

Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights Into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator by Jung H. Pak New York: Penguin. 2020

In the flurry of literature on North Korea, few examples capture the intricacies of the so-called 'hermit kingdom' under the youthful leader, Kim Jong-un, as well as Jung H. Pak's *Becoming Kim Jong Un*. Following three meetings with US President Donald Trump, widely heralded for their optical value but little else, Kim Jong-un has occupied the limelight in both media and academic scholarship. Pak's book successfully unpacks the nuances within the third generation of North Korean leadership, drawing on her extensive experience as part of the US intelligence community.

Pak performs a stellar job of situating Kim Jong-un's leadership as a product of the inception of the North Korean state in 1948, the legacies of the Korean War and the rule of his predecessors Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Drawing extensively on analysis from her time in the CIA, as well as more recent sources, Pak seeks to show how 'we simultaneously underestimate and overestimate Kim's capabilities, conflate his capabilities with his intentions, and question his rationality, whilst assuming that he possesses a strategic purpose and the means to achieve his goals' (p. 9). The difficulty of unpacking 'the real Kim' poses a fundamental problematique for all analysts of North Korea.

Pak draws on a diverse repertoire to explain North Korea's behaviour under Kim Jong-un across domestic and international spheres, ranging from Kim's domestic consolidation of power marked by the execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek (p. 105); the murder of Kim Jong-nam in Kuala Lumpur in 2017 (p. 146); confronting external threats, such as through the hacking of Sony Pictures in 2014 (p. 138); to the interpersonal relationship between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. Her insightful comparisons of the two leaders—for example, 'both Trump and Kim appealed directly to the masses ... Trump did it through massive rallies and by reaching millions more with his Twitter account. Kim did it through his propaganda apparatus but also via his constant on-the-spot guidances' (p. 159)—shed particular light on the disjuncture between their convivial interpersonal relations and stalled dialogue at the interstate level.

Arguably, the most potent aspects of Pak's work lie in her recommendations for how the international community, specifically the United States, can develop more fruitful policy towards North Korea. Pak rightly stresses how 'Kim's interests thus lie in conflict not peace,

in autarky rather than integration, and in the possession of nuclear weapons, which make his survival and long-term Kim family control possible, not denuclearization' (p. 235). Coordinated international action must manifest in a robust alliance system with South Korea. The involvement of China is also vital. Yet given Kim Jong-un's recent *rapprochement* with China—albeit in a fluctuating fashion—and the failure of the Six-Party Talks in the 2000s, the 'five-party talks' between South Korea, Japan, US, China and Russia, which Pak proposes, are unlikely to succeed. They will continue to be seen by the DPRK as part and parcel of a hostile international order, with which it should make no compromises. Moreover, while increasing what Pak calls 'Kim's perception of regime fragility' is necessary for any domestic change, how plausible is such a situation, given that Kim has already declared the completion of the DPRK's nuclear force? Although Pak rightly calls for greater attention to be paid to North Korean human rights issues, its attitude of seeing pressure for human rights in the same vein as condemnation of its nuclear programme—namely as part of a US 'hostile policy'—will pose a challenge for any further negotiations with the DPRK.

There is notable emphasis on how the reunification of the peninsula remains a goal of Kim, true to the wishes of his father and grandfather (p. 235). But how can we reconcile these ambitions with Kim's initial overtures towards Trump, his declaration of the completion of the country's nuclear ambitions, and his shift from the *byungjin* line of parallel nuclear and economic development towards the 'new strategic line' of domestic economic development? These actions might suggest that while reunification has not disappeared as an ultimate aim, it has been intertwined with, and even superseded by, other, more pressing, short-term priorities. Even with the DPRK's recent displays of its expanding missile capabilities, which came after the publication of Pak's work, should we assume that any concessions, grandiose or paltry, remain off the table? While Pak seems to think so, it is important to consider Kim Il-sung's voracious pursuit of normalization of relations with the United States in the 1990s. Of course, North Korea today is a far cry from the DPRK in the 1990s and 2000s, with an increasingly sophisticated and robust nuclear programme, yet if normalization would bring benefits—economic and also in terms of status—for the DPRK, would Kim be averse to the idea?

As the new Biden administration in Washington settles into power, and with the Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul aiming for one final diplomatic push before the end of Moon's term, how will Kim Jong-un respond to these changes? As Pak argues, there are 'no silver bullets *vis-*

à-vis the North Korean problem' and 'any policy must be sustained over time before it shows any demonstrable effect' (p. 245). Yet, at its core, the single five-year term of the South Korean presidency, and the four-year terms of the US presidency, stand in stark contrast with the lifelong tenure of the North Korean leader, and the effect this cannot but have on how North Korea engages with the international order.