

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce Bechtol, *The Last Days of Kim Jong-Il: The North Korean Threat in a Changing Era, Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books, 2013, 195 pp.*

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The months since the succession of the youthful Kim Jong Un to the position of Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have been accompanied by widespread speculation over the future directions that the international community can expect from Pyongyang for the foreseeable future. Such interest is warranted, given the pattern of unpredictable behavior that has emanated from North Korea in preceding decades, hence the extent of the scholarly debates over the intentions of the North Korean leadership.

It is in the midst of this debate that Bruce Bechtol has published *The Last Days of Kim Jong-Il: The North Korean Threat in a Changing Era*. To the extent that Bechtol seeks to cast a specific interpretation of the North Korean leadership that remains implacably hostile to the outside world, Bechtol's publication is exhaustive in its detail and elegantly cogent in its logical analysis. Bechtol's manuscript utilizes wide-ranging fieldwork interviews with, and testimonies from, North Korean defectors to paint a lucid portrayal of the inner workings of the DPRK leadership. Such supposed access to the inner workings of North Korea have enabled Bechtol to develop a compelling case that places the North Korean leadership's explicit culpability behind the sinking of the Republic of Korea (ROK) corvette *Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeongpyong Island in 2010 that led to a total of 50 South Korean deaths.

Furthermore, in light of the aforementioned North Korean attacks on the ROK, Bechtol's analysis deserves credit for underlining Pyongyang's adoption of a strategy of asymmetric warfare. Such a development is not surprising, given the conventional force superiority of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S. nuclear umbrella over South

Korea. Under such circumstances, a direct, all-out North Korean attack on the South would lead to a counter-attack that brings about the collapse of the DPRK itself. Rather than risk such a suicidal outcome, a posture of asymmetric threats, incorporating commando raids, tunnel infiltration, submarines and covert deployment of radiological devices, is perfectly logical as the instrument of choice on the part of the Pyongyang regime. In light of the potential for instability in North Korea resulting from the transition to Kim Jong Un, such threats have to be taken seriously by policymakers in Seoul and Washington.

At the same time, however, Bechtol's manuscript falls short in three key respects. Firstly, *The Last Days of Kim Jong-Il* is lacking in critical self-reflection of Bechtol's own starting assumption that the North Korean leadership has maintained an unwavering posture of implacable hostility towards the ROK and U.S. This is evident in Bechtol's uncritical citation of testimonies from North Korean defectors. Whilst the latter do provide a valuable insight into the workings of Pyongyang, the veracity of defectors' claims has to be qualified. Whilst many North Koreans who flee have been driven by famine, other defectors – in particular, the privileged elite who were privy to the DPRK's policymaking apparatus, and whose testimony Bechtol so heavily relied upon – are abandoning a position of comfort within the North Korean political hierarchy. This in turn suggests that such defectors may have an axe to grind with the DPRK's government, thereby potentially undermining the objectivity of their testimony. Furthermore, as most North Korean defectors choose to settle in the ROK or U.S., many may have a vested interest in exaggerating their usefulness to the political leadership of their new home. Thus, for instance, the highest profile DPRK in history, Hwang Jang Yop, repeatedly claimed that North Korea remained intent on developing nuclear weapons even after the signing of the Agreed Framework. Some months later, Hwang himself admitted that he had no proof to support his claims.¹ More recently, another defector, Shin Dong-hyuk, admitted that he had exaggerated and falsified many aspects of his account of life in a North Korean gulag, *Escape from Camp 14*.² Under such circumstances, whilst the testimony of North Korean defectors does offer a valuable insight into the workings of Pyongyang, it would be necessary to qualify the objectivity of such a source of information.

A second problematic aspect of Bechtol's manuscript concerns his narrowly selective choice of source material. Although he assured

readers of his intention to ‘consider dissenting views’ (in the context of the sinking of the *Cheonan*), Bechtol’s work shows little evidence of such neutrality and even-handedness, both in the context of his examination of the *Cheonan* sinking, and his analysis in general. It is notable that Bechtol does not mention separate investigations by Chinese and Russian naval officers that suggest that the ROK corvette may instead have been sunk by a stray naval mine.³ A similarly skewed review of military data characterizes other aspects of *The Last Days of Kim Jong-Il* as part of Bechtol’s call for affirmation of the U.S.-ROK deterrence posture against North Korea. Urging an increase in U.S. arms exports to the ROK, Bechtol warned, “a shortage of fighter aircraft will occur in coming years as it is forced to replace decades old F-4 and F-5 jets.”⁴ Such an appraisal conveniently overlooks the fact that the ROK’s replacement of its second-line F-4s and F-5s has been underway for decades, and its current frontline strength consists of more than 200 F-15s and F-16s. By way of comparison, the frontline strength of the North Korean Air Force consists of 30 MIG29s (in the event of a war, this number would likely be smaller due to the shortages of fuel and spare parts). It is almost as if Bechtol began his manuscript with his intended conclusion that the existing deterrence capabilities of the U.S.-ROK alliance should be further strengthened against North Korea, then cherry-picked the data to support his argument.

