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Benjamin R. Young. *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781503627635

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 Introduction by Van Jackson, Victoria University of Wellington

Few actors in international relations evoke caricature and misunderstanding like North Korea. A country that has long vexed US policymakers, North Korea has become the go-to adversary of convenience for the American imagination.

The Pentagon pinned its post-Cold War force structure to the assumption of a second Korean War, meaning that a decade of US military primacy was justified by rendering North Korea into a bogeyman.¹ In popular culture, Hollywood has made North Korea both America's stock enemy and a laughing stock. North Korea has been a cardboard-cutout bad guy in far too many action films, the most farcical of which was the 2012 remake of the Cold War jingoist flick *Red Dawn*, which substituted North Korea for China as the force invading America. And yet, from *Team America: World Police* to *The Interview*, Hollywood has also mercilessly satirized the cult qualities of North Korea's ruling regime.

What few Americans care to do is situate North Korea in its own place and time; its own experiences of the world. How has North Korea ended up in this position as the United States' reliable rogue, and for so long—an object we fear when it suits, an object of ridicule at all other times? Neither Washington nor Hollywood has shown any interest in this question, but Benjamin Young has, albeit indirectly. *Guns, Guerillas and the Great Leader* punctures caricatures of North Korea as a “Hermit Kingdom,” portraying its political project as ruthlessly strategic but also status-obsessed and doomed to fail.

Contra prevailing images, North Korea was deeply internationalist, but the revolutionary (and sultanistic) commitments guiding that internationalism were far grander in ambition than the means at its disposal. In its own way, North Korea can be seen as having pursued a utopian project throughout much of the Cold War that exploited the power-political blocs formed not just by US-Soviet rivalry but also post-World War II decolonization and the Non-Aligned Movement. For decades, North Korea was not alone in fighting American power, and neither was it an appendage of America's great-power enemies. But the deck was stacked against Pyongyang's revolutionary ambitions, especially as the international political economy began to change in the 1970s—the financialization of global capital and the shift in the global modes of production increasingly favored transnational industrial networks centering the global North.²

In *Guns, Guerillas and the Great Leader*, Young uncovers the extent to which—and how—North Korea tried to be a revolutionary force in the Third World, stitching together networks of regimes and groups that were militantly opposed to US-centered capitalism and imperialism. What is remarkable about this, especially from an international-relations (IR) perspective, is that it shows how small regimes which we might otherwise dismiss on a global scale can be deeply engaged protagonists in balance-of-power politics—not just clients. IR scholarship's obsession with states not only leads us to overemphasize the “great” ones; it discounts the ways that actors can exploit relational contexts and the power structures that reside both within and beyond the

¹ Van Jackson, *Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), 76.

² Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2013).

state.³ Young exposes precisely this blind spot as part of the historical record of North Korean diplomacy in the Third World.

The reviews in this roundtable all note that Young has made a contribution here. The reviewers have their own standpoints regarding what might have been done better or where questions were begged that warrant further research, but they all find something distinctive in what Young has produced.

Bridget Coggins commends Young for pushing us away from viewing the Cold War through a superpower lens, and for bringing in the role of domestic politics to account for North Korea's foreign policy—especially the way Young's narrative combines the personalistic idiosyncrasies of Kim Il-sung's leadership with the global Third Worldist political currents that were trying to bring into being a world that was different from the one we came to know. Despite seeing value in Young's research, Coggins takes issue with what she sees as his occasional caricaturing of North Korea as political opportunist and dead-beat debtor—a regime whose “rogueness,” in the conventional wisdom, ostensibly owed to exporting violence and not internalizing the norm of reciprocity long before it owed to a track record of nuclear defiance. She argues that bringing in more of a Third-World perspective might have complicated such simple Manichean imagery.

Christopher Green similarly wishes that Young had brought in more of how Third World governments themselves viewed North Korea during the main period in question (roughly the 1960s and 1970s). Green reminds us—and Young's book validates at many points—that for a long time North Korea was not a global rogue in any meaningful sense, especially not in the Third World. That only began to change as it failed to repay its immense debt burdens. Green describes Young's portrayal of North Korea as useful for illuminating why, through the mid-1990s, North Korea still had officials on the ground in places like Nigeria to coordinate games and parades celebrating its independence—it was a residual legacy of Pyongyang's previous era of intensive diplomatic outreach.

But Green is skeptical that there can be a unifying explanation for the wide range of diplomatic projects North Korea undertook in the Third World. He praises Young for bringing attention to them, but to the extent we can ascribe a singular motive, he argues that it is mostly to do with competing for legitimacy in a global struggle against South Korea. The inter-Korean battle over zero-sum symbolic capital—or, the argument over which Korea is the “real” Korea—was certainly an important explanation for North Korea's unique form of revolutionary export to the Third World. But it also raises a question about the relative weight we should assign to different factors driving North Korea's outreach to the Third World—to what extent was it based on Pyongyang's geostrategy (power-balancing against capitalist imperialism) versus its competitive pursuit of legitimacy in relation to South Korea? Clearly Kim Il-sung saw a synergy in these two motives insofar as prevailing over South Korea would have been a blow to the geopolitics of global capital.

Andrew Yeo applauds Young for both situating North Korea in a global historical context—reframing it as something other than a Northeast Asian *problématique*—and for the thick descriptions of North Korean

³ On thinking about power politics relationally, see especially Stacie Goddard and Daniel Nexon, “The Dynamics of Global Power Politics: A Framework for Analysis,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1:1 (2016): 4-18.

activism in the Third World, much of which has not been documented elsewhere. Yeo especially appreciates Young's narrative connecting North Korea's growing status insecurity to outward belligerence (including the Rangoon bombing of 1983). As South Korea's global status rose in the 1980s (in part because of its favorable position in the shifting economic order), that of North Korea necessarily diminished, and that loss induced desperation in Pyongyang, which incentivized it to engage in the kinds of transgressive foreign policy activities that led to its eventual "pariah" status. The only shortcoming Yeo finds in the book is the way it discounts how North Korea's relations to the Soviet Union and China shaped its engagement with the Third World. It is one thing to de-center "great powers," which is a commendable move; it is quite another to ignore them altogether.

