

Non-Traditional Security Issues in North Korea edited by Kyung-ae Park. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. 265 pp. 9 tables. 14 figures. \$54.00 (cloth)

Is it possible that North Korea's nuclear weapons, ballistic missile tests, bellicose rhetoric and aggressive provocations are a sign of its weakness and insecurity rather than its strength? What if traditional security discourse and policy, centered on the military dimension of interstate relations, not only prevented scholars from seeing the source of this weakness, but also contributed to greater insecurity in other, non-traditional areas? If this were the case, how might traditional and non-traditional security issues be interconnected, and how might scholars, analysts, and policymakers begin to conceptualize and pursue solutions to the many complex problems presented by North Korea?

While the vast majority of North Korea-related literature remains narrowly focused on the nuclear and missile issues within a traditional state-centric, realist framework, the various authors in Kyung-ae Park's edited volume, *Non-Traditional Security Issues in North Korea*, take a decidedly different approach. Inspired by the constructivists of the Copenhagen school, the work of human security scholars, and, in some cases, by their own experience within North Korea, the authors problematize traditional security discourse in order to address the above questions.

Moving beyond an exclusive focus on military threats to the state, the various authors define security "in terms of freedom from threats to the safety and welfare of

society and the individual” (p. 51). Furthermore, they widen the definition of threat to include not just military but also political, economic, societal, and individual issues. Such non-traditional security (NTS) issues include: energy and food security, migration, gendered effects of economic crisis, human rights, and illicit transnational activities. A brief historical overview helps situate the overall work.

Starting in the late 1980s and increasing with the end of the Cold War, North Korea experienced a series of external and internal shocks. Despite its purported self-reliance, North Korea’s economy and agricultural system was fundamentally dependent on the Soviet Union and China for cheap imports, raw materials, and spare parts at concessional “friendship” prices. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and China’s shift to a more market-based trade relationship, North Korea could no longer acquire the energy and other inputs it needed, and its industrial economy began to collapse, taking with it the agricultural system. Extensive flooding and drought in the mid-1990s exacerbated these structural problems. These shocks, combined with North Korea’s centralized, inefficient, and tightly integrated economy, led to the emergence of various NTS and human security issues.

For those in the field of North Korean studies, these issues are not new. There is an expanding literature on North Korea’s economic breakdown, famine, refugee crisis, fledgling marketization, human rights abuses, and even the lives of ordinary North Koreans.¹ In fact, the various authors in this volume not only extensively cite this literature but also have contributed to it. However, what makes the current work a worthy

contribution is that it brings many of these issues together in one accessible volume, and, more importantly, does so within a unique, NTS framework. In the preface, Park correctly notes that no other book in the field has done this.

The most interesting and consequential aspect of the book, however, is not solely its NTS framework but its focus on the intersection of traditional and nontraditional security issues. The opening and closing chapters by Jae-Jung Suh and Brendan Howe, respectively, provide conceptual bookends for this approach. Suh (chapter 1) modifies Charles Tilly's famous dictum (war makes the state and the state makes war) and instead notes how "war also breaks, or at least weakens, states," with North Korea being a textbook case (p. 4). Suh describes North Korea as an "insecure state, unsafe society," wherein the leadership's obsessive pursuit of regime security either causes or exacerbates NTS challenges in a way that profoundly threatens the welfare of ordinary North Koreans (p. 9). This degradation of human security itself feeds back into national insecurity, setting a "vicious cycle" in motion (p. 5).

Howe (chapter 10) observes that instead of posing a traditional security dilemma, North Korea poses an *insecurity* dilemma. In other words, the Kim regime's increasing weakness, in addition to posing a threat to its own people, "is projected outward as a diversionary and unifying tactic, thereby causing international uncertainty and instability and even potential security threats to neighboring states and their allies, almost as a form of collateral damage" (p. 239). This "recursive causality" between traditional and nontraditional challenges can be seen throughout the book's various chapters (p. 4).

Historically, the Kim regime's national security concerns and *juche* (self-reliance) ideology led it to adopt energy and food strategies that privileged sovereignty over openness (chapter 1). Von Hippel and Hayes (chapter 2) show how this resulted in a tightly integrated economy, which spiraled downward in the face of external and internal shocks, creating profound energy insecurity for both the regime and ordinary North Koreans. The need to obtain energy supplies and support its aging energy infrastructure, in turn, drove North Korea's nuclear weapons policy. As is well known, North Korean nuclear weapons developments have reverberated outward, sparking traditional security concerns among other states and giving rise to increased external pressure in the form of sanctions, as well as enhancements in the defense and war-fighting capabilities of South Korean and United States Forces Korea (USFK) forces.

In regard to food, Ireson (chapter 5) notes how the agricultural breakdown severely impaired the regime's ability to provide for its people, thus potentially undermining its ideology, leadership, and, therefore, its legitimacy. This, in turn, led the regime to favor certain domestic groups over others in its distribution of what dwindling resources remained. The regime's *songun* (military-first) policy can be seen as a direct result both of its energy and food insecurities and its corresponding need to shore up support among those elements most essential to state security and regime survival.

