

By Tom French

Cranfield University's Hazel Smith once argued that the major flaws in most analyses of North Korea were the assumptions that the communist regime was either; 'bad' i.e. 'evil', malevolent or belligerent; or 'mad', irrational, unknowable or unpredictable. The sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in disputed waters on 26th March by a North Korean submarine, as now tacitly admitted by the South Korean Defence Ministry, at first glance clearly seems to fit Smith's definitions, being classified by most as a belligerent, or even irrational, act.

However, Smith put forward two alternatives of her own to explain some of the actions of the secretive Northeast Asian state: that the regime was 'sad', being motivated by its dire economic and humanitarian situation, or 'rational', acting in desperation from a realist perspective, hoping to preserve its existence in the face of overwhelming external pressures and internal problems.

Externally it seems that sinking of Cheonan is 'mad', but the internal succession politics of the Kim regime might make it a rational choice for a faction seeking to gain power, or even the leadership itself, in seeking to maintain a grip on the military during the transition.

Of course the 'mad' / 'bad' analysis may also prove fruitful if it turns out the sinking was conducted by a rogue commander without direct authorisation from central command or Kim himself.

Nevertheless, if centrally directed, the move is a highly risky gamble and is certain to have an economic impact in the form of tougher sanctions at the least, a fact which perhaps explains Kim's sudden visit to China to ask for more aid for an economy already reeling from last year's botched currency reform.

Whatever the cause, the sinking of the Cheonan is unlikely to benefit the regime internationally and hence an internal political explanation seems the most convincing at this point.

About the author

Tom French is a graduate of Durham University and is currently completing his PhD in Northeast Asian Security from Southampton University.