



Book Review

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The North Korean Nuclear Weapons Crisis

Jina Kim

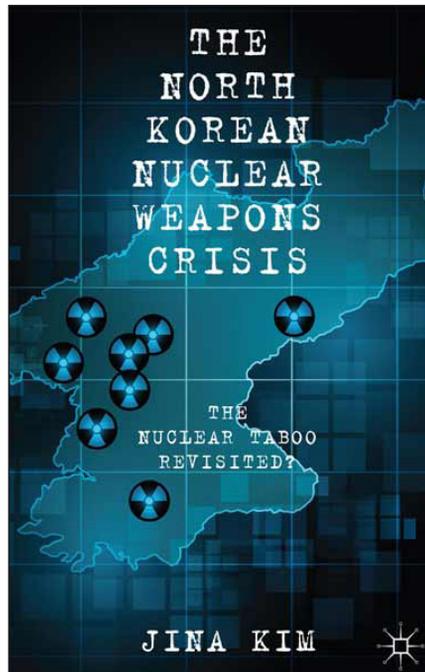
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Not all scholarly works benefit from a treasure trove of facts and details. Sometimes there is too much data. The effort of the writer must be to tease out the most salient issues, arrange them in a manner consistent with the goals of the book, and present them in a cogent discussion that is accessible to the intended audience. It is not an easy task and it is not always successful, as any professor (who essentially does similar work preparing lectures), historian, or writer of non-fiction will tell you.

Jina Kim's work clearly is blessed by an abundance of information concerning the threat to the nonproliferation regime that North Korea poses. The information is offered in six chapters under a political science umbrella designed to explore the book's subtitle: *The Nuclear Taboo Revisited?* The taboo she refers to is the denial to develop nuclear weapons, and not as she is careful to point out, the denial of their use. Kim seeks to examine how the North Korea's negative identification as an outlier state and its negative interactions with the United States and its Southeast Asia partners contributed to the crisis. She patently rejects the North's behavior as irrational. In her analysis, there are credible motivations



for the regime's behavior.

The treatise is divided into a section on the "first" DPRK nuclear crisis, followed by chapters on North Korea's negative identification (its view of itself and its relation to other members of the international community), another on its negative interaction with the five negotiating nations with emphasis on the United States, a chapter on the "second" crisis, and a final section reviewing the negative identification and interactions the DPRK experienced from it.

There is much detail here, packed into a dense narrative that, despite its overabundance of detail, must be cited for the factual gems it contains that are crucial to understanding the DPRK. Take for example, the section on North Korea's guiding social principal of *Juche* ideology found in Chapter 3. This phi-

losophy stresses national autonomy, self-reliance, and self-respect. It has been infused into the daily lives of North Koreans since 1972 when it was embedded in a new constitution adopted by the Supreme People's Assembly. Its importance arises when North Korea confronts international rules that require obedience to an external agency. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is one such body that presents a philosophical dilemma for the DPRK. For the North, cooperation while tolerating the presence of foreign inspectors with clear discovery and reporting intentions when fervent independence and self-sufficiency has been the long-standing commandment of the day is, at best, very difficult. Another example is the *Songun* policy, implemented during the period of the second nuclear crisis. This simply put, means that the DPRK places the military above all else even at the expense of the well-being of its citizenry. Alarming in its outcome, the *Songun* policy stresses the importance of the military for the protection of socialism. Since the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe, the DPRK has stressed its solitary struggle to defend socialist ideals.

Though the explanations of *Juche* and *Songun* are clear and become clearer and more relevant as one dives further into the book, other external factors perhaps mitigate against clarification and a full understanding of the behavior of the DPRK. One of these may be an American, and perhaps an international prejudice, against North Korea. This nu-



clear crisis has been so long in the making and the actions of the DPRK so frustrating, rash, and seemingly irrational at times, that statements of fact that seek to explain the apparent irrationality can run up against a wall of chauvinism, intolerance, and incredulity constructed by the outsiders the North must deal with. It can be presumed that the actions of the DPRK have been so despicable that no depth of factual explanation for them can have any credence or assist in the search for a solution to the crisis. This is, to put it mildly and kindly, most unfortunate. But this is exactly what Kim is attempting to do here.

