

Roland Bleiker, *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. Borderlines Series, vol. 25. 224 pp. \$27.95 (cloth).

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For decades, most, if not nearly all, of the security-related literature on North Korea tended to cover the same basic and very predictable ground. Empirically, we would hear about the difficulty of analyzing the North Korean regime due to a lack of access, to the unreliability of data, or to the sheer opaqueness of the system. Of course, this did not stop scholars and others from pontificating on the inner workings of the North Korean political system and state. This is not to say that such analyses were necessarily unwarranted or misguided. Certainly, there was and there continues to be a very important need to analyze, understand and explain the behavior of the North Korean regime and the dynamics of the system. Unfortunately, the predictability—really, staleness—of the majority of extant analyses are not merely a product of empirical obstacles. Another, arguably, much larger obstacle is the near-total lack of theoretical vision and insight among these studies, the source of which is not difficult to identify. It is, quite simply, the overwhelming dominance of a state-centric and realist approach.

Realism, as Roland Bleiker, author of *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation*, explains it, revolves “around an image of international politics as dominated by nation-states”, which exist within an international environment characterized by “... one key structural feature, anarchy: the absence of a central regulatory authority” (p. xxxviii). Anarchy, we are told, makes the world an inherently dangerous and threatening place; more important, it supposedly makes the intentions (and character) of states transparent. This is because, in an anarchic world, intentions are manifested through observable behavior, i.e., foreign policies. Based on this assumption, most observers have concluded that the fundamental nature of the North Korean state is crystal clear: it is a dangerous and aggressive “rogue” that cannot be trusted and that only responds to and is deterred by superior power. To think otherwise, realists tell us, is to be naïve and even stupid; to *act* otherwise is potentially disastrous.

This very brief explanation of realism and its influence on studies of North Korea is a necessary starting point for understanding and appreciating Bleiker’s *Divided Korea*. For Bleiker directly and forcefully challenges the conventional “wisdom” of state-centered, realist thinking and analysis. Indeed, the title of his introductory chapter, “Rethinking Korean Security,” makes this point clear. In this chapter, Bleiker tells us that a fundamental rethinking of prevailing interpretations of North Korea and of Korean security issues is necessary if we ever wish to develop a basis for lasting peace on the peninsula. The big question, then, is how to do this. According to Bleiker, the answer is clear. It requires, first and foremost, the presentation of “new conceptual perspectives on existing security dilemmas” (p. xxxviii). For Bleiker this means, in part, the embrace of a “critical” or constructivist approach, one that takes into account the importance, even centrality, of *identity formation*.

The issue of identity formation is the focal point of the first three chapters of Bleiker’s book. In chapter one, the author examines the emergence or, more appropriately, the social construction of two antagonistic and essentially antithetical identities on the Korean peninsula during the Cold War period. “To be South Korea means, above all,” notes Bleiker, “not to be Communist.” And to “be North Korean means not to be part of a capitalist and imperialist order” (p. 10). Of course, there is nothing surprising about this observation; indeed, it borders on the

banal. Bleiker's larger point, however, is that, once created, identity constructs have a fundamental impact on the world. In the case of security relations between the two Koreas, the impact is clear. As the author explains it, "the prevailing identity constructs have helped to legitimize the very militarized approaches to security that have contributed to the emergence of tension in the first place" (p. 15).

In chapter two, aptly titled "The Persistence of Cold War Antagonisms," Bleiker extends his discussion to the post-Cold War period. Here, he examines the reasons for the striking resilience of Cold War political structures on the Korean peninsula. The persistence of what he calls "a small but highly volatile Cold War enclave surrounded by a world that has long moved away from a dualistic ideological standoff" is, at first glance, a puzzle (p. 17). Why have security relations on the Korean peninsula remain essentially static in era of immense change? The answer, to Bleiker, cannot be found through an analysis of military-strategic considerations alone, but must instead look to issues of identity construction. The discussion in this chapter is central to Bleiker's overall argument, for key to the social constructivist framework is the notion that identity constructs are not mere *reflections* of deeper political and ostensibly objective military-strategic processes, but are, instead, integral to (and constitutive of) these processes. In other words, in chapter two, Bleiker's main objective is to tell us how the "antagonistic identity constructs" of which he speaks have served to sustain and reproduce an environment of hostility, distrust, and unremitting tension between the two Koreas. A key part of his analysis is a focus on continuing state control over cross-border relations. Both states, according to Bleiker, "have been able to promote and [to continuously] legitimize an unusually narrow approach to security issues ..." (p. 18), and both states, despite some contradictory signs, have continued to thoroughly demonize the other as irredeemably dangerous and threatening. This reflects, Bleiker asserts, a type of pathological illness (p. 23) wherein entrenched antagonistic enemy constructs have infected virtually every aspect of life within both Koreas. Like a cancer, moreover, getting rid of entrenched identity constructs is not easy; this is especially true when few people either recognize it or know how to treat it, which, Bleiker suggests, is the case in both Koreas.

