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Review by Victor Teo, The University of Hong Kong

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) stands out often as an ‘abnormal’ phenomenon for many humanities and social science scholars in their research. For political scientists and diplomatic historians in particular, the DPRK is a poster child for bad behavior in international relations. For most of the Cold War period, the DPRK has maintained minimal contact with the outside world beyond the socialist bloc, even as Pyongyang deftly balanced its relations with the Soviet Union and the China in order to survive. Pyongyang’s self-imposed isolation was further increased during the great famine of 1994-1998 [Arduous March (고난의 행군)] in the mid-1990s.

There were some feeble attempts by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to reach out to the United States, China, and Japan for an increase in economic trade and material assistance, but they did not fundamentally change the way the DPRK conducted its foreign relations. Beyond asserting the norms of sovereignty and loyalty to their regime, the North Koreans are not known for their fidelity to international law or global norms. To that extent, writings on the DPRK in the last two decades have therefore mostly focused on topics such as DPRK’s international criminal transgressions, human rights abuses, and the problems associated with nuclear proliferation. 1 Balazs Szalontai’s article, “North Korea between China, Japan and the ROK, 2012-

2016,” is timely because its publication came on the tail of a nail-biting 18 months of tensions from 2017 to June 2018 between the United States and the DPRK. It was perhaps sheer serendipity that both the Trump administration and the Kim regime found enough strength and wisdom to take the diplomatic road to the June 12 2018 Singapore summit.

Recent writings on DPRK’s foreign relations have often been limited to discussions of bilateral relations with Washington, Beijing, or Seoul or in a multi-lateral six party context. Arguably, prior to Kim Jong-un era, the DPRK can be perceived as a ‘reactive’ and ‘passive’ actor more concerned with regime longevity than anything else due to her self-imposed isolation policy. This image is also underpinned by the idea that DPRK’s foreign policy merits little study because of the regime’s bureaucratic inertia, ideological dogmatism and the dominance of DPRK’s Supreme leader. North Korea’s political hostility towards Japan, China, the Republic of Korea (ROK), and the United States has left it little diplomatic wriggle room. A cursory survey of the writings in the period leading up to the summit, whether in the scholarly literature or digital publications and social media, there are not many works that focus clearly on the dynamics of regional diplomacy and tensions. Many writings on the DPRK fail to go beyond partisan politics (really ‘beltway politics’) or policy advocacy.

The important contribution of this article is its focus on the DPRK and its approach in treating the DPRK as an active (rather than passive and reactive) agent in advancing its diplomatic agenda. Even though employment of this game-theoretical approach is not new, the article is innovative as the DPRK, rather than a major power like the United States or the People’s Republic of China (PRC), is made central to the scope of the enquiry. This illuminates the nuances of DPRK diplomacy that are often lost in pieces that discuss the DPRK as an ‘issue’ or as a ‘factor’ in the foreign policy of other powers. Szalontai begins the article by examining how the DPRK’s diplomatic strategy is affected by PRC-ROK, Japan-ROK and Sino-Japanese interactions. He goes on to skillfully illustrate how Pyongyang sought to exploit various conflicts in these aforementioned bilateral relations from the period of 2012-2016. By historically contextualizing these interactions, Szalontai argues that during times of inter-Korean rapprochement, Pyongyang has had more chances of exploiting tensions in Sino-Japanese or Japan-ROK friction than in periods of North-South tensions.

The article makes a valiant effort to make sense of the complicated regional dynamics involving the DPRK by offering an interpretation and analysis of recent developments on the Korean Peninsula through a comprehensive analysis of Pyongyang’s relations with its Asian neighbors, namely China, Japan and South Korea. In the author’s words, this is done through the deployment of “Lowell Dittmer’s game-theoretical analysis as a method” (2018: 156). Essentially, Dittmer’s model has three models of interactive behavior between parties (which he calls patterns of exchange relations), consisting of the “ménage a trois” where

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relations between three parties are symmetric; the romantic triangle consisting of one “pivot” actor, and two “wing” actors (with enmity between them). The third model, of the “stable marriage,” suggests that there is amity between two of the players, and enmity between each and third (157 citing Dittmer 2018).

The author draws several important conclusions. First, North Korean leaders often resort to negative exchanges (like sanctions and threats) when they are unwilling or unable to offer attractive benefits to another state, which itself is a classic trait of pariah states. Second, the DPRK prefers zero-sum games and has less interest in win-win relations. Third, the DPRK would prevent any diplomatic cooperation between ROK and other states when these political alliances are potentially inimical to the DPRK’s interests, and Pyongyang’s favorite strategy is to always fixate on players it would like to ‘exclude’ from the game (176). Fourth, Pyongyang has a successful track record of exploiting differences between its neighbors to its own benefit on occasions, but this strategy has not consistently paid off (177). Fifth, North Korea is rarely able to entice all of its neighbors to work with it simultaneously if its position is confrontational, particularly as both China and Japan are able to find more powerful and desirable partners to work with. Sixth, the DPRK’s ‘divide and rule’ strategy suggests that the prospect of inter-Korea rapprochement is still dubious and the idea of regional cooperation a distant dream. These points are powerful and thought-provoking ones and certainly deserve more discussion.

This well-written piece also raises some further questions. First, one might wonder if the triangular model concept proposed by Dittmer might be the best conceptual model that could be ‘borrowed’ to explain the foreign relations of the DPRK, given that Dittmer had originally developed this for the analysis of United States’ relations with China, the USSR, and Japan. The question here is if there are important differences in the constituency of the DPRK and the United States in the way they approach their diplomatic strategies that is not adequately captured or portrayed via the model. This is by no means to suggest there is any problem with Dittmer’s or Szalontai’s work; this is simply a methodological question that needs further research and clarification. The second question I have is how these findings speak to international relations theory. For instance, how does the DPRK’s case relate to the dominant paradigms of neo-Realism or Constructivism or even to the ideas of bandwagoning, hedging, or balancing. If the ‘game theoretical’ model is used as a ‘method,’ then the conceptual contributions could perhaps be fleshed out more clearly. As I understand it, this article is part of the author’s larger work on the subject, and hopefully we will be able to read more on the topic in the author’s subsequent work. Third, this article seems to suggest a degree of DPRK agency in the control and manipulation of its relations with its neighbours. While I agree with the important points made in the conclusion, I have always wondered if the DPRK is always capable of these nuances and careful strategic thinking. In short, I wonder if the regime in the DPRK is as clever as we make it out to be, or if we are interpreting facts to fit the model being presented to us. Without the aid of more primary source materials, diplomatic cables, first-hand accounts of actors in Pyongyang, and other important archival materials, these questions are almost impossible to answer. Having said that, this article is well written and makes for splendid reading. I have no hesitation in recommending this to scholars, students, and anyone with an interest in North Korea.

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Victor Teo is Assistant Professor at the Department of Japanese Studies of The University of Hong Kong. He received his Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics & Political Science. His latest publication is *Japan’s Arduous Rejuvenation as a Global Power: Democratic Resilience and the US-China Challenge* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He is now working on a second monograph-length project on “Asian Responses to Rising China” (forthcoming 2019).

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