

Review Essay

Notional North Korea

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Winston Churchill once remarked that a certain country was “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Of course, the statesman was referring to the late great Soviet Union, but this could also be said of present day North Korea. Since 2002, the consuming focus of this reviewer’s research has been the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). I am routinely asked: “What do you use for sources? Isn’t information about North Korea difficult to find?” The answer, which often surprises people, is that there are vast amounts of information out there for a researcher to tap. This information is available on the Internet, on television, in documentaries, in newspapers, in newsmagazines, in academic journals, and in books. What is remarkable in recent years has been the proliferation of books about North Korea. Just keeping tabs on the books published in English is becoming a challenge. A good number of these new volumes will be assessed in this essay.

Because a surprising amount of information about the DPRK is readily available, the researcher of North Korea confronts the twin challenges that bedevil any information age researcher: how to keep from drowning in data and how to separate the wheat from the chaff. Beyond this, an even larger and more challenging question looms for those who focus on North Korea: How does one make sense of all the confusing and often contradictory information? In the past year or two, attention has focused largely on the following: the stalled Six Party Talks related to North Korea’s nuclear program, Pyongyang’s counterfeiting of foreign currencies, the launch of multiple missiles on 5 July 2006, and the nuclear test of 9 October 2006.

What kind of country is North Korea and what explains the range of behaviors the world has witnessed? The DPRK is a system that seems to defy simple classification or clear comparisons, and its leader presents a rather eccentric and puzzling persona in his platform heels and bouffant hair style. As Australian academic Gavan McCormack rightly observes in his book *Targeting North Korea*, the powerful “images chosen for endless repetition in our media . . . reinforce the sense that it is a place so bizarre as to be beyond the ken of the modern world.” Certainly, the footage of malnourished children, missile launches, and goose-stepping soldiers, alongside déclassé dictator fashion quickly leads one to assume that the system is bizarre, the leader is loopy, and the entire North Korean situation is basically beyond our comprehension. At the very least one concludes from this collage that Pyongyang is erratic and Kim is crazy. In a post-9/11 world, if one adds weapons of mass destruction to the equation, the sum total of all fears is very frightening.

But upon what is this assessment based? It is constructed upon a “notional North Korea,” a DPRK that lives in one’s mind or imagination—generated from the vivid images noted above—rather than a real existing country. Looking at the actual evidence available in the books reviewed here, one begins to discern the pattern of a North Korea that is far more comprehensible and rational, if still most disturbing and extremely worrisome. Admittedly, even after devouring a score or more books, the researcher must engage in considerable informed speculation. However, this exercise is an occupational hazard implicit in the study of North Korea. It might be simpler and less time consuming to give into an instinctive impulse to throw one’s hands up in exasperation and declare: “These people are crazy!” In spite of this appealing option, informed, reasoned analysis and even speculation based on a careful culling of information presented by experts and eyewitnesses is a far better basis from which to develop policies and plans. Many of the books examined in this essay are very good places to begin one’s tutorial on North Korea.

The 11 volumes reviewed are of different genres but together they represent an impressive collection of accumulated expertise from authors who have significant expertise from years of studying North Korea, several with first-hand experience in North Korea. One, *The North Korean Revolution*, written by Columbia University historian Charles Armstrong, examines the origins of the DPRK based on extensive archival research. Two other books are basic introductory texts: *North Korea in the 21st Century*, written by a British diplomat, J. E. Hoare, and his spouse, Susan Pares, and *North Korea at the Crossroads* written by US academic Suk Hi Kim. There are two detailed eyewitness accounts, one, *Comrades and Strangers*, written by Michael Harrold, a British subject who lived and worked in Pyongyang in the 1980s, and the other, *In North Korea*, is co-authored by Nanchu, a US citizen who visited North Korea in 2001 posing as a Chinese tourist, in collaboration with American-based scholar Xing Hang.

Three of the books are written by journalists who are all veteran Asia correspondents, many of whom have visited North Korea one or more times. The first, *Kim Jong-Il*, is a biography of North Korea’s leader, written by Seoul-based journalist Michael Breen. A second, *In the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*, is a thoroughly researched and engagingly written comprehensive study of North Korea by Bangkok-based journalist Bradley Martin. The third, *Rogue Regime*, presents a more current affairs focus on North Korea. Written by Jasper Becker, it adopts a tough but even-handed treatment of the subject. While Gavan McCormack’s *Target North Korea* also adopts a current affairs approach, it is far more sympathetic to Pyongyang.

