

REVIEW ARTICLE

Understanding the Hermit Kingdom As It Is and As It Is Becoming: The Past, Present and Future of North Korea

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ABSTRACT *North Korea, a Cold War remnant in East Asia, has long been treated as an impenetrable mystery and an excruciatingly difficult subject to comprehend given its closed system, under which it has maintained its isolation even from its closest allies and neighbours. The idiosyncrasies that revolve around North Korea do pose challenges for understanding the country through the “conventional wisdom.” Nonetheless, as acknowledged by the scholarly works reviewed in this article, the regime in Pyongyang must be dealt with as it is and as it is becoming so as to better understand both the challenges and opportunities for the country. The difficult task for the United States (US) and its allies in East Asia, however, is to be pragmatic in terms of dealing with the regime in Pyongyang and to project strength in a way that promotes long-term regional and global peace as well as the betterment of people in the country. The books reviewed are Charles Armstrong, Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992, Andrei Lankov, The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia and the collection edited by Kyung-ae Park and Scott Snyder, North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society.*

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The intensifying forces of globalisation and interdependence, especially since the end of the Cold War, have massively and often positively transformed East Asia in terms of economic development, political stabilisation (though not always accompanied by political liberalisation and democratisation) and less confrontational ideological, cultural and societal interactions among states at the regional level and beyond. However, North Korea remains as one of the last Cold War remnants in East Asia, associated with some of the most difficult and protracted regional security, diplomatic, economic, and even human rights and humanitarian problems, with global implications. Thus, there are ample reasons for the international community to take this country seriously instead of simply dismissing

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or ridiculing its leaders for their seeming irrationality and cruelty. Yet, North Korea has long been treated as an enigma and an impenetrable mystery to much of the world and an excruciatingly difficult subject to comprehend given its closed system, under which it has maintained its isolation even from its closest allies and neighbours.

Despite the assumption of North Korea being a “hermit kingdom,” about which so little of its inner workings and foreign policy rationales towards the outside is known, however, Charles Armstrong’s *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), Andrei Lankov’s *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013) and the collection edited by Kyung-ae Park and Scott Snyder, *North Korea in Transition: Politics, Economy, and Society* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012) challenge us to reconsider this prevailing view. By analysing the major changes and continuities of North Korea’s logic of existence and its struggle to safeguard survival and independence since the onset of the Cold War until the death of its second leader, Kim Jong Il, and the beginning of its third-generation power succession, these volumes eschew one-dimensional clichés that simplistically portray the country as being “irrational,” “rogue” and “uncontrollably dangerous and provocative.” Even with different rhetorical nuances and future prospects, these authors encourage readers to see and be prepared to deal with the regime in Pyongyang as it is and as it is becoming instead of dismissing it as a crazy, ruthless, helpless and isolated government. The uncomfortable reality, as either explicitly or implicitly acknowledged by these authors, is that the North Korean regime is unlikely to voluntarily make any dramatic changes in the foreseeable future or “wither away” without having any grave internal and external repercussions. Their converging and underlying message, therefore, is that one needs to take North Korea seriously so as to better understand both the challenges and opportunities facing the country.

On the Question of Rationality

Is the regime in Pyongyang truly irrational? In the minds of many outside observers, especially Western leaders and analysts, the answer has usually been “yes.” At least on the surface, an image of North Korea as an unpredictable regime appears to reflect the reality. Echoing this thought, the head of US Pacific Command, Samuel Locklear, questioned the North Korean leader’s ability to make lucid and logical decisions, saying that Kim Jong Un’s behaviour “would make me wonder whether...he is always in the rational decision-making mode” (as quoted in Oswald 2014). Locklear is not alone in this. In the aftermath of North Korea’s third nuclear test in violation of United Nations resolutions, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, asserted that his country would not be subject to “irrational and reckless provocation” by North Korea (as quoted in *The Guardian*, April 2, 2013). Similarly, Australia’s then Prime Minister Julia Gillard described North Korea as a nation squandering its resources on building nuclear weapons and missiles while neglecting millions of starving children and adults and as a regime that cannot be trusted to behave rationally or with goodwill (*The Australian*, April 11, 2012). Indeed, there seems to be a subconscious proclivity for simplistic and undifferentiated views of North Korea.¹ Yet, such a simplification is detrimental to efforts to grasp the complex logic behind the North Korean way of dealing with its internal and external matters.

