

BOOK REVIEW

CONTENTIOUS ACTIVISM AND INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS

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How does one live according to reason if the other, the alien, the foreigner, whether remote or nearby, may burst into one's world at any moment?

Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* 293

We have become accustomed to viewing and thinking of North Korea, and inter-Korean relations, in terms of *realpolitik*. The uncertain security situation in the Korean peninsula — not least because of the secrecy and difficulty of knowing the intentions of the North Korean leadership — tends to determine a materialist and rationalist analysis driven by the assumption that both South and North Korea seek security at all costs. Lankov,¹ for example, understands the North Korean leadership as adopting a ‘survival strategy’, and describes them as ‘remarkably efficient and cold-minded calculators, perhaps the best

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¹ Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

practitioners of Machiavellian politics that can be found in the modern world'² who, given the present situation (a poor, under-resourced nation with few international friends, and no means of sustaining its economy) seek to 'stay in control and protect ... their property'.³

Danielle L Chubb, in *Contentious Activism and Inter-Korean Relations*, ('*Contentious Activism*') contests the view that understanding the Korean peninsula requires its politics to be framed in the security terms of strategic studies, and to be determined by the relationship between domestic and international politics, which is state-centric and rationalist. Further, Chubb challenges the cognitive hegemony of the military focus of power politics which has become the horizon to which all other perspectives on North Korea and inter-Korean politics have been assimilated. *Contentious Activism* is not an attempt to overturn rationalist accounts and analyses completely. Indeed, a number of leading studies of North Korea confirm the continued validity of viewing it in Washington-centric terms. This is understandable given the reality of the contained hostility of the world's most tense border, and the productive leveraging of this premise in successful negotiations such as the 'Agreed Framework of 21 October 1994 between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea' for the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, negotiated by the Clinton Administration.

From this perspective the most pertinent questions are the following. Can the North be normalised and incorporated into the international system of states? What, if anything, can be done of facilitate this (or should the world simply wait for its inevitable collapse)? And, then, what sort of normality would the North assume — South Korean entrepreneurial, or Chinese state-run, capitalism? These are not, however, the central questions of inter-Korean relations (or, at least, not the form they currently assume), nor do rationalist approaches adequately account for those relations. As Chubb argues, '[t]he pursuit of justice is at the very core of inter-Korean relations'. The South Korean discourse of the peninsula exceeds mere pragmatic, realist security concerns, and involves 'a deep sense of responsibility and obligation'.⁴

For Chubb, power alone (at least a homogeneously conceived power) is not sufficient to explain South Korean activism in relation to inter-Korean relations. In this she echoes Martin Wight,⁵ who, in discussing diplomacy's

² Ibid xii.

³ Ibid xiii.

⁴ Danielle L Chubb, *Contentious Activism and Inter-Korean Relations* (Columbia University Press, 2014) 9.

⁵ Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (A & C Black, 2002) 94.

relation to power, maintains that power is always linked to systems of belief, and is exercised according to the strengths of those beliefs. The interest that power serves must therefore be considered within the context of the geopolitical zone, the historical frame in which it operates, and in relation to its agents. For Chubb, inter-Korean relations must be studied through a lens sensitive to the detailed and nuanced interactions between political power and social norms. Without such a perspective, it is not possible to understand why the self-interest of South Korean activists goes beyond material survival, and beyond the political zero sum game, to consider 'the greater good of the Korean peninsula as their most cherished goal'.⁶

The particular norms on which South Korean activism centres are: unification, human rights in North Korea, and democratisation. Each has implications for inter-Korean relations. The normative discourse of South Korean political activists historicises agency so that Korean identity, and inter-Korean policy and security concerns, can be negotiated. Under the paradigm of a deliberative politics,⁷ the two Koreas enter into relations not as complete identities, but socially, as entities undergoing construction through social and discursive processes. Security does not precede discussions about unification either, because the prospect of unification modifies threat perception and adjusts the cost-benefit analysis. Further, the prospect for unification is both anchored in Korean history, and dependent on how the two Koreas currently perceive each other. Because of the potential for relieving security threats through normative debates concerning unification, deliberation becomes central to justice.

Importantly, normative debate represents the possibility of overcoming the determinations of history. Were it otherwise there would be little reason for optimism (or debate) regarding unification. It is well to remember that the Korean War that ended in 1953 concluded not with a treaty but merely a ceasefire, which nevertheless the South refused to sign for the reason, amongst others, that to do so would be to recognise the North's statehood. While the South's two most significant leaders — Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun (together 1998–2007) — forged their political identities as activists pursuing unification, Pyongyang's official aim has always been to destabilise the South in order to bring about its conversion to a Communist state, by establishing an underground guerrilla resistance led by North Korean commandos. It even formed the Revolutionary Party of Unification in Seoul in 1964 to contest local elections before the Party was eventually outlawed by

⁶ Chubb, above n 4, 9.