Two books round out the volumes under review—both jam-packed with information and analysis. *Korea After Kim Jong-il*, written by Marcus Noland, one of the leading experts on North Korea’s economy, is a slim but dense monograph that assesses the future of North Korea with a particular focus on economics. Last but not least is *Going Critical*, a book co-authored by Robert Gallucci, Daniel Poneman, and Joel Wit, three officials from the Clinton administration, each very involved in crafting or implementing North Korea policy in the 1990s.

Drawing upon these books, this essay addresses the following six controversial issues: (1) uncovering the real North Korea; (2) identifying the real Kim Jong

II; (3) ascertaining the direction in which the regime is heading; (4) defining the role of the military; (5) discerning the logic behind North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and missile programs; and (6) deciphering how Pyongyang perceives Washington.

Potemkin Pyongyang

Notional North Korea begins from the presumption that the DPRK was established as a Soviet satellite by the occupying Red Army in 1945. Thus Pyongyang was routinely assumed to be a pliant client regime of Moscow. Because of this notion, many anticipated the early demise of the DPRK following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. There was an expectation that the Central European revolutions of 1989 would be repeated in North Korea. But as historian Charles Armstrong makes clear in his well researched book *The North Korean Revolution*, the Soviet-installed DPRK soon became completely "indigenized." North Korea took on hardy Korean roots and resiliency greater than a mere one-man dictatorship. Rather, Pyongyang emerged as a powerful totalitarian regime robust enough to survive shocks such as the end of socialist largesse from Moscow and Beijing, the death of DPRK-founding leader Kim Il Sung in 1994, and a severe famine and economic crisis in the mid- and late-1990s.

First impressions can be deceiving where North Korea is concerned. What visitors to Pyongyang and other locales in the DPRK see is usually only what the regime wants them to see. Visitors usually have a set itinerary and are closely supervised by minders with little freedom to roam and minimal or no access to ordinary North Koreans. Inevitably everything the visitor sees is a showpiece—usually staged and choreographed to project a particular image. One way to understand the DPRK is as a grandiose and sprawling Potemkin village. Named after one of Catherine the Great's ministers, Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin, the term refers to an idyllic construct designed to impress and deceive a visiting dignitary or dignitaries, thus hiding a reality that is far from idyllic. The grandest Potemkin set piece is the one city that virtually all visitors see and spend most if not all of their time—Pyongyang. North Korea's capital is the ultimate showpiece with broad boulevards, massive buildings, imposing monuments, and scores of multistory apartment blocks. One of the city's crown jewels is a subway system which runs smoothly and efficiently between spotless, polished, and magnificently decorated stations. At first blush one is impressed by all of what appears to be evidence of a large, modern, and well planned urban landscape. But then you notice that the roads are mostly devoid of motor traffic and in many areas there are few if any pedestrians. Even the dazzling subway becomes suspect. Journalist Bradley Martin, who has made four trips to North Korea, wonders if the Pyongyang subway is a hoax: Are its commuters government employees whose fulltime jobs are to ride the trains day-in-day-out in an effort to make the mass transit system appear to be functioning competently? Fellow journalist Jasper Becker also comments that "the city was evidently designed to serve as a stage set whose props could be moved around at will"

Moreover, even those who have spent years living in Pyongyang and had considerable interaction with North Koreans find it hard to get much beyond superficial pleasantries. Michael Harrold, who lived and worked in Pyongyang for seven years, admits: “In a country where even living in the capital city was a privilege, everyone was careful about what they did and said, particularly around foreigners. The result was a population obsessed with casting themselves and their country in a faultless light.”

