

# Korean crisis essay samples

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Since the end of the Cold War, the Korean Crisis between North Korea and South Korea remains as one of the world's longest ongoing conflicts as the region remains in conflict despite the 70 year armistice between the two countries. The North remained hostile against the South throughout the armistice period, attacking the South and violated international law. Several attempts have been done throughout this period to try to get the North to concede to a permanent peace in the Peninsula and the removal of its nuclear weaponry, but the North remained adamant on its position as a hostile country. The international community feared North Korea's hostile nature as they can shift the status quo in the Peninsula, and this fear was realized when North Korea's newest leader, Kim Jong-Un revoked the détente in 2013 and resumed the conflict with its Southern half. Today, it remains to be seen as to what North Korea's true intentions are for calling off the decades old détente between them and South Korea whilst their nuclear power is already close to firing strength.

Since their separation in 1950, both the North and South Koreas remained in a fierce stalemate that had the Peninsula at a state of unrest. According to Felician (2011), North Korea had tried its best since 1953 to break the status quo set by the armistice in order to push South Korea into attacking their borders, and have a reason to conquer the South. While the South had managed to resist the taunting from the North and succeeded in becoming a highly-industrialized country, the North had receded and became one of the poorest and most secretive states in the world that still tried to get the South to fight back from its small skirmishes it instigates. While these skirmishes were taking place, the North had earned the attention of the globe not only

as one of the few communist countries to exist in the modern world, but also as one of the few countries to have a regressive system politically, economically and socially. North Koreans viewed their leaders – Kim Il-Sung and his son Kim Jong-Il – as deities and had limited rights while the Kims had full control over the country’s political, economic and social affairs of the country. The international community had admonished the North consistently for their appalling treatment towards their citizens and “prisoners of war”, especially their continuous refusal to restore peace in the Peninsula and the removal of their nuclear missile capacity. However, the North remained unyielding and continued their tests even at the present time despite the contentions of the international community .

Considering the unpredictability of the new North Korean leadership, understanding their intentions in calling off the 70 year détente can be quite difficult. However, looking at it in an international relations theory perspective, two possible theories can provide insight: neorealism and constructivism. Neorealism, according to Lamy (2011), is divided into three versions: structural realism, neo-realism understanding absolute and relative gains, and defensive/offensive realism. Structural realism argues that the effects of the structure of international politics must be considered in order to understand why certain shifts take place. Its proponent, Kenneth Waltz, argued that anarchy molds the structure and influences the unequal distribution of capacities between each actor. With this structure molded by anarchy, it then defines their foreign policy to compensate for the lack of influence or power and establish their impact in the order of the international system. Structural realism also argues that those with immense power or

capacity has more influence in the anarchic international system, determining their collective capacity as a state and influence others on how they should react .

The second version of neo-realism involves relative gains and absolute gains. Burchill et al (2009) stresses that states are mostly after influence and power (absolute gains) and would engage in agreements to improve their capacity. Its proponent, Joseph Grieco, argues that states would also establish the means on how they can get more from cooperative agreements (relative gains). However, the capacity of cooperation to provide gains is hindered because of other states' desire to get more from their allies, forcing other states to back out when the risk is too high. Even if institutions try to establish agreements between states, states would try their best to cheat in these agreements to benefit more from the treaty . The final version of neo-realism is offensive/defensive realism. Offensive realists, according to Lamy (2011), argued that relative power is essential in improving a state's capacity to influence the international system. Leaders take into consideration all the eventualities of possible expansion from other states to shift the international system. In the other end, defensive neo-realism argues that most leaders are aware on what the war can bring to their countries and apply the policies based on their state interest .

Neo-realism, in these three versions, is a perfect theory to expound on North Korea' security logic, especially when it comes to their nuclear capacity and position in the international community. North Korea's hostile behavior towards the rest of the globe had stemmed towards the fact it remained unheard since the fall of the Soviet Union, using their nuclear capacity as a

means to influence the international community and ensure their survival. Synder (2001) cited that the North had tried to get the United States to listen to their pleas since the Soviets were North Korea's largest partner prior to its dissolution, its dissolution destroying North Korea's economy. However, the South had taken away the attention of the US towards North Korea, therefore, causing the North to take extreme action and declare their intent to break their early agreements with the international community such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993. Neo-realism comes into play in this end as the North utilized their influence to get the US to engage in talks while putting their nuclear power as a bargaining chip and to sustain the regime. North Korea's blatant use of a bargaining chip and expounding their nuclear capacity had allowed it to stain through the tribulations placed by the international community for their cooperation, using bluffs and threats to get what they desire. Experts believe that this is one of the reasons why the international community fails to understand North Korea's intentions because they are using their control on negotiations to get the compromise they need for their benefit .

This technique of molding their foreign policy to sustain nuclear power as a means to protect their vulnerabilities can also be seen in the objectives of Kim Jong-Il (1994-2011) as he ensured that the military presence is dominant in the country. Pinkston (2006) cited that the country's military leadership under Kim would ensure that the country can deflect the international threat posed to them and ensure that the North Korean society remains protected . In the era of Kim Jong-Un, neo-realism emphasizes that he is using all that he can to sustain the regime especially now that it feels threatened by the

West. Yoon and Lim (2013) stated that while Kim Jong-Un does not showcase some signs to the international community as to how far he is willing to test their limits, it is visible that he also is after the ideas of his predecessors.

