

# North Korean Review

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## ARTICLES

- Securitizing Cooperation: Nuclear Politics and Inter-Korean Relations
- Socializing a Nuclear North Korea: Human Security in Northeast Asia
- Dramatic Change in North Korea: Instability and Human Flight Propensity
- Does a Stable Identity Ensure Ontological Security? *Talbukin* in South Korea
- The North Korean Regime, Domestic Instability and Foreign Policy
- Why Expanded North Korean Sanctions Fail
- More Than Regime Survival



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accomplish mutual gain and accommodate peace. Clemens reminds academic readers that international relations is more than abstract concepts and impersonal theories, and asserts that human agency may solve our problems, noting that “determined individuals have sometimes overcome the thrust of material forces and neutered the vagaries of time and chance.”

Thus Spoke Zarathustra. And if there is such a great overman who can dissuade the fortunes of time from another grand misbehavior—another Korean War or even World War III—then we may be safe from harms way. Clemens contends that foreign affairs is not deductible from neorealist physics, but is instead shaped by the intangible mysterious power Machiavelli called *fortuna* and Nassim Taleb refers to as *black swans*. Neorealists would naturally be skeptical of such opaque idiosyncratic formulations of ultimate causation and critical of Clemens neoliberal-constructivist model for conflict resolution in North Korea and the World. Yet without such hope there is good reason for despair, as structural forces of geopolitics and the security dilemma seem to be pushing and pulling us toward the abyss.

In his final chapter, Clemens discusses the limits of rational policymaking, the possibility of parallel truths, and decision-making under uncertainty. He analyzes ten alternative approaches to limiting North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction, finally favoring traditional engagement and negotiation strategies for devising outcomes beneficial to key stakeholders. Similar to Lyle Goldstein’s proposal for “cooperation spirals” Clemens proposes a diplomatic strategy with the acronym GRIT (graduated reciprocity in tension-reduction) to achieve these results.

Although Clemens book is wise and reflective, he does not see far beyond the box of failed conventional diplomatic strategies. He nevertheless provides a comprehensive review of North Korea and the World, and makes an important and timely contribution to fathoming the greatest security danger the United States faces today. I agree with Clemens that negative sanctions will not deter the Kim regime, and that our only hope is to also offer some sort of alternative positive incentive that might encourage a change in behavior. This book is for policymakers and all Americans concerned about a belligerent, insecure and impoverished nation that is developing weapons of mass destruction that may soon be capable of annihilating a major American city in less than an hour at the push of a button. Therefore, this volume is well worth our attention.

—Shepherd Iverson, former professor at the Institute for Korean Studies, Inha University, South Korea

### ***North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un***

Gause, Ken E. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), 2015. 344 pp. Paperback \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-98-564-8053

### **North Korean Confirmation Bias**

For decades, Ken Gause has been wading through the subtleties of totalitarian leadership. With his new book, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un*, Gause draws an interesting, and complex, picture of the world’s in-fashion regime, and the running-challenges presented by its third-generation transfer of power. In late 2011, Kim Jong-il died suddenly on a train journey outside Pyongyang, North Korea. His son, Kim Jong-un, though already chosen as heir to the regime—and in the early stages of succession—was working at a deficit that neither his father nor grandfather before him had to deal with. The young Kim did not yet have a personality cult to draw legitimacy from, just as he did not have an in-depth relationship with the elite of the country. His time abroad in Switzerland, relatively young age, and insufficient time for internal propaganda to build-up a reputation equal to that of his father, made this impossible.

Walking through this uneasy transition, with all its convoluted decision-making and layer-upon-layer of bureaucratic structure, has brought Gause to develop a self-referential “model” for piecing it all together. Beginning with the execution of Kim’s uncle, Jang Song-taek, then edging slowly through descriptions of key institutions, and finishing with an analysis of the internal security apparatus, Gause draws on his previous work in the field to try and show the reader just how messy and uncertain a leadership transition of this kind is. Essentially, Kim’s leadership position and the regime seemingly buttressed around him, are in fact fluid, and in a state of “transition.” The legitimacy is absent, the loyalty is questionable, and “necessary connections” haven’t been forged. The title, as clichéd and unimaginative as it is, does spell out for the reader just how Gause sees North Korea under the new leader—“in danger of collapse.” Every purge, promotion or demotion seems to validate this for Gause. The book reaches for something new, something important about the secretive country and its leader; but fails almost entirely to grab hold.