The upshot is that visitors find it extremely difficult to get an accurate picture of the country and the living conditions of ordinary North Koreans. Harrold, employed as an editor in a Pyongyang publishing house, insists that “seven years is not enough [time] to understand a country.” This is especially true if that country happens to be the DPRK he notes, because: “I was shielded from the North Korean reality. I learnt the language up to a point and I had friends, but still I barely scratched the surface of what North Korea was all about, what the people there really thought.” J. E. Hoare, the diplomat who opened the United Kingdom’s Embassy in 2001, makes a similar comment in the introductory text he wrote with his wife, Susan Pares. Even visitors better equipped to interpret and understand North Korea than most Westerners are perplexed and puzzled by what they discover. Citizens of communist and former communist countries profess bewilderment, to whom the nuts and bolts of the totalitarian political system and their manifestations should be both recognizable and comprehensible. As one Chinese visitor whispers to American “tourist” Nanchu: “This is a very strange country, even stranger than ours during the crazy Cultural Revolution [at the zenith of Mao Zedong’s personality cult].” It is sometimes tempting to conclude that those who study the DPRK from outside have a better grasp and understanding of the situation inside North Korea than those who have access to the country.

While trying to glean a deeper understanding of North Korea, it is helpful to remember the enormous difficulties that North Korean defectors have in understanding and adjusting to life in South Korea. Is it so surprising, then, that the reverse should be so challenging—especially when the authorities and the populace are so adept at presenting a particular kind of reality to foreign guests? The DPRK is a land of illusions in which things are rarely what they seem—a Potemkin village on an unprecedented scale.

Will the Real Kim Jong Il Please Step Forward?

Who is North Korea’s 64-year-old dictator and what does he want? Probably there is nothing about North Korea that triggers a stronger response from Westerners than a photograph of North Korea’s supreme leader. The Kim Jong Il we see comes across as a real life caricature of himself, a person who would be more at home playing the role of an extraterrestrial villain in a spoof of a science fiction or international espionage films such as the *Austin Powers* series. Indeed, several years ago, the *Economist* newsmagazine ran on its cover a photograph of Kim with the caption: “Greetings, earthlings.”

But once we get beyond the oddball visual image, the challenge is to reconcile a pre-2000 depiction of Kim as a pampered playboy recluse with the contemporary depiction of Kim as a driven, dynamic dictator. It is common for observers to view Kim's boozing, womanizing, and antics with his subordinates as confirmation of his debauchery, decadence, and spitefulness. Moreover, there is a tendency to analyze Kim's actions exclusively through a Western psychological lens while ignoring or overlooking the practical or cultural dimensions of the behavior. As Michael Breen cautions in his biography of Kim, there is often a method behind the apparent madness: Many of Kim's actions are calculated to reinforce his status as the boss and establish the hierarchy among his subordinates. Part and parcel of the challenge in understanding Kim Jong Il is to recognize the cultural dimensions as well as the practical and functional aspects of his actions. Significantly, Kim's subordinates appear to accept his antics as normal and acceptable practice.

Breen has written an informative if breezy and short biography. A reading of chapter seven will prove helpful to anyone seeking a better grasp of Kim Jong Il. In contrast, fellow journalist Bradley Martin has produced a more encyclopedic coverage of Kim, his father, and his extended family; including wives, mistresses, and offspring. In fact, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* rates as one of the most comprehensive and authoritative studies of contemporary North Korea available. This 800-plus page tome is the result of extensive research in printed sources, interviews with defectors, and firsthand observation by the author. Martin contends that dictator Kim has two faces: "[that of] an often insensitive and brutal despot . . . [and another one that is] generous and charming."

Even with a better understanding of the dictator, what remains unclear is what Kim wants. Jasper Becker, in his thoughtful book *Rogue Regime*, incisively observes: "One of the central mysteries of North Korea is what Kim Jong Il has really been trying to achieve in the [more than] ten years since his father's death. No coherent long-term domestic or foreign policies have emerged, and in the absence of a convincing plot line, conflicting theories have been put forward with great passion." There are conflicting theories but one can make a quite plausible case that all Kim's efforts here have been geared toward establishing and cementing his power and authority. How has he done this?

