

11-1-2011

Patrick McEachern. Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Totalitarian Politics. New York: Columbia University Press. 2011.

Elena Kolesova Ph.D.

Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, ekolesova@unitec.ac.nz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kolesova, Elena Ph.D. (2011) "Patrick McEachern. Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Totalitarian Politics. New York: Columbia University Press. 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol3/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Patrick McEachern. *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Totalitarian Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2011.

Among all nations with nuclear capacities, North Korea remains the world's poorest. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the nation is willing to use its nuclear know-how as a bargaining tool in negotiations with other countries, a tendency that often frustrates and confounds those attempting to negotiate with the single-party state. Indeed, to much of the world, North Korea largely retains its enigmatic image as a 'black box,' ruled by an autocratic Kim Jong-il (son of North Korea's longest serving and totalitarian leader—and Kim Jong Il's father—Kim Il Sung). In this context, the publication of Patrick McEachern's new book, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Totalitarian Politics*, is timely. McEachern, a specialist in North Korean affairs, challenges the stereotypical view of this country as "some type of monolith" and argues that although Kim's role is critically important within the political arena, North Korea's political institutions play an equally critical role in North Korean politics (p. 4). Following his main argument about the existence of a level of pluralism among the political institutions in North Korea, McEachern takes the reader on an exciting journey through the evolution of North Korean political life under the regimes of the two Kims.

Through analysis and critique of the competing theories or models of North Korean politics (including totalitarianism, post-totalitarianism, personalism, institutional pluralism and corporatism), McEachern argues that the post-totalitarian model allows for the clearest understanding of the North Korean state and its policy making mechanisms. According to the author, the post-totalitarian model is one in which the politics within an otherwise totalitarian regime are somehow shaped or influenced by the forces of competing institutions within the state, thereby tempering the authority of the regime leader. This means that McEachern's focus is primarily concerned not with "whether [power] is dispersed" within North Korean politics but "*how* [it] is dispersed" (emphasis added) (p.30). By connecting his post-totalitarian model with extensive empirical data that include translated speeches of North Korean leaders, official reports, commentaries, and articles, he suggests that all traditional models previously applied to the political analysis of North Korea have limitations and are, therefore, unable to truly capture the complexities of the North Korean political reality. The book is divided into eight chapters. In the core of the book is the analysis of the three major institutions that help maintain North Korean regime continuity: the cabinet (the government), the military (the Korean People's Army), and the party (the Korean Worker's party). McEachern discusses the primary political debates among these three institutions on three major policies: the State's economic policy, its inter-Korean policy, and its U.S. policy. The book begins with the description of a disagreement between Kim Jong Il, the chairman of the National Defense Commission and the general secretary of the Korean Worker's Party, and Kim Yong-sun, the Korean Worker's Party Secretary, concerning the presence of American troops on the Korean peninsula during a historic visit of the South Korean President to Pyongyang in June 2000 (pp.1-2). Such an opening sets the stage for McEachern to introduce his main argument about the importance of both individuals and institutions in North Korean bureaucracy and the need, therefore, to examine the roles of both individuals and institutions when analyzing North Korea's decision making processes. Next, McEachern briefly outlines North Korea's current economic policy and its policies toward South Korea and the U.S. He then offers a model for understanding North Korean politics based on the strong theoretical tradition of comparative politics (the empirical work of area studies), followed by his own contributions and reactions to these ideas (p.11). (On this note, the nature of McEachern's contributions does lead the reader to wonder whether this text should be seen

as a contribution to the academic field or rather as a timely, topical reader consisting of the practical contributions of a foreign-service officer stationed in Seoul.)

