

WHY DOES CHINA PREVENT NORTH KOREA FROM COLLAPSING?

Shawn Ho

Rajaratnam School of International Studies

Why does China continue to support North Korea and prevent its collapse? Much research has been done on China's pursuit of its various security and economic interests in North Korea. Less research has been conducted on China's geopolitical interests in North Korea (defined here as how China uses North Korea as a tool to enhance its own political position relative to other states in Northeast Asia). Most importantly, there has been no study done on which of these three independent variables—China's geo-political, economic or security interests in North Korea—is the key variable that makes China do its best to prevent North Korea from collapsing. This paper aims to fill that academic gap. Through a critical analysis of the research done thus far by scholars in this field, and through an examination of the latest open-source materials, I arrive at the conclusion that China's North Korea policy is largely driven by a pursuit of its own geo-political interests and less so by its security and economic interests in North Korea.

Introduction

This paper aims to answer a question which remains a puzzle in international relations: why does China continue to support North Korea and prevent its collapse?¹

1 For this paper, China's policy decisions towards North Korea are those made by the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) and not those made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) International Liaison Department or the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The apex of Chinese foreign policy-making is in the FALSG which is the primary consultative body of the CCP for foreign policy. Ning Lu, "The Central Leadership, Supraministry Coordinating Bodies, State Council Ministries, and Party Departments," in *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform*, ed. David M. Lampton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 45-49; and Gregory Moore, "Less Beautiful, Still Somewhat Imperialist: Beijing Eyes Sino-US Relations," in *Handbook of China's International Relations*, ed. Shaun Breslin (London: Routledge, 2010), 135.

In recent years, North Korea's third nuclear test and its attacks on South Korea's Cheonan warship and artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island were provocations that were widely condemned by the international community. Despite these condemnations, China continued to maintain an overall policy of supporting North Korea despite knowing that this would result in high costs to China in the form of tremendous damage to both its bilateral relationships with other states and to its international image as a responsible rising power.²

Some scholars have attributed China's continued support for North Korea to the "special" relationship between the two states that had first begun during the Korean War when "hundreds of thousands" of Chinese soldiers died fighting alongside North Korean soldiers.³ However, over the decades, this "special" bilateral relationship has deteriorated significantly and "the ideological fabrics that bound the two together have eroded beyond recognition."⁴ China's establishment of diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1992 started China's "Two Koreas" policy and confirmed that "the bond once touted as that of teeth and lips" was "no longer as special."⁵ As there is "no altruism in international relations, including those between China and North Korea," it is clear that China has its own interests in mind when it continues to support North Korea.⁶ Numerous studies have concluded that China's greatest interest with regard to North Korea is in ensuring that the regime does not collapse.⁷

2 For more details on the impact that China's responses to the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents had on its bilateral relationships with the US and South Korea, see: Scott Snyder and See-won Byun, "Cheonan and Yeonpyeong: the Northeast Asian Response to North Korea's Provocations," *Rusi Journal* 156, no. 2 (April/May 2011): 74-81.

3 In October 2009, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao referred to the "hundreds of thousands" of Chinese casualties and 130,000 Chinese soldiers buried in North Korea. "Wen Jiabao paid visit to People's Volunteer Army Cemetery," *Phoenix*, October 5, 2009, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/wenjiabao/200910/1005_8202_1376953.shtml.

4 Chong-wook Chung, "The Korean Peninsula in China's Grand Strategy," RSIS Working Paper, no. 192, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, March 8, 2010, <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/WorkingPapers/WP192.pdf>.

5 Samuel Kim, "The Future of China and Sino-ROK Relations," in *The Future of China and Northeast Asia*, eds. Tae-hwan Kwak and Melvin Gurtov (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1997), 271; and Chong-wook Chung, "The Rise of China and the Security Dynamics in the Korean Peninsula," in *China and East Asian Strategic Dynamics: the Shaping of a New Regional Order*, eds. Ming-Jiang Li and Dong-min Lee (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), 97.