Kyung-ae Park (chapter 3) covers interesting aspects of this recursive causality in relation to North Korean women. Famine and malnutrition have led to a generation of physically stunted men, which undermines the conventional strength of the DPRK's

armed forces. Consequently, women have been forced to take on greater roles in the military. Thus, the regime's obsessive pursuit of military security contributes to women's disproportionate workload, which itself drives increasing numbers of female defections, women's avoidance of marriage, and the breakdown of the North Korean family. In addition, Park notes that in the wake of crisis, women have become the main actors in North Korea's fledgling markets. Although women are driven to this activity by acute economic hardship and famine, the possibility emerges for "a cultivation of their self-consciousness and awakening of their right to resist" (p. 66). Park is aware of how tenuous a claim this is, and acknowledges the severe obstacles to any organized opposition. However, in a context of ongoing hardship and inconsistent, heavy-handed regime policies, the potential for private subjectivity is an important consideration, even if only in the interstices.

Kang (chapter 4) argues that, despite the relatively small amount of money involved in its illicit transnational activities, the highly politicized nature of the North Korean regime creates a situation where transnational law enforcement issues become entangled with more traditional security negotiations. The Banco Delta Asia (BDA) incident (2005–7) demonstrates how North Korea's need for much needed currency, which itself is borne of its energy insecurity, directly disrupted the Six-Party talks.

Manyin (chapter 6) and Lee (chapter 8) both shed further light on the external dimension of North Korea's NTS and human security issues, and how they interact with other states traditional security concerns. Manyin charts how China has taken on a larger

role as an external provider of fuel, food, and fertilizer as a result of its own national security calculations regarding the possibility of regime collapse and the attendant likelihood of massive refugee flows out of North Korea and into Chinese territory. Lee shows how China's designation of most North Korean defectors as illegal aliens or economic migrants leaves them without official refugee status or protections. They are thus exposed to serious human rights abuses in China or forced repatriation back to North Korea, with a high likelihood of severe punishment and imprisonment a result of their defection. Again, China acts the way it does in order to maintain its bilateral relationship with North Korea, and out of the fear of even greater numbers of defectors crossing the border if it were to take a more welcoming stance toward refugee and human rights protections.

If these multiple levels and units of analysis appear complex, or even messy, it is because they are. This is one potential criticism of the work and the approach to North Korea that it attempts to foster. The reason realists focus on the state as the primary unit of analysis is that it is, if not the only legitimate actor, the most influential one (p. 227). As Morgenthau argued, such a model allows for “an outstanding continuity in foreign policy” across countries, making them “appear as an intelligible, rational continuum.”² This volume openly challenges this approach by arguing that: “it is essential that all aspects of the security spectrum be considered; traditional and non-traditional, state-centric and human security”—intra- and inter-national (p. 229). At times, this brings forth a bewildering array of facts and processes. However, is the conceptual difficulty of

an approach reason to avoid it? When traditional security policies and frameworks, whether emanating from P'yŏngyang, Washington, or Seoul have failed repeatedly, it is incumbent on scholars and policymakers alike to explore alternative options. This book does just that.

This leads to a second, more serious critique of the work, namely, the very real difficulties obstructing the solutions offered. Lee (chapter 8) is correct that China could significantly improve its treatment of North Korean defectors by designating them as political refugees, shielding them from human rights abuses, and, above all, not forcibly repatriating them back to North Korea. However, legal and logical arguments do not easily lead to actual implementation. The same goes for NGOs. Snyder (chapter 9) makes an interesting point that NGOs are well-suited to address NTS and human security challenges, “precisely because the essential ingredient in addressing many of these problems is the building of capacity to address specific human needs, a response that does not depend exclusively on the state and may be more effectively provided at the level of the individual” (p. 209). Nevertheless, as Snyder himself acknowledges, the nature of the North Korean system poses unique challenges, as the state remains the central arbitrator regulating all NGO interaction, while the individual remains fundamentally subordinate to the state.

Possibly the most frustrating area where such obstacles remain is in relation to human rights. Tsueno Akaha (chapter 7) notes that even in the face of a growing awareness of systematic human rights abuses in North Korea (which the UN Office of the

High Commissioner for Human Rights has repeatedly designated as crimes against humanity), China's veto on the UN Security Council and North Korea's own militant defense of its traditional sovereignty prevent any realistic application of the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP), which itself remains an emerging norm rather than an universally accepted rule or principle under international law.

To be fair, the authors are aware of and even cite these obstacles. Hence, this is not so much a critique of their ideas as it is a reflection of the inherent difficulty of dealing with North Korea. In a sense, the criticism itself proves the point. The international community cannot understand North Korea as a traditional security threat without first understanding its complex NTS and human security issues. Moreover, these challenges themselves cannot be addressed without also grappling with the state-centric dynamics that influence them. *Non-Traditional Security Issues in North Korea* correctly argues that an exclusively traditional approach to North Korea not only has failed repeatedly but has also obscured other complex processes at work. Considering the magnitude of the challenges, this book points the field of North Korean studies in the right direction.

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¹ Stephan Haggard, and Marcus Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea* (Washington DC: US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2005); Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, eds., *The North Korean Refugee Crisis: Human Rights and International Response* (Washington DC: US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2006); and Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010).

² Hans J Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 6th ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1985), 6.