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Review - Getting to Yes in Korea

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DARYL MORINI, JAN 7 2011

Walter C. Clemens Jr.'s *Getting to Yes in Korea* is a masterful piece of scholarship. In a mere 219 pages of vivid and absorbing prose, Clemens succeeds in asking, and answering, some of the toughest questions raised by North Korea's nuclear enrichment programme, and the broader implications of Pyongyang's military brinkmanship for peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Most impressively, the author treads where few International Relations (IR) scholars dare set foot—transcending ossified academic debates and offering original policy recommendations. This is one of the IR books of 2010 not to miss. Read it.

Whether your fields of interest lie in International Relations (IR) theory, diplomatic history, negotiation theory, or peace and conflict studies, you will undoubtedly find numerous gems in this scholarly yet highly-accessible source. *Getting to Yes in Korea* has numerous strengths, three of which stood out to this reviewer.

Style

Firstly, the outstanding trait which the reader will immediately notice is the high quality of Professor Clemens' literary style. The prose in this book explains the most complex problems of international politics and IR scholarship with a poetic touch, where many resort to dry, wooden language. The author's written form is refreshingly clear and free of specialist jargon. His use of original analogies is also note-worthy. Thus, the author argues that North Korea's unpredictable policies are more complex than a Beethoven symphony, and more akin to "a Bach concerto with

constant point and counterpoint…so that a listener can hardly know where one leaves off and the other takes off."[1] One need not enjoy classical music to appreciate the author's style and originality.

In an era of mind-numbing management speak in politics, society and academia—when each strategic initiative is measured by how effectively it is facilitated to ensure the timely completion of positive outcomes for key stakeholders[2]—there is nothing like poetic license to inform and inspire the reader. Such imagery is a welcome change to what could be a stale discussion about the relative power distribution of the international system, external- and domestic-level constraints on North Korean policy-making, and/or the mutually-constitutive nature of North Korea's identity and interests. The author cuts through the nonsense, and makes a clear argument in plain language: diplomatic negotiation, through the right combination of soft and hard power (dubbed smart power) *can* work in bringing a lasting peace to the Korean peninsula. *Getting to Yes in Korea* is a model of what a highly-accessible IR book with widespread appeal beyond the academy—among the public and in policy-making circles—should look like. This book is a lesson for the discipline, demonstrating by example how IR can avoid societal irrelevance.

Scope

Evidently, literary style alone does not a great work make. The multidisciplinary scope of *Getting to Yes in Korea* is one of the book's fortés. The author explores various IR theories (realism, neo-realism, liberal idealism, constructivism, etc.) and how they may apply to Korea. But the author presents a broad and sweeping narrative, dealing in a straightforward manner with debate ranging from the disciplines of IR, economics, history, diplomatic studies, and more. Although broad in scope, the author successfully weaves and synthesises these diverse intellectual fields in *Getting to Yes in Korea*. For example, in Chapter Two the author draws on quantitative data from, *inter alia*, the Human Development Index (2007) and Political Freedom Index (2008) to compare the markedly different socio-economic developments of both Koreas.

In Chapter Three, the author presents a sweeping narrative of Korean diplomatic history, specifically of U.S.-Korean relations, which frames further discussion chapters. He details enough great power machinations between the U.S., China, Japan and Russia to make *WikiLeaks*-founder Julian Assange blush. Fundamentally, the author argues that the U.S. policy of "less than benign neglect" towards Korea ended in appeasement to an expansionary Imperial Japan. A 1906 U.S.-Japanese deal recognising Japan's suzerainty over Korea, according to Clemens, resembled the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union—which only formed a temporary axis of convenience between future enemies.[3] Chapter Four explains "how one Korea became two" at the end of the Second World War. Chapter Five details North Korea's drive for nuclear energy and weaponry, and draws on the author's archival research in intra-Eastern Bloc diplomacy. This section is fascinating for its insight into what East German, Hungarian and Soviet diplomats thought of their brash and demanding Korean comrades. Despite the serious subject, there is room for humorous reflection, as when North Korea insisted that its students be able to study confidential subjects on nuclear energy in the Eastern Bloc—to the consistent bafflement of European communists. When East Germany offered to train North Koreans in language lessons and the social sciences, Pyongyang failed to express its interest.[4] Clearly, North Korean leaders were not looking for a recruitment pool of International Relations scholars (majoring in Marxist theory) and German Literature graduates.

