

*Review Essay*

## **North Korea: The Final Frontier?**

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*The Guerrilla Dynasty – Politics and Leadership in North Korea*

by Adrian Buzo, I.B. Tauris & Co., London, 1999

Price: GBP: 12.95 pp. 323

*North Korea in the World Economy*

by E. Kwan Choi, E. Han Kim and Yeesook Merrill (Eds)

Routledge Curzon New York, 2003, Price: GBP 75pp. 246

*North Korea : The Politics of Regime Survival*

by Young Whan Kihl and Hong Nack Kim (Eds),

M.E. Sharpe, New York, 2006 ,Price: USD 78.95 pp. 322

The paradox that is North Korea primarily stems from its being the final outpost of Cold War theatrics. As an anachronism in the post-Cold War world, with a political system that exemplifies the first instance of dynastic succession in the 'socialist' world; an economy that has witnessed the degeneration of the 'socialist industry'; a society that for all practical purposes is sustained by massive amounts of food aid following years of drought, floods and chronic mismanagement of resources, North Korea in most contemporary discourses is portrayed as an 'embarrassment' or 'strategic nightmare', given its proven capabilities of launching long-range missiles coupled with an ongoing nuclear weapons programme.

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The books reviewed here are a sampling of the literature increasingly available on North Korea—a country that until very recently was ‘beyond the pale’ of academic inquiry. Adrian Buzo in his book *The Guerrilla Dynasty*, locates the very political temperament of the North Korean regime as the *rerum concordia discors* (the concord of things through discord). In a fascinating and thought-provoking narrative, Buzo isolates as ‘generic characteristics’ the lessons Kim Il Sung and his colleagues drew from the universal laws of Marxism, the revolutionary organisational and tactical framework developed chiefly by Lenin and the practical experience of Communist parties in power. Flowing from these have been the two revolutionary political institutions—the ruling monolith Korean Worker’s Party (KWP—*Choson Nodong-dang*) and the Korean People’s Army (KPA—*Choson Inmingun*). ‘Specific characteristics’ that have been applied by the North Korean leadership, according to Buzo were the peculiar traits of militarism, isolation, extreme centralisation (even by socialist standards!), and the cult of personality leadership that has evolved into hereditary succession.

### **Juche Politics**

Located in a unique geopolitical setting, North Korea, despite its limited geographical size, population and resources, has been the ‘irrational’ actor exercising a disparate tenor to the rather ‘rational’ actors surrounding it. These include the continental powers, Russia and China, on its northeast and northwest, the highly industrialised economic superpower, South Korea, on its south, and of course, Japan, across the seas, one would not be entirely off the mark to characterise North Korea as being situated at the crossroads of Northeast Asia. Disregarding the perils of being located in a setting dominated by big powers, the history of North Korean attempts at being recognised as a legitimate entity have always been directed towards the only external powerful actor in the region—the United States. Since the Korean War (1950-53), the poignancy of a divided peninsula and the radical interpretation of ideology as also superpower rivalry divided the Korean people—a *fait accompli* that followed the Armistice of 1953. With the demise of the socialist ideology following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a ‘globalised order’, North Korea has, to the amazement and annoyance of observers, turned its back to the world and continued to chart out a course of action fundamentally guided by its central ideology of *Juche*.

The word *juche* was used for the first time on December 28, 1955, by Kim Il Sung in a speech entitled “On the Need to Repel Dogmatism and Formalism and to Establish *Juche* in Carrying Out Ideological Programs.” *Juche* refers to the most correct Marxism-Leninism-oriented guiding philosophy, designed to carry out revolution and construction. The semantic interpretation of *juche* is “self-identity,” but the idea of “self-reliance” is more appropriate if one were to comprehend the North Korean milieu. *Juche* ideology consists of two parts – the philosophical theory, which maintains that the masses are the masters of history and revolution, and the guiding principles, which justify a personality cult by saying that ‘the masses are not able to take up spontaneously any revolutionary course unless they are organised into revolutionary forces and are led by the *suryong* (the Leader). An integrated trinity thus emerges, with the *suryong*, the party, and the masses.