Benjamin Young's response to the reviewers expresses both surprise and gratitude that his book—which targets historians and area studies scholars—has resonated with scholars from other disciplines, noting that the reviewers are not historians. He clarifies that he sees North Korean identity as expressing itself in violent ways that make its global stigmatization reasonable, and reiterates his belief that North Korean domestic politics is at the core of its foreign policy. Young also rebuts the critique by Green, and to a lesser extent Coggins, that his work did not engage global-South perspectives adequately, noting that he incorporated archival material from Africa as part of his narrative.

In the end, *Guns, Guerillas and the Great Leader* leaves us with a tragic depiction of a once-vibrant, world-shaping North Korea whose star gradually fell. North Korea's trajectory owes something to its own choices, but those choices were shaped by the scars of earlier traumas. They were also downstream of international structures (not only the balance of military power but the shifting character of global capital) that rendered its anti-imperial, status-conscious quest somewhat Quixotic.

Participants:

Benjamin R. Young, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of homeland security and emergency preparedness in the Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is the author of the book *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World* (Stanford University Press, 2021). Previously, he was an Assistant Professor in Cyber Leadership & Intelligence at Dakota State University and a postdoctoral fellow in Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College. He has published a number of scholarly articles on Cold War history and politics in peer-reviewed journals, such as the *International History Review*, the *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, and *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*. He was a 2018-2019 CSIS/USC NextGen US-Korea Scholar and has also written journalistic pieces for *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Diplomat*, *Nikkei Asia*, *The National Interest*, *Reuters*, and *NKNews.org*. Dr. Young has lived in South Korea during a Fulbright fellowship and has traveled extensively in North Korea, China, and Russia.

Van Jackson is a Senior Lecturer in international Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, and holds multiple think tank appointments: as a Distinguished Fellow at the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada; a

Senior Associate fellow at the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Nonproliferation & Disarmament; a Non-Resident Fellow at the Sejong Institute; and the Defence & Strategy Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies. He has written two books on U.S.-North Korea relations with Cambridge University Press. His third book, *Pacific Power Paradox: American Statecraft and the Fate of the Asian Peace*, is forthcoming with Yale University Press (2023). His research spans Asian security, progressive foreign policy, the theory and practice of grand strategy, and leftist intellectual history. Van also hosts *The Un-Diplomatic Podcast* and writes regularly for *The Duck of Minerva*.

Bridget Coggins is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara and an Adjunct Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Korea Chair. During 2021-2022 she is serving as an advisor in the U.S. State Department's Conflict and Stabilization Operations Bureau on a Council on Foreign Relations, Tenured International Affairs Fellowship.

Christopher Green is an assistant professor in the Korean Studies department of Leiden University in the Netherlands. He is a consultant for International Crisis Group and former senior manager of the Seoul-based *Daily NK*, which reports inside news from North Korean affairs via a network of trained citizen journalists inside the country. He has published widely on North Korean politics, economy, ideology, and culture, as well as contemporary South Korean broadcast media portrayals of resettled North Korean migrants. He is translator of the memoir of a senior North Korean defector, Hwang Jang Yop.

Andrew Yeo is Professor of Politics and Director of Asian Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington DC. His forthcoming work, *State, Society, and Markets in North Korea* will appear later this year with Cambridge University Press. He is also the co-editor of *North Korean Human Rights: Activists and Networks* (Cambridge University Press 2018, with Danielle Chubb). Dr. Yeo's research and teaching interests include international relations theory, East Asian regionalism, Asian security, US grand strategy, civil society, Korean politics, and North Korea.

The international relations field takes for granted that the most powerful governments have the most expansive interests. Despite its small size, minimal wealth, and geo-political precarity, however, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPKR) had outsized plans to influence others in the Third World. In *Guns, Guerillas and the Great Leader*, Benjamin Young details North Korea's foreign policy strategies for ideological and political development (1956-1989), from founder Kim Il-sung to his son, Kim Jong-il. In some countries the remnants of North Korea's influence attempts are still visible in the form of statues and street signs. But in most, the efforts amounted to little lasting change. As North Korea's economy and human development tanked relative to its South Korean neighbor beginning in the 1980s and its pariah status grew with its use of terror, its nuclear program, and its dire human rights abuses, most states that had been Cold War friends and "successes" for the Kim regime have reconsidered.

Young's is among a handful of well-timed books reminding those currently watching the rapidly escalating great power competition between the United States, China and Russia that the field of foreign influence and prestige is a crowded one that is not exclusively contested by the superpowers.⁴ While Washington's and Beijing's perspectives are dominant, they do not exist in a vacuum. During the Cold War, superpower competition between the Soviet Union and the United States was not the only dimension of political contestation. *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader* argues that North Korea's domestic politics were the principal driving force behind its foreign policy—as was the case with many of its non-aligned peers, from Yugoslavia to India to Ghana. And ultimately, its domestic politics were also responsible for its policies' lackluster performance.

The book is brief and quickly paced. Its chapters are divided into different phases over the course of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's rule. Young rightly emphasizes how the Kims' individual dispositions effected striking departures in a way that only a personalistic, centralized authoritarian system could. Yet he also uncovers consistent threads of anti-colonial and Third World national identity that he argues other histories of the time have not acknowledged (4-5). He does so while exploring four themes: the DPRK's developmental model and outreach, Pyongyang's support for national liberation movements and the resulting newly independent states, Inter-Korean competition as a motive for foreign policy, and Kim Il-sung's personal relationships with Third World leaders.