Military capacity and strengthening, as well as the country's growing capacity of handling nuclear weaponry remains as one of Kim Jong-Un's major foreign policy as it would allow them to emphasize to the people that they are indeed capable of dealing with the threats posed by the US and South Korea should they be pressed to battle.

In addition to this, Kang (2002) cited that no matter what the West could offer, the North would always feel the need to sustain their nuclear and ballistic capacities because it is their bargaining chip and the means for them to sustain the vulnerabilities the West can plunder against them .

Kitchen (2010) agreed to this sentiment because the North had been able to vie itself time for the past decades to sustain the regime's presence and determine the geo-political structure of the international community before determining how they can use such occurrences to their benefit. North Korea had to ensure that this perception is correct as a wrong analysis of the international community's current status may lead to the onset of war, which North Korea is technically not ready for despite their nuclear capabilities .

The North, under neo-realism, also intends to ensure that the US would acquiesce to their demands in their own terms rather than the US determine the circumstances of the negotiations. Kim Jong-Un had already stressed he would use every means necessary – from espionage, assassination, kidnapping to all-out skirmishes – to ensure that the West cannot influence the North further. He also highlighted that he would take over the leadership

of both the military and the Korean Workers' Party to sustain the goals he set for the regime's continuous prosperity. This then allows the North to hide its true intentions to the world and ensure that they would continue to have leverage despite the lingering threats posed to them by the South and their allies .

In another perspective, constructivism is also perfect in explaining North Korea's current stance on the crisis. According to Reus-Smith (2009), constructivism argues that the state behavior is influenced by historical and social ideas and perspectives regarding a specific item rather than how it affects human nature. People, state or groups, would act in accordance towards an object or other actors based on the definitions placed to them by society. These meanings would then determine as to whether or not a state would act in accordance of the usual norms or see it similarly. For example, sovereignty is seen as a social institution that gives the state immense influence, but this varies depending on states and how the state uses it. National interest is also a major topic for constructivist thinking as it emphasizes that these national interests are base ideas of the needs of the state, which would also include their desire for power, security and wealth. Socially constructed nature of interest does not alter primary interests, but it emphasizes the material forces of their desires.

Constructivism is also known for their perception of structures (or the institutions and the shared meanings it has in the international community) and the agents (actors who operate in the international community). Enmity, therefore, between countries may change depending on the social structure of each state and how each actor perceives a specific point. Constructivism

then argues that both institutions and actors can influence the norm presented in international life and establish the state of international behavior. The norms, then begin to shape up international standards and influence the states accordingly. Finally, constructivism presents several perceptions on what is anarchy. In their point of view, anarchy is the social system that lacks legitimate authority and is not organized in any form. Alexander Wendt, one of the theory's major proponents, emphasized anarchy is from the assumption that actors see each other as rivals regarding a specific good. "Rivalry" can then be explained as a social relationship between states. Relationships are not fixed or permanent in international relations, therefore, providing a variety of ideas to persist between states. This difference in ideas and understanding enables the creation of a community with a rich mix of social relations. Inter-state conflicts, under constructivism, illustrates social efforts between states to operate in cases of war. All of these four elements are inter-related in examining international relations and indicate how social order is created . In the case of North Korea, constructivists argue that the hostility of North Korea towards the West and the West's distrust towards the North is mostly because of their social relationships. In the case of the US, they respond to the social relationship they have towards the South and the fact they see North Korea's hostility and nuclear power as a threat despite the fact their other allies have the same nuclear power. Resisting the North would allow them to gain the benefits they wish in the Peninsula while they can already influence the situation without it. Tracing back in history, the US had long emphasized a desire in the Korean Peninsula as Chang-II (2010) cites that it



was their deterrent for China and Russia should they wish to reclaim control over the Asian region. The US continued to fight for Korean independence and unification even at this very day and remained against the North even in the United Nations . In their end, North Korea finds nothing wrong about their nuclear power or their communist ideals to be different with the nuclear power and communist ideals of other countries. While their nuclear power is perceived as a threat, it is only a defense mechanism in their end similar to the nuclear capacities of other countries with Nuclear Power. As far as their communist ideals, North Korea's ideals are not as different with the Chinese communist ideals. Constructivism, in this end, emphasizes that history and society had played a key role in shaping the “ national interests” and perceptions of each country regarding the other's hostilities . Looking at the perspectives given by both international relations theories, it is visible that neo-realism indicates that North Korea leans towards the capacity in holding on to its power while using their nuclear capacity as a bargaining chip to stall off the threat.

With the tensions in the Korean peninsula still shaky at best, it is clear North Korea would try its best to hold on to its current state of affairs no matter how much scrutiny they will get from the international community. On the one hand, the neo-realist perception that they are vying time and manipulating the international arena to strengthen their forces is likely, and supportive of the current image North Korea tries to present as the regime finds itself weak and threatened from the South and its allies. The nuclear power they possess both acts as leverage and a defense mechanism against the threat, allowing them to counter whatever the international community

has against them and still protect the regime. On the other hand; however, the constructivist stance that the North is perceived as a threat because it deviates towards what the international community perceives is right and just. In this extent, North Korea's intent is mostly to show that they are only using nuclear weaponry as a defense similar to their fellow nuclear states and not to cause war. No matter what North Korea is after, as long as the international community fails to prepare itself from the North's motives, there is a likelihood that peace in the Korean peninsula would remain unreachable.

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