Ironically, North Korea is still ruled by its deceased founding leader, Kim Il Sung, yet another dubious distinction for a much-reviled country. Legitimising this is the Preamble of the 1998 Constitution, which states, “the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the entire Korean people will uphold the great leader comrade Kim Il Sung as the Eternal President of the Republic, defend and carry forward his ideas...[on] the *juche* revolution under the leadership of the Workers Party of Korea.”

In the Kim Jong Il (Dear Leader) era and following the 1998 constitutional revision, although the KWP is still a force, it is the National Defence Commission (NDC) that has emerged as the most powerful political organisation. Without doubt, the NDC is the command post of the ruling elite and despite the setbacks of the past, it is the military-first (*songun- chong chi*) politics that prevails in the country. The logic behind Kim Jong Il’s promotion of a ‘military-first’ policy is two-fold: to be the veneer for the Kim regime’s shortcomings in the face of dismal economic failure and food shortages; and to use the military to strengthen his authority to not only defend North Korea from external threats, but also to build a so-called *kangsong taeguk* (Strong and Prosperous Great Power).

### **Juche Diplomacy**

The aspect of “self-reliance” inspires North Korea’s bargaining in its strategic diplomacy. Largely termed as ‘brinkmanship,’ North Korea conducts its diplomatic negotiations with adversaries and allies with tact

and determination. It has proved repeatedly that its style of bargaining is not only robust but also governed by the rules of negotiating on the edge. The diplomatic orientation of *juche* is to be witnessed in North Korea's striking and rather strident adoption of the personality cult as a reaction to the Sino-Soviet ideological diffusion of the late 1950s and early 1960s. By not siding with its allies and maintaining independence in the exercise of its foreign policy during the Cold War years, North Korea exhibited the vices of seclusion and self-righteousness rather than the virtues of flexibility and pragmatism that were needed and are the *leitmotif* of modern diplomacy and statecraft. This peculiar behaviour may also be called the 'Trojan Horse' paranoia that keeps North Korea from joining the world, as it distrusts foreigners, lest they take advantage of its weakness and vulnerability. A historical precedent of this behaviour was displayed by the Choson Dynasty, which secluded itself from the outside world for much of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

North Korea's strategic objectives rarely deviate from a set of pre-established strategic goals and plans. Its long-lasting policy goal of forcing US troop withdrawal from the southern half of the Korean peninsula is based on its strategic objective of realising Korean unification on its own and without interference from foreign powers. Further, as several rounds of six-party talks have revealed, North Korea's demand for direct negotiation with the US is to replace the Korean Armistice agreement with a permanent peace treaty that very clearly is predicated upon the strategic calculus of undermining the rationale for US troop presence in South Korea. While the Clinton Administration was not averse at initiating a dialogue with the North Korean leadership and even endorsed a visit to Pyongyang in October 2000 by Madeleine Albright, the current Bush Administration has derailed the relative gains of the October 2000 visit by labelling North Korea as part of an 'axis of evil', being complicit therefore in entertaining North Korea's 'brinkmanship'.

From the North Korean perspective, US conventional air, naval and ground plus nuclear forces in South Korea, Japan and the Western Pacific (Guam in particular) pose an imminent threat to its survival. Further buttressing this threat is Washington's refusal to normalise diplomatic relations and deny recognition and legitimacy to the Kim Jong Il regime as also the slapping of multiple layers of economic sanctions that impede North Korea's efforts at economic revitalisation. Young Whan Kihl and

Hong Nack Kim in their book, *North Korea: The Politics of Regime Survival*, correctly, categorise 'regime survival' as the prime motivation goading the North Korean leadership. As a corollary, it is also surmised that the North Korean adherence to *juche* is antithetical to the ancient Korean dynastic practice of *sadaechui* that transliterates into "Serving the Great and belittling the self."