North Korea is disturbingly rational. In effect, it is a striking example in the modern system of inter-state relations that defies the conventional wisdom, embedded in a famous

remark, once made by Thucydides (1951, 331) who posited that “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” It seems paradoxical and ironic that what is often described as one of the poorest and the most reclusive countries in the world has not only maintained its survival but also become an epicentre of security concerns and even posed strategic challenges to many great powers, including the US, the mightiest power in our time. If North Korea had been irrational, this could not have been possible.

This is the underlying message that Lankov seeks to convey in *The Real North Korea*, in which he explains that North Korean behaviour is neither irrational nor insane. Lankov is well positioned to scrutinise why North Korea has come to be an international problem and why its leaders behave as they do. Soviet-born with first-hand experience of Leningrad’s final years, educated in Pyongyang’s prestigious Kim Il Sung University as a young exchange student, and now a professor at Kookmin University, in Seoul, Lankov’s unique insight is the product of his years of research in Soviet archives, contact with North Koreans in exile, and rare access to a network of acquaintances and informants in North Korea. By looking into the inner logic of the actions of North Korean leaders, often identified with its infamous brinkmanship and sabre rattling, Lankov argues that these are “manifestations of a quite rational survival strategy,” emerged as a result of the country’s own tragic history of confrontation with the outside world combined with instincts of its leaders to “live dangerously” as there is no viable alternative “but to try to remain a pariah” to survive in what they perceive to be a hostile environment (258).

As elucidated by Lankov, this is “a remarkable feat,” made by the Pyongyang regime against all odds. Notwithstanding a highly and increasingly unfavourable environment that the regime faces as “a relic of an era long gone,” it has nonetheless managed to be “in full control of its country” (xi). This is something made possible by North Korean leaders who are fully aware of what they are doing when it comes to manipulating great powers so as to extract what their country needs. In this sense, they are not “ideological zealots” or “sadistic killers” but shrewd and cold-minded calculators who have skilfully used “diplomacy,” including its infamous nuclear brinkmanship, in perhaps the most naked Machiavellian way that can still be found in the modern world. Although the North’s bellicose and often nonsensical rhetoric, buttressed by its occasional armed provocations, may appear to confirm its alleged irrationality or inexorable evil, Lankov says its leaders so far “have known where to stop, how not to cross the red line, and how not to provoke an escalation of tensions into a full-scale war” in their peculiarly pragmatic way to cope with the world around them (xi).

Similarly, in *Tyranny of the Weak*, Armstrong examines the astute ways through which the Kim dynasty managed to survive despite its unquestionable weakness during the Cold War. He also explains how the regime’s past has set the pattern by which the entire country still faces the world in the twenty-first century. In his comprehensive and vivid historical analysis, Armstrong sheds light on a notable “success” of the Kim regime, which has deftly used its diplomatically weak position, repeatedly playing its major allies and patrons (and sometimes even its enemies) against one another to maximise its own benefits. Cultivated in decades of manipulating and manoeuvring, this phenomenon of the “tail wagging the dog” or the “tyranny of the weak” has become a trademark in North Korea’s foreign policy. By integrating evidence compiled from across the globe, ranging from newly opened archives in China to vast numbers of Soviet and East European documents published by the Cold War International History Project at the Wilson Center in Washington, Armstrong presents a rich synthetic picture of North Korea’s foreign

relations history. Through this multi-archival, multi-perspectival assemblage, he seeks to overcome the critical challenge of not being able to access North Korea's own archives. The outcome is his superb analysis of why the Pyongyang regime's longevity "has in its own way been a remarkable achievement," especially given that it has been "in a precarious international position" for over half a century (5).

