

РЕЦЕНЗИИ

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The Korean puzzle: A view from India**K. K. Khudoley*

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One of the most complex challenges to contemporary international relations has been the Korean question. Dating all the way back to the Cold War (it manifested most saliently during the Korean War of 1950–1953), in the 21st century it evolved gradually, taking on a new quality as a result of the emergence of North Korea's nuclear arms and missile program. Thus, the Korean question outgrew the scope of being a purely regional problem to become closely associated with the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and some other global issues. Hence, there has been a growing interest on the part of politicians, diplomats, and academics in the current status and trends characterizing the developments in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean Peninsula. Most recently, a series of comprehensive studies regarding these problems have been published. One of those is a collective monograph put together by experts at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses.

The composition of the book under review is quite logical. It comprises four parts which progressively deal with the general issues of international relations around the Korean Peninsula, namely the likelihood of signing a peace treaty, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, sanctions, demilitarized zone and the like, the policies of major actors (i.e. USA, China, Russia, Republic of Korea, and Japan), India's approach to the Korean problem, as well as the key results of the Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un summits in Singapore (2018) and Hanoi (2019). All of those parts are written by highly qualified experts, many of whom have had extensive experience in both the academic and practical aspects

* Review of the book *Major Powers and Korean Peninsula: Politics, Policies and Perspectives*. East Asia Strategic Review. Ed. by Title Basu. Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses. New Delhi, 2019. 373 p.

of diplomacy and defense. The team of Indian scholars have undertaken a thorough analysis of the issues at hand, drawing on a wide range of primary sources and academic literature. Therefore, I will focus only on the issues open to discussion.

The book offers both detailed and elegant analysis of the general situation around the Korean peninsula and of the key actors' plans. Nowadays, the center stage belongs not so much to multilateral as bilateral talks and relationships. One cannot but agree with the authors that the meetings between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un have significantly strengthened North Korea's international standing (for the first time the two leaders communicated "as equals" — p. 36), but the likelihood that they would reach agreement on normalizing relations was not very high due to ginormous mutual distrust (p. 140). The situation in Korea is being increasingly impacted by a growing rivalry between the U.S. and China. Neither of the two powers would object to Korea's reunification as long as the latter stays clear of the other rivaling country's sphere of influence. At this point, the reunification is hardly possible even hypothetically. Russia, as the book rightly notes, does not condone Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, yet it would rather see stability preserved in Northeast Asia. Perhaps, it is worth adding that Russia's commitment to stability in this region derives from its desire to counteract "color revolutions" in any part of the globe (when Kim Jong-un took over power, some in Russia's establishment feared that a "color revolution" might occur in North Korea) and to maintain the elements of the Yalta-Potsdam system, which have remained in Northeast Asia much more intact than in Europe. Given the context of marking the 75th anniversary of victory in the Second World War, this is of particular importance for the Russian leadership. Thus, the authors of the book are right to argue that "for the time being, status quo serves the interests of all parties as every stakeholder shuns war" (p. 131). This is largely consistent with our own line of thinking that "the situation will be suspended, but not forever" [1, p. 211].

A recurring of the 2016–2017 confrontation is rather unlikely, but other than that, the situation may unfold in any way imaginable. Moreover, this could happen in quite a precipitous and unpredictable manner. Neither it is likely that the status quo persist even in the medium term.

One of the most pressing and debatable issues is the effectiveness of sanctions imposed on the DPRK. The authors note that North Korea has not followed through the UN Security Council resolutions, meanwhile, a number of countries have failed to comply with those altogether. As the book argues, "it is not in Chinese or Russian national interests to push North Korea towards instability owing to the effective implementation of sanctions" (p. 8). In several passages, it is also suggested that sanctions had not been effective in general (p. 66–68, 115). The latter argument seems particularly debatable. Indeed, history does not present too many cases, in which a state under the threat of sanctions would comply with all the requirements imposed on it. Still, in most cases, sanctions have had a deterrent effect, forcing states to act more cautiously. It is highly likely that Pyongyang would have gone much further in developing its nuclear missile program had it not been for the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in 2016–2017. Their effect is also evidenced by the fact that North Korea is constantly raising the question of their removal or relaxation. In that sense, their effectiveness has reached its limit and one should not expect anything more of them (p. 83–84) — the authors are quite clear-eyed about this — yet, those sanctions can be used as bargaining chips in negotiating with North Korea (p. 67).

In our view, the book would greatly benefit if Part II had a separate chapter with a generalized analysis of North Korea's internal politics and economics — the factors that determine its behavior in the international arena. Comparing the opinions of various experts would be particularly important here since the data on North Korea are sketchy and unreliable, invariably requiring careful verification. In considering discussions about the stability of the North Korean regime, the Indian scholars are inclined to believe that currently there are no serious domestic threats to it (p.6). In our opinion, the North Korean regime could have collapsed in the 1990s had there been strong international pressure, when after the disintegration of the USSR and Kim Il-sung's death the country was experiencing severe crisis. The current DPRK leader Kim Jong-un managed to consolidate the regime rather speedily, and the nuclear missile program in large part contributed to that. So, it is quite true that “North Korea is unlikely to dismantle its nuclear capabilities since nuclear weapons are perceived critical to regime survival” (p.6). Indeed, Kim Jong-un's claim that North Korea created the most powerful state that Koreans have ever witnessed in their 5000-year history is appealing to both the upper stratum and the population at large.