6 Ding-Li Shen, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China," *China Security* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 2006): 20. In addition, in his survey of Chinese scholars, Sunny Lee also found that the majority of the scholars he surveyed (at 47 percent) felt that the current relationship between China and North Korea is one which is best described as "ban xin ban yi di peng you" (half trusting, half suspicious friend) and it is no longer one of true friendship or one that reflects a true alliance. Sunny Lee, "Chinese Perspectives on North Korea and Reunification," Korea Economic Institute of America, January 24, 2012, <http://www.keia.org/event/chinese-perspectives-north-korea-and-reunification-0>.

7 Numerous studies have concluded that China's highest priority in North Korea is the prevention of

Much research has been done on China's pursuit of its various military-strategic interests (defined here as an interest in avoiding situations that will adversely affect China's military and strategic calculus in its Northeastern region, should North Korea collapse) and economic interests in North Korea. Less research has been conducted on China's geopolitical interests in North Korea (defined here as how China uses North Korea as a tool to enhance its own political position/standing relative to other states in Northeast Asia). Most importantly, there has been no study done on which of these three independent variables—China's geopolitical, economic or military-strategic interests in North Korea⁸—is the key variable that causes China to proceed with its policy of preventing North Korea from collapsing. This paper aims to fill that academic gap.

My hypothesis is that China's decision to continue to support North Korea and prevent its collapse is driven more by the pursuit of geopolitical interests and less so by military-strategic and economic interests in North Korea. The starting point of this paper is that China's North Korea policy is guided by its grand strategy which seeks to "engineer China's rise to great power status" by making the best use of a "20 years' period of strategic opportunity."⁹ From the Chinese perspective, this 20-year period (until 2022) is a rare window of opportunity for China to rise rapidly to become a "great power" and, should it not make the best use of this opportunity, a similar opportunity may not come for a very long time.

regime collapse: "Shades of Red," *International Crisis Group Asia Report* no. 179; "China and North Korea: Comrades Forever?," *International Crisis Group Asia Report* no. 112, February 2006, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/northkorea/112_china_and_north_korea_comrades_forever.pdf; David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term," *Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 43-56; Jae-cheol Kim, "The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in North Korea: A Preliminary Assessment," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 6 (2006): 898-916; Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2004); Jin-moo Kim, "North Korea's Reliance on China and China's Influence on North Korea," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 23, no. 2 (June 2011): 257-271; David Kang, "USC Director Reflects on Kim Jong Il's 'Great Successor,'" December 19, 2011, http://uscnews.usc.edu/global/usc_director_reflects_on_kim_jong_ii_s_great_successor.html; Bates Gill, "China's North Korea Policy-Assessing Interests and Influences," (USIP Special Report, no. 283, US Institute of Peace, July 2011); and Gilbert Rozman, "Why Beijing-Seoul Ties So Fraught," *The Diplomat*, January 28, 2012, <http://the-diplomat.com/2012/01/28/why-beijing-seoul-ties-so-fraught/?all=true>; Congressional Research Service, "China-North Korea Relations," January 22, 2010, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/138774.pdf>.

- 8 A key difference between the categories of China's "military-strategic interests" and "geopolitical interests" is that the former concerns/affects China's Northeastern region whereas the latter concerns the status/strength of China's political position vis-à-vis other states in Northeast Asia (including the US).
- 9 For more about China's grand strategy, see: Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); the phrase "20 years' period of strategic opportunity" was coined by Jiang Zemin in 2002 and quoted in: Ji-Si Wang, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no.2 (March/April 2011): 68-79.

There are three sections in this paper. The first section will cover the main military-strategic and economic interests that China supposedly has in North Korea and offer a critique of both these often-cited interests and an explanation on why neither of them is the main reason behind China's continued support of North Korea. The second section contains my research on the geopolitical benefits that China gains via North Korea and in relation to the US and South Korea as well as an evaluation of the significance of these geopolitical interests to China. The third and final section will sum up the key arguments and findings of this paper.

Critique of China's Military-Strategic and Economic Interests in North Korea

This section will focus on a critical analysis of the military-strategic and economic interests that China is often assumed to have in North Korea. I will first briefly mention what these supposed interests are and then proceed to explain why neither of these factors can be the main reason behind China's interest in preventing North Korea's collapse.