For example, the impetus for initiating the Korean War came not from Stalin or Mao but from Kim Il Sung, who justified his planned invasion to his communist patrons by presenting the attack as a heroic defence of Korea, also known as "the Fatherland Liberation War," to free the people of South Korea from the American imperialists and their Korean collaborators. By framing the war as a pre-emptive strike, instead of a war of aggression, necessary to counter South Korea from launching an attack against the North if the communists did not strike first, Pyongyang further convinced Moscow and Beijing that "the potential gains of a North Korean invasion" would be worth the risks (24). Far from its powerful communist allies determining Pyongyang's every action, this much weaker power took the initiative that would come to define one of the most critical moments in the history of the Cold War as well as the history of Korea. This episode is crucial for understanding not just that particular war but the evolution of subsequent events in North Korea during the Cold War and the aftermath.

The pattern of North Korea deftly playing its weak hand against its powerful neighbours continued and even intensified throughout the Sino-Soviet split, during which the Pyongyang regime repeatedly extracted security, economic, and political concessions from both Moscow and Beijing by navigating through their tense rivalry without fully siding with either. What is particularly telling in this regard is the story on North Korea's handling of the USSR and China to sign two almost identical treaties with each power in the early 1960s without prior knowledge of the other. Even in the midst of the Sino-Soviet split, which made achieving a strategically more reassuring trilateral treaty with both Moscow and Beijing impossible, Pyongyang still managed to solve its deepening security concern, caused by a new military regime in South Korea, through attaining treaties with each of its allies within a matter of days. As asserted by Armstrong, this was a clear manifestation of North Korea's rational strategy of maximising benefits while manipulating, instead of being manipulated by, its powerful allies. Even after Moscow and Beijing's normalisation of diplomatic relations with Seoul and in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, Pyongyang has continued its pattern of extracting resources from the new great power rivals in the region, manipulating and circumventing Beijing and Washington.

Regarding North Korea's foreign relations, these continuities as well as the inevitable changes in the post-Cold War era are eloquently illustrated in *North Korea in Transition*, edited by Kyung-ae Park and Scott Snyder. In particular, the chapter by Liu Ming examines the complexity of North Korea's China policy, which has been driven not by "pure friendship" but by its own pragmatic "interests in responses to China's foreign and domestic policy" over the last 60 years (212). Echoing Armstrong's analysis of the "power of the weak," Ming sheds light on how the North has taken an upper hand in its relationship with China, leading Beijing into a direction more favourable to Pyongyang's interests without compromising its independence in dealing with its powerful ally. Despite some unavoidable fluctuations in the bilateral relations between China and North Korea, both of which have gone through substantial changes in their domestic politics and external affairs, the Pyongyang regime "assiduously avoids providing any concession of strategic value to China at the same time that China is perceived

internationally to have decisive influence over North Korea” (290). This is the paradox of the Sino-North Korean relationship where Beijing’s influence is limited notwithstanding Pyongyang’s overwhelming economic and political dependence on China. Sure enough, North Korea’s heavy reliance on China has complicated Pyongyang’s strategy in dealing with Beijing. Nonetheless, in line with the logic, described as “the tyranny of proximity,” North Korea’s much stronger neighbour, China, has found itself in a position of not having many viable alternatives but to embrace the Pyongyang regime as it is.² In spite of substantial power asymmetry to China’s advantage in the conventional sense, North Korea’s very existence constantly reminds China of the importance of assuring the North’s survival so as to maintain regional stability, which is necessary for China’s continuing rise. China’s persistent economic and diplomatic support for North Korea is also a reflection of Beijing’s greater strategic objective to prevent the North from being absorbed by the democratic South or placed under the US influence in case of Pyongyang’s sudden collapse.³ However, China has had to bear the cost of propping up the Pyongyang regime in the form of the inevitable strategic tensions and policy conflicts in its relations with the US and its other neighbours.

