

North Korea & the Global Nuclear Order: When Bad Behaviour Pays

Edward Howell (Oxford University Press, 2023) 300 pages, bibliography.

The United States–South Korea Alliance: Why It May Fail and Why It Must Not

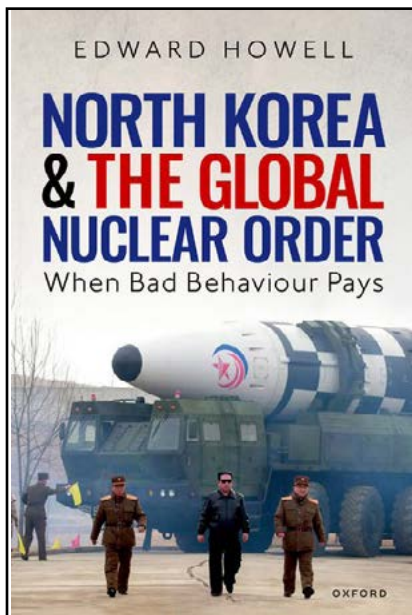
Scott A. Snyder (Columbia University Press, 2023), 318 pages, notes, index.

Reviewed by Yong Suk Lee

The two Koreas are a study in contradiction. In the northern half of the peninsula is a hermit kingdom ruled by a despotic, hereditary dictatorship. In the south, the most free, abundant, and successful political entity in Korean history. One thing they have in common is that relations with the United States, positive or negative, are key influences in their national security thinking. First-time author Edward Howell and long-time Korea watcher Scott Snyder offer readers a close look at how different opinions about Washington shape this debate in Pyongyang and Seoul.

North Korea's transgressions are well documented: prison camps, drug and wildlife trafficking, counterfeiting, cyber-attacks, and now selling missiles to Russia for use against Ukraine. Kim Jong Un is the third generation of Kims to lead the North, founded by his grandfather Kim Il Song in 1949. Already there is speculation that a fourth generation is in training: Kim Jong Un's young daughter lately has been seen accompanying him on inspections of factories and farms.

North Korea & the Global Nuclear Order traces the history of the North's nuclear program and its negotiations with the United States. Howell describes North Korea's stratagem as "strategic delinquency" and asks "how North Korea has become a nuclear-armed state and how we might account for its behavior over the past thirty years?" (2) Howell argues that Pyongyang has benefited materially and socially from delinquency and flouting international norms. Its weapons of mass destruction deter rivals, help to shore up the regime, and convey status in negotiations during bilateral and multilateral talks. (72–81) The collective lessons the international community taught Pyongyang's leaders is that breaking global rules



and threatening the world order bring benefits. North Koreans who suffer from economic sanctions and chronic food shortages are not priorities for Kim Jong Un and his elites. Kim may genuinely care for his people and want to improve their lives but this desire takes the backseat in policymaking, when eternal perpetuation of the Kim family rule remains the top goal.

Howell shows that North Korea made its nuclear goals clear as early as the 1990s, when the United States and its allies began their hopeful engagement with Pyongyang. An unnamed US official told Howell that Pyongyang's lead negotiator claimed that a nuclear-armed North Korea could be a US ally and the North could become "your Israel in East Asia." (107) A decade later, during the Six-Party Talks, former US officials claimed that the North wanted to be accepted as a legal nuclear weapons state and saw the talks with the US, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea as an opportunity to draw attention and get free goods. (138)

North Korea & the Global Nuclear Order is Edward Howell's first book. A lecturer in politics at New College, University of Oxford, he places North Korea's foreign policy behavior of the last 30 years in a theoretical framework. The book does not offer solutions; instead, it spotlights, dissects, and examines a story well known among international observers and assumed as an inevitable cycle of threats, negotiations, and lies. Readers are left with little doubt that this is a course of action the leaders in Pyongyang will continue in the future.

What is left out in Howell's excellent debut is discussions about North Korea's strategic credibility. North Korea has not bargained in good faith and most experts

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agree that it is not likely to give up nuclear weapons, yet policymakers are drawn to the negotiating table again and again, looking for a deal or are encouraged to do so. Pyongyang is able to get away with bad behavior because it has convinced the world that it will follow through with its threats to drown its neighbors in a “sea of fire” if the United States and its allies try to forcibly disarm the regime. The North’s strategic credibility goes hand in hand with its strategic delinquency. Washington and its allies may have overwhelming military advantage over the North, but Pyongyang has managed to erode this lead by developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

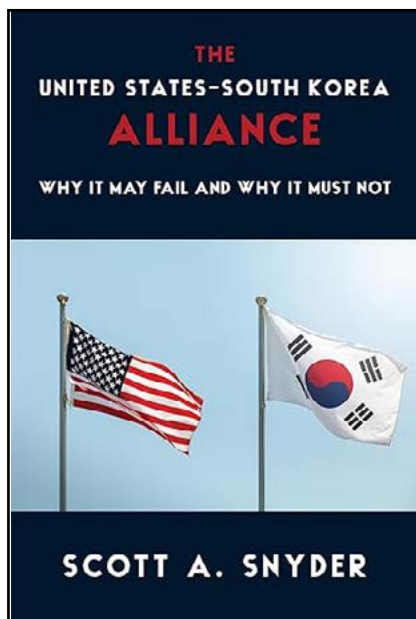
Former and current intelligence analysts who worked on Korea issues will grin and cringe while reading Howell. Some may see *North Korea & the Global*