In the second chapter, McEachern analyzes a number of theoretical models that are often applied to North Korean political structures and hypothesizes that under Kim Jong Il's regime, authority remains centralized, and Kim Jong Il remains an autocratic leader. However, he says, power is more diffuse in today's North Korea than it was under the regime of Kim's father, Kim Il Sung (p.34). McEachern develops his main argument further by proposing the presence of bureaucratic resistance in North Korean politics, a presence that supports McEachern's hypothesis that political institutions in North Korea do indeed possess authentic political leverage (and a presence that would not likely exist if Kim Jong Il were not at least minimally amenable to political exchange) (p.48). The theoretical discourse presented in this chapter makes McEachern's work useful not only for understanding the North Korean state but also for understanding post-socialist or post-communist regimes generally. The second chapter also introduces a research methodology based on content analyses of North Korea's elite press, translated into English by North Korean interpreters. Such analyses are used to understand the political debate among the North Korean government, the military, and the Korean Workers' party. Such a choice is perfectly logical, as the three major themes selected for analysis within this text make up the core of the North Korean political debate. However, McEachern's overemphasis on theory leads to a weakness in the text with respect to understanding the human side of such regimes. When analyses are elevated to the level of models and concepts that describe political regimes, the result is a certain dissociation from human agency. While McEachern correctly points on page 21 that "[t]otalitarian regimes are short lived," the human cost of such regimes must not be forgotten.

Chapter Three focuses on the evolution of North Korean politics under Kim Il Sung and provides historical context for the current North Korean regime. McEachern notes that while much has been written about the birth of the state and its impending death, there is a gap in evaluating the whole of North Korea's political history (p.52). He attempts to bridge this gap in this and the next chapters by constructing a history of the North Korean political regime, thereby making this chapter an appropriate stand-alone reading for those who may be interested in a concise history of the North Korean political regime.

Chapter Four discusses in more detail the three main political players in North Korean politics as McEachern sees it: the cabinet, the Korean People's Army, and the Korean Workers' Party. The chapter also describes North Korea's security apparatus, the Supreme People's Assembly (SAP), and provincial and local governments and judiciaries and their respective relations with the government, the army, and the party. McEachern concludes that the state's three major political institutions have a corporate-like identity and provide an institutional world view in regard to political policy. However, he says, the country's *constitutional* entities (the security apparatus, the SAP, and the subnational governments and their judiciaries) do not have systematic influence on national policy decisions (p.99).

The next three chapters test the theoretical constructions described in the first half of the book and examine a number of specific policy issues through analyses of political debate in the North Korean central press. Chapter Five starts with an examination of the 1998 constitutional revision and takes the reader through the launch of the first North Korean rocket, Taepodong-1, in September 1998 and, in [name year], the negotiations with the U.S. regarding inspections of Kumchang-ri, a suspected nuclear facility. This chapter also examines the deterioration of North Korean-U.S. relations as a result of the OPlan 5027, extracted by the Combined Forces, which outlined military actions that would be undertaken by joint U.S.-South Korean forces in the case of military conflict between North Korea and South Korea. The chapter focuses further on North Korean economic policy and concludes with a discussion of inter-Korean relations. The culmination of the negotiations between

North and South Korea, in June 2000, became the first summit between the two Koreas, ending only ten days before the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Korean War. For McEachern, it is important that during these negotiations, Kim Jong Il openly admitted that he had chosen to engage in such inter-Korean negotiation despite objection from within his own party. This admission of Kim Jong Il's further supports McEachern's hypothesis that North Korean politics is shaped not only by some totalitarian force within Kim Jong Il as an individual but rather by the jockeying for and negotiation of power among the three major political institutions in North Korea. Indeed, McEachern uses the word "jostling" to describe the angling for power demonstrated by these three political entities during the turbulent years from 1998 to 2001, a period that was full of struggle for bureaucratic supremacy and control of political agendas between the party, the military and the cabinet.