As a scholar of rebel diplomacy, following the ascendant, though not yet legitimate, regimes of the world, I was particularly interested to read about Kim Il-sung's efforts to cultivate relationships with similarly revolutionary partners. According to Young, Kim Il-sung did so as a long-term drive to secure North Korea's place among the world's rightful governments in venues including the United Nations. Yet the high-wire nature of the Kims' support for revolutionaries became clear when their preferred regimes failed to gain power and those countries' embattled leaders punished North Korea. Perhaps predictably, the regime's support for

⁴ See for example, Julia Lovell's masterful *Maoism: A Global History* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2019) and Tim Harper's excellent *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

the domestic discontents of other countries won it little support from anyone other than a rogue's list of foreign governments: Iran, Angola, Zimbabwe and Syria among them.

It is challenging to write anything on North Korea that penetrates beyond the superficial. Because it is such an exceedingly closed society, without even a partial historical "opening," scholarly work relies on what little information the regime itself releases. That information is ballasted by a small group of outsiders and experts with in-country experience. Most are defectors (those that emigrated), aid workers, foreign migrant workers, or former diplomats. This means that when it comes to explaining foreign policy, there is no access to the discussions, internal bureaucratic politicking, or even standard processes and procedures among the internal elite that are so fundamental. Serious scholarly research programs remain dedicated to simple sorting out what government titles imply about those bureaucrats' actual jobs (North Korean elites often hold several positions simultaneously).⁵ North Korea is even more of a 'black box' of unknowns than the typical single-party state.

Young does as well as can be expected with the paucity of information currently available from the North Korean side. But the book does at times fall into a quixotic North Korea caricature as a result. Did North Korea actually stop supporting Mobutu Sese Seko and his ambitions in Angola, going so far as to switch sides in the war to the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), because Mobutu had the gall to ask Kim to pay his country for cobalt? A Swedish diplomatic telegram says so, but it describes a fairly dramatic, costly diplomatic and military turnaround without much explanation (86-87). My biggest criticism is that at some points the book lacks context that seems like it might have been available from other sources in the Third World. And that that context would have better supported Young's primary thesis on why North Korea was structurally doomed to fail in its various foreign policy campaigns.

The work is at its strongest when we occasionally do hear Third World voices. While access to world leaders is impossible, documents and sources for North Korea's partners from the Cold War are more accessible. Their archives are relatively more open. Their diplomats and aid recipients are often still alive. When Young discusses them, their personal impressions, working relationships, interests and frustrations provide a welcome addition; they add a great deal of texture to the story. Take, for example, Young's personal interview with Mahmood Mamdani recounting the mismatch between North Korea's plans for its Ugandan friendship societies and their de facto role as an anti-Obote youth organization (130-131). The conversation shows how North Korean ambitions and naivete ran up against newly independent countries with strong nationalisms of their own. They were not the pliable, eager students of ideology that the North Koreans expected; Ugandans were agents of their own political destinies and manipulated the Kim regime's money and institutions for their own needs.

Diplomacy is always a two-way street. The superpowers learned similar lessons in places such as Afghanistan and Ethiopia at around the same time. For the non-aligned governments working against the overwhelmingly

⁵ For example, Jacob Reidhead and Eunhou Song's ongoing work on patronage networks during North Korean leadership successions and Stephan Haggard, Luke Herman and Jaesung Ryu's 2014 article "Political Change in North Korea: Mapping the Succession" *Asian Survey*, 54:4, 773-800.

powerful alternatives during the Cold War, the impressions of those within the weaker, newer, and struggling targets of North Korea's influence attempts are essential.

I would have been interested to see more parallels drawn with similarly motivated revolutionary states. If the story of North Korea's Cold War politics with the Third World is inextricable from the regime, then other governments with similar aims but different regimes ought to have done better. Rather than pursuing ideological and revolutionary education from the top down, grass-roots strategies should have gained traction and been more persuasive.

China was (and is) clearly a larger and more powerful country, but it would be interesting to know whether efforts to export Maoism in places such as Mozambique where both countries were seriously engaged, had similar approaches or outcomes. Gregg Brazinsky's *Winning the Third World* (2017) could have been usefully engaged on that account.⁶ Vietnam would have provided another, perhaps more comparable, revolutionary state with ideological export in mind. Both countries are discussed in the text, but are compared only superficially, for example, when Young discusses the numbers of revolutionaries trained by China or North Korea (50). Had the author delved more deeply into these cases, the narrative might have offered insight on whether it was North Korea's approach, substantive politics, or something else that rendered its influence so fleeting.

In general, however, Young has written a compelling and thoughtful book on a subject that has received little attention until now. Given readers' seemingly inexhaustible curiosity about all things North Korea, this is no small feat for a first book. I look forward to reading what comes next.

⁶ Gregg Brazinsky. 2017. *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill.