The significance of identity constructs extends well beyond the two Koreas. Indeed, in the case of Korean security, geopolitical considerations have played a key role. This is the main theme of chapter three, "The Geopolitical Production of Danger." In this chapter, Bleiker shows how "Korea's security dilemmas became intertwined with Cold War international relations and how the ensuring identity constructs continue to shape politics on and toward the peninsula long after the collapse of the Soviet Union" (p. 36). Simply put, a main point of this chapter is that, in the West and especially in the United States, the prevailing and deeply entrenched image of North Korea as an evil, rogue state has played a central role in perpetuating the Korean security dilemma. To grasp Bleiker's logic, it is important to understand that image or identity constructs are more than just words or convenient labels. Rather, they are fundamental (but often unacknowledged) frameworks of interpretation. Ironically, from a realist perspective, the construct of a rogue state suggests that North Korea is different from other states, that the DPRK leadership is *not* motivated by the same basic security concerns that govern the behavior of other, "normal" states. To Bleiker, the assumption that North Korea is not "normal" is a serious problem: in particular, it absolves other states—most notably, the United States—of any responsibility in perpetuating insecurity on the peninsula and in the region. On this point, Bleiker is very clear. As he puts it:

If one steps back from the immediate and highly emotional ideological context that dominates security interactions on the peninsula, the attitude and behavior of North Korea and the United States bear striking similarities. Both have contributed a great deal to intensifying each other's fears. Both have also drawn upon their fears to justify aggressive military postures. And both rely on a strikingly similar form of crisis diplomacy. America's Korea policy, particularly under the administration of George W. Bush, bears a stunning resemblance to Pyongyang's much-vilified nuclear brinkmanship tactic, for Washington too relies on the projection of threats in order to win concessions from its opponent ..." (pp. 59-60).

In the second part of his book, Bleiker provides suggestions on how to promote a more peaceful political environment on the Korean peninsula. He focuses on the importance of dialogue (chapter four)—and especially a dialogue that transcends state control. At the same time, in chapter five, Bleiker demonstrates a clear understanding of the immense difficulty of this task, not the least of which is overcoming the fear and distrust that dominate each side's image of the other. A major part of the problem stems from North Korea's fear of the outside world. Bleiker, though, also lays responsibility on the South Korean side, which sees reconciliation almost exclusively in South Korean terms. According to Bleiker, this is the problem with the South's "Sunshine Policy," which, at its base, assumes that peace and unification can only emerge when North Korea opens up and embraces the values and virtues of democracy and market economics (p. 93). Thus, while Bleiker sees the Sunshine Policy as a positive development, he suggests that it is not enough. What is needed, instead, is a "willingness to accept that a half-century of antagonistic identity practices has created differences that cannot be simply subsumed into one worldview, no matter how desirable this compulsion appears" (p. 61). Differences, in short, need to be recognized and embraced by all sides. This is the basis for Bleiker's final substantive chapter, "Toward an Ethics of Difference." "The key", Bleiker tells us, "is not to deny difference but to make it part of a new, more pluralistically defined vision of identity and unity that may one day replace the present, violence-prone demarcation of self and other" (p. 100). This may sound utopian, but it is, perhaps, the only viable hope for lasting peace on the peninsula. Moreover, as Bleiker discusses in chapter six, there are signs of an "ethics of difference" emerging within South Korea. It will be a long, slow process, but one that is clearly possible of reaching fruition.

There is much to recommend in Bleiker's book. To begin, he provides one of the freshest analyses of Korean security in many, many years. For this reason alone, *Divided Korea* is well worth reading. Even more, though, Bleiker makes an important and, to my mind, necessary argument, albeit not because he is breaking theoretical (or empirical) ground. Indeed, Bleiker's theoretical framework is, in many respects, old hat—at least to those of us who are not stuck inside the realist cocoon. Still, only a handful of scholars or writers have applied a constructivist framework to an analysis of Korean security. (And, even fewer scholars have done so in as accessible a manner as Bleiker has done. In this regard, *Divided Korea* should be required reading for any student of North-South relations.) Bleiker's argument is important because it forces us to confront prevailing and largely unquestioned assumptions about Korean security, and it is important because it provides a new way of thinking about solutions to the problems of Korean security. Unfortunately, I fear Bleiker's insights might be lost on or willfully ignored by those who need them the most—i.e., policy-makers and so-called security experts who benefit from a world of continued insecurity.

