Donald Gregg, A Plot Twist in Korea’s Story

Bound by Destiny: Donald Gregg, Kim Dae-jung, and Turning Points in the US-ROK Alliance
Edited by John Delury and Kang Tae-ho
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Reviewed by Inspector O

THROUGH VARIOUS MEANS I recently came into possession of a book, Bound by Destiny: Donald Gregg, Kim Dae-jung and Turning Points in the US-ROK Alliance, with a small envelope affixed to the cover. It was too cold to sit outside, so the next day I took the book to the Ongyu Restaurant, which sits on the banks of a river — the Taedong — that neatly divides the city of Pyongyang. There I read contentedly at a table in the corner, where the waitresses knew not to bother me, except now and then to fill my teacup.

The envelope was sealed, and my curiosity was such that I convinced myself that it fell to me to open it, which I did. To my surprise, the note inside said only, “Read me.”

The words were hand-lettered in a vaguely aristocratic English script, but the route by which the book had made its way to me involved no Englishmen, of that I was sure. “Possibly Irish,” I muttered, and let the puzzle go for the moment.

By late afternoon, when I had nearly read the book to the end, the manager of the restaurant came over to my table and said I should have to order something or leave. I showed her my police credentials, but she was not impressed, and informed me that she knew my vice minister very well herself. I told her I was on surveillance, and bade her lean closer as I lowered my voice.

“We are worried about a saboteur,” I said, letting my eyes roam over the room crowded with diners. “We think there is a team of them somewhere here. We may need your help, but for right now, say nothing.”

The woman snorted. “You have an hour more, then you can take your surveillance outside. I need the table for paying customers.”

Within the allotted hour, I had finished the book and written notes to myself, which I have gone over several times to make sure they are accurate. These I have attached below, for future reference.

NOTES

The last three decades of the 20th century saw an extraordinary cast of characters in the south of Korea, Koreans and US officials alike. What is clear from Bound by Destiny is that as frequently as they talked about their close relations and their blood-sealed alliance, the two sides more often than not saw — and still see — the world quite differently. What bound them closest was their perception of a common stand against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Even then, there were often cracks in the alliance.

The book focuses on the work in Korea of former CIA station chief and US Ambassador Donald Gregg, whose career has been well known to us. He is an exceptionally sharp observer of events and personalities on both sides of the military demarcation line. He also played a central role in a number of pivotal events, though it is too soon to tell if his involvement had lasting effect, or at least, how the consequences will be seen in the fullness of time. This is not to take anything away from Gregg’s courage, insights and good fortune, for it is disquieting to imagine what the ferociousness of the Korean issue over a half-century ago sent ripples across the years that molded perceptions and tortured its people.

Gregg also notes in his remarks that he once acted flatly against his instructions while he was the CIA’s chief of station, and that he subsequently encouraged classes of new CIA officers to disobey if they thought their orders were wrong. One wonders if those CIA officers who practiced torture not so many years ago agreed with their orders, or if they were brought to justice for the violations of human rights that are so fond of talking about.

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Gregg credits Roh Tae-woo with South Korea’s opening to Eastern Europe and the USSR. Roh played his hand well, no doubt, but if his hand had held fewer dollar bills, he might not have done so well in this department. Seoul bought opening to Eastern Europe and the USSR. Roh bought off everyone in sight, including the Soviet Union (for four billion dollars), and made our dissatisfaction clear, including to Moscow. It gained us nothing. Washington might well ask itself if brokering marriages between Seoul and Moscow and Seoul and Beijing without paying equal attention to its own relations with us was, in the end, as wise as it may have seemed at the time.