Business school professor Suk Hi Kim, author of the introductory text *North Korea at a Crossroads*, underscores the importance of traditional Korean political culture in appreciating the degree of obedience and conformity to the Kim dynasty. A significant part of this is Confucianism. The idea of centralized political authority, a rigid hierarchy, and strict deference to one's superiors are all part and parcel of this. Moreover, notes author Kim, in this context, Kim Jong Il can be viewed as a virtuous leader and a good son who takes his filial duty to his deceased father Kim Il Sung very seriously. Gavan McCormack also underscores the importance of Confucian values, notably filial piety, in bolstering support for the Kim regime. But as Martin and others note there are rumblings of discontent against the dictator, and son is not held in the same high esteem that his father still is. And yet, somehow, Kim still maintains an iron grip on his position. His longevity in the wake of his father's passing—12 years ago and counting—is a testament to Kim Jong Il's

shrewd political acumen. What Kim understands is that he must keep his core supporters, the military and top political elite contented and controlled. Thus far he has done so via a mix of material rewards (promotions and luxury goods), praise (status symbols and weapon systems), and intimidation (purges, demotions, promotion of rival officers).

What's Up with the Military?

The military looms very large in the DPRK. There is little question that North Korea is the most militarized state and society in the world. This is true whether one calculates the number of uniformed personnel in the armed forces, reserves, and militia as a proportion of the total population, the percentage of government expenditures allocated for defense, or the share of the DPRK economy that the defense sector comprises. The Korean People's Army (KPA) seems to be the most important institution in North Korea, apparently more important than the chief political organism, the Korean Worker's Party. Ostensibly the DPRK is a socialist or communist party-state built in the image of the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China. In these systems a key principle is party control of the military. In North Korea this principle seems to have been turned on its head. Since 1998, Pyongyang has espoused a "military first" policy which appears to place the military on a pedestal as the most privileged and prominent organization in the country; even higher than the Korean Workers' Party. And the military controls a vast 'second economy' of mines, farms, factories, and trading companies. In short, as Michael Breen pithily notes, "The army is the country's biggest corporation." The most powerful organ is the National Defense Commission (NDC) and the body is dominated by men in uniform. It is tempting, as Gavan McCormack argues, to declare Pyongyang a "military dictatorship."

But how accurate is the term "military dictatorship?" Charles Armstrong's study of the origins of the DPRK reveals the regime was "highly militarized" from its earliest days even before the formal establishment of the KPA in 1948. Actually, however, as Armstrong incisively observes, far from being merely a military-ruled state, the Pyongyang regime is a "party-state-military triumvirate" with close "inter-connection among these institutions . . . [so as to produce a] 'mono-organizational' system." Thus, institutionally, North Korea is no military dictatorship.

Moreover, who is the most powerful man in North Korea? Who chairs the NDC? Who put the KPA front and center in the first place? The answer to these three questions is, of course, Kim Jong Il. He could be officially considered a soldier; formally he holds the rank of Marshal. But Kim almost never dons a KPA uniform and has had no real military experience or training. In short, he is best seen as a civilian dictator. Nevertheless, Kim relies heavily on the military for now and is likely to for the foreseeable future. Still, he may decide at some point that the KPA has become too powerful and then seek to weaken it by purging some generals and/or building up another organizational entity. Indeed, this is what other shrewd dictators have done to maintain themselves in power. In any event, as long as Kim Jong Il is the ruler, it is not accurate to label the Pyongyang regime as a military dictatorship.

Notional Nukes?

The creeping North Korean crisis concerns the status of Pyongyang's nuclear program. Why has Pyongyang pursued nuclear weapons so doggedly? Gavan McCormack argues that the Kim regime believes that it has been held hostage "to what it perceives as repeated threats of nuclear attack [from the United States]." It is no leap of logic to conclude that the best way to escape from this threatening situation is to develop one's own nuclear program. Indeed, Jasper Becker quotes a North Korean defector who worked for many years at the Yongbyon nuclear facility as saying "the object of the work at Yongbyon was always clear to everyone." The purpose was to develop nuclear weapons, not to meet North Korea's energy needs. Moreover, "North Korea has learned," as McCormack also astutely observes, "that the only way it can attract international attention is precisely by flaunting its weaponry." Pyongyang's 2006 missile launches and nuclear test certainly seized the world's attention.