In the strategic diplomacy of bargaining and negotiating, a conspicuous aspect limiting North Korea's options is that its friendships with significant allies remain tepid while its adversaries retain a high degree of cohesion in their containment of Pyongyang, throughout a period of exceptional change and flux in the region.

### **Juche Economics and the Role of China**

Choi, Kim and Merrill's *North Korea in the World Economy* (the academic outcome of an August 2001 conference on "North Korea in the World Economy" by the Korea-America Economic Association) fills the gap as regards an evaluation of the North Korean economy – a task hugely complicated by the relative secrecy and lack of verifiable data. One of the most striking aspects of North Korea's evolution in the years following the 1953 Armistice was the adoption of a neo-spartan model of creating a socialist system. This model had militarism as its credo and it was applied as an organising principle of both society and economic activity, especially since early 1960s following the uncertainty that clouded the socialist world after the Sino-Soviet ideological rupture. The break propelled North Korea into an isolationist and reclusive mode of existence, even within the socialist bloc. Maintaining the neo-spartan model, it was the military that was responsible for half of all industrial production, enjoying priority access to raw materials, first call on the nation's power grid and transport infrastructure, and not accountable to the State Planning Commission. This sustained militaristic purpose of economic activity is undoubtedly, responsible for North Korea's destitution. Aptly, the militarism of North Korea supports Weber's observation that, "the war economy, with its overwhelming sense of contingency and its rough, inefficient methods of resource allocation, inherently tends towards bankruptcy."<sup>1</sup>

Immune to the practicalities of transforming the economic structure, Kim Jong Il, continues to lay emphasis on the primacy of the military. Perhaps, the only indication of any change came in July 2002 when North

Korea introduced limited measures for economic reform. These have four major components – micro-economic policy changes to increase the importance of material incentives; macro-economic policy measures decentralising decision-making; the establishment of special economic zones, and an external aid seeking strategy. The adjustments led to an end to the rationing system for daily commodities (except food), a huge increase in prices of essentials and in wages, a major devaluation of the currency (official exchange rate), abolishing of the foreign exchange coupon system, increased autonomy of enterprises, authorisation of the establishment of markets and other trading centres, and a limited opening of the economy to foreign investment. Prices remain under centralised control but at levels closer to those existing in peasant (free) markets. North Korea has not abandoned the socialist planned economy, but it has been compelled to reform certain aspects.

The introduction of these limited economic reforms has the subtle, yet nuanced, influence of Beijing. In this light, Kim Jong Il's recent visit to China offers some interesting clues. From January 10 to 18 this year, Kim Jong Il made a remarkably conspicuous "unofficial" visit to China. Kim's itinerary (including Wuhan, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, and Shenzhen) was reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping's famous Southern Tour of January-February 1992 (covering Wuchang, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and Shanghai), which reaffirmed Beijing's commitment to economic reform in the post-Tiananmen era. Kim made it clear that he was interested in seeing for himself the results of China's reform. Clearly, his intellectual curiosity and openness to new ideas are positive attributes conducive to reform in North Korea.

Encouraged by this historical precedent, some North Korea watchers regard Kim's "Southern Tour" as a prelude to extensive reform in the near future. To corroborate their case, they add that economic opening and reform measures followed Kim's previous visits to China. In particular, they point to Kim's trip to Shanghai in January 2001, when he exclaimed that Shanghai had undergone a cataclysmic transformation and "changed beyond recognition",- a remark he repeated during his latest visit. Kim subsequently circulated an internal memo in October 2001, emphasising "New Thinking" and laying out the basic principles for the July 2002 reforms. For sceptics, Kim Jong Il's Southern Tour is largely a feint for foreign consumption, designed to reinforce Chinese and South Korean

perceptions that he is someone they can do business with. They also believe that Kim's trip is not a prelude to fundamental reform, but rather an attempt to draw political support and economic assistance from China and South Korea in the form of continued food aid (as the World Food Programme is downsizing its presence in North Korea) and the supply of energy and credit lines.