Chapters Six to Twelve form the analytical crux of *Getting to Yes in Korea*. In this author's opinion, Chapter Six (*How Kissinger and Zhou Enlai Got to Yes*) was one of the best in the book. This preference stems from the author's use of negotiation theory, including the concepts of tit-for-tat (TFT) and graduated reciprocity in tension-reduction (GRIT) bargaining methods. Despite the acronyms, these concepts are clearly explained with reference to the Sino-American thaw of the 1970s. Among other details, readers will learn about the diplomatic battles opposing Chinese and U.S. diplomats in the 1950s, and how a single flea could derail negotiations.[5] The author argues in favour of GRIT negotiation on the Korean peninsula, a method which he attributes to psychologist Charles E. Osgood. Nevertheless, the author also cites the anecdote of one U.S. soldier during the 1970s who, by simply smiling at one North Korean counterpart, nearly provoked a brawl with these soldiers who interpreted friendliness as weakness.[6] The lesson is clear. "Utter cynics," according to Clemens, "do poorly in world affairs because they are blind to prospects of mutual gain. But suckers and martyrs also fare poorly in power politics."[7]

The author's expertise in U.S.-Soviet diplomatic relations, as well as Soviet and Cold War history, is another of the key assets of *Getting to Yes in Korea*. This book is impressive for its sweeping and authoritative scope and content. Clemens also exhibits academic honesty, clearly stating where a particular view is his personal opinion. "My own view," he writes at one point, "is that North Korea's existing system is unlikely to endure beyond a few years."[8] The justification for this statement is to be found in Dr. Clemens' contribution to IR theoretical debates, which form another strong point of this book.

Theoretical Contribution

In the introduction to this review, I wrote that Clemens transcended "ossified academic debates" in *Getting to Yes in*

Korea. This does not mean that the author ignores IR debates, but that he engages with, and then surpasses these throughout this text. He examines IR theories to frame his reflection (in Chapter Ten) on the notorious agent-structure debate. For example, he begins by discussing the neo-realist view of the world, namely that "International Relations are a mirror of the material structure defined by the hierarchy of military and economic power."[9] The deterministic theories of systemic realism and geopolitics (which basically claims that geography is destiny) do not suffice to explain North Korean behaviour, according to the author. The author suggests that these material forces only "set the stage", but do not pupeteer the actors, least of all Kim-Jong Il. The argument is simply that, according to systemic realist/geopolitical premises, one would expect North Korea to have buckled beneath the overwhelming relative power of the United States and South Korea since at least the 1970s, when geoeconomic power favoured the South, and certainly during the food shortages of the 1990s in the North. But the problem is that North Korea defies this logic:

"Yes, the North had long been relatively weak, but it did not bow to superior force. Confronted with challenges on all sides, the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] championed self-reliance and either walked away from negotiations or drove very hard bargains. Often it opted to hang tough."[10]

In this case, the author suggests that systemic-level IR theories, especially neo-realism, are not helpful in understanding the foreign policy behaviour of the North Korean régime. Negotiation theory, as we have seen, helps us to analyse the micro-historical role of individual actors, diplomats and other actors. But can a theoretical perspective meld together this individual-level theory, and a broader, state-level theory of the international system?

The author suggests that Machiavelli's concept of *Fortuna* can fill this void. Between pages 166 and 169, Clemens asks a set of specific, historical 'what if' questions to challenge the deterministic assumptions of systemic realism and other system-level IR theories. Simply put, the author points out that IR theories seldom make way for unpredictability in world affairs, "black swans", or ungeneralisable quirks of timing, leaders' personalities, and historical happenstance. Clemens puts forward this caveat at the very beginning of the book: "Any study of foreign affairs must recognize the limitations on what we can know and understand."[11] This is a modest claim which much IR scholarship could benefit from recognising. Ultimately, the author seems to be saying that the agent-structure debate must make room for another variable: sheer dumb luck, or *Fortuna*. Each 'what if' scenario, the author argues was "shaped by structure and agency—by the configuration of forces and actions of individual players. They seem to mock any explanation based on materialistic determinism."[12] Clemens highlights the all-important role of timing, such as the interesting insight that the U.S. invasion of Iraq "diverted Washington's attention from North Korea in 2003-2004, even as it probably deepened Pyongyang's determination to acquire a nuclear deterrent."[13] The author criticises IR theories which claim to decipher the world from the material base of power alone, doing so with an historian's eye for detail.

The author finishes his theoretical discussion by examining those theories which deal with ideas and free will, namely idealism, neoliberalism and constructivism. Reaching an objective conclusion, he argues that none of the three basic perspectives—material determinism, free will, or *Fortuna*—can adequately account for North Korea's Janus-faced foreign policies.[14] Clemens provides the useful analogy of a hiking trip to make the point that theories of International Relations need not be zero-sum and mutually-exclusive, and that the three aforementioned principles interact closely:

"The actual physical contours—the rivers, mountains, etc.—are like the forces that condition and constrain states. The hiker can go from A to B along several possible routes—with some being safer, quicker, or more scenic than others. *Fortuna* may shape the journey in the form of warm, clear skies, or flash floods, rainstorms, lightning bolts, fallen trees, and other hazards. Accidents of timing and coincidence—good and bad 'luck'—can be critical. At every juncture the prudent hiker must make choices."[15]

For IR theorists and other experts concerned with the timeless debate between structure and agent, or determinism and free will, Clemens' hiking analogy is an original contribution that can advance the theoretical agenda of the discipline. Indeed, the author broadens the debate by introducing inter-dependence theory, complexity theory, and Social Darwinism into the discussion, thereby showing that existing IR paradigms are simply unfit to comprehensively

address such questions as how societal "fitness" can affect a state's behaviour on the world stage.