However, even in the wake of the underground detonation of 9 October 2006, few things about North Korea have been clarified, not least of all what the regime holds in its nuclear arsenal. It appears that some kind of low-level nuclear explosion occurred—traces of radiation were detected—but the size of the detonation was less than one kiloton, suggesting either that Pyongyang intended a larger explosion but failed, or that the explosion was deliberately kept small in size to keep the rest of the world guessing while satisfying domestic constituencies. While the jury is still out on whether the explosion can be considered a success for DPRK foreign policy, domestically it appears to have achieved its intended goals. The reality that Kim Jong Il is not just acting on a world stage but also on a domestic stage is often lost on analysts and observers. Precious few of the books under review attempt to explore the dynamics of North Korea's internal politics—only Breen and Martin come to mind—although several authors mention it in passing.

With the October 2006 test Kim Jong Il has considerably enhanced his own stature within the DPRK elite; and probably among ordinary people as well. Moreover, the prestige and morale of Kim's core constituencies—notably the military—has been lifted. The evidence on this last point is fragmentary but convincing: The terse official statement announcing the successful test singled out the KPA for praise and, in the days following the test, KPA soldiers along the demilitarized zone were observed to be engaged in bouts of chest thumping and obscene gesturing toward their South Korean and US counterparts across the Military Demarcation Line.

But the burning questions remain: What has the regime got and how can it be delivered? Most specialists believe that North Korea has a handful of nuclear devices but no one can say with complete certainty. Even in the aftermath of Pyongyang's 9 October underground test one cannot say much beyond that North Korea detonated a small nuclear device. And since the DPRK has not permitted proper inspections of its facilities, we simply don't know for sure. While it is only prudent to assume that the DPRK has nuclear weapons, we need to be open to the possibility that, as Becker says, that "[i]t might all still be smoke and mirrors." In other words, is Pyongyang engaged in a major ruse to convince everyone—including its own people—that it has nuclear weapons when in reality it does not? It is definitely in

North Korea's interests to make everyone think this. Moreover, if the DPRK has nuclear weapons, it remains in Pyongyang's best interests to be as ambiguous about the actual details of their capabilities as possible. Its arsenal would be small and therefore very limited. Although Pyongyang has a substantial number of ballistic missiles, it does not appear to have successfully produced a nuclear warhead yet. To make up for this the regime wants to keep everyone guessing and hence off-balance. In addition, Pyongyang gains negotiating leverage by keeping the precise status of its nuclear program ambiguous and concerns alive over North Korea as a potential nuclear proliferator.

A Sea Change in Pyongyang?

Which leads us to the next issue: Has Kim made the decision to move his regime in a fundamentally different direction? Has he concluded that systemic reform is the only real answer to the deep-seated challenges that his regime faces? And if North Korea is reforming, what is the outlook? No one argues that Pyongyang is reforming politically but there is considerable debate over the scope, meaning, and impact of economic reforms in the DPRK.

One claim is that North Korea has adopted broad, thoroughgoing reforms that are transforming the economy. The significant steps that adherents to this interpretation can point to include: price reform, appearance of markets, as well as the creation of special zones to attract, and passage of laws to facilitate, foreign investment. Andrei Lankov argues that because of all these changes, North Korea can no longer be labeled as a "centrally planned economy." But if this is so then why do observers, such as J. E. Hoare and Susan Pares in their book *North Korea in the 21st Century*, remark: ". . . a sense of hesitancy still marks the whole reform process?" Three interpretations or answers have been offered. The first—according to Selig Harrison—is that Kim Jong Il has to move his reform initiatives cautiously and gradually because he has to struggle against "hardliners" who are adamantly opposed to the whole process.

