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Charles K. Armstrong. *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950-1992.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. 328 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-5082-2.

Reviewed by Mitchell Lerner (The Ohio State University)

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Not Crazy After All These Years

In December 2011, the *Onion*, that great satirical newspaper, opened with the headline, “Kim Jong-Un Privately Doubting He’s Crazy Enough To Run North Korea.” Over the next few pages, the writers for the *Onion* described Kim’s alleged concerns about his future regime, concluding that, “While emphasizing that he was definitely completely insane and would likely become even more so as leader of North Korea, the younger Kim nevertheless wondered if he could ever be enough of a lunatic to truly replace the most unhinged dictator on the planet.”^[1] Other voices, often more serious than the *Onion*’s, have echoed the description: “We don’t know much about North Korea and who this Kim Jong-il is,” proclaimed Congressman Jay Kim (R-CA) in 1998. “I understand he is not a rational individual.”^[2] And the widely known stories, of mass starvation and poverty; of drug trafficking, counterfeiting, and money laundering; of prison camps and repression; and especially of a personality cult that is arguably unrivaled in modern history, seem to confirm the popular image of a crazed land run by deranged leaders. Charles Armstrong’s *Tyranny of the Weak*, however, suggests otherwise. Armstrong’s study of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) foreign policy during and after the Cold War asks the reader to, above all else, take North Korea seriously and recognize the skill with which its leadership has often played its weak diplomatic hand. The country’s ability to survive, he explains, “in a precarious international position, extracting maximum concessions from its ma-

jor allies (and occasionally even its enemies) despite its objective weakness, has in its own way been a remarkable achievement.” Yet, he laments, few works have attempted to explain North Korea’s foreign relations in an extended and systematic fashion (p. 5). In *Tyranny of the Weak*, Armstrong, over the course of almost three hundred pages that cover almost fifty years, shows us just how much we can learn by doing so.

The early part of the book focuses on the Korean War period and its immediate aftermath. Armstrong integrates the latest materials from archives of the former communist bloc states, not only in his efforts to evaluate Kim Il Sung’s decision to cross the 38th parallel in June 1950, but also in his detailed study of the war’s progression. The material here is generally not new, although certain aspects, notably the detailed focus on the DPRK occupation of the South, and on the U.S. and Republic of Korea’s re-education plans during the occupation of the North, are particularly interesting and informative. Armstrong also argues for a post-revisionist approach to our understanding of the outbreak of the war, one that posits a middle ground between the orthodox interpretation that portrays Soviet leaders as manipulative puppet masters directing the invasion and the revisionists who argued that the conflict was a civil war that became internationalized only in its later years due to the interference of the superpowers, especially the United States. Recent evidence, Armstrong argues, shows that while the com-

munist superpowers certainly played critical roles, the most significant influence was that of Kim Il Sung himself, who manipulated them to the best of his ability, and who was responding to a number of indigenous factors including the ongoing guerilla war with the South that existed before June 1950 and the genuine (and not totally unreasonable) fear that the South would strike across the parallel first. Northern agency and pre-1950 Korean dynamics were thus critical, Armstrong notes, and hence the war was more than just an international war between proxies and more than just a civil war that went global; it was a civil war and an international conflict at the same time, one born in local circumstances and driven by local actors even while it had a clearly international component.

The real focus of the book, however, begins in the mid-1950s, particularly in December 1955, with Kim Il Sung's famous *Juche* speech (formally titled "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing *Juche* in Ideological Work"), which he delivered to the Presidium of the Korean Workers Party Central Committee. *Juche*, which would soon become the central ideological construct of DPRK society, preached independent policymaking and self-reliance, and the diminution (if not outright exclusion) of external influence. "If we ignore the history of our country and the traditions of our people," Kim warned, "and take no account of our realities and the level of preparedness of our people, and copy from foreign experience mechanically, it will lead us to commit dogmatic errors and will do much harm to the revolutionary cause."³ *Juche* remains one of the most hotly debated topics in the historiography of the DPRK. Scholars have suggested that it served as a way for Kim to advance his political power by discrediting his political opponents as being insufficiently Korean; as a tool to manipulate the North Korean masses by rallying them behind a nationalist construct and a "Great Leader" who directed the nation in accordance with its precepts; as a genuine reflection of a Korean value system with deep roots in the nation's past; and even as a propaganda tool designed largely for external audiences, a tool whose influence has been greatly exaggerated by outside observers. Armstrong, however, adds another element to the discussion, stressing *juche* as a means for Kim to assert his nation's independence in the foreign policy realm, even if it created tensions with his erstwhile allies in China and the USSR. Kim, in this account, recognized from even the early Cold War years that he did not necessarily agree with all of the international policies of the communist superpowers, and needed to ensure "wiggle

room" for the DPRK in the future. The *juche* speech, in this depiction, was thus not just about politics or domestic life but was the start of a fifty-year effort to chart an independent course that often contrasted with the path preferred by the Soviets and Chinese. It was, Armstrong notes, "the beginning of North Korea's divergence from the Moscow-dominated international socialist community, a declaration of independence from Soviet control and influence" (p. 90).