Echoing the theme of Pyongyang’s shrewd playing of its weak hand, David Kang, writing on North Korea’s relations with the US and the rest of the world in *North Korea in Transition*, acknowledges the regime’s ability to pose an intractable dilemma to Washington policymakers over a range of issues from international security and nuclear proliferation to famine and human rights abuses. Kang asserts that decades of American efforts to effectively and positively influence the North’s provocative behaviour have not been successful despite excessive power asymmetry in favour of the US. At the same time, Kang explains that the regime is “both strong and weak.” For example, the North’s continuing nuclear and military challenge is only one aspect of its overall strategy, designed to offset its weakness and to enhance its security in reaction to both external and internal pressures. Even though the North’s nuclear or other military provocations have worked “at cross-purposes with policies designed to affect its economy and the lives of its people,” Kang argues, its obsession with military power may also reflect its lonely and desperate search for status to be recognised as a nation-state equal to all others in the world (262–263). In this, North Korea’s leaders reveal a deep-seated insecurity, augmented throughout its modern history, partly as a result of the reluctance of the US and other regional states to view North Korea on its own terms or to grant North Korea “a tremendous honor” of being treated as equal unless the North would modify its ways. Yet, the policy of containment, meant to confront the North’s belligerence, has not brought Pyongyang to its knees and has further deepened its insecurity and inevitably exacerbated hardships for its people.

The Evolution of North Korea’s Security Dilemma

Over decades, North Korea’s deep-seated security concern has been the greatest obstacle for this otherwise “rational” actor to improve its status and more constructively interact with the community of nations as a “normal” state. In *Tyranny of the Weak*, Armstrong makes his case that the Pyongyang leadership’s “tyranny within” is a reflection of its obsession to look out for itself, “directly related to a sense of weakness toward external threats” that has lasted and heightened since the outbreak of the Korean War (9). Unlike common assumptions that the Korean War was merely an international war fought by

local proxies or a civil war, which became internationalised, the conflict was simultaneously civil and international, during the course of which the North encountered its allies' bitter clash of differing (and often conflicting) motivations as well as its enemies' atrocities, buttressed by their overwhelming power. The two allies of North Korea agreed to support the North's bellicose path to initiate the war as it appeared that the potential gains of the invasion would outweigh the risks. Yet, far from demonstrating the harmonious collaboration among fraternal allies, Chinese-Korean-Soviet war preparations were marred by their lack of mutual trust and ineffective communication.

The Korean War was also the beginning of the North's painful realisation about how deeply it had to rely on other countries for its own survival and how limited the allies' help could be in terms of protecting it from its enemies. Meanwhile, heinous acts committed by both the armies of the North and South against soldiers and civilians have poisoned inter-Korean relations and those memories have continued to serve as a major obstacle to unification. On top of that, American atrocities in the form of mass bombardment, including indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets, have had a "long-term psychological effect on the whole of North Korean society" and taught an unforgettable lesson about the North's vulnerability to American might (Armstrong 2013, 30). In this sense, the war against the US, which has lasted for over half a century within a peculiar framework of an armistice, has provoked and heightened North Korea's fear of outside threats and its anxiety about the possibility of finding itself on the brink of being annihilated by that mighty power again.

