

REVIEWING THE IMPOSSIBLE: VICTOR CHA'S NORTH KOREA

Lee Choon-sok

Cha, Victor. The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future. New York: Ecco, 2012. 544 pages. ISBN 978-0061998508

One can indeed dub 2012 as an “historical year” of power transitions. Perhaps no other year in recent memory has garnered so much nerve-wracking attention and global enthusiasm such as what we are witnessing today. With the re-election of Barack Obama, the once-in-a-decade power shift in China, the possible replacement of Yoshihiko Noda with a more hawkish prime minister, Vladimir Putin’s comeback, the ascension of Kim Jong-un in North Korea and the December presidential election in South Korea, 2012 is certainly no disappointment, especially for experts and observers of the Korean Peninsula. One can just imagine the “cool” outer response by Pyongyang but the actual flurry of activity taking place in its corridors of power. Although this period may be exciting for international affairs experts and political science students, it is most likely devastating for the average North Korean who’s hoping for earnest change and ease of hardship in the “impossible state.”

Victor Cha’s most recent work, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*, is a 463-page book focusing on the political machinations in North Korea. Cha was the Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council under President George W. Bush and is currently the head of the Asian Studies program at Georgetown University. *The Impossible State* is Cha’s fourth book on East Asian security relations. For those who desire a broad view of North Korea and what some view as its “Stalinist” mentality, Cha’s book is an adequate first-step, albeit from a Bush-era diplomat’s perspective.

Cha quickly explains the title of his book and how he views North Korea as

“impossible.” He writes that although the Soviet Union collapsed decades ago and Arab strongmen have recently fallen, the Kim dynasty continues to hold onto power and “has outlasted anyone’s expectations” (p. 7). Hence, the name, the impossible state, and a regime’s stubborn refusal (known as “gojib” in Korean) to be relegated to the annals of history of failed communist states and its unwillingness, from a US perspective, to negotiate. One can immediately note Cha’s political stripes, which is not surprising considering his service in the non-sense, hardline foreign policy of the George W. Bush administration. Cha provides the reader with a wide spectrum of issues regarding the North’s nuclear weapons program, the deification of the Kim family, the inter-Korean rivalry, the North’s brief market experimentation, and the power succession from Kim Jong-il to his princeling son, Kim Jong-un.

Cha writes that North Korea is embarking on an ultra-orthodox revival of the *juche* ideology, which he calls “neo-*juche* revivalism.” Cha writes that neo-*juche* is different from *juche* in two respects. One, “it is reactionary in its rejection of the opening and reform policies that were tried from the mid-1990’s to the mid-2000’s” (p. 59). In essence, the North’s poor economic record was precisely due to its experimentation with market-reforms. Second, neo-*juche* is primarily centered on *son’gun*, North Korea’s “military first” policy. In other words, Kim Jong-il’s legacy of designating the military as the top-state organ is at the heart of neo-*juche* revivalism. Their reasoning is that the North saw its best days in the past when *juche* was in its nascent stage during the 1960s and 1970s. During these two decades, the North’s economy was bustling and its military humming. Also, the worldwide communist movement was expanding and the North was dominating the peninsular narrative to the point where North Korean propaganda themes became the focus of the 1972 Joint Communiqué (p. 46). Therefore, if the North returns to the “purest” forms of *juche*, or neo-*juche*, then it can relive its past glory and look forward to better days. However, Cha sees neo-*juche* differently:

...the rise of neo-*juche* conservatism today is an act of desperation. It represents a last-gasp effort to define a new legitimacy for the state that has failed miserably in fulfilling its end of the social contract. (pp. 62-63)

Overall, readers can infer that Cha is saying that the North’s days are numbered and that China’s continual assistance cannot prop up the House of Kim forever. The main problem with this argument is that as long as the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) is in power, there would be no reason for China to cut off aid whatsoever. Hence, we can presume that the status quo will continue for quite some time unless there is a regime change in either country. China's dilemma is indeed a cruel Catch 22; it has to tolerate the North's bad behavior while continuously refilling its coffers to avoid a sudden collapse. Cha couldn't have stated it better when he wrote that both countries are "mutual hostages" (p. 317).

One issue that deserves more attention is human rights in North Korea. Cha provides an insider's view of the Bush administration's policy towards human rights in North Korea and recounts how President Bush put human rights on the map by speaking about it with other world leaders and meeting with North Korean defectors, yet Cha does not offer enough of his own perspectives. Despite devoting one chapter to the issue, he fails to adequately show the gravity of the situation and its effects on a wary China, a seemingly apathetic South Korea, and most importantly the North Korean defectors. There needs to be a more forceful mention of an issue that now affects the entire Asia-Pacific region, where North Korean refugees have literally set foot.

Lastly, Cha's comments on unification paint a vaguely optimistic picture of two possible scenarios facing both North and South Korea. The first is a "hard-landing" scenario; a sudden collapse of North Korea, and the second is a "soft-landing" scenario; a more gradual unification process. Though one can be impressed with his meticulous analysis of possible outcomes, Cha fails to mention the grim reality that any unification scenario will be tampered with by China. With its massive investments in North Korea's mineral deposits and other resources, which have been used to reinvest in its two poor northeastern provinces, it is highly unlikely that China would just sit back and watch a unified Korean government nationalize its projects. When it comes to the northern part of the peninsula, China has always been sensitive about its border near the Yalu and Tumen Rivers, and for good reasons. The first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the US advancement near the Chinese border during the Korean War resulted in millions of deaths combined (p. 343). This author believes unification will not come without strong Chinese resistance, if not full occupation of the northern part of the peninsula within two hours of a DPRK collapse.¹

As the Kim Jong-un regime reaches the end of its first year in power, coupled with President Obama's reelection, many peninsula observers have expressed hope of a renewed US-DPRK dialogue and even a return to the Six

1 "Chinese troops could reach Pyongyang in 2 hours," *Korea Times*, January 27, 2012, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2012/01/182_103530.html (accessed November 10, 2012).

Party Talks. One South Korean official has even stated, “Obama’s re-election could end up providing a new political impetus.”² Yet North Korea’s track record has shown that a positive overture can quickly turn into an about-face. Cha remains skeptical of such an outreach by the North because history has proven that it reneges on its promises time and time again. Whether the Obama administration will continue its policy of “strategic patience” or embark on a different approach, one thing is certain—the North Korean people are the ones who will be affected the most by whatever policies the vested players choose. This writer sincerely hopes that the regional powers think about this before reentering any future negotiations. **YJIS**

2 Park Byong-su and Ahn Chang-hyun, “More active approach to NK expected in Obama’s second term,” *Hankyoreh*, November 8, 2012, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/559650.html (accessed November 10, 2012).