



Defiant Failed State: The North Korean Threat to International Security

By Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr.

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Reviewed by
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Bruce Bechtol, a retired military officer and former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst, is a well-known security studies academic and an associate professor at Angelo State University's Center for Security Studies. His previous works deal almost exclusively with the security dilemma that North Korea poses to the United States, its allies, and the international community. This book is a continuation of Bechtol's efforts to describe and explain the seemingly unpredictable nature of the Kim regime, North Korea's military capabilities, and the future of the Korean Peninsula. This is Bechtol's response to those who would discount North Korea as a threat to the United States and its allies.

Bechtol's goal in this book is to "discuss the main threats that North Korea presents to the national security of the United States and its allies" (p. ix). He notes that after the Cold War, North Korea became a "multi-faceted" threat through its arms supply industry, nuclear capabilities, and uncertainty surrounding leadership succession (p. 2). Moreover, Bechtol supports continued "hard line" foreign policy efforts (containment and deterrence) when dealing with Kim Jong-Il and the North Korean government.

The preface states that Bechtol's intention is not to "produce an analysis that is overly focused on political science or international relations jargon, or a work that is built on theory" (p. x). Thus, the text has the tone of both a historical narrative and a current intelligence report on North Korea's actions and capabilities. The main portion of the book explores familiar territory for

those who study North Korea. This includes discussions of military capabilities, weapons proliferation, the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program, issues surrounding Kim Jong-Il's successor, and the Republic of Korea (ROK)-U.S. military alliance. Bechtol concludes with a treatment of North Korean capabilities viewed through a U.S. Department of Defense lens (using the "diplomatic, informational, military, and economic" construct) and recommendations for both a firm U.S. foreign policy and a strong U.S.-ROK alliance to counter North Korea's threat. These areas are important for any analysis of North Korea and its foreign policy activities, which often have repercussions not only for East Asia, but for the entire world. While three of the main chapters are expanded or rewritten articles that have been previously published by Bechtol, their inclusion within a single text allows readers to gain a more comprehensive view of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) within a single volume.

Although Bechtol intentionally limits his text to a discussion of the threats posed by the Kim regime, this narrow scope is the most significant weakness of the book. This text contains a detailed and scrupulously notated study of recent DPRK threat activity (down to the grid coordinates of long-range missile danger areas on p. 33), but lacks a much-needed wider scope of analysis. For example, although he does briefly discuss the ascension of Kim Jong-Il to power (pp. 101-102), the inclusion of a more detailed comparison between the first transition between "the Kims" (Kim Il-Sung to Kim Jong-Il) and current efforts by the North Korean regime to establish Kim Jong-Un (Kim Jong-Il's son) could help to clarify events surrounding succession. In describing North Korea's military threat, Bechtol correctly notes that its asymmetric threat is credible, but omits mentioning how the current threat compares to the DPRK's long history of unconventional activities. Additionally, North Korea's actions have significant repercussions within the region, and the inclusion of an international relations perspective would help bolster Bechtol's arguments. Finally, comparisons to other Communist regimes (past or present) might allow for a better understanding of DPRK activities.

North Korea continues to exist as a recalcitrant and isolated Cold War country, and remains, at its very core, a sovereign nation focused on state survival. Surrounded by perceived threats (from Japan, South

Korea, and the United States), North Korea continues to look to China for support while attempting to ensure that it can survive (at any cost) without outside assistance. North Korea's threatening foreign policy activity might be similar to other state-level patterns observed throughout history. Examination and comparison of North Korean activity to Japan's efforts at autarky prior to World War II, Cuba's long history of Communist rule and isolation, or China's modernist approach to communism and economic expansion all might help readers to understand the choices made by the Kim regime. Contrasting North Korea with other "rogue" nations could help support Bechtol's arguments that the North Korean threat remains both unique and dangerous to U.S. interests.

There are a number of other minor areas in which the book might have been improved. The text assumes readers have an understanding of regional U.S. interests and military contingencies in the region—a phrase such as "designated ROK forces chop to the CFC commander" (p. 169) might be confusing to some readers. Additionally, a number of Bechtol's graphics fared poorly in the publishing process, although this might have been out of his control. Finally, although Bechtol provides a detailed discussion of successors to Kim Jong-Il and presents two figures that describe the Kim family (p. 105) and its "Power Circle" (p. 118), the argument is difficult to follow and could be clarified with the inclusion of another figure showing the hierarchy of other key (nonfamily) individuals.

Bechtol makes a credible argument that North Korea remains a threat, but readers would benefit from a more complete discussion of the historical, regional, and theoretical issues that surround the Kim regime. Nevertheless, Bechtol has done an admirable job of describing actions taken by North Korea that pose a security risk for East Asia, providing noteworthy information for policy analysts. The hardest part in writing about North Korea is how to research and analyze its closed society and political system in a credible manner. Bechtol's book clearly demonstrates that examining the complicated nature of the DPRK's leaders and government remains a difficult task for any scholar. **JFQ**

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