The accounts in the book suggest that our portrayal of the US as governor-general in Seoul was not far wrong in earlier years. Gregg relates how at one point Gregg is unusual in that he is not seized with the malady that frequently infects reminiscences, especially of diplomats, who tend to see their own role as central, when in fact it is only contributory — at best.
early in his tenure as CIA station chief in Seoul he spoke negatively about then-KCIA Director Lee Hu-rak, a son of a bitch if ever there was one. When Lee came to the North in 1972, he feared for his life, worried that we might execute him. He might well have worried, but that is not how we conduct our business. Lee was on a mission to meet with Kim Il Sung; it would have been insane for us to harm a hair on his evil head. Gregg recognized Lee for what he was, and for that he deserves praise. But he is much too modest in supposing his words only “might” have had an impact. If Lee had had no enemies within Park Chung-hee’s inner circle, then of course nothing could have shaken him from the tree. But he had enemies at court! This is Korea, and no man has that much influence with the ruler, but he has legions of those who would bring him down. All it takes is a few words from the most influential of the influential — the CIA station chief — for the once high to be brought low. As for who in 1973 prevented Kim Dae-jung’s assassination — for that is what it would have been — Gregg credits US Ambassador Philip Habib for knowing “how things work around here.” It almost happened a second time, after Kim’s arrest and subsequent death sentence on trumped-up charges at the time of the kwangju incident in 1983. The question is — and neither Gregg nor Richard Allen (national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan), who played a lead in discussions with the Chun Doohwan regime, seem to know for sure — was Chun so wise or merely so vain as to trade Kim’s life for a trip to Washington to meet Reagan?

Gregg describes with pride his role in having the annual US-ROK Team Spirit military exercise cancelled in 1992. This was a major stroke, for the exercise was of tremendous concern to Kim Il Sung and caused us to waste considerable resources every year responding. Where Gregg is mistaken, however, is in his estimate of the consequences of the exercise abruptly being reinstated in 1993. Gregg says neither he nor the State Department were consulted and, for the first time of which I am aware, says the decision was made by then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney. Curiously — or maybe not — Kim Chong-whi seems not to believe that the State Department was uninformed of the decision to reinstate Team Spirit. The book does not indicate whether he thought restarting the exercise was a good thing or if its reinstatement could lead to mischief.

Most outsiders have convinced themselves that restarting Team Spirit led to Pyongyang’s decision to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). I happen to know through an acquaintance that the NPT withdrawal was in the planning before the Team Spirit decision was announced in the early autumn of 1992. Kim Jong Il was looking for ways to withdraw from the treaty and a decision had already been more or less made to proceed. Cheney helped provide the cover, and for that, as well as for several other things he did subsequently, we have always felt a debt of gratitude to him. I have sometimes asked myself, if Team Spirit hadn’t been reinstated, what twists and turns Pyongyang would have used to justify the NPT withdrawal in March 1992?

Gregg also describes, with some deserved pride, his contribution to the decision to withdraw US tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea. The book is not meant to provide the details for the decision-making in Washington on this subject.

Most of the book is taken up with much earlier history, but there is a bow to more recent events. Gregg explains how in November 2002, after the disastrous meeting between First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok-ju and Assistant US Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs JamesKelly a month earlier, he delivered to the White House an oral message from Kim Jong Il (he correctly points out that this was not a “letter,” which would have had a much higher profile and to some extent carried more weight.) In Gregg’s telling — which matches exactly the version recounted several years earlier by Don Oberdorfer, who accompanied Gregg to Pyongyang — Hadley showed no interest whatsoever in the message or in what the two veteran American observers had to say about their visit.

It is incredible that the Americans did not understand how much positive leverage they had at that moment, and they threw it all away without a second thought. Kim Jong Il had been working on important new economic policies for well over a year and finally launched them in July 2002. The last thing he needed was a crisis with the US only 90 days into the process. If the Americans had taken seriously the message from Kim that Gregg brought back to Washington, along with all the other signals we were sending at the time through other channels, things almost certainly would have turned out differently. But, of course, there was no chance of the Bush Administration doing that.

Inspector O is, or was, a detective in the Ministry of People’s Security assigned to a small group charged with investigating crimes in Pyongyang, usually involving neither sex nor money. He is also, and not incidentally, a creation of James Church, a nom de plume if there ever was one.