North Korea's fear of being attacked by any foreign power, above all the US, has been one of the driving forces behind its nuclear ambitions. As highlighted by Lankov in *The Real North Korea*, its leaders believe that their nuclear programme serves indispensable military purposes, the most significant of which is the utility of nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent. Paradoxically, however, Pyongyang's fear of being attacked has been intensified due to its nuclear ambitions. During the course of the first Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis in the 1990s, officials in Washington seriously considered the option of a pre-emptive strike against the Youngbyon plutonium facility. As Bruce Cumings discusses in his chapter in *North Korea in Transition*, however, Washington's pre-emptive scenario "utterly disregarded the conflict situation on the Korean Peninsula," including the fact that the Korean War has never officially ended and the North, the world's most remarkable garrison state, "has been preparing for the next war" ever since the armistice. Under the circumstances, Cumings asserts, a pre-emptive strike could have been followed by the North attacking the South, the ultimate consequences of which "might have included American attacks using nuclear weapons," causing "a nuclear war in the name of non-proliferation" (77). North Korea's determination to attain nuclear weapons has been further strengthened by US military actions taken against a number of states in the 2000s, including Iraq and Libya. Lankov indicates that the case of Gaddafi's Libya, in particular, has taught Pyongyang an important lesson about the futility of willingly surrendering nukes in line with the global nuclear non-proliferation norm (210). Rather, this episode has reinforced North Korean leaders' belief that had Gaddafi's regime had nuclear weapons, the West would probably not have made a military intervention when the regime was challenged by the local opposition forces. All in all, the experiences of the 1990s and 2000s have assured North Korean leaders of the necessity of possessing nuclear weapons as the ultimate strategic deterrent. What lies at the heart of Pyongyang's security dilemma, however, is that its efforts to protect itself through

maintaining nuclear weapons capabilities have made it a unique target of the US and the international community in their pursuit of the goal of nuclear non-proliferation, inevitably making the North less secure.

The North's Efforts to Hold the Regime Together

The North Korean regime has managed to sustain its existence by adopting some idiosyncratic measures. On the ideological front, its overwhelming dependence on its communist allies during the Korean War and on broader socialist-bloc assistance after the war compelled its leaders to invent an ideology of its own to seek self-assertion. Against this backdrop, *Juche* was first articulated by Kim Il Sung in the mid-1950s as the regime's bedrock ideology, which would help the North solidify its autonomy vis-à-vis its powerful allies and strengthen its own national interests and peculiarities. In retrospect, Armstrong argues, Kim Il Sung's enunciation of *Juche* was "the beginning of North Korea's divergence from the Moscow-dominated international socialist community, a declaration of independence from Soviet control and influence" (90). *Juche* has become the core ideological foundation, highlighting the need for independent policymaking and reduction (if not complete elimination) of external intervention. More than anything else, *Juche* was essential in consolidating Kim's political power as it discredited his domestic political rivals as being insufficiently Korean. Concurrently, the status of Kim as a "Great Leader" was enhanced while he was being portrayed as the father of the North Korean people, guiding the nation onto a more independent and honourable path.

Combined with ideological manoeuvring, the Kim dynasty's effective implementation of such measures as its cult of personality, ceaseless propaganda and widespread surveillance have allowed the regime a high degree of stability and continuity despite intensifying internal and external challenges. Indeed, the extent of the North Korean authorities' intervention into people's lives is unparalleled. In this sense, the regime has come "as close to an Orwellian nightmare as the world has ever come" (Lankov 2007). For decades, the driving force behind North Korea's persistence has been this unique system, within which everyone is under the watchful eyes of the government that seeks to prevent its people from having access to outside information.

Yet this regime stability and people's loyalty are unlikely to last given the changes that have occurred in North Korea, especially since the end of the Cold War. In its search for survival, the regime has reluctantly allowed the country's limited "opening" in the form of embracing foreign aid, endorsing economic interactions with the South and not taking draconian measures to eradicate the country's emerging capitalist class and "cultural invasion" from the outside. Bradley Babson, in *North Korea in Transition*, sheds light on the deep historical roots of North Korea's continuing economic isolationism and sense of insecurity, which have made Pyongyang extremely cautious about taking necessary measures to integrate itself into the global economy as doing so is "inextricably linked with the political challenges of the transformation of North Korea's domestic political economy and its relations with its neighbors and with the international community at large" (153). Nevertheless, the leadership is aware of the need to expand foreign trade and investment in order to achieve the economic development, which is essential for its survival in the long term, irrespective of its handling of the military and other security challenges. In fact, under the guise of "controlled capitalism," Babson argues, the North Korean regime has taken small yet notable measures to create institutions to facilitate its