Where Professor Clemens excels is in crafting a work that passes the test of "policy-relevant theory", because *Getting to Yes in Korea* has a set of clear "operational measures" to transform the theoretical stage of discussion into practical policy recommendations about what leaders and decision-makers could and should do.[16] (For these recommendations about how the Obama administration should deal with authoritarian governments, and how to get to 'yes' in Korea, see chapters Twelve and Thirteen respectively). This is perhaps the greatest contribution of this book to the IR discipline, in that it leads by example in demonstrating that clearly-written, highly-accessible and policy-relevant International Relations scholarship is not a luxury—it is a necessity if IR scholars hope to avoid irrelevance by writing exclusively for each other, and about epistemic and ontological problems which, unless operationalised, will not contribute to a better world beyond academia.

Critique

Several critiques can, and probably will be leveled at *Getting to Yes in Korea*. To this reviewer, these minor critiques are, by and large, trumped by the essential qualities of this work. But they are worth briefly exploring for the sake of academic even-handedness.

The first, and potentially most serious critique, is that the author verges on political partisanship in favouring the negotiating efforts of U.S. Democrats over Republican administrations. The author is no doubt correct in arguing that such U.S. presidents as Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton encountered greater immediate success in bringing North Koreans to the negotiating table—pointing above all to the 1994 Agreed Framework as the closest thing to a U.S.-North Korean grand bargain yet. In Chapter Nine, Clemens spares no blows for the Bush administration's 'Axis of Evil' diplomacy towards North Korea. With good reason, the author is critical of a government which conceived of the world in messianic and "essentialist" (if not eschatological) terms of good versus evil. But the author might be charged with being unevenly critical of the Bush administration, in contrast to the Clinton presidency. Some language is arguably too blunt and evaluative for a work of this quality, such as the statement that Washington's development of tactical nuclear weapons was "just heavenly for the 'rapture' movement among Bush's backers—Christians anticipating an Armageddon from which only they would emerge triumphant." Although this may be a correct description of the worldview of *some* of Bush's backers, it is a broad generalisation and one with a more polemical tone than rest of *Getting to Yes in Korea*. Furthermore, no source is attributed to carry some of the weight behind such an assertion, which would have pre-empted the critique of unfair treatment of Republican governments.

In another case, the author may show a more benign judgement towards Bill Clinton than his successor when he writes that the Clinton team "opened the door partway to yes" with Korea, but could not do so fully due to bad timing. Clinton, according to Clemens, "felt he had to choose in the final weeks of his presidency between Korea and another mediation effort for the Middle East. He chose the latter." But the author does not attribute a source to Clinton's thinking, which may open up the critique of unfair leniency towards the outgoing president. There are grounds to believe that the Clinton government was not the ideal role model in diplomatic negotiation either, and failures of diplomacy could be pointed to in the former Yugoslavia, in Somalia, in relations with Russia, and in Rwanda—where academics have charged the then-U.S. president with being aware of the ongoing genocide, yet failing to act with either hard, soft or smart power.[17] These omissions cannot be blamed on the author, whose subject falls outside of the specific area study of the Korean peninsula. However, the fact remains that Chapter Nine can be accused of gratuitous Bush-bashing, because it arguably does not set up a level playing field by severely criticising the (admittedly numerous) failures of the Bush administration's diplomacy, without giving a symbolic nod to foreign policy failures under the previous Democratic president. Even where these critiques are deserved, by placing too much emphasis on the 'bad diplomacy' of the Bush team, versus the 'good diplomacy' of the Carter and Clinton teams, critical readers may mistakenly deduce that the author is saying: 'Democrats good, Republicans bad'. Out of procedural fairness, it is arguably too early to give a definitive judgment on the diplomatic negotiations undertaken by the George Bush administration—and the Clinton government for that matter—because classified documents are yet to be released into the public record.