The headline pandemic narrative for North Korea seems to be one of retreat and reversal. There was a period of dramatic diplomacy involving summits with the leaders of China, Russia, South Korea, and the United States in 2018 and 2019, and these were initiated via the visually striking ‘Winter Olympic truce’ of early 2018 that followed on from threats of ‘fire and fury’ during the preceding two years.⁷ After that North Korea rapidly retreated from the international arena, eschewing offers of dialogue in the aftermath of a failed US-DPR Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) summit in Hanoi, and then slamming shut its frontier with China in January 2020 to forestall the entry of the virus that soon came to dominate the globe.⁸

The resulting border closure resulted in collapsing trade volumes, catalyzing an existing recession in the sluggish North Korean economy. The economy shrank by approximately 4.5% in 2020, putting GDP into reverse until it hit an anemic 88.6% of the figure recorded by the Bank of Korea for 2016.⁹ Unfortunately, the results of that recession can only be dimly seen through the fog of North Korean politics because, *inter alia*, almost all diplomatic and NGO staff felt they had little choice but to leave the country in the aftermath.¹⁰ What is clear, however, is that reduced trade flows meant government accounts were not topped up as they would normally be, and the state seems to have responded to that with harsh measures to extract hard currency from the economy. These measures can be seen as reversing early Kim Jong Un-era economic reforms, restoring in some measure the role of the state as the pre-eminent actor in the economy as a whole.¹¹

China has indicated that it is set to remain largely closed to human traffic until the middle of 2022, and recent events in Shanghai and several other cities (including Changchun and Jilin, both large urban areas relatively close to the North Korean border, as well as Yanji in the ethnically Korean region, Yanbian, which does border the North) suggest that the country may be unwelcoming for rather longer.¹² Similarly, one would be foolish to bet against North Korea remaining closed to all visitors until well into the future. Cross-border trade in goods has resumed as of the first quarter of 2022, but at a very low level and with some onerous disinfection provisions attached.¹³ People are still not allowed to cross the border. The government therefore has no capacity (even if one makes the rather heroic assumption that it has the will) to ease the

⁷ “The Korean Peninsula Crisis (I): In the Line of Fire and Fury” and “The Korean Peninsula Crisis (II): From Fire and Fury to Freeze-for-Freeze,” reports, *International Crisis Group*, 23 January 2018.

⁸ Victor Cha, Katrin Fraser Katz, and J. Stephen Morrison, “North Korea’s Covid-19 Lockdown Current Status and Road Ahead,” report, *CSIS*, 9 March 2022.

⁹ Lim Song and Cho Tae-hyeong, “북한의 ‘중앙은행 돈표’ 발행의 배경과 시사점: 개연적 추론” [Background to and Implications of North Korea’s ‘Central Bank Cash Coupons’: Probabilistic Reasoning], *Bank of Korea Issue Note* 2022-15, 30 March 2022; Randall S. Jones, “North Korean Economy Shrinks in 2020,” blog post, *KEI: The Peninsula*, 1 October 2021.

¹⁰ Jean H. Lee, “Goodbye Pyongyang,” blog post, *Wilson Center*, 3 March 2021.

¹¹ Peter Ward, “The Price Is Right: How North Korea Has Sought to Rein in Market Forces,” *NK Pro*, 8 February 2022; Peter Ward, “North Korea Continues to Claw Back Control from the Private Economy,” *NK Pro*, 17 May 2021.

¹² “Millions in China’s northeast placed under COVID-19 lockdown,” *Al Jazeera*, 20 March 2022; “Millions in new lockdown as China faces worst Covid outbreak in two years,” *France 24*, 13 March 2022.

¹³ A small volume of trade through the main port of Nampo has continued throughout the pandemic.

pressure on market economic actors, and the economy of the North is very unlikely to rebound. Diplomatic and NGO staff do not expect to be allowed back to their desks in Pyongyang for the foreseeable future.¹⁴

But here as everywhere, there is more than one pandemic story to tell. Even as it stayed closed to almost all humans, North Korea quietly opened its cultural borders with China in 2021.¹⁵ Six months before cross-border trade resumed, there were reciprocal events in Beijing and Pyongyang to commemorate the June 2018 and 2019 summits between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Chinese President Xi Jinping, summits that reaffirmed North Korea's value to China and restored it to the position of tolerated-but-frustrating ally, rather than liability (as had become increasingly the case in 2016 and 2017).

These events included a photo exhibition in the Chinese embassy in North Korea that was well attended by local Korean Workers' Party officials, and a symposium in the Chinese capital hosted by Song Tao, who heads the International Liaison Department, that section of China's Communist party with the unenviable task of managing relations with the uncompromising, frequently uncommunicative Koreans.¹⁶ Most strikingly, North Korea's Ambassador Ri Ryong Nam published an op-ed eulogizing bilateral ties in the Chinese state media, and China's Amb. Li Jinjun did the same in the Korean Workers' Party rag, *Rodong Sinmun*.¹⁷

It is of value, in other words, to see North Korea's international entanglements in the round. The dominant contemporary narrative of retreat and reversal is not misguided, and given North Korea's extreme responses to the risks posed by COVID-19 it may even represent the majority of cases.¹⁸ But just because Pyongyang is rejecting talks with the United States, South Korea, and their friends and allies, it is not rejecting talks with everyone. And that brings us to this book.

Here, Benjamin Young delivers insights into a relatively underexplored facet of North Korea's attempts to grow and maintain its twentieth century relations with what used to be known as the Third World. Young explores the implications of what was in essence a battle with South Korea, one whose main goal was to secure the greatest possible degree of political legitimacy on the world stage. It was a battle that North Korea waged

¹⁴ These are the views of diplomats from several European countries that were articulated in private conversations during 2021. In each case, either they or close colleagues should have been in North Korea at the time we spoke, but were not.

¹⁵ It is my assumption that were it not for COVID-19, North Korea and China would have been in an active period of cross-border trade during 2020 and beyond, at least within the restrictions imposed by UN Security Council sanctions on the country. Of course, this is a counter-factual claim, but one that fits with the rhythm of China-DPR Korea relations over recent years.

¹⁶ "N. Korea, China hold rare joint symposium to mark anniversaries of leaders' reciprocal visits," *Yonhap News Agency*, 23 June 2021.

¹⁷ Ri Ryong Nam, "Abide by the sublime will of our highest-level leaders and build an even more beautiful North Korea-China friendship garden," *People's Daily*, 21 June 2021; "China's ambassador stresses cooperation with N. Korea for regional peace," *Yonhap News Agency*, 21 June 2021.