Two broad inferences can be drawn from Kim Jong Il's Southern Tour. First, the relationship between China and North Korea is far deeper and more extensive than before, and, second, while North Korea will pursue further economic reforms, its path is likely to be different from China's, as indicated by Kim's emphasis on developing a model suited to the 'peculiar characteristics of the country.' *Juche* thus remains the country's ideological bulwark.

During his January visit, Kim met all nine members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo and held separate talks with Wu Bangguo and Wen Jiabao as well as with Hu Jintao. In addition to having an in-depth exchange of views on "important international and regional issues of mutual concern", Kim Jong Il and Hu Jintao spent time discussing economic matters. Wen Jiabao and Kim Jong Il exchanged views on boosting economic cooperation between China and North Korea. The Chinese premier is learnt to have explained to the North Korean leader the current economic situation in China and the relevant content of the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010). This exchange may be of more than passing interest for the two leaders, given that North Korea is about to implement a multi-year economic plan (three-year basic industry and agriculture plan from 2006 to 2008) for the first time since 1996, when its economic difficulties made multi-year planning redundant. Not only does China provide North Korea with an example of an economy where "plan" and "market" co-exist, but there also is ample room for coordination between the two sides, especially with regard to bilateral investment projects.

In fact, since Kim Jong Il visited Beijing just before the inter-Korean summit in 2000 to restore North Korea's relations with China, their economies have become increasingly integrated. Their bilateral trade has increased from \$0.49 billion in 2000 to \$1.39 billion in 2004, raising China's share in North Korea's total trade from 20 per cent to 37 per cent. In comparison, South Korea's share in North Korea's trade has stayed around 18 per cent while Japan's share has plummeted from 19 per cent to 7 per

cent. Furthermore, prices in North Korea's informal markets track those in China's north-eastern provinces, as merchants and ordinary citizens are increasingly engaged in cross-border trade. Gone are the days when Chinese companies were reluctant to invest in North Korea.

It, therefore, appears that Kim Jong Il is in search of a model that will bring about economic development and political stability given North Korea's conditions, which are different from China's in terms of geography and geopolitics as well as economics. Also, unlike China, which embarked on extensive reform after normalising relations with the US, North Korea is yet to normalise relations with the US and Japan. In addition, while China was a predominantly agricultural country when it launched extensive reforms and enjoyed a large productivity increase after breaking up collective farms, North Korea has a relatively small agricultural sector and probably should rely more on improvement in labour-intensive manufacturing.

Of course, regional security issues continue to be of great concern for North Korea and China even as their bilateral relations deepen on all fronts. China is likely to do what it can to get North Korea back to the negotiating table and resume the six-party talks. During their summit meeting, Kim and Hu in effect agreed to work together to "overcome the difficulties" and get the process going again. However, Chinese pressure on North Korea with regard to the six-party talks should not be overstated. When the US and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework in 1994, China was quite concerned about the possibility of the US establishing a foothold in North Korea. After five years of weak US engagement in East Asia under the Bush Administration, however, China enjoys a much stronger position. Its influence in North Korea and the rest of East Asia is rising, and China is in no hurry to pressurise North Korea as long as the six-party talks process continues.

In conclusion, despite the multiple external shocks and internal woes, North Korea has managed to defy all collapsist scenarios and predictions, as well as the classical realist axiom that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." This paradox is partly explained by geography – North Korea occupies China's *cordon sanitaire* and is well placed in prolonging its survival. The economic and political factors charting the course of China-North Korea relations have the potential to develop into a 'strategic dilemma' for the US and Japan.



While the US adopts a policy of 'tough negotiations', hoping that the North Korean regime will eventually succumb to pressure, the reverse seems more plausible, as China, South Korea and to some extent Russia do not want the regime to collapse, preventing the resultant chaos. Accordingly, it is in Beijing's interests to invest the minimum necessary political and economic capital to sustain North Korea in order to avert a regime collapse.

### **References/End Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (translated from the German by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (ed.) with an introduction by Talcott Parsons, New York, Free Press, 1964, pp. 76-77.

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