China's Military-Strategic Interests in North Korea

There are three often-cited military-strategic interests that China has in North Korea, all of which are related to scenarios that might unfold and adversely affect China's Northeastern region should North Korea collapse: 1) the loss of a buffer zone against US troops; 2) a refugee crisis; and 3) loose nuclear weapons/materials.¹⁰

Firstly, the mainstream argument goes that China does not want North Korea to collapse as this will mean the loss of a buffer zone against US troops currently stationed in South Korea. In the immediate aftermath of North Korea's collapse, US troops might cross the 38th parallel to "provide relief, enhance

10 Andrei Lankov, "Why Beijing Props Up Pyongyang," *New York Times*, June 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/opinion/12iht-edlankov.html>; Feng Zhu, "China's North Korean Contradictions," Project Syndicate, December 2, 2010, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/zhu1/English>; Bonnie Glaser and Brad Glosserman, "China's Cheonan Problem;" Bonnie Glaser and Scott Snyder, "Preparations Needed for North Korean Collapse," *PacNet*, no. 27, May 20, 2010, <http://csis.org/files/publication/pac1027.pdf>; Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder and John S. Park, "Chinese Debates on North Korea," *PacNet*, no.11, February 8, 2008, <http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/pac0811.pdf>; Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor-Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea," (USIP Working Paper, US Institute of Peace, January 3, 2008), http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/071227_wp_china_northkorea.pdf; and You Ji, "China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no.28 (2001): 387-398.

stability, or increase their influence.”¹¹ In the longer run, the US may also reach an agreement with its South Korean ally (since a collapse of the North Korean state would lead to the emergence of a reunified Korea led from Seoul) to base US troops and military facilities in the Northern part of the Korean Peninsula. This is of greater concern to China in an era of increasing security competition between China and the US and China does not want US troops to be based even closer to Chinese territory.

Secondly, should North Korea collapse, it is expected that a large number of North Korean refugees will cross into the northeastern provinces of China. China would then have to provide the necessary humanitarian resources in terms of food and shelter to a very large number of North Koreans. In such a scenario, unlike current instances of North Korean refugees being labeled as “illegal economic migrants” and repatriated back to North Korea,¹² China will not be able to give the same rationale for refusing these North Koreans, especially if armed conflict breaks out on the Korean Peninsula.

Thirdly, with regard to North Korean nuclear weapons/materials, there is a possibility of these weapons/materials getting into China as it would be impossible to fully secure all of the approximate 100 sites in North Korea that are related to its nuclear program immediately after North Korea’s collapse.¹³ The presence of nuclear weapons/materials in China would pose a direct threat to the safety of its people and could also be sold to rogue individuals and groups.

Critique of China’s Military-Strategic Interests in North Korea

In this section, I will explain why these often-cited military-strategic concerns cannot be the main variable that determines China’s North Korea policy. This is because there is no certainty that these problems will definitely unfold in the manner that is often assumed. Besides, even if some of these problems will unfold in the way that is often assumed, China certainly has the resources and capabilities to deal with them.

11 M. Taylor Fravel, “International Relations Theory and China’s Rise: Assessing China’s Potential for Territorial Expansion,” *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 518.

12 US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, “China’s Forced Repatriation of North Korean Refugees Violates International Law,” March 23, 2012, http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press_display.asp?id=2272.

13 “Seoul Suspects about 100 Sites in N.K. Linked to Nuclear Program,” *Korea Times*, October 5, 2009, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2009/10/113_52920.html; and Bonnie S. Glaser and Scott Snyder, with See-Won Byun and David J. Szerlip, “Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula: Impediments to US-South Korea-China Coordination,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 2010: 13-19, http://csis.org/files/publication/100506_Glaser_RespondingtoChange_Web.pdf.