interactions with its capitalist neighbours and to attract foreign capital without fully opening. This, in itself, is a major departure from North Korea's previous emphasis on complete isolation and autarky.

In the eyes of the North Korean leadership, social and cultural changes in the country may seem to pose even greater threats to the existing regime. North Korea's famine in the 1990s has led its population to find coping strategies in order to survive, leading to the rise of the new trading and entrepreneurial class that has become the backbone of North Korea's system of jungle capitalism.⁴ Relying on interviews with North Korean refugees, Lankov, in his chapter in *North Korea in Transition*, illustrates the emergence of the "new rich" and how they function as entrepreneurs, merchants and commercial operators in an environment where they have access to unauthorised and uncensored information about the outside world. This new pattern defies the assumption that the state is the only provider of jobs, income and information, thus "slowly eroding the authority and control of the government" and implanting dangerous ideas (in the eyes of the leadership) to North Koreans (191). In the same volume, Woo Young Lee and Jungmin Seo examine the effects of "cultural pollution" from the South, caused by the spread of South Korean cultural products, ranging from music to soap operas and films that are especially popular among the younger generation. Despite the illegality of such "subversive" products in the North, South Korean cultural influences have expanded along with the illicit distribution of DVDs, CDs and USBs. Lee and Seo anticipate that the potential of this cultural penetration could be substantial, especially if an emerging counterculture would be used as a prism through which the North Korean people start to see their enduring economic and political hardships.

Future Prospects

All the idiosyncrasies that revolve around North Korea pose enormous challenges in terms of understanding the country through the so-called conventional wisdom. As illustrated by Scott Snyder and Kyung-Ae Park in *North Korea in Transition*, its dynastic, family-centred, military-first system still persists, notwithstanding the failure of its leaders to provide even the people's most basic needs, the country's continuing reliance on outside sources for survival, and the new challenges posed by social and cultural changes due to penetration of subversive information from the outside. Yet, the verdict is still out on whether each of these factors would function as a catalyst for the North's demise or dramatic system transformation. There is no consensus reached even among the most renowned North Korea experts, including the contributors to the volumes, reviewed in this article.

The chapter by Charles Armstrong in *North Korea in Transition* shows that the North Korean system, buttressed by the regime's masterful manipulation of ideology in support of the Kim dynasty, has proven to be remarkably resilient and quite malleable. Built on a similar view, Bruce Cumings, in the same volume, squarely repudiates the widely assumed collapse scenario while emphasising the durability of the system that is likely to endure in its current form of "monarchy" under the third-generation leadership. On the other hand, Victor Cha and Nicholas Anderson, also in the same volume, use the lessons of the Arab Spring to analyse the prospects for North Korea. They argue that it "shows no potential to have an Arab Spring" (103); nonetheless, something similar could occur if "the combination of tectonic, bottom-up societal shifts counteracted by rigid, top-down

repression efforts is creating a tension in the North,” generating a political earthquake in the country (112). Despite the seeming tranquillity in the Pyongyang regime, even after the death of Kim Jong Il, it cannot completely shield itself from the forces unleashed by modern technology and information in the increasingly interconnected world, which would make the North Korean leaders’ efforts to control their people even more difficult. Thus, Cha and Anderson predict, the rigidity of North Korea’s ideology and political system would ultimately lead to its demise, especially because of its inability to adapt itself to new realities and new demands from its people and from the outside world.

