NORTH KOREA’S PLACE IN EAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on North Korea’s strategy of survival and prosperity for the twenty-first century as expressed in its relations with, and policies towards, the United States and its East Asian neighbours in the post-Cold War era. It aims to illuminate how North Korea’s policy goals and instruments for those countries have been structured to secure its national interests as part of this strategy.

North Korea has been consistent in its efforts to fulfil the goals set out in the early 1990s as an ‘exit strategy’ from the unfavourable circumstances brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union and East European socialist states. Several prominent factors, however, at the levels of both agency and structure, have influenced the successes and failures of the country’s policy toward its East Asian neighbours and the United States.

In the following essay, North Korea’s post-Cold War strategy will first be explained. A review of seven critical choices made by North Korea in implementing its strategy and an investigation into the factors at operational and structural level that influenced the making of those choices then follow. The study will next attempt to examine the policy instruments of hard and soft power that North Korea has employed during the conception and implementation of its choices. North Korea’s concrete policies towards its East Asian neighbours of South Korea and China,1 and the United States, are then reviewed, followed by an assessment of the North’s strategies and policies. In addition, the study will deal with the 2010 incident of the South Korean navy corvette Cheonan and its policy implications, and the developments in North Korea’s succession politics in which Kim Jong Un, Kim Jong Il’s third son, became the official heir to his

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1 North Korea’s policy towards Japan and Russia will not be covered here, since neither country has had a significant place in North Korea’s overall strategy in recent years. It is true, however, that North Korea’s policies towards Japan and Russia will become more important when the country succeeds in solving pending issues with the United States and South Korea and expands its engagement with the rest of the world with a new Weltanschauung.
father. Finally, the essay will discuss what the future holds for North Korea in East Asian international relations.

**NORTH KOREA’S STRATEGY OF SURVIVAL AND PROSPERITY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East European socialist states the North Korean leadership was faced with dramatically changing domestic and external circumstances. Its top priorities since then have been maintaining political stability, legitimising its rule, and achieving the security of the state, regime and system on the one hand, and economic recovery and development on the other.

As for any state, national security and economic development were, and are, the two most vital goals for North Korea. Its leadership seemed determined in its search for nuclear resolution and security assurances from the United States, while enhancing domestic economic performance; this despite being subject to hostile circumstances and extended nuclear confrontation with the United States. North Korea’s efforts towards normalisation of its relations with the United States should thus be interpreted in a positive light—as its best attempt to kill two birds with one stone.

It was obvious at the time of the nuclear crisis that North Korea’s efforts towards economic recovery and development would be severely limited by its isolation from the international community, an isolation that would continue indefinitely without either a resolution to the nuclear problem or security assurances and normalisation of relations with the United States.

North Korea’s fixation with national security had much to do with its hostile relations with the United States. For almost two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea’s policy towards the United States has been remarkably consistent in that it desired to end the Korean War officially by signing a peace agreement and sought to normalise bilateral relations. By doing so, North Korea aimed to dismantle the Cold War structure in place on the Korean peninsula, namely, of confrontation with the United States.

As for economic recovery and development, North Korea introduced market-oriented reform into its economy, despite increasing tension on the peninsula and security threats from the Bush administration. North Korea was well aware of the dangers entailed. The reforms would necessarily undermine the existing socio-economic order and could possibly