From there, Armstrong takes the reader through a broad history of North Korean foreign relations that goes all the way through the post-Cold War period, and which emphasizes Kim's efforts to maintain his nation's independent policymaking while manipulating his allies and even sometimes his enemies, largely by playing them off against each other and capitalizing on interbloc rivalries, as well as by reaching out to the nonaligned world when it suited his purposes to do so. No short review could do justice to the number of international developments examined in *Tyranny*, but Armstrong leaves few stones unturned as he follows Kim's path from the critical 1956 Plenum in which he purged his Soviet- and Chinese-allied critics and thus centralized his power; through the often-changing dynamics of relations with the South and with Japan; through the impact of the Vietnam War and the "Second Korean War" of the late 1960s; through the fight for recognition at the United Nations and other international organizations; through the Third World outreach efforts of the early 1970s; through the succession of Kim Jong Il and the end of the Cold War; and above all else, through the DPRK's place within the Sino-Soviet relationship. Through all of the stories, a few constants emerge: Kim's skill in manipulating the Sino-Soviet split; the determination of Northern leaders to preserve their independent decision making authority; the North's steady albeit generally unsuccessful desire to increase its standing among the nonaligned nations; and the inability of both American power and globalization to penetrate the North. In the end, Armstrong notes, the North should be viewed not as an incomprehensible place led by incomprehensible leaders but as a weak nation that was able to compensate for its relative lack of power through skillful diplomacy that in the end won it aid, influence, and standing far out of proportion with its strength. "The DPRK," he concludes, "played its very weak hand against its Great Power neighbors quite skillfully, and if the goal of the North Korean regime was to maintain its autonomy and integrity over the long haul, then it succeeded better than any other small socialist state in the world" (p. 136).

The result is a wonderful book. Armstrong covers more topics in more depth than one would think possible in a work of such moderate length, and he does so without ever losing the narrative or overwhelming the reader. He integrates sources from across the globe, with particular emphasis on the most recent documents from the fallen Soviet-bloc states. A few areas are particularly informative, notably his discussions of the postwar rebuilding of Pyongyang and Hamhung; the North's outreach efforts towards the nonaligned movement in the 1970s; and the impact of the 1988 Seoul Olympics on the DPRK. But it is a terrific book overall, a virtual tour de force of North Korea and its relationship with the Cold War world.

Despite my admiration for the book, there are two omissions whose inclusion might have made it stronger. First, there is no conclusion, only an epilogue that looks at the DPRK's last decade and which seems a bit forced and out of place here. One waits in vain for Armstrong to draw broader conclusions from his study about weak states versus strong states, about the fluidity of the Cold War alliance system, about the nature of power in the international arena overall. The introduction even hints at such an approach and a few brief statements are scattered throughout, but without a larger conclusion to tie it together, this remains an excellent book about North Korean foreign policy whose larger lessons are not applied beyond its borders.

Second, there is not much of an effort to examine the extent to which domestic forces influenced DPRK policy. Armstrong largely ignores the school of thought that finds Kim's foreign policy to be, at least to some degree, intended to preserve his regime by creating situations that he could use for domestic propaganda and/or justification for the nation's shortcomings under his leadership. Kim's wave of bellicosity in the 1960s, for example, emerges in this book as a genuine product of his desire to unify the peninsula in light of changing international circumstances, without much consideration about how changes at home might have influenced him as well. Yet, recent evidence suggests a greater role for domestic influence than Armstrong suggests; one letter from East German officials in Pyongyang in the late 1960s, for example, observed the growing tension between the North and the United States and its allies, and concluded, "Probably for the DPRK, there are mostly propagandistic reasons behind the present positions."⁴ Czech officials in the North agreed, noting that the "spreading military psychosis had other functions, like distracting people from the existing economic difficulties, 'justifying' stagnation

of the standard of living, demanding the strictest discipline and obedience, and preventing any criticism."⁵ These two forces, of course, are not mutually exclusive; Kim could (in fact, almost certainly did) shape his policies with an eye towards both foreign and domestic imperatives, which were in many cases mutually reinforcing. Still, readers hoping to find some discussion of the internal motives behind DPRK policy will likely be disappointed by what they find here.

Still, these are fairly minor concerns that perhaps reflect my own unfair desire for the author to have addressed the topics that I wanted him to address, rather than the topics that he did address. Overall, Armstrong has succeeded brilliantly at what he set out to do: examine the foreign policy of Cold War North Korea in a way that moves beyond cliché and recognizes its successes as well as its failures. The book is thoughtful, comprehensive, convincing, and provocative. It covers familiar territory in unfamiliar ways, and places unfamiliar territory into comprehensible yet original frameworks. In the end, *Tyranny of the Weak* will likely stand for years as the best work on the topic in existence.

Notes

[1]. Kim Jong-Un Privately Doubting He's Crazy Enough To Run North Korea, *The Onion*, December 18, 2011, <http://www.theonion.com/articles/kim-jongun-privately-doubting-hes-crazy-enough-to-18374/> (last accessed October 19, 2013).

[2]. *U.S. Policy toward North Korea*, Hearing Before the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House Of Representatives, One Hundred Fifth Congress, Second Session, September 24, 1998, available online at http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/intlrel/hfa52334.000/hfa52334_of.htm (last accessed October 17, 2013).

[3]. Kim Il Sung, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing *Juche* in Ideological Work," in *Kim Il Sung, Selected Works, Volume I* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1964), 584.

[4]. Letter to Secretary of State and First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Comrade Hegen, from Embassy of the GDR in the DPRK, December 12, 1966, reprinted in Mitchell Lerner, "Mostly Propaganda in Nature," *North Korea International Documentation Project*, Working Paper #3 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010), document #2, 52-53.

[5]. "Information about the Situation in Korea," available online at: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114572> (last February 4, 1968, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Czech Foreign Ministry Archives, accessed October 20, 2013).

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