In *The Real North Korea*, Lankov presents a similar outlook, predicting the regime’s unsustainability in the long term and the inevitability of the old system slowly falling apart. Even its reform in “the Chinese way” would entail enormous pressure as it could trigger dramatic implosion of the regime in the process of its transformation. That is why North Korea’s decision-makers are stubbornly unwilling to embrace even the most basic measures necessary to take a positive and constructive step forward. Lankov’s policy recommendations for solving the North Korean problem, however, seem highly cautious in as much as to render a bit of criticism for being too passive and even indifferent.⁵ For example, Lankov asserts that “there are no silver bullets or magic potions that can solve the North Korean problem instantly, easily, and painlessly” (xiv); what is more, neither hard-line nor soft-line policies have worked so far and neither is going to significantly change the international and domestic behaviour of the North Korean elite. He further argues that there is “not all that much” that the outside world can do (258) and “one should not become too enthusiastic about” making efforts to speed up the slow-motion erosion of the Kim family dictatorship, which is destined to “either a hard landing or the extended survival of the regime in its existing form followed, in due time, by an even harder landing” (259). This seemingly apathetic and unsettling prospect is, however, the reflection of his sophistication (not lack thereof) in terms of elucidating the complex reality of the North Korean situation and his restrained scholarly intuition in predicting the unpredictable, that is, North Korea’s ultimate endgame.

Notwithstanding his melancholic outlook, Lankov encourages his readers to see the North Korean leaders not as evil villains but “often well-meaning human beings” who initially had lofty ideals and good intentions to create “a perfect world”; yet, their ruthless idealism combined with a series of wrong choices have made them and their people “captives of a brutal and inefficient system” with no easy way out (260). As put by Lankov, the major victims in all this are not “we outsiders” but North Korea’s own people; they are the ones who have borne the greatest suffering. What’s tragic, yet also hopeful, however, is the fact that these are not “brainwashed automatons” or “docile slaves” but “normal” human beings with similar feelings and emotions as everybody else (62).

In a similar vein, David Kang, in *North Korea in Transition*, reminds his readers that North Korea, though a totalitarian regime, contains more diversity of opinion than commonly assumed with people who “are not simply brainwashed robots” but “real people with many different opinions” (269). He also discusses the changes which have gradually become penetrated by informal and sporadic information largely due to weakened state control together with commercialisation and marketisation. Kang, however, ends his chapter by also countering the widely held “collapse scenario” by pointing out its record of remarkable endurance and adaptability. Even while acknowledging that the regime is much weaker and more exposed to the outside world than ever before, he postulates that these changes will not necessarily guarantee North Korea’s demise. “North

Korea presents no easy solutions for policy makers in Seoul, Washington, and other capitals, but rather a series of difficult trade-offs" (270). By stating the obvious, Kang emphasises the need for the US and the countries in East Asia to understand the inner workings of North Korea and learn to live with it even as it would remain "a totalitarian, closed, militaristic, and repressive regime" (267). This is in line with Armstrong's core message, that is, one must not underestimate the power of the weak or overestimate the power of the strong. Pyongyang's ability to refuse Washington's demands reveals how even the mightiest global power cannot shape the world exactly in its own image.

