Timely Update of a Compelling Classic

The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History
By Don Oberdorfer, updated by Bob Carlin

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1997 and updated in 2002, Don Oberdorfer’s The Two Koreas has been a touchstone work for many university classrooms, a favorite of general readers and a useful resource for many specialists for its rare combination of readability and thoroughness. The 2013 edition, updated by Robert Carlin, a former US State Department official, advisor to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), and former CIA analyst who has been following Korea since the 1970s, remains an engaging yet detailed look at the contemporary history of US relations with the two Koreas from the 1970s to the present.

Weaving information from a catholic range of sources, including several hundred interviews with various political figures in Washington DC, Seoul, Beijing and other places, a credible range of academic work published in English, and first-person recollections into a compelling tale of diplomacy and high politics, the book depicts a colorful cast of presidents, diplomats, advisors, and bureaucrats over the span of the book’s 19 chapters and postscript.

As a journalist, Oberdorfer was based in Japan and Korea when many of the key events occurred, while Carlin was involved in intelligence and KEDO. Their insider accounts provide an array of captivating details and colorful touches that are sometimes missing from academic publications.

The story begins with a vivid description of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and a quick overview of the full sweep of Korean history. It moves into full gear when the spotlight is directed to 1972, when North and South Korea undertook their first official talks against the backdrop of the Nixon Shock — US President Richard Nixon’s surprise decision in 1971 to abandon the gold standard and introduce floating exchange rates — and the waning stages of the Vietnam War. The second chapter also details South Korean President Park Chung-hee’s ruthless suppression of domestic opposition, including some new details on the torture and ultimate death in 1975 of Chang Chun-ha, a prominent journalist who had been a consistent critic of Park, and the kidnapping of opposition political leader Kim Dae-Jung from a Tokyo hotel in 1973.

Overall, the narrative moves at a brisk pace, balancing the sweep of Cold War international politics with more personal fragments. For example, the third chapter opens with a gripping account of the 1974 assassination attempt on Park Chung-hee at a ceremony Oberdorfer was covering in person. The assassin’s bullets missed Park as he delivered his speech, but killed his wife, Youn Young-soo, who had been sitting behind the president. In a now famous story, as his wife was carried to the hospital and the assassin, Mun Se-kwong, a Zainichi Korean born and raised in Japan but directed by a North Korean minder, was corralled, Park dusted himself off and, to the amazement of those present, completed his speech.

The chapter then moves into a concise and cogent depiction of the aftermath. The diplomatic fallout in relations with Japan, and the effect his wife’s death had on Park — revealed via a translated excerpt from Park’s personal diary — is painted with a keen eye for various scales and resonances. The chapter then moves to the discovery of tunnels that the North Koreans dug into the Demilitarized Zone, South Korea’s secret nuclear weapons program, and border confrontations culminating in the Axe Murder Incident of 1976 in Panmunjom.

Chapters four and five deftly outline the various scales and registers of US-Korean relations during the administration of US President Jimmy Carter, and the reverberations of Park Chung-hee’s assassination in 1979 by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jae-kyu. The assiduous assemblage of interviews, media reports and declassified US documents results in an account that many contemporary and retrospective analyses have yet to match in detail.

Chapters six to ten provide compact overviews of the democratization of South Korea in 1987, North-South relations in the 1980s, and the shift in the foreign policy strategies of Beijing and Moscow amid the crumbling of the communist bloc. The narrative pace slows but maintains empirical density (especially relating to developments in Washington) once the book hits the 1990s and the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993. In chapter 11, “Joining the Nuclear Issue,” which is roughly at the midpoint of the book, the focus shifts almost entirely to nuclear-related issues. The remaining chapters chart US relations with North and South Korea through the 2000s. Here North Korea, replete with information that even many specialists would find rare. Nonetheless, there are, unavoidably, some missing elements. I list these below not as a protest, but as a guide for what readers new to the book might expect.

First, there is little in the way of an overall argument. Neither Oberdorfer nor Carlin, as they readily acknowledge, are historians interested in analysis. The writing is fluid, the stories are compelling, and the depth of empirical research is laudable, but this is emphatically a narrative account. While some passages emphasize the Confucian elements of North Korea’s brand of communism, and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s quote about North Korea being a “socialist monarchy” is invoked, the book is not intent on advocating a specific explanation of the North Korean political system. Most information from interviews has been crosschecked when possible for accuracy.

As a journalist, Oberdorfer was based in Japan and Korea when many of the key events occurred, while Carlin was involved in intelligence and KEDO. Their insider accounts provide an array of captivating details and colorful touches that are sometimes missing from academic publications.

again, the complex imbrications of public maneuverings and private concerns that infused the international negotiations are enlivened by the use of an impressive number of interviews. The book’s postscript brings readers up to the summer of 2013, the 50th anniversary of the Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War — a fitting conclusion for a book whose author first visited Korea in 1953 as a young US Army lieutenant, just weeks after the ceasefire.

The Two Koreas remains an in-depth and galvanizing account of US relations with South and but these for the most part have not been used as pieces with which to construct an argument for or against any particular analytical positions. Explanations for some specific events are presented, but readers should not expect sustained or overarching argumentation, whether of the inductive or deductive variety.

