THE CLAIM THAT North Korea is a mystery that defies explanation is a cliché amply supported by numerous newspaper op-ed pieces and the apparent failure of policy-making communities in Washington and in Asian capitals to devise an adequate solution to the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. However, three recently published books on North Korea have begun to challenge this rather hackneyed assertion, in the process providing a set of new perspectives on this distinctive and critically important state.

Each work adopts a different disciplinary approach drawing from, respectively, political science, history and policy studies, to offer a rich set of new empirical findings that substantially extend our understanding of North Korea. Given the diversity of methodologies employed it is perhaps not surprising that the authors reach different conclusions. While it is likely to prove difficult to establish a consensus on the nature of the North Korean state or the options for resolving the current nuclear impasse, the publication of this high-caliber new research indicates that debating such questions can and should be both stimulating and illuminating. A little like the familiar story of the blind men and the elephant, each of these interpretations provides a partial and incomplete insight into a political phenomenon that can seem radically different to different observers.

With Inside the Red Box: North Korea’s Post-Totalitarian Politics, Patrick McEachern, a Seoul-based US Foreign Service officer and formerly a North Korea analyst in the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, offers a view of North Korea firmly rooted in the field of comparative political science. Echoing implicitly the bureaucratic model of decision-making first described by writers such as Graham Allison in his seminal study of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Essence of Decision, McEachern argues powerfully that institutions matter in North Korea. Monolithic interpretations that attribute policy in Pyongyang to the calculations or caprice of individual leaders, whether Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il, fail to appreciate the regularization of policy-making in the North and the evolutionary trends that have gradually given three key sets of decision makers — the Cabinet, the Party and the Military — different and often increasingly conflicting influence over policy.

For McEachern, three key sets of changes in the mid-1990s have contributed to this systematization of decision-making: first, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and North Korea’s loss of material and political support from one of its most important allies; second, the leadership transition from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il in 1994 and the need for the new leadership to legitimize itself in the eyes of the North Korean public; and third, the famine of 1995, which resulted in the death of some one million North Koreans. Kim Jong-il remains unquestionably the most important political actor in the North, but over time he has been forced to accept that power is much more diffuse than during his father’s time. The totalitarian model that operated from 1948 to 1994 has been replaced by “a more decentralized, post-totalitarian, institutionally plural state,” McEachern writes.

Methodologically, McEachern’s innovation is to argue that a close scrutiny of public speeches and the press releases of these three different sets of institutions can reveal not only where power lies but also how it shapes policy outcomes. This is, in effect, old-fashioned political tea-reading from the world of Kremlinology, and it is no accident that McEachern takes his comparative cues from the work of distinguished Sovietologists such as Gordon Skilling and Jerry Hough. In building his case, he also sees consistency and coherence in the positions of these competing bureaucratic actors. Pragmatic rationalists who are willing to embrace economic reform, for example, populate the cabinet. It is staffed with Foreign Ministry specialists who favor inter-Korean dialogue and have consistently supported negotiating with the United States. In contrast, the party takes a much more ideologically rigid position, seeing economic reform as exposing the North to the risk of political chaos and the same ineluctable weakening of state control that destroyed the political elites of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The party’s position in this context is framed in moralistic, purist terms and pragmatism invariably is of secondary importance. Finally, the military also acts as a brake on reform, whether economic or political. Its interests are defined in narrowly strategic terms and have been reinforced by the expansion in the late 1990s of the increasingly important National Defense Commission (NDC).