With regard to the possibility of US troops being based north the 38th parallel should North Korea collapse, this may be an unfounded fear for China. Christopher Hill had publicly stated that China and the US could come to an agreement that US troops cannot be stationed north of the 38th parallel in a reunified Korea. Moreover, Hill added that given the current political mood in the US and given the disappearance of the North Korean threat following its collapse, “it might be difficult... to continue to station any US troops on the peninsula at all.”¹⁴ Steve Tsang was also of the view that, should North Korea collapse, the “US rationale for keeping its own military forces in South Korea would disappear” and “if the US wished to maintain bases in Korea in the longer term, it would have to secure permission from a proud and newly united Korean nation” which is “hardly a foregone conclusion.”¹⁵

From the Chinese perspective, its senior leaders also do not appear to be too concerned about the loss of this buffer zone. Former Vice Foreign Minister Chun Young-woo had said that senior Chinese leaders increasingly felt that North Korea was of little value to China as a buffer.¹⁶ This is especially so in the post-Cold War era where China no longer views Seoul or Washington as a “direct military threat.”¹⁷

With regard to the possible refugee crisis China might face in the event of North Korea’s collapse, it could also be untrue that that there will definitely be hundreds of thousands (or even millions) of North Koreans who will cross over into and remain indefinitely in Chinese territory. North Korea’s collapse could unfold in many different ways. For instance, if there is no outbreak of armed conflict and if foreign countries are able to provide food to the North Korean people following the regime’s collapse, some of them may choose not to leave their home/ancestral land where they have lived all their lives. Even if there is an armed conflict which would result in a desperate rush for survival away from the conflict zones, the option of going to China would probably be limited mostly to people who live above the peninsula’s “narrow neck” and especially

14 Christopher Hill, “After Kim Jong-Il,” *Project Syndicate*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/hill14/English>.

15 Steve Tsang, “China Without North Korea,” *Project Syndicate*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/why-a-north-korean-collapse-would-not-threaten-china-by-steve-tsang>.

16 A senior researcher interviewed by Bonnie Glaser had added separately that keeping a buffer zone had declined in importance with the end of the Cold War and “won’t be important unless there is a new Cold War.” He also said that “the Chinese military doesn’t have special interests in preserving a buffer zone.” Glaser, Snyder and Park, “Chinese Debates on North Korea.” This *PacNet* commentary is based on a report that covers Chinese views of North Korea in more detail: Glaser, Snyder and Park, “Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor:” “US Embassy Cables: China ‘Would Accept’ Korean Reunification,” *Guardian*, December 1, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/249870>.

17 Scobell, *China and North Korea*, 17.

those who live close to the China-North Korea border.¹⁸ The people based in Pyongyang might find it difficult to venture northwards even if they wanted to due to difficult and rough mountain terrain.¹⁹

In addition, for those North Koreans who choose (and are able) to leave North Korea, they might adopt other options such as leaving en masse to South Korea,²⁰ or even go to other parts of China or Japan via sea routes seeing that the majority of North Koreans live along coastal areas and in the greater Pyongyang area. As such, this fear of an influx of refugees to China may be unfounded or exaggerated.

Even if one of the worse scenarios happens, Chinese officials had assessed that it could cope with an influx of 300,000 North Koreans without outside help although they might need to use the military to seal the border should the refugees arrive “all at once.”²¹ China’s PLA has also reportedly developed contingency plans for such humanitarian missions.²² Given its massive troop presence of approximately 430,000 troops stationed in the Shenyang Great Military Region that borders North Korea,²³ China certainly has the manpower to handle this problem. Moreover, Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Lind have estimated that it would require China only about 24,000 troops to “assume border control responsibilities” along the border.²⁴

With regard to the issue of loose nuclear materials following North Korea’s collapse, China’s PLA has also reportedly developed contingency plans

18 Moreover, in the view of Steve Tsang, such a refugee crisis for China would be “short-lived” and “international assistance would be readily available.” Tsang, “China Without North Korea.”

19 Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, “The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements,” *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 97.

20 In the event of North Korea’s collapse (and depending on the nature of its collapse), there is a possibility that North Koreans might be granted access by the South Korean government to enter South Korean territory (either through sea travel or via roads such as those leading from the Kaesong Industrial Complex to South Korea). The point I am trying to make is that it is too simplistic to assume that, should North Korea collapse, the one and only place North Koreans are likely to flee to (even if they choose to and are able to) is across the Sino-North Korean border into China. As such, the often-cited refugee crisis that China will face in the event of North Korea’s collapse may be unfounded.