Aside from this potential critique, there is preciously little to reproach of this work. To be sure, area experts and

negotiation theorists may take issue with some of the author's propositions. For example, critics of the "armchair reforms" of negotiation proposed by Roger Fisher and Bill Ury in *Getting to Yes* (1992), on which Clemens draws, would suggest that getting to yes in Korea will be a whole lot harder than simply getting the North Koreans to sign on the dotted line.[18] But that is a debate among experts, rather than a serious lacuna of this book. Overall, the author sets out the objective of the book in its title—*Getting to Yes in Korea*—and it delivers what it promised: viable diplomatic alternatives to Korea remaining the "cockpit of nuclear war" in Asia, and quite possibly the world.[19] If anything, one suggestion to add to this book's appeal as a valuable resource on diplomatic negotiation, crisis management, and conflict resolution, would be for the author to expand on Chapters Six, Seven and Ten, in a future edition or an alternative publication, as these chapters arguably represent the most original and thought-provoking academic contributions to IR theory, and theories of diplomatic negotiation, including valuable insights into how to negotiate across cultures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Getting to Yes in Korea* is an excellent work of IR scholarship and policy analysis. It answers some of the most puzzling questions about the hermit communist dynasty of North Korea, such as: What is *juche*? How important is the concept of "face" in Korean politics? And can Obama negotiate with an ailing Kim-Jong Il, or his successor/s? The author argues that, yes, head-of-state summit diplomacy between President Obama and his North Korean counterpart is a potentially useful initiative to explore, which "may be necessary to break a cycle of hostility and open the way to normal relations between dangerous adversaries."[20] This specific recommendation, and perhaps others, will be contested. What should remain uncontested, however, is the boldness and honesty of the judgments underpinning Clemens' policy recommendations. Cynics will not be able to merely say 'this can't work'. Serious contenders to the author's arguments will have to answer the questions: 1) Why will this not work? 2) If diplomacy does not provide long-term solutions to the Korean tinderbox, can war? And 3) if Clemens' premises and, therefore, policy recommendations are wrong, what is a better course of action?

Although this book appeared before the November 2010 bombing of Yeonpyeong island by North Korean forces, its insights and practical recommendations are no less relevant to the question of reversing a dangerous trend of military provocations, brinkmanship and near-war collisions between the Koreas. Furthermore, the highly-accessible

theoretical contributions of this book will appeal to IR scholars, international security experts, and time-pressed diplomats alike, as well as interested general readers. As Dr. Clemens forcefully argues, a long-lasting peaceful solution to the inter-Korean division is neither impossible, nor idealistic; even if it will take much time, political capital and willpower, diplomatic creativity, and a great deal of good *Fortuna*. Clearly, human free will matters, and war is not an inevitable outcome of conflicts of interest, in Korea or anywhere else. "Getting to yes in Korea will never be essay," writes Clemens. "But all parties to tensions there owe it to themselves to try."[21] This is an extremely well-written, -argued, and -presented book, at the cutting edge of IR research and diplomatic studies.

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[1] Walter C. Clemens Jr., *Getting to Yes in Korea* (Boulder and London: Paradigm, 2010), 13.

[2] See Lainie Anderson for a recent critique of management-speak in the public domain. 'Anderson: Time for plain English', *Adelaide Now*, http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/ipad/anderson-time-for-plain-english/story-fn6br25t-1225979453772 (accessed 2 January 2011).

[3] Clemens, *Getting to Yes in Korea*, 46.

[4] *Ibid.* 84.

[5] *Ibid.* 91-92.

[6] *Ibid.* 94-94.

[7] *Ibid.* 96.

[8] *Ibid.* 177.

[9] *Ibid.* 161.

[10] *Ibid.* 164

[11] *Ibid.* 13

[12] *Ibid.* 169.

[13] *Ibid.* 170.

[14] *Ibid.* 172.

[15] *Ibid.* 173.

[16] Richard Herrman argued that "the task of operationalization is at the core of the scientific enterprise." Without moving beyond the theoretical stage, "theories will remain intellectual and mathematical exercises without demonstrated relevance." Richard K. Herrman, 'Policy-Relevant Theory and the Challenge of Diagnosis: The End of the Cold War as a Case Study', *Political Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Special Issue: Political Psychology and the Work of Alexander L. George (March 1994), p. 113

[17] See Rory Carroll, 'US chose to ignore Rwandan genocide', 31 March 2004 *The Guardian*, available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/mar/31/usa.rwanda*The Failure to Prevent Genocide: The Role of Bystanders* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007). (accessed 3 January 2011). See also: Fred Grünfeld and Anke Huijboom,

[18] Gavin Kennedy criticises the 'getting to yes' school of principled negotiation in such terms, arguing that this theory shades into mediation and is therefore impracticable in many difficult negotiating situations. See*Negotiation : An A-Z Guide* (London: Profile Books Ltd., The Economist, 2009), 7-9.

[19] Clemens, *Getting to Yes in Korea*, 3.

[20] *Ibid.* 206.

[21] *Ibid.* 1.

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