The US is viewed as an implacable enemy that can only be resisted by developing and maintaining in perpetuity the North’s nuclear deterrent. The value of McEachern’s approach is threefold: it provides a much clearer picture of North Korean decision-making that sees the pressure for change and policy innovation as emanating from below rather than from above; it combines institutional description with a historical narrative, spread over three chapters and encompassing the key political and diplomatic developments from 1998 to 2008; above all, it rejects the “black box” image of policy-making that presumes that North Korean policymaking is opaque and impenetrable. It also challenges the simplistic notion that North Korea is a reactive state unable to pursue its national interest in a focused and coherent manner that allows the country’s leadership to adjudicate between competing interests. As McEachern notes:

US policy, inter-Korean relations, and economic policy are inherently linked at some level in North Korea’s decision-making. Institutions use conditions in one of these issue areas as a debating point for policy agenda in other issue areas. Nonetheless, the state has demonstrated an ability to segment policy areas where it deems it appropriate. This segmentation allows
more nuanced policy decisions but also contributes to impressions that North Korea is simply ‘muddling through’ – that the state lacks an overarching agenda to bring it out of the current depressed situation.

If McEachern focuses on the blueprint for policy-making — in effect, the institutional flow chart of politics — Jonathan Pollack of the Brookings Institution is more concerned with the idiosyncratic and personalized nature of politics and the contingent nature of decisions shaped by historical circumstance and the intersection between domestic and foreign interests. In No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security, Pollack makes a powerful case for re-examining North Korea’s nuclear weapons policy through the lens of recently declassified historical documents, in particular Chinese and Soviet diplomatic records that have been declassified and analyzed by scholars working at the Cold War International History Project based at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC.

For Pollack, North Korea’s decision-making has remained intensely personal, a reflection of the strategic priorities of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, as well as a tiny handful of individuals, ranging between five and 12 people in all, who have acted as the principal negotiators with the United States over the past 20 years. Throughout the history of the North Korean state, the country’s leaders have sought deliberately to develop an independent nuclear weapons program. This has reflected three fundamental assumptions: that the support North Korea has enjoyed from its Russian and Chinese allies has always been conditional and therefore not reliable; that South Korea’s nuclear ambitions (especially after the 1970s) have involved the pursuit of a nuclear weapons program that, if it were to come to fruition, would ultimately threaten the security of the North; and that the long-term durability of the North Korean regime requires the possession of an independent nuclear deterrent.

Kim Il-sung’s desire to acquire an independent nuclear weapons program can be traced back to the late 1950s and was in part premised on rivalry with first the Soviet Union and then, following the onset of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s, with the People’s Republic of China. The exact historical juncture at which Pyongyang committed itself to a policy of strategic autonomy is, by Pollack’s own admission, difficult to identify. The most about which one can be certain is that it was only in the late 1970s that North Korea had acquired sufficient technical and engineering expertise to pursue its own, viable and fully independent nuclear weapons program. Not surprisingly, given his focus on nuclear weapons, Pollack assigns key influence to the North Korean military and, unlike McEachern, does not attribute much influence to rival institutions such as the cabinet:

Military and security organizations remain the dominant institutions within the North Korean system. Though some policy-makers in the DPRK appear to advocate increased economic flexibility, their power base and influence remain highly circumscribed. The Korean People’s Army enjoys a highly privileged position; it is a key factor in the technological and financial resources procured beyond North Korea’s borders by various enterprises and trading companies. There is much to admire in Pollack’s analysis, both in terms of its chronological sweep — covering the Cold War development of North Korea’s strategic policy and the intricacies of the Six-Party talks under US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama — and its ability to cast into relief key interpretative differences between Pyongyang and Washington. For example, Pollack highlights the contrasting views of “denuclearization” that surface during the September 2005 negotiations – which from the North’s point of view required, ambitiously (and arguably unrealistically), a complete end to US nuclear commitments, extended deterrence and associated US alliance obligations in Northeast Asia.

At the same time, the historical coverage here and elsewhere is perhaps itself too ambitious, reflective of the understandable desire of international relations and policy specialists to impose interpretive order on a historical reality that one suspects was more nuanced, inconsistent and perhaps, at times, contradictory than the narrative suggests. For example, Pollack claims that Kim Jong-il in 1995 had told both the Americans and the Chinese that his father had been committed to denuclearization, but we learn frustratingly little about the motives and nature of this ambition.