Second, despite the title, the book is a contemporary history not of the two Koreas per se, but (in its second half, at least) of international relations surrounding the nuclear crises, with an unapologetic focus on Washington’s role. The US-
-centric focus surfaces in several ways. In contrast to the rich tapestry of its descriptions of Washington’s personalities and policies, the book’s treatment of Japan’s attempts at rapprochement with North Korea in 2001-2002 is devoid of any reference to Kim Jong Il’s admission, made at the 2002 summit meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, that North Korea abducted Japanese nationals in the past. Considering the impact this had on the dynamics of bilateral talks, the omission is surprising. Further, there are no attempts to dissect the long-standing bilateral relations of many member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations with North Korea. Countries such as Singapore, Cambodia, and Indonesia trace their links to North Korea back to the beginnings of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, but make no appearance in the pages other than — at least in Singapore’s case — as sites for meetings. In addition, Moscow’s economic interests in maintaining a stable North Korea — for example, the proposed pipeline from eastern Russia going through North Korea into South Korea, the world’s second largest importer of natural gas — are left unaddressed. Third, the focus is almost entirely on diplomacy and politics. Contemporary social, economic, gender, ethnic, religious, and other histories are often entirely absent or scantily sketched. This means that readers would want to turn to other texts for overviews of, say, the demographic shift and the corresponding emergence of multiculturalism; political polarization between conservatives and progressives in the 2000s; causes of industrialization in South Korea; changes in the consumption patterns of regular North Korean citizens after 1997; the representation of women in mass media; the activities of environmental NGOs; or changes in the fortunes of domestic political figures in North Korea. This means that while North Korean diplomat Kang Sok Ju plays a prominent role in these pages, Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un’s recently executed uncle, makes just one appearance. Moon Jae-in, a prominent South Korean political figure, provides an interesting interview (circa March 2012) on former President Roh Moo-hyun’s policy priorities, but is not otherwise featured. More indirectly, another odd omission marks the book’s account of the 1974 assassination attempt on Park: Chang Pong-hwa, a high school student attending the ceremony, was killed by a stray bullet from one of Park’s personal guards who had been shooting at the assassin, but that fact is never mentioned.

Chapter 15, “North Korea in Crisis,” is devoted mostly to the convergence of economic stagnation and personal political decline that resulted in the great famine in North Korea and the 1997 defection of Hwang Jang-yop, a high-ranking North Korean politician and ideologue. The same chapter also contains a brief overview of the political scandals in South Korea surrounding the trials of former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo in 1996, but otherwise, domestic politics and economics serve as supplements to the central narrative surrounding the US responses to the North Korean nuclear issue, at least from chapter eleven on. A fourth point of omission is the lack of references to the relevant literature published in Korean. The book contains numerous interviews with prominent South Korean political figures from the 1970s to the present, and with three North Korean officials conducted during Oberdorfer’s 1995 visit to North Korea. But even if the voluminous propaganda issued by North Korea in various pamphlets, pronouncements, and other official statements are excluded from the assessment, there is still missing a large body of Korean-language scholarly work and personal accounts that might have been productively included.

To take one example, in Oberdorfer’s account of the 1994 nuclear crisis, the roles played by former President Carter and former US Defense Secretary William Perry are, probably correctly, tinted in celebratory tones, but some recollections published in South Korea draw a slightly different picture. Former President Kim Young-sam has stated in various media interviews that as president of South Korea in 1994, he was steadfast and vociferous in his opposition to American plans to attack the North Korean nuclear facility at Yongbyon at the peak of the crisis, arguing that Seoul would be devastated by a counter-attack by the North, if the US launched any kind of a pre-emptive strike. This account shifts the emphasis from US officials “rescuing” the situation from a somewhat illogical Kim to one in which Seoul had a more active role. On the other, former high-rank- ing North Korean defectors such as Kang Myong-do, the son-in-law of former North Korean Prime Minister Kang Song-sang, has asserted that North Korea was on the cusp of immediate collapse in 1994, but greatly buoyed by the visit (the “capitalization”) of a former US president (Carter) to Pyongyang. In recent media appearances and in his 1995 book, Pyongyang Dreams of Defection (경양은 경계를 뚫고나), Kang, who defected in 1994, has said that all it would have taken was a small military push from the US in 1994 to precipitate North Korea’s collapse and trigger the reunification of the peninsula. He has blamed the US and Kim Young-sam for letting the opportunity for reunification slip away. Up to his death in 2012, two other North Korean defectors, most notably US President Bill Clinton for backing away from the use of military force in 1994. These and other similar accounts might reasonably be assumed to be self-serving to varying degrees; nonetheless, they warrant some consideration. There are other cases that might be discussed, but suffice it to say that all this is essentially asking for crème fraîche on top of caviar.

The Two Koreas in its latest incarnation remains an exemplar of the best that serious journalism has to offer as history. Specialists will find the book rich with empirical details of great usefulness, comparable in thoroughness to the very best work by historians. At the same time, general readers will be hard pressed to find another account of contemporary American relations with the two Koreas that combines polished writing and committed research with such elan.

Hyung-gu Lynn is the ACL/KEPCO Chair in Korean Research at the Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia.

Despite the dense title, Hangzhou University political scientist Gregory Moore has compiled a stimulating, readable collection of essays premised on the rising likelihood of a full-fledged nuclear North Korea. This book might more simply go by When Pyongyang Gets the Bomb. Of course, Kim Jong Un already has up to a dozen nuclear devices of some fashion, but as the authors discuss in technical detail, the core of the issue at least — of international relations surrounding the nuclear crises, with an unapologetic focus on Washington’s role. Of course, Kim Jong Un already has up to a dozen nuclear devices of some fashion, but as the authors discuss in technical detail, the core of the issue is a contemporary history not of the two Koreas per se, but — in its second half, at least — of international relations surrounding the nuclear crises, with an unapologetic focus on Washington’s role. Of course, Kim Jong Un already has up to a dozen nuclear devices of some fashion, but as the authors discuss in technical detail, the core of the issue is

---

When Pyongyang’s Nukes Work

Reviewed by John Delury, an Assistant Professor of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul and book review editor for Global Asia.