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Book Reviews

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As international concerns over North Korea mount daily, one finds in this critical text an expansive, almost holistic, approach to dealing with a recalci-trant Pyongyang. Although Walter C. Clemens Jr. tackles the serious subjects of his subtitle—human rights, arms control, and negotiation strategy—he broaches many more and, fundamentally, the existential crisis of negotiating with evil. Sadly, the twentieth century posed the same dilemma—from the Nazis to the Balkans and then some. The question remains most pronounced today in dealing with North Korea, as the United States and the international community weigh actions against North Korea to curtail its rapid missile and nuclear development. Clemens, in the end, comes down on the side of the Churchillian adage that “meeting jaw to jaw is better than war.”

Clemens invokes the Soviet analysts of the Cold War, who struggled with the question of dialogue with what they saw as a menacing Moscow. Though the Soviet expanse (and arsenal) augured in different ways, this foundation is important for approaching a nuclearizing North Korea today. The state entity, as the author suggests, is essentially a Soviet and Stalinist derivative. Clemens does much more, though, striking at the roots of a Korean Peninsula that found its twentieth-century realities defined by colonialism, civil conflict, and war. Location is essential, and the problems of the peninsula—then and now—derive in great part from the clash of foreign interests. Of course, the essential Koreanness of its folklore and adapted Confucian precepts speak to the division of last century and the North’s mythmaking. Moreover, language, power, politics, Christianity, egalitarianism, education, and democracy all play critical roles in the evolution of the two Koreas.

An advantage of the author’s generalist approach is a lean toward questions that Koreanists might avoid, such as his asking how Korea became Japan. He compiles chapters on fundamental issues—the cultural and historical element, an exposition of how North Korea got the bomb, and the greater questions of negotiating with evil, human insecurity, and the collective duty to protect. Some readers may find this approach too segmented. I like these “books within a book,” as it makes the text teachable and allows the more casual reader to jump to areas of interest. Clemens’s introductions at chapter openings span time, literature, and philosophies, lending themselves in lyrical ways.

Should we bargain with the devil, the author asks, answering (from Robert Mnookin), not always but more often than one would like (p. 142). Clemens
weighs fully the policy dilemma of negotiating with the most unsavory of interlocutors, and from this point onward, he lays out the experiences, lessons learned, and remaining hope for dialogue. The perceived failings of the Agreed Framework that followed the first nuclear crisis of 1993 and 1994 might well give way to a return to suggestions of a grand bargain, and indeed the discussions of today ask just what incentives might lead North Korea to trade off its missile and nuclear capabilities.

The author’s final section is his strongest, examining pariahs and why North Korea is not Iran, what to do about or with China, and how to deal with North Korea in the end. He suggests 10 approaches to the North Korean regime: from ignoring it (popular in some circles) to bombing it (an America First approach) to intensifying international sanctions and pressure (the flavor of today).

Though Clemens provides a thorough overview of disjunctures in Barack Obama’s approach, one feels at the text’s conclusion the need for an addendum on the Donald Trump administration’s North Korea policy, to include consideration of Trump tweets and bellicose rhetoric, unsettling to South Korea and others used to North Korean bombast, but not that of a U.S. president. Sadly, Trump’s utterances feed North Korea’s propaganda machine and fuel mistrust, checking the author’s better approaches. Clemens dedicates the book in part to the memories of scholar Robert Scalapino and diplomat Stephen Bosworth, two wise men for whom this world yearns when pursuing peace in Northeast Asia.

Stephen Noerper

Columbia University and the Korea Society


Amitai Etzioni’s new book is an important contribution to the burgeoning literature on the future of Sino-U.S. relations. Like many other recent entries in this sweepstakes, Etzioni is concerned by the deteriorating relations between the world’s two dominant nations. However, unlike those whom he terms “adversarians,” he contends that the friction is less a consequence of long-term Chinese plans to supplant the United States (Michael Pillsbury, China’s Secret Strategy to Replace the United States), or the structural tensions inherent in the relations with an established a rising power (Graham Allison’s Destined for War), and more a result of misguided policy choices that are creating unnecessary friction and a downward spiral to conflict.