

Game of Thrones and State Behavior

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, JAN 28 2013

Warning: This analysis may contain spoilers for people who haven't read the books that make up A Song of Ice and Fire

A Song of Ice and Fire, a series of books set in a fictional world crafted by George R.R. Martin has become very popular after its adaptation as a HBO TV series entitled *Game of Thrones* (GoT). The books have become appealing to international relations (IR) scholars as they touch on theoretical concepts like realism and idealism, as well as issues like the success (or lack thereof) of autocratic governments and the role of women in politics in different societies. In this commentary, we will dig a little deeper, focusing on the alliance system integral not only to Martin's fictional world but also to real-world state behavior.

The Rising IR/Fiction Sub Genre of Studies

It is noteworthy to mention that in recent years, it has become increasingly popular for IR and security scholars to carry out serious analyses of fictional TV shows and movies. For example, the renowned journal *Foreign Affairs* has published articles analyzing the sociopolitical dimensions of the TV shows *Homeland*[1] and *Boardwalk Empire*. [2] Additionally, Tufts University professor Daniel Drezner has published a book entitled *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*, discussing how IR theories such as realism or idealism could be applied if hordes of zombies appeared in the real world.[3] Even the controversial movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, which portrays the hunt for Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden, was analyzed by General Michael V. Hayden, CIA director from 2006 to 2009.[4] Furthermore, in commentary published by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (a Latin America-oriented think tank in Washington DC) this author discussed water politics and the possibility of a military coup in Bolivia, as portrayed in the not-so fictional world of the James Bond movie *Quantum of Solace*. [5] Regarding Martin's world, the popularity of the books and the TV show prompted it to be featured in articles in both *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*. [6]

It is apparent that crossover analysis of IR issues and how they're portrayed in fictional worlds are likely to continue, and it may only be a matter of time before a university offers some type of minor concentration on IR/Fiction studies, particularly as there are already universities that offer courses that discuss Hollywood productions and real world politics.[7] If this happens, an analysis of the *Game of Thrones* series would likely to be found in any course syllabi. While George R.R. Martin's fictional world offers numerous opportunities to analyze the finer points of IR theory, space constraints will limit us to discussing just a few.

The Realistically Fictional Shifting Alliance System

Throughout the history and ongoing events of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* book series (including the War of Five Kings, which is where the TV series roughly begins) a constant theme is the shifting alliances of Kings as well as the heads of major and minor Houses (Westeros, the island-continent where most of the events take place is based around essentially a feudalistic and monarchical type of government), particularly once internal warfare for the throne starts. We will briefly summarize some of the major issues/players in Martin's saga (warning, this will contain spoilers), and then we will carry out an analysis and comparison of the alliance system in Westeros and the real world.

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1. *Policy Making as a One-Man Show*: An important player in the book series is the House Frey, under the control of Lord Walder Frey. Once the House Stark begins its rebellion against the Iron Throne (the holder of which governs the entire island), the importance of the Freys is stressed because of two reasons; the large size of their army and their control of a set of two castles (known as the Twins), including a key bridge which the rebel army of Rob Stark must cross in order to continue his march South. Frey ultimately betrays the Starks in *A Storm of Swords* in favor of the ruling Iron Throne forces.[8]

2. *Does Having A Greater Common Enemy Turn Rivals Into Allies?* Two contenders for the Iron Throne during the War of Five Kings are Robert's brothers, Stannis and Renly Baratheon, each leading their own army. While common sense may dictate that both brothers should join against a common enemy (namely Geoffrey Baratheon, who occupies the Iron Throne, and his powerful allies, the House Lannister), the two brothers, both greedy for the throne, are ready to go to war with each other. Additionally, there is also the war between members of the Night's Watch, a military order that guards a gigantic ice Wall in the frozen north of Westeros, and the people that live beyond the wall, including a self-proclaimed King Beyond the Wall are his army of "Freemen", who want to cross the wall and enter Westeros. Nevertheless, the major security threat for both the Watch and the "freemen" are not each other, but the "Others" (people that have come back to life in a *zombiesque* way) that are awakening and taking over the lands to the north of the island continent. A critical motivation for the freemen's attack on the Wall is to migrate south so they can escape from these zombie-monsters.[9]

3. *Alliances by Small Players*: Between *A Storm of Swords* and *A Dance With Dragons*, Jon Snow, as commander of the Night's Watch, enters into essentially unholy alliances with their historical nemesis, the freemen beyond the wall, as well as with King Stannis Baratheon, leader of one of the rebel factions that covets the Iron Throne. The reasoning behind Snow's decisions comes out of pure desperation. Due to periodic attack by the freemen and the Others, the Night's Watch is militarily weak. With just a few hundred men left, nearly none of the Night's castles along the Wall remain fully functional.[10]