*North Korean House of Cards* picks up from where Ken Gause’s previous books have left off, and it feels like this is a significant part of the problem. Gause is the director of the International Affairs Group at CNA (not an acronym for anything), and the author of *North Korean Civil-Military Trends: Military-First Politics to a Point*, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change* and the 2012 publication, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment: An Examination of the North Korean Police State*. Each book has been steadily better received.

Talking about his current book, Gause acknowledges that the final sections are nothing more than updates from *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment*, and that the overall presentation “leverages past research.” As the reader is edged through the internal workings of the North Korean security apparatus, of a regime stacked upon an elite core of cadres, of built-in institutions for maintaining that elite where they are (and the masses where they are), and of contingency planning for unexpected challenges—all with regular mentions of the State Security Department (SSD), Seventh Bureau (Prisons Bureau), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the Military Security Command (MSC)—it is hard to avoid the feeling that Gause is simply putting a new spin on an old publication. And this is a feeling that is forced upon the reader, whether they are aware of the author’s past works, or not.

Gause’s North Korean “model” is leveraged around regime purges. Not just Kim’s uncle, Jang Song-taek, but also those of numerous high-ranking officials across different levels of government. In this, it must be said, Gause’s analysis is certainly plausible; seeing these as the reactions of a leader unsteady in his position, nervous about alternative power centers, and fighting to avoid being overthrown. So in the case of Jang, he was removed from power and executed, by a panicked nephew who was witnessing what he believed to be a growing challenge. For every high-profile promotion, or demotion, there is a cold calculation of survival being made by the young leader. The moving out of an older hierarchy with loyalty to previous leaders, and their replacement with a new, younger, hand-chosen generation of elites. The regularity and violent nature of these reshuffles pushes the readers mind back to the Kim Il-sung’s purges of the 1950’s and 1960’s, and makes the author believe that Kim Jong-un is more ruthless and brutal than both his father and grandfather before him.

This fulfills part of the “model”: “he must slowly build his own system of rule,” after which he must start “implementing successful policies.” Working toward this, Kim has rebuilt long-running symbols of party strength: the Politburo, Secretariat, Central Military Commission, the Central Committee, and the spectacles of Party Conferences (institutions that were allowed to fall away under previous rule). It slowly creeps up on the reader, but throughout this Gause is increasingly cutting events to suit a picture he has decided, based on past experience, applies to North Korea just as it would any other country. A plausible account of events, but almost entirely unverifiable based on the nature of the sources (we will come to this later), and doubtful considering what avoids serious analysis.

Looking into the individuals gaining or holding on to power, Gause sees a military lead-

ership muscling their way into key institutions, and increasingly holding sway over Kim's rule. Rather than a sign of weakness, this could just as reasonably be considered a sign of strength. When Kim's father inherited the country from his grandfather, he was faced with an ideological crisis. The famine was forcing citizens to look at the leadership differently—they were no longer able to rely on the state for their daily needs. To deal with this shifting situation *Songun*—Military First policy—was announced, with America positioned as a greater threat than ever before, and hence everyday scarcity would be an unhappy, but necessary price to pay. And ever since his father's death, Kim Jong-un's public legitimacy has been built less on aesthetic similarities with his grandfather, and more by retroactively strengthening the image of the man who picked the current leader for the job—his father. Propaganda efforts, including public statues, are now increasingly presenting Kim Jong-il on a par with Kim Il-sung. In this, Gause doesn't just miss where Kim Jong-un's legitimacy is coming from, but also skips over the ideological nature of the country as a whole. As *Songun* (built upon an infantilizing race-based nationalism) kept the father in power, there is no reason to believe it won't do the same for the son, especially if the military are further empowered as a result. When Gause comments that Kim Jong-un "definitely has a different leadership style than his father, Kim Jong-il," he is missing the substance of it all. Playing to a military dominated support base is something that should have been expected—an old ideological game with a new face.