¹⁸ "North Korea Accused of Shooting and Burning South Korean Defector," *New York Times*, 24 September 2020.

primarily by exporting a quixotic brand of post-colonial independent economic, social and political development that the author brands “speaking Juche” (7).¹⁹

The book is fascinating as it sets out in readable form that inter-Korean legitimacy battle in the early decades of the two states, an era when literally any sovereign territory with a vote in the UN became a sought-after target for both North and South, all the way down to small island chains in the waters of the Caribbean and Pacific. The more these small states could be encouraged to “speak Juche” in the process, the better for North Korea and worse for the South.

This was not a period in which North Korea was a pariah to the developed world. To a greater or lesser extent, most countries were willing to do business with Pyongyang from the 1970s, at least until it stopped paying its debts and it became impossible to ignore North Korea’s determination to arm itself with nuclear weapons.²⁰ But many of the outreach efforts of the North in this period—especially those conducted on the margins of the world economy—have been relatively overlooked or not brought together in a text that attempts to envision what all the outreach could have meant. Therein is the value of Young’s work.

But while this is an ambitious book, it is one with notable weaknesses. Some are derived from precisely that effort to find a lens through which to view a disparate range of diplomatic projects. Concepts are employed somewhat tokenistically, not least the aforementioned “speaking Juche”. There is also lost context at times. Particularly where archival information is in short supply; this diplomatic history takes on the character of a decontextualised list. All this is to a degree understandable.

On the other hand, the realities of North Korea’s rapidly weakening position in the twilight of the era of its developmental exports are rarely explored, even when it seems plausible that they could be, and local voices go missing.²¹ It is fascinating that as late as 1996 there were North Korean instructors in Nigeria helping the government celebrate the country’s independence day by bringing into being a local variant of the Mass Games, massive synchronized displays of gymnastics and dance backed by images created by thousands of youngsters holding colored cards (107). Credit goes to Young for recounting the story. But it would be equally fascinating if one could also learn, first, what the Nigerians themselves made of it all, and, second, just what conditions in North Korea were like in 1996; what it must have taken—what political priorities had to have been decided on at the center of North Korean power—for these projects to continue whilst ordinary North Koreans were dying in their tens of thousands of hunger in the DPRK itself.

Part of the problem, it seems, is that the book is largely dependent on Western diplomatic archives and others held in the West. There is not much information on what happened locally that substantively influenced the

¹⁹ Young rightly notes that Juche, at least in principle, “upheld the dignity of national unity and patriotism in the midst of Great Power competition and the Sino-Soviet split” and its “utopian motivations and ideological simplicity, with its emphasis on national autonomy, was precisely what appealed to many Third World peoples and operated as an effective form of soft power for the North Korean regime” (7). As an aside, it is perhaps regrettable that Young does not take on board B.R. Myers’s entreaty to stop capitalising the word Juche. See: B.R. Myers, “Western Academia and the Word *Juche*,” *Pacific Affairs* 87, no. 4 (December 2014): 779-789.

²⁰ “North Korea Is Told of Loan Default,” *New York Times*, 23 August 1987.

²¹ North Korea’s rapidly deteriorating geopolitical and economic conditions after 1974 are captured in the “North Korea in...” series published by *Asian Survey*; for example, B.C. Koh, “North Korea 1976: Under Stress,” *Asian Survey* 17, no. 1 (January 1977): 61-70; David H. Satterwhite, “North Korea in 1996: Belligerence Subsiding, Hunger Worsens,” *Asian Survey* 37, no. 1 (January 1997): 10-19.

events in which North Korea took part. Africa's many liberation struggles, for example, are the subject of an entire field of studies that is not utilized. This opens up the book to accusations of excluding African agency (and indeed the agency of other objects of North Korean interest). There may be little appetite among readers for extensive discussions of access and representation, but they are legitimate questions to ask.

There is also some prose here that, at a minimum, should have been deepened. Young asserts only that it was Kim Il-sung's frustration with a lack of African development that drove him to lessen North Korea's financial commitments in the Third World (129). Given the limitations of North Korea's approach, I daresay Kim's frustrations were real. But it is certainly also true that a major driver of North Korea's retreat from the inter-Korean competition for legitimacy was its own tightening fiscal constraints. Elsewhere, there are also a handful of unsubstantiated comments, such as the declaration that the Solomon Islands "remained largely unknown within the DPRK" (119). True on the balance of probabilities, but also impossible to verify.

In the end, notwithstanding its flaws, this book represents a useful addition to the existing canon of histories of North Korea.²² It fills a research gap with a diplomatic history that is rich from some angles, though not always in terms of all the countries involved. Whilst looking to works of experts on those countries to remedy some of the shortcomings, readers would be wise also to pair the work with histories of North Korea's domestic developmental conditions, in order to understand from whence these developmental export/foreign policy projects came, and why they subsequently vanished. For this one may turn to works by Paek Hak-soon or Cheong Seong-chang, whilst Hwang Jang-yop's 1998 memoir offers some extraordinary insights from a man who, for better or worse, truly knew how to "speak Juche".²³

²² Not least as the author of a relatively recent book to try and bring together Pyongyang's diplomatic entanglements was later found guilty of plagiarism. The offending text: Charles Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak North Korea and the World, 1950-1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013). Readers should look instead to the publications of Balazs Szalontai; e.g., *Kim Il Sung in the Krushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Stanford, CA/Washington, DC: Stanford University Press/Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005); "You Have No Political Line of Your Own": Kim Il Sung and the Soviets, 1953-1964, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (undated): 87-103; "In the Shadow of Vietnam: A New Look at North Korea's Militant Strategy, 1962-1970, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 122-166. Noteworthy general histories of North Korea in English include Andrei Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). I further recommend that Korean speakers look to the texts in the following footnote.