In modern times, a government's foreign policy is ideally formulated after a rational discussion by a head of state and close advisors, while taking into account a country's national interests and geopolitical concerns. However, in several autocratic or semi-autocratic governments that continue to exist, a single leader can unilaterally decide on foreign policy decisions (akin to Lord Frey ruling over his plethora of children, all minor lords of the territory controlled by House Frey). For example, elements of the archetypal authoritarian leader and his foreign policy were visible in Libya's foreign policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, during the rule of long-time dictator Moammar Gaddafi.[11] Additionally, autocratic leaders such as the ruling dynasty in North Korea or Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe have essentially imposed a self-isolation of their nations from the outside world, to the detriment of their respective citizens.[12]

Furthermore, Walder Frey's decision to switch alliances from the Starks to the Iron Throne is a good fictional example of similar decisions by real-world leaders. During wartime, it is not uncommon for governments to switch alliances if they feel the tides of war are turning and they prefer to be on the winning side. An example of this happened during World War I when Italy signed defense accords with the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. However, once the hostilities started, Italy remained neutral for the first months of the war. Rome ultimately entered it on May 1915, but on the side of the Allied Powers. Moreover, the Snow/Stannis and Snow/Freemen alliance is an example of defense pacts between small, militarily weak, nations with stronger ones; a standard tactic used throughout history. For instance, prior to World War I, weak European states like Belgium and Serbia entered into alliances with stronger states (such as the British, German or Russian empires), in a complex system of defense pacts in order to deter potential aggression.[13]

Even in periods of peace, small states look for alliances in order to create strong military, economic or diplomatic blocs. For example, the Caribbean nations have united in a bloc known as CARICOM, with interesting integration-oriented judicial, trade and diplomatic initiatives.[14] The group is particularly relevant in the Western Hemisphere when the Organization of the American States (OAS) is choosing a new secretary general. CARICOM nations are known for voting as a single bloc (they have 15 members), essentially making them "kingmakers" as whichever candidate the group supports will likely get elected.[15] Moreover, Latin American nations have come together in

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recent years with the creation of organizations like CELAC and UNASUR to counter the U.S.'s historical continental influence. Again, integration, just like Jon Snow's weak Watch allying itself with stronger entities, is an important tactic for small nations to become relevant and counter the influence of stronger states.[16]

Finally, the real-world alliance system also denotes how states may enter into alliances with other actors who, for example, may have unlikable leaders or domestic policies. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Rob Stark and Jon Snow are portrayed as very likeable and honorable leaders who, because of geopolitical and geosecurity concerns, must enter into alliances with the Freys (with Walder Frey coming off as an old, dictatorial leader with a preference for significantly young wives), or Stannis (a ruthless leader). Certainly, in the real world, common enemies have made for strange bedfellows. During World War II the Allies joined together with Russia in order to fight Nazi Germany and the Axis Powers even though, before the war started Adolf Hitler and his government were perceived by the West as a barrier to the spread of Communism into Europe.

Moreover, national interests have caused nations to increase their relations with other governments that may have leaders known for corruption and human rights violations. For example, the U.S. styles itself as a beacon of democracy and freedom, but has in the past decades become allies with the likes of Iraq's Saddam Hussein (against Iran), Egypt's Hosni Mubarak (for stability in the Middle East vis-à-vis Israel), Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov (to use Uzbek territory to transport supplies to Afghanistan),[17] Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai (to bring stability to his country) and Peru's Alberto Fujimori (to crack down on leftist-insurgents and drug traffickers in the Andean nation). The European Union has also maintained relations with Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, even after the 2005 Andijan Massacre,[18] due to "hard-nosed EU and NATO interest in maintaining supply routes to Afghanistan, and in Uzbek energy reserves, which now take precedence."[19]

Conclusions

A Song of Ice and Fire and its TV adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, is replete with memorable situations and characters that make it a literary masterpiece, due to a complex and complete fictional world spawned from the mind of George R.R. Martin. For IR scholars and enthusiasts, *A Song of Ice and Fire* provides plenty of material that can be compared to real world historical events and incidents, including, as we have briefly touched upon in this commentary, the complex system of alliances, served by national interests and decisions by autocratic leaders. Over the past century, the world has witnessed two World Wars, one Cold War, and a currently changing multipolar international order, which provide us with plenty of examples of shifting alliances and a plethora of scholarly analyses that explain the reasons behind them. Meanwhile, just like in the real world, the kings, queens and lords of the fictional world of Westeros and beyond are in an ever-changing system of alliances and defense pacts to protect their national and personal (often differing) interests.