21 “Wikileaks Cables Reveal China ‘Ready to Abandon North Korea,’” *Guardian*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-cables-china-reunifiedkorea>.

22 Glaser, Snyder and Park, “Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor,” 19; Drew Thompson, “Border Burdens: China’s Response to the Myanmar Refugee Crisis,” *China Security* 5, no. 3 (2009) 16; and Chang-Hee Park, “North Korean Contingency and Prospects of China’s Military Intervention,” (IIRI Working Paper, no. 5, Ilmin International Relations Institute, October 2010).

23 Of China’s seven Great Military Regions (GMR), the Shenyang GMR is the one bordering North Korea. It has a 430,000-strong army. Cheong Ching, “China will not let North Korea collapse,” *Straits Times*, December 29, 2011, A2.

24 Bennet and Lind, “The Collapse of North Korea,” 119.

for counter-WMD-related missions in North Korea, especially since most of North Korea's critical WMD facilities are located closer to the Chinese border.²⁵

While it would not be possible to secure all the known nuclear sites (let alone the unknown ones that China may not even know about) immediately after North Korea's collapse, fortunately for China, Korea is a peninsula and given China's enormous military resources in the Shenyang Great Military Region bordering North Korea, it could technically "contain weapons, fissile material and WMD personnel by sealing off North Korea's coastline and its borders" in cooperation with other states.²⁶

China's Economic Interests in North Korea

There are two often-cited economic interests that China has in North Korea: 1) access to Rajin-Sonbong Special Economic Zone (Rason SEZ) and its ports; and 2) access to untapped minerals in North Korea.²⁷

Firstly, by having access to the Rason ports which are located in the northeastern part of North Korea, China can significantly reduce the transport time required for shipments from its Northeastern regions to its southern or to Japan and South Korea. For instance, it takes three days to ship goods from Hunchun in China to the Shanghai port (via Rason) instead of the usual 11 days by train. The use of cargo ships requires also just about one third of the money spent for inland train transport. From Hunchun to Japan's Niigata port, it would take just over 10 hours through Rason port instead of the three or four days it would take via the ports in Liaoning province.²⁸ Gaining access to the Rason ports is part

25 Bennet and Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea," 101; Glaser, Snyder and Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor," 19; Thompson, "Border Burdens," 15-18; and Chang-hee Park, "North Korean Contingency and Prospects of China's Military Intervention," (IIRI Working Paper, no. 5, Ilmin International Relations Institute, October 2010).

26 A detailed proposal on how this can be done is contained in: Bennet and Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea," 100-104.

27 Yeon-ho Lee and Jeong-shim Kang, "The Changjitu Project and China-North Korea Economic Cooperation: Beijing's and Pyongyang's intentions," (paper presented at the British International Studies Association (BISA) Annual Conference, Manchester, April 27, 2011), http://www.bisa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_bisa&task=view_public_papers_author_char_search&char_search=K; Daniel Gearin, "Chinese Infrastructure and Natural Resources Investments in North Korea," (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Backgrounder, October 20, 2010), <http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/ChineseInfrastructureandNaturalResourcesInvestmentsinNorthKorea.pdf>; and "China Secures Right to Use 3 Piers to be Built on N. Korean Port for 50 years," *Yonhap News*, February 15, 2012, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2012/02/15/88/0401000000AEN20120215007600315F.HTML>.

