.1 Concurrently, I argue that external conditions are less important factors for Kim regime’s decisions to engage in conflict. Most international relations scholars readily admit that domestic factors influence foreign policy, yet the linkages between internal conditions and international actions by authoritarian states are often difficult to identify. This research seeks to address this gap in knowledge about the world’s most secluded state, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

This paper is organized as follows. In the first section, I discuss diversionary theory and derive two hypotheses. These are based on the relationships between DPRK-initiated conflicts and the conditions faced by the North Korean regime (internal

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1 Diversionary theory contends that leaders, in times of crisis will commit their nations to external use of force to alleviate the national focus from domestic to international issues. This concept has a number of names such as the diversionary theory of war, the diversionary hypothesis, diversionary force, or diversionary foreign policy (Levy, 1989; Mitchell and Thyne, 2010; Kisangani and Pickering, 2007; Oakes, 2006).

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and external pressures). The next portion identifies and defines both the dependent variable (Kim regime’s hostile foreign policy activities) and independent variables (internal and external conditions). The third part explains the conflict data analysis of North Korean hostile foreign policy; and the fourth portion provides the overall statistical analysis of the data. In the final section, I discuss both the relationship between the analytical results and diversionary theory and the overall contribution of this research project.

2. Diversionary concepts and derived hypotheses

There is an abundance of historical anecdotes surrounding the use of diversion by national leaders to solve domestic tensions. Notable figures such as Machiavelli, Shakespeare, and Jean Bodin have commented on the unifying potential of diversionary foreign policy activity. Additionally, one of the most famous interstate conflicts, the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), began purportedly because Russia needed a “short victorious war to stem the tide of revolution” (Walder, 1974). More recent conflicts associated with diversionary force include the 1982 Falklands War, US invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003, US 1998 missile attacks against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan, and the conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008 (Oakes, 2006; Kisangani and Pickering, 2009; Oreskes, 1990; Milbank, 2002; Purdum, 1998; Filippov, 2009).1

For North Korea, diversionary behavior offers the potential advantages of unifying the public against a common foe—generally the United States or South Korea—and a means for the government to direct public attention from domestic difficulties.2 While some may argue that authoritarian governments have little use for diversion, since these types of regimes tend to limit the activities of the public (Peceny and Beer, 2003), other scholars suggest that diversionary activities are common among many states and North Korea is no exception (Mitchell and Prins, 2004; Reilly, 2004).

North Korea’s foreign policy activities, as with any other state, range from cooperation to conflict relationships with other nations.3 Yet the international community is most concerned with Pyongyang’s provocative foreign policy actions, which seem to demonstrate the Kim regime’s willingness to risk war to achieve foreign policy goals. This “hostile foreign policy” (HFP) includes activities such as clandestine infiltrations into South Korea, nuclear weapons testing, and diplomatic threats. To analyze these potential diversionary activities, I formed the two hypotheses. The first contends that domestic factors cause the Kim regime to engage in hostile foreign policies. The second supports a systemic view of the state’s behavior and argues that the international community is more influential in North Korea’s foreign policy choices.4 These concepts are expressed as follows:

Hypothesis 1. (H1): Domestic difficulties in North Korea cause an increase in hostile foreign policy initiated by this country.

Hypothesis 2. (H2): External actors and increased international tensions cause increases in hostile foreign policy initiated by North Korea.

3. The variables

North Korea’s hostile foreign policy constitutes the dependent variable for this research, while its domestic conditions and international influences are the independent variables. To address alternative explanations for North Korean conflict activities I include two control variables: the type of South Korean administration and trade levels between North Korea and China.

3.1. The dependent variable: hostile foreign policy actions

The dependent variable used in this analysis is hostile foreign policy (HFP). I define HFP as domestic or international actions by governments or government-sanctioned entities intended to negatively influence or detrimentally affect a target state

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2 Machiavelli (1882) was referring to diversionary behavior when he observes “... the present king of Spain ... attacked Granada ... [and] kept the nobles of the Castile occupied with this enterprise, and, their minds being thus engaged by war, they gave no attention to the innovations introduced by the king, who thereby acquired a reputation and an influence over the nobles without their being aware of it.” In his play King Henry IV, Shakespeare (1823) comments, “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels; that action, hence borne out, may waste the memory of former days.” Additionally, Bodin (1555) stated, “The best way of preserving a state, and guaranteeing it against sedition, rebellion and civil war is to keep the subjects in amity one with another, and to this end, to find an enemy against whom they can make common cause.”

3 Many other conflicts have been associated with diversionary war such as the Franco-Prussian Wars, World War I, the United States’ war with Vietnam, and the 1996 conflict in Rwanda (Mayer, 1969; Lenin, 1930; Fordham, 1998; Pickering and Kisangani, 2005).

4 North Korea remains one of the poorest nations in the region ($1800 per capita GDP) and has been historically reliant on international aid to feed 10–15% of its people (CIA, 2013; Manyin and Nikitin, 2013; UN FAIS, 2012). At the same time, the North Korea’s communist leaders exercise expansive control over the social, political, and economic aspects of North Korean society (Cia, 2012). North Korea is arguably the world’s most repressive police state, yet remains reliant on the international community to survive.

5 For example, economic cooperation does occur and North Korea has gone to considerable effort to establish and maintain special economic zones with both China and South Korea (Lankov, 2011).

6 A number of scholars argue that domestic interests are related to external conflict activities (Fearon, 1994; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; Putnam, 1988; Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1992; Bueno de Mesquita, 1985).

7 This supports the “traditional theorist” view of interstate activity (Waltz, 1954, 1979; Wendt, 1992) and focuses on external causes of conflict such as the international system or a state’s perception of the international environment.
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