

RÜDIGER FRANK, *Nordkorea: Innenansichten eines totalen Staates*. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2014. 428 pages, €19.99. ISBN 978-3-421-04641-3

“Terra incognita” is a very restrained euphemism for a country that, since its founding as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) on 9 September 1948, has made the so-called Western nations at best uneasy. Following the death of the country’s founder, Kim Il-sung, in the summer of 1994, numerous think tanks in Western capitals, and even high-ranking officials in the CIA (including the director, John M. Deutch) were convinced that an implosion in the country was imminent – comparable to the developments in the former Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe.

What kind of a state is this, then, whose political leadership has thus far consistently refused to open the door even a crack to Western capital and ideas, and instead aspires to join the ranks of the nuclear powers? How can it be that the West notoriously deplores the isolation and reclusiveness of the People’s Republic, whereas Pyongyang has long maintained intensive contacts with numerous countries that have become independent since the 1960s, in the so-called Tricontinental Movement?

Rüdiger Frank, who currently holds a professorship at the University of Vienna, where he heads the Institute for East Asian Studies, approaches the country, its leadership and its people in nine chapters. The Leipzig-born author, an economist and Koreanist by education, had ample opportunity to become acquainted with the DPRK as an exchange student a year after the end of East Germany, and to expand upon those experiences repeatedly, at expert conferences and as a member of economic and political delegations visiting the country. Frank’s book evinces a high level of competence, resulting in a pleasantly objective tone. Most books on North Korea reveal more about the author’s personal longing to confirm preconceived opinions than about the country itself.

In the first chapter, “Tradition and Origin”, the reader is confronted directly with Korea’s distinctive situation and dilemma: namely its geostrategic location between “Big Brother” China and the country of Japan, with the latter’s ambitions for supremacy over the peninsula. After two victorious campaigns against China and Russia, Japan turned Korea into a protectorate and finally into a colony in 1910. With far-reaching consequences: at the end of World War II, it was the victorious powers, the USSR and USA, who divided the country along the 38th parallel into spheres of influence in the North and South, respectively – with the “protective powers” politically supporting anti-Japanese partisan groups in the North and more collaborational elements in the South. Kim Il-sung was at that time only one of many partisans, but he understood how to use his tactical skills and charisma in the years that fol-

lowed, under the aegis of the Soviets, to build up his leadership position, which he had consolidated by the mid-1950s at the latest.

The more international the confrontation between the Eastern and Western Blocs became and the more the Cold War escalated, the deeper Korea became drawn into the maelstrom of a competition between two systems: the capitalist postulate of freedom and the socialist expectation of salvation. In their own different ways, both Seoul and Pyongyang viewed themselves as respective political bastions. The first hot conflict in the Cold War, the Korean War (1950–1953), which saw extremely high losses especially among the civilian population, began as a bitter civil war and ended as an international conflict with a ceasefire that has still not been transformed into a peace treaty, even today.

In the four chapters that follow, Frank focuses on the ideology, politics, economy and reform capability of a regime that – uniquely in the world until now – is run in the form an expanded Kim family business. One of the main reasons for its continued survival is that the structure of government, the state apparatuses and the mechanisms of power remained finely balanced. There is a kind of tri-partite governing system: old war comrades of the country's founder, Kim Il-sung, from the time of the partisan struggle against the Japanese, became an integral part of the government, party and military leadership, much as the specialists and autochthonous cadres in the formerly socialist countries of the Eastern Bloc. In more recent years it is the graduates of the elite Kim Il-Sung University who join the regime.

The emergence of the ideology *chuch`e* (“master of one’s own body”, “subject” or “creating with one’s own power”) also served, in particular, to preserve self-determination in all matters and a foreign policy equidistance between Beijing and Moscow, the two rivals for hegemony in the communist and international labour movement. “*Chuch`e* is one of the most important justifications for the Great Leader principle and a source of legitimation for Kim Il-sung and all those who invoke him. In this function, *chuch`e* remains relevant and powerful today. Because of its flexibility, the ideology also offers scope for economic and political reforms, at least theoretically. Perhaps the most important function of *chuch`e*, however, is the – for many Koreans – seemingly indissoluble bond linking socialism, leader and nationalism” (p. 101).

In the sixth chapter, “Special Economic Zone: Cash Cow and Risk Factor”, the author very clearly describes the trade and economic relations which have existed between North Korea and its neighbours China and Russia for years, particularly in the border region. The crown jewel of these special economic zones was without doubt the industrial zone of Kaesŏng, which was a direct result of the first inter-Korean summit in the summer of 2000. At that time, during a truly historic meeting in Pyongyang, the heads of state of both Koreas agreed to develop Kaesŏng’s industrial zone as a prototype of direct bilat-

eral cooperation. What was initially so euphorically celebrated came to an abrupt end in February 2016. In protest against North Korea's continuing nuclear and missile tests, Seoul argued for the closure of the Kaesŏng industrial zone. Pyongyang immediately hit back, expelling the South Korean personnel from the country and shutting down the complex. If and when it will ever be put back into operation remains one of many unknowns on the peninsula.

Frank dedicates the final three chapters to the government policies of Kim Jongun, the future prospects for the People's Republic and the image that it seeks to project, both internally and to the outside world. Mindful of historical experiences with foreign countries (recently, several US-enforced regime changes in the Middle East) and for reasons of the inherent survival logic of the system, North Korea's nomenclature has clearly adopted the following fundamental approach: if we cannot be respected internationally as a friend, then we can at least be respected as a worthy enemy. At least, so the thinking goes, until we have joined the phalanx of nuclear powers – a strategic consideration that Kim Jongun affirmed in his New Year's address of 2017. At the same time, however, this goal – certainly a balancing act – should be achieved in line with economic development, a policy that is known today as *pyŏngjin* and means “to accomplish two things at once”.

North Korea – quo vadis? Past efforts to gaze into the crystal ball have proven utterly misplaced. The author thus wisely and for understandable reasons prefers to avoid any prognosis. “Despite repeatedly urging caution about any predictions,” writes Frank on page 380, I am firmly convinced that North and South Korea will one day reunite, even if this currently seems improbable. There are many reasons for this.”

Frank's well-researched and commendable study should be read primarily by all those who strive for a deep and serious understanding of the DPRK and who can play a decisive political role in dismantling the enemy stereotypes on both sides and promoting a long overdue culture of dialogue. Three criticisms can be made, which do not in the least diminish the contents of the opus. The choice of the book's title, *North Korea: Internal Views of a Totalitarian State*, is unfortunate, and some passages in the foreword are a bit self-promoting – a state has no views, and an author's seriousness is not measured by the frequency with which he meets with experts or elder statesmen. Last, but not least: occasionally the author seems to want to “work off” his East German past against the foil of a completely different type of real socialist system. This comes across as artificial, especially as he himself rightly warns against false analogies.

Rainer Werning