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NORTH KOREA Another Country
By Bruce Cumings.
Reviewed by Stephen Kotkin

Communism collapsed. Well, not exactly. Not in Cuba and not across Asia. It did give way in Mongolia and Afghanistan, both Soviet satellites, but indigenous communist regimes persist in China, Vietnam and North Korea. In the U.S. imagination though, Pyongyang stands apart.

Kim Jong Il's neighbors cannot ignore his saber-rattling and refugees, but Japan, China, Russia and especially South Korea have not seemed overly panicked. So what's the fuss in the United States? Could North Korea's alleged nukes and misfiring missiles really menace the American homeland? As for Pyongyang's possible proliferation, why not help reinvigorate the International Atomic Energy Agency? Must Washington police the planet? And must all countries come to resemble the American system? Why not let those in the neighborhood confront or engage the addled workers' paradise?

North Korea, insists Bruce Cumings, is indeed an American concern a stance he shares with his bete noire, axis-of-evil antagonists. But whereas hawks urge a toppling, he writes of the North Koreans that it is their country, for better or worse another country. And yet, he contends in six timely essays (some familiar from his many expert books), the United States contributed mightily to the North Korean predicament and Americans should acknowledge this forgotten responsibility and negotiate a permanent peace.

In some of this compact volume's most effective passages, Cumings quotes prominent U.S. journalists on the showdown with North Korea CIA estimates of one or two bombs, doomsday alarms to act now before he reveals that the quotations come from 1991-94. Today's hullabaloo is a rerun. He counters the hype with an instructive history.

One chapter documents the roots of the North Korean revolution in the 1930's anti-Japanese guerrilla war in Manchuria, which more than Soviet tanks brought Kim Il Sung and his cohorts to power. Another examines the dynastic succession of his son, Kim Jong II, who works at home in his pajamas, like an information economy habite, but in public sports polyester leisure suits, pointy-toed elevator shoes and oversize sunglasses of malevolent tint, like a throwback idol. Meanwhile, his illegitimate son craves a Ferrari, and his adopted daughter scorns communism's tedium for Switzerland's high life hints of elite defection.

These insights are served up with liberal doses of anti-American- imperialism castor oil and North Korean sugar tablets. On my infrequent visits to the country, Cumings writes, I have been happy, adding that empathy for the underdog is
something I can’t help, being a life-long fan of the Cleveland Indians.

Penal colonies hold 100,000 to 150,000 people, over half of them political prisoners, Cumings reports. But he deems the gulag both smaller than usually asserted and survivable, partly because detainees’ families are incarcerated with them. Free adults face military induction for eight-year terms, the first six without home leave. It’s a garrison state (7 million of its 23 million people are in the army or reserves), but he points out that conscripts labor in construction or agricultural brigades. A multiyear famine continues to starve and kill. What holds it together?

Politically, North Korea is not a nice place, but it is an understandable place, Cumings writes, an anti-colonial and anti-imperial state growing out of a half century of Japanese colonial rule and another half century of continuous confrontation with a hegemonic United States and a more powerful South Korea. In other words, the country’s staying power as well as its deformations (the author’s euphemism) supposedly emanate not from communist ideology and censorship but from its historical crucible, especially the holocaust, as he puts it, that the North underwent during the Korean War.

Cumings damns the Bush administration the greater evil for refusing the pleas of this shrewd despotic regime to lift it out of its post-Soviet soup and protect it from being swallowed up by the South.

Yet of the reforms under way in North Korea, Cumings skeptically points out that the bureaucracy divides into incommunicative fiefs while the dominant military reveres and profits from the status quo. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is the pride of elites stuck on the memory of how, until the 1970’s, the North outperformed the South. Trapped in a time warp, the system awaits an inescapable generational change.


Credit: The New York Times

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