A second interpretation, as McCormack observes, is that Kim "is caught in a dilemma." He wants to reform openly but at the same time he is fearful that by doing so he will undermine his power and destabilize the regime. As a result, Pyongyang has implemented a series of limited, ad hoc, and temporary adjustments that have not fundamentally changed the Stalinist economic system. This amounts to what the reviewer calls "reform around the edges." Marcus Noland, one of the foremost experts on the North Korean economy, seems to fall somewhere between the first and second interpretations in his analysis. He has written a short but dense book analyzing the current situation and exploring possible future trajectories. Noland, in chapter three of *Korea After Kim Jong-il*, offers a thoughtful and sobering discussion of the economic reforms announced by Pyongyang in mid-2002. He asserts that "North Korea is probably the world's most distorted economy," and is not optimistic that these haphazard reforms will significantly improve the economic crisis. On the contrary, he believes that the core elements of these reforms, "marketization and inflation," far from helping matters, will simply exacerbate "existing social differences." Suk Hi

Kim, an economic specialist like Noland, also falls somewhere between the first and second interpretations but much closer to the former than the latter. In Part III of his book, Professor Kim provides a far more optimistic assessment about the scope and direction of the reforms than Noland. Indeed, Kim's book includes a section on advice to those considering investing in North Korea. Nevertheless, Kim does acknowledge that the Pyongyang regime "knows that such reforms may contain the seeds of its defeat or demise."

A third interpretation put forward by Andrei Lankov is that Pyongyang has simply been responding to changes from below. Thus, most of the "reforms"—free markets, price reforms—are merely grudging official acceptance of changing realities on the ground as ordinary North Korean citizens force change in order to survive. According to this interpretation, the regime was simply reacting in tacit recognition that some policies were not working or at least not in the way they were intended. Here it is worth noting that communist economies never work the way they are supposed to work. They suffer from one crisis or malfunction after another. Managers and operators learn work-arounds because centrally planned economies (CPEs) never work properly in practice. Barter, black markets, and bribery all tend to be endemic. Michael Harrold provides the following anecdote from the mid-1980s. He was being chauffeured through the North Korean countryside when the driver suddenly noticed that the fuel gauge was on empty. Without hesitation, Harold's escort asked him for a pack of cigarettes as the driver sped up to pass a military truck on the road ahead of them. As soon as the car had passed the truck, it slowed down and the escort gestured for the truck to stop. The escort got out, chatted with the truck driver, and offered him the cigarettes. In no time gasoline was being siphoned from truck to the car. Bribery has always been significant but has become increasingly rampant and flagrant as the formal economy completely collapsed in the 1990s and 2000s because people cannot get what they need to survive otherwise.

While these phenomena are openly condemned, there is unspoken recognition that without them the economy would not function at all. Perhaps the most important feature of a CPE is that this system by its very nature produces bottlenecks and hoarding. Thus, renowned Hungarian economist Janos Kornai dubbed it the "shortage economy." As Bradley Martin's defector interviews clearly show, North Korea suffered food shortages for decades before the severe famine of the 1990s.

If North Korea has not adopted thoroughgoing reform in response to earlier crises, why should one think it would start to do so now? Of course, this could be happening. But Pyongyang's leaders appear to believe that the regime has endured without radical economic reforms in the past and can continue to survive with only minor tinkering. Noland's study tends to support this line of thinking: His comparative analysis of countries experiencing chronic dire economic circumstances indicates that regimes can survive sustained economic downturns and extended economic devastation for many years. But back to the limited reforms instituted in recent years in North Korea: Are conditions in the DPRK slowly but surely changing for the better; are economic reforms taking hold? Martin and Nanchu both offer vivid and depressing depictions of the situation in North Korea but each ultimately end with hopeful conclusions. Based on the evidence they present, though, their optimism seems born more of

wishful thinking—Martin calls it “optimistic daydreaming”—than based on any actual evidence. The incremental and zigzag nature of change in North Korea may be either a reflection of Kim Jong Il trying to outmaneuver “hardliners,” of Kim’s hesitation for fear of unraveling his regime, or change initiated from below. Whatever the explanation, perhaps the best hope for reform is that the partial reforms develop an unstoppable momentum of their own.

A DPRK of Two Minds about the USA

North Korea constantly complains that the fundamental problem it faces is the “hostile policy” of the United States. According to Pyongyang, the solution is for Washington to prove otherwise. But distrust and bad feeling between North Korea and the United States runs so deep that this is easier said than done. Moreover, the problem runs both ways. North Korea also needs to prove to the United States that it has “no hostile intent.” Pyongyang complains about the harsh language Washington uses to describe it: a member of the “Axis of Evil” and an “outpost of tyranny.” Moreover, they appear extremely sensitive to how Americans refer to Kim Jong Il. While they have a point, the irony is that it is the North Koreans who are the originators of vituperative verbiage and masters of trash talking. Nevertheless, words are a good place to start. But words must be followed by actions on both sides.