We can summarize the book series' way of diplomacy and state behavior with two memorable quotes: "You may well have the better claim, but I have the larger army"[20] and "In the game of thrones, even the humblest pieces can have wills of their own. Sometimes they refuse to make the moves you've planned for them." [21] Most of Martin's fantasy world is based around realist-international relations theory, without much room for idealism, and with several parallels that can be made to real-world events.

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[1] Richard A. Falkenrath. "The Holes in 'Homeland.'" *Foreign Affairs*. December 14, 2012. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/138506/richard-a-falkenrath/the-holes-in-homeland>

[2] Selwyn Raab. "Boardwalk Empire As History." *Foreign Affairs*. June 25, 2012. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137750/selwyn-raab/boardwalk-empire-as-history>

[3] Daniel W. Drezner. *Theories of International Politics and Zombies*. January 3, 2011. Princeton University Press. <http://www.amazon.com/Theories-International-Politics-Zombies-Drezner/dp/0691147833>

[4] Michael V. Hayden. "Relax 'Zero Dark Thirty' is only a movie." CNN.com. December 28, 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/28/opinion/hayden-intelligence-politics/index.html>

[5] W. Alex Sanchez. "Latin America: Water Politics, Coups and James Bond." Commentary. Council on Hemispheric Affairs. June 15, 2012. <http://www.coha.org/latin-america-water-politics-coups-and-james-bond/>

[6] Charli Carpenter. "Game of Thrones as Theory." *Foreign Affairs*. March 29, 2012. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137360/charli-carpenter/game-of-thrones-as-theory> . Also see: Alyssa Rosenberg. "Realpolitik in a Fantasy World." *Foreign Policy*. Argument. July 18, 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/07/18/realpolitik_in_a_fantasy_world

[7] For example, the New School in New York offers a class entitled *Hollywood and the World*. (<http://www.newschool.edu/ucc/courseDetail.aspx?id=NINT5171> . In addition, Columbia College in Chicago offers a course entitled *Zombies in Popular Media*, while the University of Arizona will now offer a minor concentration in Hip-Hop.

[8] There are two major reasons for Walder Frey's betrayal of the Starks: A. He could see the tides of the war turning and decided to ally with the Iron Throne, and B. Because he was insulted that the rebellious Rob Stark (the King in the North) had married a girl instead of one of Frey's daughters, as they both had previously agreed upon. While Lord Frey is supposedly loyal to the House of Stark, Walder Frey explains to Catelyn Stark (the matriarch of House Stark) during a meeting that he is upset that the Starks have shown nothing but contempt for him and his family over the years, specially by refusing to marry his kids to the Stark family.

[9] Again, while it would make sense for the Watch and the freemen to unite against a common enemy, they first go to war with each other, and then there has to be a change in leadership (most of the Watch's old guard as well as the King beyond the Wall are killed) for a shaky alliance to take place between two sides to unite against the monsters.

[10] In addition, Snow believes if he does not enter into some kind of alliance with King Stannis, the monarch could simply take over the Watch's castles and kill the Watch's remaining members. It is worth to note that Snow held until the last possible moment from entering into alliances with either the freemen or Stannis, as he did not receive either soldiers or any other type of help from his brother, Rob Stark, and other military powerhouses in the kingdom. Real-world alliances by nations out of extreme necessity is a case-study in itself.

[11] For a great analysis of Gaddafi's African policies, see: Hussein Solomon and Gerrie Swart. "Libya's Foreign Policy Flux." *African Affairs*. July 2005. Vol. 104, Issue 416. P. 469-492.

[12] A list of dictatorial leaders around the world can be found in: George B.N. Ayittey. "The Worst of the Worst." *Foreign Policy*. July/August 2010. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/21/the_worst_of_the_worst?page=full

[13] The alliance system prior to World War I has been analyzed by various scholars. For example see: Gordon Martel. *Origins of the First World War: Revised 3rd Edition*. Pearson, 3 Edition. July 2008. <http://www.amazon.com/Origins-First-World-War-Revised/dp/1405874317>

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- [20] George R.R. Martin. *A Clash of Kings: A Song of Ice and Fire* . Book Two. Bantman. January 2003. Chapter 31. Catelyn.
- [21] George R.R. Martin. *A Feast for Crows: A Song of Ice and Fire* . Book Four. Bantman. November 2005. Chapter 23. Alayne.

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