28 Andray Abrahamian, "A Convergence of Interests: Prospects for Rason Special Economic Zone," (KEI Academic Paper Series, Korea Economic Institute, February 24, 2012), http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/rason_sez_paper.pdf; "Hunchun Sees New Benefits of Location on the Border," *China Daily*, February 22, 2011, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/usa/business/2011-02/22/>

of a larger plan that China has which is known as the “Changjitu Project” (an abbreviation for Changchun City, Jilin City and Tumen River area) which aims to develop China’s landlocked northeastern region.²⁹

Secondly, China views North Korea as a good source of high quality anthracite coals that can be obtained at a lower cost (at an average of around \$101 per ton as compared to the international average of around \$200 per ton).³⁰ From January to September 2011, out of the 8.42 million tons of minerals that China imported from North Korea, 8.19 million tons (or 97.3 percent) were anthracite coals.³¹ China also views North Korea as a good source of other minerals since North Korea hosts sizable deposits of more than 200 different minerals and it has among the top 10 largest reserves of magnesite, tungsten ore, graphite, gold ore and molybdenum in the world.³²

Critique of China’s Often-Cited Economic Interests in North Korea

In this section, I will explain why these often-cited economic interests cannot be the main variable that affects China’s North Korea policy. Should North Korea collapse in the near future, it is certain that a reunified Korea (led from Seoul)

content_12055979.htm; “China Poised to Secure East Sea Shipping Route,” *Chosun Ilbo*, May 23, 2011, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/05/23/2011052300645.html; “Chinese People’s Daily on Operation of Rajin Port,” *NK News*, June 1, 2011, <http://nknews.org/2011/06/chinese-people%E2%80%B2s-daily-on-operation-of-rajin-port/>; and “China Gains Sea of Japan Trade Access,” *Global Times*, March 10, 2010, http://china.globaltimes.cn/diplomacy/2010-03/511351_2.html.

- 29 Rason comprises of three ports of which the primary one is Rajin port which has three piers. Chinese companies have leased the use of the first and second piers while a Russian company has leased the use of the third pier. Andray Abrahamian, “A Convergence of Interests;” “Report on Rason SEZ,” *Choson Exchange*, September 2011, <http://chosonexchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Choson-Exchange-Rason-Report-August.pdf>; Yeon-ho Lee and Jeong-shim Kang, “The Changjitu Project and China-North Korea Economic Cooperation;” and Scott Snyder, “Rajin-Sonbong: A Strategic Choice for China in Its Relations with Pyongyang,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 10, no. 7 (April 1, 2010), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=36215&cHash=b8c79b916c](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=36215&cHash=b8c79b916c).
- 30 North Korea had an estimated production capacity in 2007 of 25 million tons per year and it has approximately 20.5 billion tons of coal reserves. Drew Thompson, “Silent Partners: Chinese Joint Ventures in North Korea,” *US-Korea Institute*, February 2011: 22, http://uskoreainstitute.org/wpcontent/uploads/2011/02/USKI_Report_SilentPartners_DrewThompson_020311.pdf.
- 31 These 8.42 million tons of minerals were worth \$852 million which is triple the amount compared to the previous year. “North Korea’s Mineral Exports to China Tripled from Last Year,” *Yonhap*, November 6, 2011, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2011/11/06/0200000000AEN20111106000300315.HTML>.
- 32 A large percentage of Chinese companies in North Korea are engaged in its minerals industry. Of the 138 Chinese companies registered as doing business in North Korea in 2010, 41 percent were involved in extracting coal, iron, zinc, nickel, gold and other minerals. Kyung-soo Choi, “The Mining Industry of North Korea,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 23, no. 2 (June 2011): 211-230; “North Korea, New Land of Opportunity?;” and John C. Wu, “The Mineral Industry of North Korea,” (US Geological Survey 2005 Minerals Yearbook, June 2007).

will emerge as a pro-US state that borders China.³³ This will mean that China will lose economic benefits it currently gains in or via North Korea.³⁴ However, this should not be a major concern for China, (and thus should not be the main factor behind China's continued support of North Korea) because China does have alternatives it can look to for similar benefits.

With regard to China's loss of access to the Rason ports should North Korea collapse, China does not have to be overly concerned about this as it has alternative ports in Liaoning province. China has in fact put aside 220 billion RMB (\$35 billion) in infrastructure investment into a new coastal economy development strategy whereby 59 port projects are scheduled for early development in Liaoning province.³⁵ For instance, China has been developing its Donggang Economic Development Zone (Donggang EDZ) with the aim of making it the "sea gate, logistics center and manufacturing base for Northeast China."³⁶ Located close to the Donggang EDZ is the Dandong ice-free port which is also in the process of being expanded to handle more cargo.³⁷ As such, the multiple ports in this entire development area of Liaoning Province coastal route could serve as an effective alternative to the Rason ports in enabling China to accelerate the development of these provinces.