Pyongyang may face a Washington dilemma. On the one hand, North Korea appears genuinely to fear the United States; on the other hand, the Pyongyang regime seems to desire improved relations with Washington. Indeed, if North Korea is to ever feel completely secure and fully revitalize its economy, improved relations with the United States leading eventually to normalization are essential. However, while Pyongyang wants good relations, the regime is fearful about what this would mean. After all, it uses the United States to justify a constant state of war and extensive domestic repression. It may be that Kim Jong Il finds himself in a classic dilemma: He sincerely wants to improve relations with Washington and modernize his country but at the same time he is grateful that a hardline and hostile US policy provides him with the convenient and constant external massive threat. This threat can be manipulated as desired to whip up fear of imminent attack and to inspire absolute loyalty to the regime as a North Korean defector explained to Martin. If the siege mentality lifts, Kim fears this may remove the regime’s justification for its very existence in the minds of the long suffering masses.

In trying to make sense of Pyongyang’s turbulent relationship with Washington in the current creeping nuclear crisis, it is worth looking back at the first North Korean nuclear crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here the recollections of three key actors in the Clinton administration provide some useful and fascinating insights about efforts to grapple with the problem. Ambassador Robert Gallucci served as lead negotiator and it was he who signed the controversial “Agreed Framework” on behalf of Washington in October 1994. Daniel Poneman was the nonproliferation expert on the National Security Council, and Joel Wit was also deeply involved in North Korea policy from his perch in the State Department. Pyongyang’s various threatening announcements—one on 12 March 1993, that it was withdrawing from the Nuclear

Nonproliferation Treaty and another on 13 June 1994, that it was withdrawing from the International Atomic Energy Agency and expelling inspectors—triggered a deepening crisis. Particularly sobering are chapters six, seven, and eight in which the authors recount the events of mid-1994 when tensions over the nuclear program threatened to spiral out of control. Gallucci, Poneman, and Wit describe how the Clinton administration was poised to move the United States down a path that could have made war with North Korea “likely but not inevitable.”

Hostilities, of course, did not break out in 1994. But it took the intervention of an outside mediator, former President Jimmy Carter, to defuse the crisis. Without Carter’s intervention it is not clear what would have happened. Then Secretary of Defense William Perry soberly sketched out to President Clinton—and other senior leaders assembled in the White House’s Cabinet Room—the possible consequences of the course of action they were considering. As described by Gallucci, Poneman, and Wit, Perry cautioned that the steps that the administration was poised to take could easily initiate a dangerous cycle of action and reaction as Pyongyang responded to each measure Washington took. What is significant about this dramatic episode is that North Korea was willing to step back from the brink and talk to its nemesis. Of course this did not mean during its dialogue with the United States that the DPRK eschewed the hallmarks of its diplomacy: double talk and double dealing.

Conclusion

So, based on the 11 books under review, what can one conclude about North Korea? First, Pyongyang is a Potemkin village; a state where nothing is what it appears to be at first glance. Second, Kim Jong Il is a driven dictator whose actions, when closely scrutinized, seem to be calculating and rational. Third, the military is Kim’s core constituency because it serves not only as the regime’s shield to defend it from external threats but also as a last line of defense against internal challenges. And even without WMD, the KPA presents a major conventional threat to the Combined Forces Command of the Republic of Korea and United States. Fourth, North Korea’s nuclear program represents a long-standing initiative to provide indigenous security guarantees for the regime. Nukes are the ultimate weapons to liberate Pyongyang from dependence on or blackmail by external powers. It is also a nod to Kim’s core constituency; the KPA. Fifth, while the economic reforms thus far enacted are real, they represent ad hoc measures rather than an unambiguous sea change in North Korea’s strategic direction. Finally, North Korea appears to be of two minds about the United States. A harsh and inflexible line from Washington allows Pyongyang to avoid facing up to probably the greatest dilemma it confronts in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Any hope of getting beyond the current stalemate will require a complete re-examination of one’s assumptions of a notional North Korea.

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