All things considered, there is a legitimate reason why North Korea is depicted as a conundrum, persistently frustrating both scholars and policymakers alike when it comes to predicting the future. Perhaps the most realistic assertion is that the future of this country is unknown. Yet, this is not necessarily bad news given that it means there is still room for building the future to be more constructive and positive. Then, how to face a North Korean regime that defies the "imperial logic" of power relations, violates common decency, and does not fit the existing types of state identity in the twenty-first century? North Korea may truly be a tyrannical regime. By examining Strauss' analysis of tyranny, however, Armstrong reveals the inescapable reality that one must embrace; "under certain conditions the abolition of tyranny may be out of the question. The best one could hope for is that the tyranny be improved, i.e., that the tyrannical rule be exercised as little inhumanly or irrationally as possible" (290; for the original text, see Strauss 1991). The best way to face the tyranny of this sort, therefore, is to encourage it to be a little less tyrannical by carefully balancing out necessary pressure and constructive engagement. Lamenting the views of the neo-conservatives that shaped the first George W. Bush administration's foreign policy, Armstrong prudently alludes that the US could be a greater danger than North Korea, an "outpost of tyranny" in terms of destabilising the regional balance of power. This could happen if the US attempted to justify its excessively assertive foreign policy "actions on the basis of universal principles" while portraying the North as an outright enemy and "an outlaw of humanity" that does not deserve to have any hope for rapprochement with the outside world (292). Maintaining such a position, without understanding and addressing North Korea's deep-seated fears and frustrations embedded in its own historical experience, could be as detrimental as North Korea's enduring tyranny. The difficult task for the US and its allies in East Asia, therefore, is to be pragmatic in terms of dealing with even a tyrannical regime like Pyongyang and to project strength in a way that promotes freedom in North Korea for the sake of long-term regional and global peace, not to mention for the betterment of people in the country.

Overall, these volumes are valuable additions to the study of North Korea, notwithstanding some variations in terms of the authors' interpretations of the past, evaluations of present challenges, and future forecasts. Released in the critical new era, defined by Pyongyang's third generation of hereditary power succession laden with greater uncertainty amidst the inevitable shifts in North Korea's politics, economy, foreign relations, and even society and culture, each of these volumes presents cogent and authoritative analyses, through which any sensible reader could develop a valuable guideline to understanding North Korea's past and present more comprehensively as well as to better preparing for the unknown future.

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Notes

- ¹ One must also be vigilant about leaders of world powers, especially of the leading Western democracies who depict North Korea as a “socialist” holdout. Even though such a stereotypical view is anachronistic and insufficient to shed light on the nature of the Pyongyang regime, whose totalitarian centrism has been closer to an Orwellian exorcism rather than being socialist, it is still promoted as “the ideological capital” with which to remind the world of the triumph of democracy and the power of the West.
- ² “The tyranny of proximity” refers to a situation in which North Korea’s more powerful neighbours do not have many viable alternatives but dialogue to deal with its brinkmanship. The underlying assumption here is that the more desperate the leaders in the North become in terms of their sense of insecurity and/or economic difficulties, the more provocative actions they will take. Despite substantial power asymmetries to their advantage in the conventional sense with their relations vis-à-vis North Korea, this logic has drawn North Korea’s neighbours in East Asia and even the US, though unwillingly, into a compromising position in their dealings with the Pyongyang regime (see Kim 2011).
- ³ In effect, China has benefited from North Korea’s very existence as the North serves as an indispensable geostrategic buffer between China and American troops stationed in the South. Likewise, the North’s existence has continued to legitimise the stationing of large numbers of American troops in countries like South Korea and Japan as a necessary measure to manage the constant threats by the “communist” North, thus sustaining the logic of America’s hegemonic reach (or some might say US militarism) in the region even after the end of the Cold War. In this sense, North Korea’s existence still serves a useful function in terms of keeping the status quo in Asia and beyond in a way to fulfil geopolitical interests of these major powers.
- ⁴ In the concluding chapter to their collection, Park and Snyder say that “jungle capitalism” refers to the ruthless “form of capitalism practiced in North Korea at the grassroots level...in which individual traders who are trying to survive might face any number of predators and parasites, including demands for bribes and possible expropriation of goods by local authorities” (284).
- ⁵ Delury (2013) for instance, critiques that Lankov “ultimately fails to provide useful suggestions for resolving the Korean conflict” while overestimating “the certainty of regime collapse.” Delury challenges Lankov’s view that “the only thing Washington can do is wait for the regime’s inevitable demise, perhaps giving it a nudge here and there by exposing North Koreans to the world beyond their borders.”

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