²³ Cheong Seong-chang, *현대북한정치: 역사, 이념, 권력체계* [*The Contemporary North Korean Politics: History, Ideology, and Power System*] (Seoul: Hanul, 2011); Paek Hak-soon, *북한 권력의 역사: 사상, 정체성, 구조* [*The History of Power in North Korea: Ideas, Identities, and Structures*] (Seoul: Hanul, 2010); Hwang Jang-yop, *나는 역사의 진리를 보았다* [*I Have Seen the Truth of History*] (Seoul: Sidae Jeongsin, 1998).

Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader is a scholarly achievement that advances our knowledge of North Korean history, politics, and international relations. It is a must read for North Korea watchers hoping to better understand how the country's diplomatic past relates to and contrasts with its bleak present situation. Situated at the intersection of diplomatic history, international relations, and North Korean studies, Young offers a facet of North Korea mostly unknown to even many North Korea experts. Rather than examining North Korea's fraught relationship with the United States or its surrounding neighbors in Northeast Asia, Young focuses on a bygone era of North Korean enlightenment and its relationship to the developing world during the Cold War. This includes North Korea's ties to African nations, and to a lesser extent, its diplomatic relations throughout Latin America and Asia. To this end, Young's book investigates four inter-related themes: North Korea's developmental model; The regime's support of national liberation movements and newly decolonized nations; the role of inter-Korea competition in driving North Korea's Third World policy; and North Korean leader Kim Il-sung's personal relationship with other revolutionary, post-colonial leaders (5-10).

The regime's nuclear achievements notwithstanding, contemporary analysis on North Korea almost unequivocally treats the country as a failed pariah state; North Korea is isolated, heavily sanctioned, and in perpetual need of outside aid and assistance.²⁴ In contrast, Young's book offers new insights, or at least a useful reminder, that North Korea once presented itself as a "model worthy of emulation and adoration of successful development" (6). *Juche*, the ideology developed by Kim Il-sung that advanced ideas of "national self-sufficiency, anti-capitalist development, and national defense" garnered interest and gained traction among Third World supporters in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (6-7). North Korea's status as a "non-white industrialized nation" (7) straddling the Communist Second World and developing Third World also provided anti-colonial states an alternative model to follow outside of the Western 'free world' and the Eastern bloc.

North Korean support for the Third World was far from passive. As Young documents with archival evidence, the Kim regime provided anti-colonial states with material support, including (to no one's surprise) military supplies and weapons. The regime also dispatched agricultural specialists, doctors, engineers, teachers, gymnasts, and artists to offer advice and technical support, often without remuneration, to demonstrate its "solidarity with post-colonial peoples" (9). Young reveals a variety of esoteric skill sets the North Koreans had to offer to developing countries and anti-colonial revolutionary groups. For instance, the regime had "earned a niche" in cave and tunnel building. During the Vietnam War, Kim Il-sung encouraged Vietnamese Communist leaders to build factories halfway into mountainsides or in underground caves and offered to send 500 experts and workers to build caves and tunnels (39).

²⁴ Ankit Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Edward Howell, "The Juche H-Bomb? North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and Regime-State Survival." *International Affairs* 96:4 (2020): 1051-68; Andray Abrahamian, *Being in North Korea* (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2020); Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Anna Fifield, *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019); Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*. 1st ed. (New York: Ecco, 2012).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the North Korean regime also sent laborers, agricultural specialists, and engineers across sub-Saharan Africa (74). In Tanzania, North Koreans helped farmers design an irrigation system for rice. In Somalia, North Koreans built a cement factory and polytechnic institute. In Guinea and Mali, they established a ceramics factory that produced dinner plates and other porcelain ware, although according to American and Hungarian diplomats these were of very poor quality (76).

North Koreans also exported their Mass Games. A true masterpiece of propaganda, the Mass Games featured thousands of gymnasts performing meticulously choreographed dances and acrobatics while a sea of schoolchildren turned placards in perfect synchronization to spell out revolutionary slogans. Young vividly describes how the Mass Games enthralled African dignitaries including the likes of Somali president Siad Barre, Ugandan strongman Idi Amin, and Burundi leader Michel Micombero, all of whom received North Korean support to establish their own version of National Day celebrations (101-104). Other clients inviting North Korean instructors to offer training in the art of mass spectacles and celebrations included revolutionary and/or authoritarian governments in Guinea, Togo, Madagascar, Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Guyana, and Zimbabwe. The “socialist aesthetics and collectivism” fostered by the Mass Games appealed to revolutionaries (106), and dictators such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe gravitated towards their “illiberal emphasis on regimentation and social control” (108). On this effective tool of North Korean soft power, Young comments, “Many peoples in the Third World seemingly appreciated the physical benefits, flashy aesthetics, militaristic style, and collectivist approach of the Mass Games. The Mass Games were political education hidden under a veneer of creativity and revolutionary spirit.” (108).

The chapters in *Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader* proceed thematically, but they also loosely follow a chronological timeline of North Korea’s diplomatic rise and fall. For instance, Chapter 1, titled “Building a Reputation,” highlights North Korea’s successful development strategy during the late 1950s and 1960s. This is in contrast to the last two chapters (chapters 4 and 5) where regime has obviously begun to shift into survival model by the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is marked by the regime’s willingness to use the Third World “as its own personal playground to wage violence against political enemies” in a losing battle of legitimacy vis-à-vis South Korea (151).

Noteworthy is the 1983 bombing in Rangoon where North Korean agents, in a failed assassination attempt against South Korean president Chun Doo Hwan, killed four Burmese and seventeen South Koreans (108). South Korea’s level of development had already surpassed that of North Korea at that point. As Young suggests, Seoul’s hosting of the 1988 Olympic Games pushed North Korea towards greater desperation as it sought to compete with South Korea for international legitimacy. This included committing acts of violence such as the bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987. On the diplomatic front, North Korea reached out to tiny island nations in the 1980s in the Caribbean and the South Pacific to boost its own legitimacy and undermine South Korean influence (117-118). Meanwhile, facing economic stagnation, North Korea turned increasingly to arms deals with African despots to earn hard currency (125).