There are many “blank pages” in the story of the North Korean nuclear missile program. Still, as argued by the authors of the book, it likely dates back to the mid 1950s (p.46). Initially, attempts to train students in nuclear related professions had been made already prior to the outbreak of the Korean War [2, p. 135–139]. And it was only due to the lack of qualified instructors that North Korea was later compelled to turn to the USSR for help in these matters. The Pyongyang nuclear missile program seems to have gone through two phases. The first one was about creating weapons of deterrence to blackmail other states for economic assistance, while the second one appeared more ambitious — it was about dramatically boosting the country's international standing. One would have to concede that at this point “North Korea is a de-facto nuclear power” (p.40), which also implies that this may lead to deterioration of the international situation. One should reckon with the probability that North Korea could also assist other states that are willing to develop nuclear missile weapons in circumventing the non-proliferation regime. Meanwhile, the chances that North Korea will reform itself and integrate into the world economy remain quite slim.

Naturally, of particular interest are the Indian scholars' assessments of the Soviet and Russian policies towards the Korean Peninsula. They admit that now it is hard to say whether or not the USSR really wanted that North Korea obtain nuclear weapons (p.50). Of course to answer this question conclusively would be possible only after all Russian and North Korean archives have been declassified. Still, during the Cold War, for a variety of reasons the USSR sought to be the sole possessor of nuclear weapons within the Communist bloc. This was one of the main causes for its conflict with China in the late 50s — early 60s. The chances that the Soviet Union would have made an exception for Pyongyang, given that their relations had been strained ever since the mid-50s, were not high. At present, the Russian establishment do not approve of DPRK's efforts to develop its nuclear missile program, however, they believe that it is more of a headache for Washington rather than Moscow.

As the book rightly points out, “Russia is the only major player in Northeast Asia that has a stable relationship with both the Koreas” (p.252). Yet, in the context of its ongoing confrontation with the West, the pro-North Korean bias in the Russian politics has gone

up somewhat. And this is not due solely to the fact that the approaches of Moscow and Pyongyang to a number of international problems are either close or coincide. The idea of the state with authoritative model of capitalism being superior to that with liberal democracy has become widespread among members of the ruling class in Russia. In this sense, the idea is fully applicable to North Korea. For example, according to State Duma parliamentarian Kazbek Taisayev, if Korea's reunification were to take place, it would likely follow the formula "one country — two systems" with North Korea's socio-economic model leading the way [3].

Still, with its status as a de-facto nuclear power gaining foothold, North Korea may take a tougher stance towards Russia as well.

It would be advisable if the book's authors elaborate in more detail on a prospective trilateral cooperation between Russia, the DPRK, and the Republic of Korea. The two major projects — constructing a gas pipeline and linking the railway networks — remain no more than just talking points. Unlike Kim Jong-il who supported the construction of a gas pipeline, Kim Jong-un avoids being specific. Connecting the railway networks of the three countries would require not only a huge amount of investment but also a degree of confidence that the constructed network would be used at full capacity. The question of whether North Korea would allow passenger trains to cross over its territory remains open. The lack of infrastructure, be it in just a few sectors of the economy which would have to unite the markets, does not add to stability of the region either.

The book repeatedly asserts the existence of traditionally friendly ties between the peoples of India and Korea, which date back as early as the Middle Ages. In this regard, a legend is cited of the Korean King Suro marrying Suriratna, an Indian princess from Ayodhya. Then, there is a mention of D. Nehru's fellow feeling for the Korean liberation movement, R. Tagore's admiration for Korean culture, as well as India's stance within the UN on the Korean question after World War II and particularly after the Korean War (1950–1953) (p. 284–286). Meanwhile, India tries to maintain an unbiased position, having established consular (1962) and then diplomatic relations (1973) with the two Koreas simultaneously. India has elevated its relations with the Republic of Korea to the level of Special Strategic Partnership and, at the same time, continues to be a key trading partner for North Korea, keeping political dialogue with it open on a variety of matters. It is remarkable that Pyongyang's active engagement with Pakistan has not negatively affected India's relations with North Korea (p. 319). Still, the book points out that currently there is not much appetite in Korea for any initiatives coming from India, while the latter is not proactive in that respect either (p. 299). Hence, a conclusion is made that "in fact India does not appear to have any viable locus stand in the security and political issues between North and South Korea" (p. 299) and, even more categorically, that "India will do well to stay out" [p. 40]. At present, this seems to hold true. However, when the current power balance in Northeast Asia is shifted, India's initiatives both within the UN and as directed towards the two Koreas may come in handy.

Overall, the collective monograph by the scholars at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses is undoubtedly making an important contribution to the study of the Korean question, which encourages debate and promotes comparison of views on this complex aspect of contemporary international relations.

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