

# Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Catastrophe

Gavan McCormack

Reviewed by Neil James

Professor Gavan McCormack, currently living in Tokyo, holds the chair in Japanese history at ANU and has written numerous books and articles on North Asian matters. This book is his attempt to summarise the complex problem of contemporary North Korea.

McCormack writes regularly for publications such as the *New Left Review*, *Eureka Street*, the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He sits heartily within the Australian cultural milieu that is prone to blame the United States for most of the world's problems (and to attribute most of Australia's disagreements with Asian countries as always Australia's fault).

This said, there's much of interest in his account. He notes that North Korea has failed its people and he lists in detail the many depredations, horrors, hypocrisies and contradictions of the Kim Jong Il regime. Where McCormack parts company with much, but certainly not all, conventional strategic thought is in arguing that reassuring this peculiar but, as he sees it, not irrational, regime is more important than any viable alternative. He argues strongly that the price of avoiding potentially catastrophic war on the Korean peninsula means ignoring the regime's chequered record for truthful negotiation and adherence to diplomatic conventions—and is even worth risking accusations of appeasement. As he notes: 'The Kim Jong Il regime is indefensible but violent intervention to change it is more likely to lead to the sort of chaos that is engulfing Iraq and Afghanistan than to resolution of problems that, in the last resort, only the Korean people, North and South, can solve'. The culturally and racially homogenous Koreans are, in fact, comparatively well equipped to avoid the racial and religious sectarianism of Iraq and Afghanistan—but McCormack's essential point about the complexities of forced regime change still stand.

A McCormack theme that the North Korean regime is culturally reminiscent of pre-World War II Japan resonates strongly. He carries the analogy further by describing North Korea today, beset by natural and man-made disasters, and under siege and threat of foreign attack (at least as they see it), as resembling, '... nothing so much as Japan in the last stages of the Pacific and China wars in 1945—chronic shortages of food, factories not working, transport and communications in chaos, people reduced to selling anything they possess in order to get food, and a psychological mood of exhaustion and tension in anticipation of some final cataclysm'.

The book is structured around seven chapters that seek to place the crisis, and North Korea and its Juche ideology, more

within the Confucian rather than the Marxist tradition. McCormack notes that the communist party has not held a conference in decades and that, rhetoric aside, the country is more a military dictatorship and an absolute hereditary monarchy than a communist remnant. Perceptions, both in North Korea and outside it, that the regime has lost the 'mandate of heaven' reinforce the regime's fears for its survival. The sudden political and military collapse of Iraq

when 'containment' was judged to fail exacerbates North Korean perceptions of both vulnerability and impending attack. The chapters on inter-Korea relations and the role of Japan are well traced. McCormack emphasises the psychological and political baggage in Japan concerning its invasions and colonial excesses in Korea. He makes the telling point that current Japanese angst, about North Korean abductions of a handful of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, are really a symptom of Japan's inability to face up to its conscription, abduction and horrific treatment of tens of thousands of Koreans in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, the chapter on US–North Korea relations, and the objectivity of the book in general in this regard, unfortunately undermine much of the discussion. The anti-American bias is often subtle, for example, where he states that the 'UN passed an American resolution' in 1950 when they actually passed, after much discussion and amendment, a resolution originally proposed by the USA. Other statements too often stray into glib cliché or polemics, such as where he wrongly compares US support to South Korea 1945–50 with the later Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

More seriously, for an Australian, he falsely claims that UN Command prisoners of war were not tortured by the North Koreans. This is a claim completely at odds with well-documented reality, including the award of a posthumous George Cross to Australia's Private 'Slim' Madden for his bravery under torture and maltreatment. This is despicable territory, for which Wilfred Burchett, quoted approvingly and inappropriately in McCormack's footnotes, will remain forever condemned. McCormack also displays a weak grasp of international law, especially the UN Charter and the Security Council's responsibility to maintain international peace and security irrespective of whether a conflict is perceived to be 'civil' or intra-state. He completely misunderstands the concept of a weapon of mass destruction (and its Soviet origins). His penchant for cliché, such as 'freedom delivered by cruise missile would be ephemeral at best', does not buttress his argument and, in this case, fundamentally misunderstands the relation of tools to ends. This is a book well worth reading but only with an open mind, and certainly not in isolation from the many other books on the complex problem of North Korea and its neighbours. ♦

Gavan McCormack, *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe*, Random House, Sydney, 2004, paperback, 229pp, RRP \$13.95.