And in this regard, the increased oppression of the North Korean regime doesn't necessarily indicate weakness. It could just as easily mean the opposite: that of a leadership comfortable enough in their position to risk large-scale upheavals. Actions that would undoubtedly make most of the elite fearful of their own positions, but that don't ferment popular revolt or spikes in defections, are not easily read as fragility. (Just as a messy bureaucratic system certainly indicates a troublesome movement of information, but does not necessarily indicate a precarious risk to a leader). Gause tends to focus too much on the cults of personality, and the idea of a family dynasty, and not enough on the strength of ideology. It is worth remembering that this is a regime, so successful in its indoctrination, that the vast majority of people that manage to smuggle themselves out to China, and who then have access to all the information necessary in order to see the true nature of their country and the ruling Kim's, invariably smuggle themselves back in. This is not your average dictatorship. Which is why applying lessons learnt from, and models built on, foreign conditions tend not to have much value.

The second thrust of the book drills down upon the "Personal Secretariat" and the "Royal Economy," with the internal security apparatus looming large over everything. These are vital cogs, according to Gause, in Kim Jong-un's maintenance of power; with all three institutions—and alternate centers of power—inescapably intertwined and working to keep the house of cards intact. The Royal Economy controls all revenue and maintains rent allocations, while the Secretariat controls how information and policy filters down as a reality for the citizenry.

Gift giving practices—or "giftpolitik" (a hold-over from Kim's father)—are outlined, and again portrayed as a sign of inherent weakness, with Kim needing to find a new, solid, economic foundation—producing increased prosperity—or risk collapsing the state in on itself. (This rings of an economic-first mindset failing to accept the persuasiveness of a military-first ideology.) Though Gause also sees a deep state that would be opposed to such economic reform, seeing it likely to infringe upon their control. It is then also added that any reform might have the effect of loosening societal suppression, and opening a back door for regime collapse. This type of cross-dimensional hedge runs heavily through Gause's book, which has the unintended consequence of numbing the audience to any hoped-for thesis.

But once he is finished outlining all the potential caveats, Gause still misses the counterfactual. That is, North Korea has already survived the worst economic hardships imaginable, and did so by keeping the system of economic control largely in place, only allowing

private enterprise to develop within the black market. The only real loss of control coming with the failed 2009 currency reform, from which the regime quietly backed away, and returned to unchallenged dictatorial rule. The point being, there is no reason to believe that the current economic conditions of the country are any more precarious than they were for Kim's father. And if the young leader is nervous about keeping his elite wealthy and affluent, then the much documented reductions in the quantity and value of giftpolitik offerings, would indicate the opposite. Once again, what Gause sees as weakness, might just as easily be strength.

Many of the reoccurring problems with "North Korean House of Cards" likely derives from how it came to be in the first place. As with his previous book, *Coercion, Control, Surveillance, and Punishment*, it was published by the Committee on Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK). HRNK is a long-laboring, non-governmental, U.S. based think tank, which does admirable work on North Korea outside of the headline grabbing issues of nuclear tests, threats of war, and comedic fascinations. One of the ways it does this, is by publishing long-form reports/projects that governments and international bodies then commonly reference when piecing together policies and condemnations. In this case, Gause was approached by HRNK, funded by HRNK, and supplied with editorial assistants by HRNK, in order to help conceive and then write this book. This is not a book that one imagines just had to be written.

And certainly once the reader manages to shake through the extensive list of acknowledgments and dignitaries that are formally announced at the beginning of the text, it begins to feel like the overly deferential transcript of a congressional hearing. The central content has a correspondingly strange composition. A large part of Gause's analysis is laid out as an encyclopedic re-telling, and profiling, of the biographies/resumes of the upper regime figures; in the author's own words, a "who's who" of the leadership. Much of which was already publically available, obvious, and unnecessary in its depth and attention for what the book is trying to show. Page-after-page of such filler is justified by the claim that this might be useful to help any future, hypothetical, prosecutions of human rights abuses; an argument that must have gone down well with HRNK.

There is a point in the book, where Gause takes the rather extraordinary position of accepting the charges leveled against Jang Song-taek and used as justification for his purge and execution. He then goes into lengthy detail as to how it all came about, which fits nicely into Gause's "model" of North Korea and the challenges looming over Kim Jong-un's succession/rule. What source could anyone outside of Kim Jong-un's immediate circle possibly have for claims like these? The same source that Gause relies on heavily throughout his analysis—"Pyongyang-watchers." "Watcher" is an incredibly nebulous category that corresponds to anyone who spends some of their time trying to understand what is happening inside North Korea.