⁷ Ibid 24.

the South Korean authorities, and some of its leaders executed, while the remainder of those unable to flee were gaoled for long terms.⁸

Whether or not deliberative politics can overcome historical mistrust and mutual suspicion, another problem is ‘the slow motion decline of the once universal enthusiasm for unification’.⁹ The ideological basis of unification debates has withered and been replaced by pragmatic market economy oriented analyses.¹⁰ Where once the discussion centred on the form unification should take — South Korean rightists preferring a capitalist liberal model — more recently consideration has turned to the price of unification. The vast differences between North and South suggest that unification would simply drain the South of wealth with the needy North bringing little to the table of union. Furthermore, public discourse, which continues to reflect the idea of the manifest destiny of national reconciliation, is not matched by private beliefs (as measured in opinion polls) The reason is that the so called ‘386 generation’ (in their 30s in the 90s; who matured politically in the 80s; and were born in the 60s) does not view unification as a natural completion of historical kinship. Instead, they experience the North as an alien and enigmatic enemy.

They have a point. North Korea is exceptional not in its having a charismatically based political leadership, but in its longevity, and cross generational survival.¹¹ Obvious and important questions arise, such as how North Korea can engage in diplomacy when the basis of political and social order is dependent on hereditary power going unquestioned, and the cult of personality is harnessed to ensure the continuity of established order. If South Korean activist discourse is dependent on historicising monolithic concepts such as security, and the state, North Korea’s depends on its remaining frozen in time. How too can a populace with no history of influence, which has never engaged in self-determination, imagine alternatives to its current existence?¹²

The attempts by the South Korean leadership to address these issues have fallen short of the standard required by ethical activism. An example is the infamous Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, based on the wisdom of Aesop’s fable concerning the contest between the sun and the north wind. Its premise was that it would be easier to warm North Korea into removing its isolationist protective armour than to try to blow this armour off

⁸ Lankov, above n 1, 29.

⁹ Ibid 161.

¹⁰ Ibid 161–2.

¹¹ See Heonik Kwan and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

¹² Lankov, above n 1, 207.

it by force. The policy in fact promoted a resistance to investigating the North's human rights abuses on the basis of the adverse effect it would have on inter-Korean relations and the threat to the security of the peninsula. Tolerating the status quo merely supported the furtherance of human rights abuses by a corrupt regime. The policy also produced some bizarre and annoying concessions on the part of South Korea — such as Kim Jong III being given \$500 million to agree to meet Kim Dae Jung in the first summit between the countries. Jung received the Nobel Peace Prize which his political opponents criticised as (literally) purchased for too high a price.

Chubb accepts that South Korea is an authoritarian state in which public debate is structured divisively between dominant and dissident discourses, and which offers restricted opportunities for activism.¹³ Further, she accepts that any deliberative space is an already structured hierarchy in which authoritarian is dominant over activist, and hegemonic over dissident. Nevertheless, she argues that South Korean activists advance frameworks for understanding inter-Korean issues, and that these frameworks are able to effect public debate because they are promoted as better moral (not objective) frameworks for understanding. She describes these frameworks as a vision of justice framed by ideology. While the state may determine the boundaries of meaning, and what counts as appropriate discourse, marginalised discourses still have an agenda-setting and policy-orienting power. That power emerges from the history of struggles for meaning over human rights, democracy and unification during which the contentious activism of South Korean political activists helped shape the political and ideational environment of contemporary South Korea.¹⁴

Identifying the contours of the political debate in South Korea, and the contribution of marginal activism to it, requires a novel methodology. Chubb adopts an historical and historical–change perspective which periodises South Korean political history into the Kwangju period, the emergence of democracy, the 1990s as a period of political reorientation, and the Sunshine era. The arguments made by activists within those periods are traced, in order to follow their normative impacts over time, which impacts are sometimes evident in explicit pronouncements, and sometimes embedded in discourses requiring unearthing. Ultimately it is the South Korean activists who understand the Korean peninsula as an essentially alienated place. For Chubb those activists approach inter-Korean relations through a process of norm negotiation. In a term coined by James Der Dorian, it is a form of

¹³ Chubb, above n 2, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid* 40.

‘diplomacy’, which undertakes a mediation between peoples who have become historically estranged from each other.¹⁵

¹⁵ James Der Dorian, ‘Mediating Estrangement: A Theory for Diplomacy’ in James Der Dorian *Critical Practices in International Theory: Selected Essays* (Routledge, 2009) 7.