We may have to wait for future historians, with access to the North Korean archives, to expose the full details behind this apparent decision on the part of the Great Leader to abruptly abandon his long-standing nuclear aspirations. McEachern and Pollack present a picture of North Korea in which the state is a proactive policy actor able to effect change. In sharp contrast, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland (fellows at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington, DC) reveal in their new work, Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea, a North Korea in which the government is much less influential or directly able to control policy outcomes. The focus is on the refugees who have chosen to leave in the face of a combination of hardships.

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ing some 1,300 North Korean refugees based in China, and a second conducted in 2008 with a smaller sample of 300 refugees in South Korea.

Carefully analyzing a detailed set of targeted questions, the authors provide a fascinating analysis not just of the refugee experience itself, but also the pattern of on-again, off-again economic reform in North Korea between the late 1990s and the present; the increased criminalization of commercial activity that has taken place since 2008-2009; the extensive penal and incarceration system in the North; and political attitudes towards dissent and the North Korean leadership among ordinary North Korean citizens.

While it is hard to do justice to all of the detailed findings that emerge from this valuable study, a number of key themes stand out. The state-inspired economic reforms of 2002, including incomplete liberalization of collective farms or the activities of individuals working in state-enterprises, have been partial and of limited effect in materially improving the lives of ordinary North Koreans. Real economic change has, instead, been a bottom-up process of “marketization from below,” prompted by the famine of the 1990s and involving state, military and party functionaries at all levels of society. The state has been at best ambivalent or more commonly hostile to reform, either through the unsuccessful attempt to reintroduce the food Public Distribution System (PDS) in 2005, or the botched currency revaluation of 2009. Failed reform and continuing food shortages, especially in the northeast of the country have imposed huge social and psychological pressures on individual North Koreans and in turn have fueled the refugee movement.

The state’s effort to combat this problem by imposing tougher criminal sentences has not been successful and, if anything, has contributed to a widening negative assessment of the regime and a greater willingness by North Korean citizens to defy the government by listening to foreign media and engaging in clandestine economic activity, despite the risk of severe and often brutal punishment from the State.

Unlike the volumes by McEachern and Pollack, Haggard and Noland go out of their way to present a number of pragmatic policy recommendations. Their concluding chapter sets out a series of concrete initiatives designed to bolster the role of the market in North Korea and minimize distorting state-intervention. These initiatives include measures to shift economic activity from agriculture into high value-added, exportable forms of production; a greater role for foreign private investment in North Korea; increased and more closely targeted humanitarian and development assistance; the promotion of internationally consistent labor standards; expanded educational and cultural contact between North Korea and foreign countries; and a pragmatic and coordinated approach to human rights issues, involving a more active and supporting role for both the US and Chinese governments.

All of these proposals are filtered through an analytical lens that is, on balance, largely pessimistic when it comes to assessing the likelihood that North Korea would embrace change, either in the form of wider engagement with the outside world, greater political liberalization at home, or in terms of suspending and ultimately renouncing the North’s nuclear weapons program.

It is in this regard that all three volumes, notwithstanding their considerable individual strengths, collectively fall short. Given the frailty of Kim Jong-il, following his illness of 2008, and the anticipated change of leadership to Kim Jong-un, the inexperienced 27-year-old heir apparent, there is much uncertainty about what the future will hold. Will the formal core institutions of government continue to function stably as McEachern’s analysis implies, or will the succession depend fundamentally on the personality of the new leader, or possibly a temporary regency under Chang Song-taek, the brother-in-law of the current leader? Alternatively, will change at the top prompt upheaval from below, as some North Korean refugees and not a few South Korean conservative politicians have argued in recent months?

In assessing any political system, the business of prediction is a risky one, and few analysts are either confident or rash enough to commit themselves to one scenario. The benefit of these latest studies is that they provide us with considerably more institutional, historical and contemporary detail as well as analytical insight on which to hazard a guess, albeit imperfectly, on what the future may hold.

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