Leaving differences of phrasing aside, such as "author interviews" or "based on discussions in the region," the reference point "Pyongyang-watchers believe" repeats so often that it forced this reviewer to run a search through the electronic text. "Pyongyang-watcher" is mentioned as a source on 91 different occasions. Considering how much of this 300-page book involves charts of institutions and job descriptions, this is a barrage upon the readers' sensibilities. And to so heavily rely on a loose collection of opinions (how such "watchers" were selected and filtered is unclear) is a dangerous standard, especially when it is being used to justify a secondary layer of conjecture in the form of Gause's "model." Just remember that these "Pyongyang-watchers" are the same people who, in 2012, wrongly predicted *en masse*, that Kim Jong-un would likely break with his father's military-first policy and reach out to the international community.

However, 91 references to "Pyongyang-watchers" is nothing compared to the 228 mentions of the "OGD," or Organization and Guidance Department. The OGD is a shadowy organization, operating just behind the scenes of government, that manipulated Kim Jong-

il, is likely to be now manipulating Kim Jong-un, and for all intents-and-purposes is running the country. This organization is incredibly helpful for Gause and his “model,” for it seems to validate the idea that Kim’s cult of personality is being held up as a puppet for a much larger, committed-to-the-pot elite, who comprise the foundation of the house of cards; with Kim at the top, lacking any real power. If we leave aside how such an analysis clashes with what is already known about North Korean ideology, the very notion of the OGD, as anything more than a bureaucratic cog, is dubious. The core claim for the existence of this deep state organization, comes largely from the entirely unverifiable, and highly-questionable, testimony of a single, prominent defector. (The accounts of North Korean defectors are notoriously unreliable in the best of situations.)

As Ken Gause, in his own words, “develops a model to make sense of a totalitarian system built on over sixty years of the Kim family dictatorship,” he imagines three distinct consolidation phases: 1. Kim Jong-un’s designation as heir in September 2010 (before his father’s death); 2. From 2013 onward, whereby he had real power to make decisions, and was forced to find a path through the existing institutions, personalities and state policies; 3. 2015 is the date (seemingly arbitrary) of full control (if achieved), though it is hypothesized that the execution of Jang Song-taek has accelerated things.

Timelines to destruction, predictions of impending collapse, state weakness, or societal overthrows are nothing new for North Korea. For the past 70 years these predictions have routinely come and passed. The country is a rare type of black box for accurate information, and this says nothing of the difficulty of forecasting mass expressions of human psychology. But what is known for sure, is that North Korea are experts at survival. They have endured through war, famine, the collapse of global communism (though North Korea were never really communist, they did receive funding and support from communist regimes), endless provocations aimed at the world’s superpower as part of *Songun*, and now increasing levels of market liberalization and outside information that many have thought would spell an end to the hereditary dictatorship. The claim that “the Kim dynasty may be living on borrowed time. The regime has entered into its third generation, which is unheard of in the annals of recent political history,” misses the obvious problem that everything about this regime exists in those “unheard of annals,” and always has. Forecasts of 5-year collapse, such as that presented by Gause, have come and gone more times than people care to remember.

With *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un* Ken Gause blends old, established details, with large leaps of inference. And in doing so he falls into many of the same problems that other authors on the topic have done. Raw speculation doesn’t carry the same opportunity costs in North Korean studies as it does in other academic fields, for obvious reasons. And such speculation occasionally has value, such as when the Moranbong band first appeared on stage in the early days of Kim Jong-un’s rule. It was questioned at the time as to whether this might be a first step in a Deng Xiaoping-type cultural opening, rather than just a bit of fun for a spoiled leader. This now seems unlikely following other brazen pieces of personal indulgences such as the visits of Dennis Rodman, the long tours and accompanying rants over the conditions of theme parks, and appearances in public with his new wife (a significant break in tradition and social custom). The Moranbong band, just as with most of what Gause sees, are/were interesting guesses, but nothing more; and likely to be just examples of regime strength, and of a leader comfortable in his position at the top.

The “model” presented in *North Korean House of Cards* is a theory in search of information to fit it. Something Gause himself alludes to when leveraging the importance of Jang Song-taek’s execution: “there is very little evidence” and “parts of what is presented in this study is a snapshot in time that may not be grounded in truth.” But if we ignore this and take “the model” as gospel, Gause’s conclusion is this: Kim had some challenges, but now things are likely stable, and it is business as usual for the North Korean state.

—Jed Lea-Henry assistant professor, Vignan University