The next chapter, covering the period between 2001 and 2006, is the largest in the book and is heavy on empirical data based on the entire spectrum of political events that unfolded following the 9/11, during which the struggle for power among the three leading North Korean political institutions continued to dominate the agenda of political life. In this chapter in particular, McEachern demonstrates that North Korea responded quite appropriately to the rather inappropriate demands of the Bush administration for North Korean regime change (pp.156-157). In his State of the Union Address in January 2002, President Bush grouped together Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an "axis of evil." This united the North Korean political institutions together in opposition to the U.S. and prevented North Korea from engaging in any authentic diplomatic discourse with the U.S. for some time. Interestingly, McEachern's detailed analysis of the political debate between North Korea and the Bush administration regarding U.S. international policy (heavily affected by Bush's rhetoric and his so-called "axis of evil") leads the reader to understand these debates in a new light: McEachern suggests that by not engaging in Bush's pseudo-diplomatic discourse, North Korea was able to move beyond an ideological trap set by the U.S. and, in so doing, demonstrated simple common sense. This sidestepping of U.S. rhetoric ultimately permitted North and South Korea to engage more authentically in a conversation on inter-Korean relations and North Korean economic development.

Chapter Seven provides an analysis of the shift in policies in both North Korea and the U.S. The punitive approach promoted by the Bush administration during 2001-2006 did not reach the desired results, and the U.S. subsequently moved towards a more accommodating diplomatic course. Between the years of 2006 and 2008 North Korean policy likewise underwent a marked shift regarding, first of all, international relations with its major partners, the U.S. and South Korea. This occurred as a result of diplomatic efforts to improve relations with North Korea by the Bush administration at the end of the Bush presidency, and, on another hand, the "hard" policy towards North Korea promoted by new South Korean President, Lee Myung-bak, the first conservative president in a decade who was elected in 2008. External factors influenced the internal debates. Between the years of 2006-2008, the party and the military won over the cabinet's efforts for marketization, that influenced economic policy between 2001 and 2006, and a significant shift took place towards food distribution at the expense of the markets. For McEachern, this ability of institutions to shape political debates in North Korea and change the political course can most effectively be explained by the post-totalitarian institutionalism model (p.214).

In the final chapter, McEachern confirms that Kim Jong Il's regime is different today from the regime of his father. The son uses the old strategy of 'divide and conquer' when he pits institutions against each other. As a result, McEachern comes to the conclusion that despite the leverage of political institutions in North Korea, no organized opposition "to the state exists within the country" (p.218). Still, he argues that the North Korean state is not as monolithic as a pure totalitarian model would suggest (p.219). His argument is based on a

detailed analysis of the political debate of the three major political institutions that he undertook in the second half of the book in chapters five, six and seven.

McEachern's analyses provide the possibility of some prediction of North Korean's political responses, at least to U.S. politics. As such, the North Korean 'black box' has begun to undergo a transition into a 'red box,' one which became less enigmatic to this reader over the course of McEachern's work. Using the Foucauldian expression "knowledge is power," the new knowledge that McEachern provides about North Korea empowers the reader, as it gives readers insight into the North Korean political mind. At the very least, the book destroys the stereotype of North Korea as "irrational" or "confusing."

While McEachern certainly achieves his objectives as stated in the beginning of the book, new questions are raised for future investigations. McEachern's primary focus was on North Korean-U.S. diplomatic relations, with further focus on inter-Korean relations. However, the connections between North Korea and the former Soviet Union (now Russia) and China were marginally examined. Without undermining the importance of the U.S. and South Korea to North Korea, the relations with North Korea's other two neighbors require further analysis. Finally, the main argument of the book also raises further questions, particularly as the notion of post-totalitarian itself may be not as original as McEachern indicates. The former Soviet Union, a classic example of totalitarian state, at least from a theoretical standpoint, is known for inter-party struggle even during times when the totalitarianism was at its zenith. Finally, the reader may be likely to generally ponder the nature of types of resistance to totalitarian authority. McEachern claims that North Korea does not have any organized opposition to the state. However, historians have written a great deal about 'off-kilter' forms of resistance that do not necessarily distract or antagonize existing domains of power but instead try to hybridize them. Such forms of resistance are less structured but not less effective than organized resistance. For example, North Korean defectors and North Korean businessmen are among the agents who were involved with economic reforms under King Jong Il, to name just a few of those who may be in disagreement with the North Korean regime. The study of these less visible forms of resistance can bring some light to the human history of North Korea and complement its political history, so well portrayed by McEachern.

Elena Kolesova, Ph.D.

Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

ekolesova@unitec.ac.nz