This is a concerted effort to seek reason behind the apparent aberrant behavior of North Korea. Such an analysis is welcomed. However, to execute this for a general readership (my take is that Kim clearly means her audience to be political scientists), due the aforementioned presumptions of intolerance and I daresay hostility directed to the DPRK, requires great skill. But even in a scholarly venture such as this, the author's interpretation of the North's behavior—the "excuses" to use a crude word—can leave a reader feeling as if they are a bit "too convenient" for the agenda the North Koreans are pursuing. Often it seems, their pronouncements and philosophies, legitimate in the view of Ms. Kim, seem to provide the North with a flimsy justification for its less-than-sterling behavior. It is one thing to pronounce a philosophy of autonomy and independence from foreign interference, but it's another to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty then break from it and claim unfair foreign (IAEA) interference. We know that everything the DPRK does is meant to buoy the regime and we know that the author wishes only to transmit these as

details and objective facts that international negotiators must understand, but the reader may not always perceive this. This then is where prejudice can creep in with the potential for a misread of the book. The abhorrent behavior of the North Korean regime can be explained, the author's contends, on the basis of certain internal constructs. To understand it requires that the reader discard any prejudgments about the nation and its behavior to date.

A narrative as detail-rich as this one would ordinarily be considered an advantage; however, the various sections of the book read somewhat like a series of *The New York Times* articles. They are replete with facts that make logical sense but one must remain diligent to maintain the cohesiveness and threads of the author's argument. As a result, one can feel as if there is too much information in the discourse. The inexperienced reader can become lost once immersed in the specifics. As a result, the narrative sometimes reads like a review of every dispute that the DPRK had with its adversaries in the nuclear crisis. It's not a terrible result—the facts are illuminating—but one does not feel satisfied that the author achieved her goal of explaining why the North and the rest of the world are at the current unresolved situation. The reasoning and the conclusions are there. It's just not an easy road to them.

Perhaps, then, the strongest portion of the book is its ending, summary chapter. Here, we can rely on the author to point out what her analysis did achieve. In brief, it indicates that the unresolved issues of the crisis are almost sure to re-emerge in future negotiations. It is also clear that an understanding of the domestic beliefs of the DPRK can assist to

predict its behavior. The uncoordinated efforts of the China-hosted negotiations need to be revamped to avoid the mis-cues that allow the North to take advantages in previous negotiations or to take actions antithetical to their spirit. Slow implementation of what was agreed upon bred suspicion of United States' intentions in the North while fostering a belief that the United States was disrespectful of North Korea. Such practices also need repair to foster future negotiations that will achieve significant results for both sides. Most significantly, the author concludes that evidence exists indicating that future negotiations are warranted. The willingness of the DPRK to suspend components of its nuclear program if its demands are met leads to the possibility that a way out of the crisis exists. Respect paid towards Pyongyang and a prioritization of its demands—failures of procedure made primarily by the United States in the past—may lead to success in coming years. Mere "stabilization" of the situation, i.e., peace on the Korean peninsula as it now stands, is not success. The author highlights unanswered questions that remain to be researched: Will the DPRK-China relationship affect how the North views itself in relation to the world? Will the status of the North's nuclear program affect the security posture of the United States?

Well-researched with nearly fifty pages of notes and a nine page bibliography, Kim's book is, despite the above criticisms regarding detail, very concise coming in at only 149 pages of narrative. This book is undoubtedly useful as a recapitulation of the history that brought us to the current situation but the read is a bit of a heavy lift. Though it is an important edition to the discussion of the DPRK nuclear crisis, it is not for those



new to the situation. At times, it feels as though one is reading a rather technical doctoral thesis. This effort may also not appeal to those with limited political science background. Despite these

criticisms and the requirement to keep and enter the author's discourse with an open mind, the book must be applauded for its unique mission to unravel the mystery behind the reckless behavior of

the North by seeking to explain how that nation views itself and its relationship to the rest of the world.