Chronicling North Korea’s rising and fading status in the Third World is not the primary aim of Young’s book, but it is certainly a theme that can be further developed. Most researchers pinpoint North Korea’s collapse and downfall to the fall of the Soviet Union and the Arduous March (i.e. the mass famine) in the 1990s.²⁵ While this is correct, Young’s historiography in Chapters 4, and especially Chapter 5 suggests that

²⁵ Andrew Yeo, State, *Society and Markets in North Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Kevin Gray, and Jong-Woon Lee. *North Korea and the Geopolitics of Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

North Korea's diplomatic luster had already begun to fade by the 1980s, even as it continued to find legitimacy among despots, small island nations, and like-minded leaders. The regime's use of international violence including the Rangoon bombing, and support for African despots such as Ugandan leader Milton Obote in return for international recognition suggests a sense of desperation on the part of North Korea to survive by "any means necessary" (125).

Young's scholarship is analytically rigorous based on primary sources. This includes archival materials housed at the U.S. National Archives, National Archives of South Korea, the British National Library, the South Korean National Assembly Library, the National Library of South Korea, the U.S. Library of Congress among other places.²⁶ Young also drew resources from diplomatic archives in the United States, South and North Korean periodicals, and news articles intended for foreign consumption. Young also draws on an extensive body of secondary sources. The book also includes North Korean propaganda posters that offer readers a visual glimpse of the regime's revolutionary message it shared with the Third World.

The only shortcoming that might be noted is the brevity of the conclusion to an otherwise excellent monograph. The conclusion begins with a wonderful quotation from Peruvian writer Genaro Carnero Checa regarding his astute but sad observations about North Korea in the early 1980s that juxtapose its early achievements with its sad reality (149). But rather than reflecting more broadly on the significance and larger meaning of North Korea's Third World diplomacy for the North Korean state or international relations, the book ends rather abruptly two pages later.

The conclusion might have offered space to tie some loose ends in the book. For instance, one wonders what became of North Korea's development model and Third World attitudes towards *juche* as Seoul overshadowed Pyongyang. Another missing storyline is whether or how Soviet and Chinese economic or political support may have shaped or constrained North Korea's diplomatic outreach to the Third World. To be fair, Young clearly states that his argument does not "investigate the degree to which the regime depended on Soviet and Chinese aid" or Pyongyang's relations to great powers (11). Even so, a discussion (even a brief one) of how North Korea's connection to the Second World affected its ability to interact with the developing world, or how the regime navigated its identity between the communist Second and developing Third World, would have strengthened the book.

Young also draws a few examples of North Korea's behavior in the Third World today that parallel its antics during the Cold War such as the cyber heist targeting the Central Bank of Bangladesh in 2016, and the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother in Malaysia in 2017. However, Young is right not to oversell the application of Cold War North Korean diplomacy to contemporary politics.

Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader is a gem among several new books on North Korean diplomacy and leadership.²⁷ The book is also very accessible to a wider general audience. Despite the book's weighty subject

Press, 2021); Byung-Yeon Kim, *Unveiling the North Korean Economy: Collapse and Transition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Justin V. Hastings, *A Most Enterprising Country: North Korea in the Global Economy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

²⁶ For a full list of archives and library sources, see Young's bibliography (193).

²⁷ Jung H. Pak, *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former Cia Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator* (New York: Ballantine Books 2021). Panda, *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb*; Jackson, *On the Brink*;

matter, its title alludes to some of the fascinating anecdotes that fill its pages, thus making Young's first monograph a thoroughly enjoyable read.

 Response by Benjamin R. Young, Virginia Commonwealth University

First, I want to thank the three reviewers—Bridget Coggins, Christopher Green, and Andrew Yeo—for taking the time to review my book. I also want to express my gratitude to Van Jackson for writing the introduction to this roundtable. Publishing a book during a global pandemic comes with certain peculiarities so I want to thank these scholars for taking the time to read my book and reflect on it. I also want to thank Andrew Szarejko for organizing this roundtable and pushing it towards publication.

One of my first reactions to these reviews was that none of them are written by historians. I do not raise this as a concern but rather as a positive development. My book is an international history of North Korea's foreign relations during the Cold War era, but I did emphasize some political science terminology in some places. For example, on pages 3-4, I mention that North Korea's foreign policy is largely based on classical realism with its emphasis on power politics and military strength. Ultimately, though, this is a history book largely aimed at historians of modern Korea and the Cold War. But the book unintentionally seems to have resonated with political scientists. As someone currently teaching in an interdisciplinary homeland security and emergency preparedness program, I am excited to see this connection and to realize that my own work fits into this dynamic. Works that blend international history and international relations seem natural but often these two fields rarely speak to one another. A more interdisciplinary blending of these two fields could yield deeper analytical and theoretical insights in the future. I am pleased that my book seems to fit into this blend.

Yeo observes that my book "focuses on a bygone era of North Korean enlightenment and its relationship to the developing world during the Cold War." But I do want to clarify that I do not see North Korea's Cold War-era presence in the Third World as an enlightening development. As my book demonstrates, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the official title of North Korea, hereafter DPRK) brought havoc and chaos to many Afro-Asian nations. From the 1983 Rangoon bombing to the training of Third-World Communist insurgents who then brought instability to their home countries, North Korea's approach to diplomacy during the Cold War was largely based on the belief that violence was the righteous path to national autonomy. North Korea has certainly become more isolationist and hermitic since the 1990s, but Pyongyang has never retreated from its militant approach to international affairs. In fact, since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has doubled down on its military strength with its nuclear development and sophisticated cyber capabilities. North Korean belligerence and state violence continues to make Northeast Asia a potential conflict zone for nuclear powers.