The third and most significant flaw of Bechtol’s work stems from his downplaying the possibility of alternative interpretations behind the intentions of the North Korean leadership. Throughout his manuscript, Bechtol emphasizes the pattern of aggressive North Korean behavior toward the ROK and its continuation for the foreseeable future. This reviewer fully acknowledges that the DPRK’s actions are transgressions against the ROK’s security and sovereignty. Neither is the author downplaying Pyongyang’s appalling human rights record or its development of nuclear missiles in the midst of severe famine gripping its people. Yet, it is notable that Bechtol does not consider the possibility of alternative interpretations of the factors that have led to North Korea’s aggressive behavior in the first place. Under many circumstances, the aggressive conduct of a regional state with hostile intentions against its neighbor may be difficult to distinguish from the desperate actions of regime fearful for its survival. Malicious leaderships intent on regional military conquest are a part of international politics, under which circumstance a pattern

of armed actions against their neighbours can be expected. Yet, the world of international politics also finds regional despots who, driven by paranoia and fear of their neighbours, have come to the conclusion that the ‘best defense is offense’ – even if the logical policy prescription includes lashing out at their neighbours in a manner little different from an aggressive conqueror.

Such dynamics reflect the logic of the security dilemma, within which the difficulty policymakers face in distinguishing their rivals’ intentions as offensive or defensive may have the inadvertent effect of causing their hostile relationship to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. What is important, then, (and absent from Bechtol’s work) is critical reflection on the factors from ROK and U.S. policymakers that have arguably led to Pyongyang’s deeply entrenched siege mentality through which successive North Korean leaders have viewed Seoul and Washington.

This much is reflected by a brief recap of the pattern of inter-Korean relations for the past one and a half decades. During the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moh Hyun Administrations in Seoul, the ROK had undertaken a policy of engagement (known as the Sunshine Policy) with Pyongyang, under which the DPRK received generous economic aid and humanitarian assistance. It is notable that North Korean transgressions against the South during this period were few and far between (the exceptions being the missile and nuclear tests of 2006 – and these appear to have been aimed at Washington in retaliation for the Bush Administration’s attempt to clamp down on North Korea’s offshore financial assets in the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia). In contrast to this, the succession of Lee Myung Bak as ROK President in 2008 led to a sharp reversal in Seoul’s North Korea policy. From his inauguration onwards, President Lee demanded improvements in North Korea’s human rights record and a complete termination of Pyongyang’s missile and nuclear programs as preconditions for any further continuation of ROK aid to the North. Seen from Pyongyang’s perspective, Lee’s actions were interpreted as a direct insult to North Korea, all the more so given that the ROK President’s position recalled two earlier incidents the DPRK’s interactions with the outside world: the Clinton Administration’s half-hearted implementation of the Agreed Framework, and the Bush Administration’s demand for complete dismantlement of the DPRK’s missile and nuclear programs.

Given that this period coincided with the height of the DPRK's famine, the North Koreans apparently came to the conclusion that Clinton and Bush were seeking to bring about the economic collapse of the DPRK through a posture of 'hostile neglect'.

Given the similarity of this position to that of Lee Myung Bak, it is apparent that the North Korean leadership saw the South Korean President's actions as a direct continuation of the coercive diplomacy that had been undertaken by Bush. Under such circumstances, the 2009 missile and nuclear tests, the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the bombardment of Yeongpyong Island are consistent with the well-known North Korean playbook of retaliating with defiance against perceived slights from Seoul and Washington. Yet, it is striking that Bechtol makes no mention of Lee Myung Bak's repudiation of the Sunshine Policy. The backdrop of South Korean actions that contributed to Pyongyang's anger is not discussed. In so doing, the impression the layman reader would have is that North Korea's transgressions against the ROK in 2009-20 came out of the blue as an unprovoked series of attacks against Seoul. Such a portrayal of these events, by neglecting to consider both sides of the story, points to a high level of bias against North Korea.

Overall, Bechtol's manuscript deserves commendation for highlighting the evolving nature of the security threat posed by North Korea's adoption of asymmetric warfare tactics. In light of the unpredictability of North Korea since the transition to Kim Jong Un, his analysis comes as a timely reminder of the need to hedge against the prospect of conflict in Northeast Asia. At the same time, however, Bechtol's work is somewhat one-sided in assuming that the North Korean leadership is driven by hostility and ambitions of conquest. Such an interpretation does not take into account the possibility that the DPRK may be driven by fear and paranoia. In this regard, whilst Bechtol's analysis affirms the case for deterrence against North Korean transgressions against the ROK, *The Last Days of Kim Jong-Il* is found to be somewhat lacking in exploring the possibility that a fear may be at the heart of the DPRK's apparently aggressive behavior. Under such circumstances, in making the case for deterrence against Pyongyang at the expense of diplomatic engagement to assuage North Korea's supposed fears, Bechtol's analysis offers the reader only a partial image of the state of inter-Korean relations.

In so casting North Korea as an existential threat to regional security that has to be deterred however, Bechtol's analysis precludes alternative policy measures that address Pyongyang's fears of the US and South Korea. In his focus on emphasizing deterrence against North Korea, Bechtol's conclusion offers, at best, a continuation of the status quo of the Cold War that has existed on the Korean Peninsula since 1953. Such a pessimistic conclusion is overly narrow in its focus, thus failing to consider alternative policy approaches aimed at stabilizing the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and engagement.

NOTES

¹ "Lacks Nuclear Proof, North Korean Says," *New York Times*, 11 July 1997.

² Catherine E. Shoichet and Madison Park, "North Korean Prison Camp Survivor Admits Inaccuracies, Author Says," *CNN*, 20 January 2015, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/18/asia/north-korea-defector-changes-story/index.html>>

³ "Russian Navy Expert Team's Analysis on the Cheonan Incident," *The Hankyoreh*, 27 July 2010, <http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/432230.html> Accessed 30 July 2010>; and "Did an American Mine Sink South Korean Ship?," *New America Media*, 27 May 2010, <<http://newamericamedia.org/2010/05/did-an-american-mine-sink-the-south-korean-ship.php>>

⁴ Bechtol, *The Last Days of Kim Jong-Il*, p. 51.