Nuclear Order as vindication of their analysis that Pyongyang has lied and cheated for the last 30 years. While analysts can feel proud for telling truth to power, facts and hard-nosed analysis do not help policymakers come up with a solution nor make military action on the Korean Peninsula any more palatable. How far can all-source intelligence help policymakers discern North Korea’s threats? How much assurance can the Intelligence Community provide? And, how are our leaders supposed to balance threats of delinquency with possible loss of thousands of lives and billions of dollars in damage to one of the most populous corners of the world? Regardless of who wins the 2024 US presidential election, one thing is for sure in North Korea policy: Washington’s choices are likely to remain the least worst options in a warehouse full of bad options.



With so much attention focused on North Korea’s bad behavior, South Korea is frequently overlooked. Scott Snyder in *The United States-South Korea Alliance: Why It May Fail and Why It Must Not* argues that a key linchpin of the US security system in Asia is often taken for granted and provides a passionate argument for why it must not.

Snyder is a Korea specialist who has spent a large part of his career studying South Korea. His last book was *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (Columbia University Press, 2018). While North Korea frequently hijacks the center stage, South Korea has moved from an impoverished developing country to a G20 nation, its consumer electronics and pop culture exports ubiquitous worldwide. South Korea today is also a thriving democracy, having shed its authoritarian roots. US aid, investment, and access to opportunities abroad played a big role in South Korea’s rise, and the US-South Korean alliance was the bedrock of its economic, social, and political transformation. However, domestic political antagonism and populist politics within



the United States and South Korea are eroding this foundation, according to Snyder.

The United States-South Korea Alliance is focused on the here and now. Snyder touches on but does not dive into the history of US-South Korea relations, which provides helpful context when trying to understand the dilemma Washington and Seoul face today. The Cold War made for strange bedfellows, and the United States supported leaders who were less than democratic but were staunchly anti-communist and pledged allegiance to Washington. In South Korea, longtime US support for brutal dictatorships fueled left-wing radicals in the 1970s and the 1980s, who distrusted US motives and are now in positions of influence and power.

Broadly labeled as progressives, most of the current leaders and future progressive presidential candidates for the foreseeable future suffered under US-backed South Korean dictators either as labor activists, human rights lawyers, or student protesters. The progressives are currently in the opposition after losing the 2022 presidential election by less than 1 percent to the conservatives, who

are generally pro-US in their world view. Progressives returning to power in Seoul is a question of when, not if, and distrust of the United States and improving relations with North Korea are their core national security principles. Snyder writes, “South Korean progressives have tended to believe that the United States perceives continued Korean division as being in its interest because it provides a pretext for maintaining US forces on the Korean Peninsula.” (89)

The progressive-conservative divide in Korean politics extends to Japan as well, especially the issue of “how to deal with the legacy of the Japanese imperial rule.” (108) The starkest example of this is how quickly Seoul’s ties to Tokyo changed following the election of conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol, who shelved historical grievances to prioritize security relations with Japan and the United States to counter North Korea. This was in stark contrast with his predecessor progressive President Moon Jae-in who weaponized historical grievances against Japan for domestic political purposes. (115) As South Korean dictators once unfairly labeled progressive activists “communists,” the Moon administration labeled critics of its Japan policy as “Japanese sympathizers,” evoking “historical analogies to play on Korean emotions in opposition to Japan.” (115)

Hotly contested elections and changes in policy orientation are characteristics of a healthy democracy. However, the possibility of a dramatic shift in Washington and Seoul—from pro-alliance to anti-alliance or from

pro-North Korea to anti-North Korea—makes longterm planning and trust-building difficult. In the end, such a schizophrenic approach only benefits North Korea and China, which share the strategic goal of eroding US influence in Asia. Snyder shows that deeply divided and polarized domestic politics is not only an American problem but a global phenomenon; it is not any less disconcerting for it.

The United States-South Korea Alliance outlines the key drivers of domestic politics in US-South Korea relations, with precise analysis of how they shaped the alliance in the last five years. It is a wonderful addition to the field, and Snyder shows his mettle as a key observer of Korean affairs. In the end, Snyder falls victim to his own successes. He does such a great job identifying the challenges facing the alliance, his policy recommendations come across as shallow and unconvincing. The author, in the last chapter, recommends that “as part of its alliance-strengthening efforts, the United States should consistently make the case for forward-deployed influence on the Korean Peninsula through the deepening of institutionalized policy coordination between the two sides” and that the United States should “critically evaluate domestic South Korean obstacles to the perpetuation of the alliance and pursue counters to overcome such obstacles.” (270) Internationalists in the United States and South Korea who value allies and alliances can hope for such an outcome, but this reader is left to wonder if it’s not a bridge too far.



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