Yeo also raises a question about further expanding my conclusion. In retrospect, I should have expanded on the trajectory of North Korea's foreign policy in the post-Cold War world but page limits dictated certain restrictions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the death of leader Kim Il-sung, North Korea turned increasingly inwards and became more nationalistic in its ideological outlook. Gone were the days of celebrating socialist internationalism or praising the exploits of Marxism-Leninism; North Korea became more jingoistic in the post-Soviet period. The 2017 assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, by North Korean agents in the Malaysian international airport speaks to the ways in which state violence from Pyongyang's high politics now emanates outside of its national borders. Pyongyang has

increasingly seen sub-Saharan Africa as a space where it can escape sanctions regimes and a place that is ripe for corruption. As long as armed conflict continues in the Global South, there will always be willing buyers of cheap North Korean arms and DPRK military training services there.

Although I am unsure of the relevance of the pandemic to my history-focused book, Green rightly observes that *Guns, Guerrillas, and the Great Leader* “explores the implications of what was in essence a battle with South Korea, one whose main goal was to secure the greatest possible degree of political legitimacy on the world stage.” Inter-Korean competition shaped North Korea’s foreign policy during the Cold War era and continues to shape Pyongyang’s grand strategy of domination on the Korean peninsula. However, Green’s point that my book is somewhat devoid of “African agency” is incorrect. While this is not a book about Africa but rather about North Korea, I did conduct several interviews with individuals from the Global South who had firsthand experiences with the North Koreans. I also utilized newspapers from several African countries for a more local perspective on North Korean activities. In addition, I utilized documents that detail on-the-ground North Korean activities in Africa, such as the building of factories and palaces by DPRK laborers. Those sources from the archives of former Eastern Bloc countries are housed digitally at the Wilson Center.

In addition, certain logistical and financial constraints affected the possibility of conducting Africa-based research for the book. After discussions with several Africanists, in which many deemed it would not be worth it for me to go to sub-Saharan Africa for the limited amount of archival materials there that explore the continent’s connections to the two Koreas, I decided to forgo a research trip. Thus, I largely utilized Western and Eastern bloc materials for my book. The UK National Archives at Kew, in particular, host a wealth of underutilized Korea-related materials. As long as North Korean archives remain closed off to foreigners, researchers must be creative and collaborative in researching the DPRK’s history. The Wilson Center’s North Korea International Documentation Project (NKIDP) is the leader of this effort to construct an archive of North Korean history from the outside-in. As Bridget Coggins rightly notes in her review, “It is challenging to write anything on North Korea that penetrates beyond the superficial. Because it is such an exceedingly closed society, without even a partial ‘opening’ historically, scholarly work relies on what little information the regime itself releases.” Surely, questions of representation and access must start in Pyongyang.

I am glad that Green picks up on my concept of “speaking Juche.” This is an extension of historian Stephen Kotkin’s idea of “Speaking Bolshevik,” which he used in his foundational work, *Magnetic Mountain*.²⁸ However, what has been surprising in the reviews of my book thus far is that only Coggins picked up on my main argument that domestic politics was the driver of Pyongyang’s foreign policy and that North Korea’s national identity was deeply tied to Third Worldism. As I stated in the book (page 4), “In establishing ties with the Third World, North Korea forged a national identity as a member of a global community of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism” (4). Even today, North Korean state-run media champions the country’s anti-colonial credentials and it is clear that the regime has no desire to become a Chinese vassal state. Also, even in 2022, one of the best ways to understand North Korea’s quixotic external behavior is by taking into account the regime’s internal factors, such as the economic situation in the DPRK and the background of the

²⁸ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

country's leadership. For example, as I spell out in the book, Kim Il-sung's background as an anti-colonial guerilla fighter laid the foundations for his later sympathies for Cold War-era national liberation movements in the Third World. In addition, Kim Jong-il's upbringing in luxury and under palace life made him into a less charismatic and less Third World-oriented figure than his father had been.

Overall, I intended my book to be a stepping stone for future scholarship on North Korea's relations with the postcolonial world. Often mischaracterized as the "hermit kingdom," North Korea has historically been far more active globally than was once thought. Analysts and scholars of the DPRK have for too long ignored the nonaligned Third World-oriented character of North Korean diplomacy. Even today, North Korea is able to use its partners and longtime allies in the developing world to help the regime bypass international sanctions. North Korea-Third World relations is an emerging subfield of North Korean studies and deserves to be included in more general histories of the Kim family regime.²⁹ I hope that my book has opened up a new way to view the North Korean government and see that the country is far more globally minded than it was originally perceived to have been.

²⁹ For example of other recent scholarship on North Korea-Third World ties, see David T. Hill, "The Fragile Bloom of the Kimilsungia: Indonesian political exiles in North Korea," *Indonesia and the Malay World* (2022): 1-22; Nate Kerkhoff, "North Korea and the Non-Aligned Movement: From Adulation to Marginalization," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 28:1 (2020): 41-71; James Kirby, "Between two Chinas and two Koreas: African agency and non-alignment in 1970s Botswana," *Cold War History* 20:1 (2020): 21-38; Balazs Szalontai, "'This Is Iran, Not North Korea': Conflicting Images of the DPRK in Iranian Public Discourse," *North Korean Review* 17:1 (Spring 2021): 79-95; Tycho van der Hoog, "On the Success and Failure of North Korean Development Aid in Africa," GWU NKEF Policy and Research Paper Series (2022): 31-42, <https://gwiks.elliott.gwu.edu/publications/nkef-publications/>.