Secondly, the minerals that China will lose access to in the event of North Korea's collapse do not represent significant losses for China. China's main mineral interest in North Korea is its coal—from January to September 2011, 8.19 million tons (i.e., 97.3 percent) of the 8.42 million tons of minerals that China had imported from North Korea were anthracite coals. If China were to

33 Christopher Hill himself said that, should North Korea collapse, "The successor state on the Korean Peninsula would be South Korea, a treaty ally of the US." Hill, "After Kim Jong-Il."

34 Given the extremely high financial costs of reunification, a reunified Korea led from Seoul will definitely need to use these ports and minerals in Northern Korea for its own reunification efforts. The amount of money required for reunification varies according to different studies and is impossible to determine. Estimates are around \$1 trillion if reunification were to take place between 2020-2029. The costs of reunification will only increase if it happens at a later time. Chang-min Shin, "Costs, Gains and Taxes," Publication by the Ministry of Justice, Republic of Korea, Unification and Law 3, November 2010; and "South Korean President Calls for Reunification Tax," *Reuters*, August 15, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/08/15/us-korea-north-tax-idUSTRE67E08K20100815>.

35 "Donggang District," *China Daily*, http://liaoning.chinadaily.com.cn/dandong/2011-01/13/content_12498842.htm; "Donggang Economic Development Zone," *China Daily*, http://liaoning.chinadaily.com.cn/dandong/2010-09/15/content_12498772.htm.

36 *Ibid.*

37 There are plans to invest 45 billion yuan (approximately \$7.07 billion) between 2011 and 2015 to boost Dandong port's annual handling capacity from its current 60 million tons of cargo to above 100 million tons. The aim is to make the port the largest along the Yellow Sea coast in China and to "cement its role as a transport hub in Northeast Asia that connects the Korean Peninsula with Eurasia." "China Expands Hub Port that Connects Korean Peninsula to Eurasia," *Xinhua*, October 25, 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/business/2011-10/25/c_131211901.htm.

lose access to this approximate 11.2 million tons of annual coal shipments (this figure is obtained by extrapolating the figure above to obtain an annual import figure), it would not be a big loss for China as it would only be a loss of about six percent of its total coal imports of 182.4 million tons for 2011.³⁸ China can quite easily replace these lost amounts of coal by either increasing its own domestic production or by importing more from its current top two suppliers of Indonesia and Australia.³⁹

For China's import of non-coal minerals from North Korea, China also has alternative markets it can look to for these minerals. For minerals such as magnesite and tungsten which North Korea has an abundance of, Russia also has massive amounts and thus China need not be solely reliant on North Korea.⁴⁰ Given that China-Russia relations "are now at their best in history" according to the Chinese Ambassador to Russia,⁴¹ and given that Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin just visited Beijing in October 2011 to sign off on trade deals worth \$7 billion,⁴² Russia is likely to be open to the idea of giving China increased access to more of its resources in exchange for other benefits from China.

China's Geopolitical Interests in North Korea

Having offered a critical analysis of why China's often-cited military-strategic and economic interests in North Korea cannot be the main reasons behind China's continued support of North Korea (given the high costs involved for China),⁴³ I shall now focus on evaluating whether China's geopolitical benefits gained via North Korea—defined here as how China uses North Korea as a tool to enhance its own political position or standing relative to other states in North-

38 For 2011, China's total coal imports were 182.4 million tons. "China Overtakes Japan as World's Top Coal Importer," *Reuters*, January 26, 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/01/26/coal-china-japan-idINDEE80P02720120126>.

39 "Understanding China's Rising Coal Imports," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 16, 2012, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/china_coal.pdf.

40 Deborah A. Kramer, "Magnesium, its Alloys and Compounds," US Geological Survey Open-File Report 01-341, 2001, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2001/of01-341/of01-341.pdf>; and Kim B. Shedd, "Tungsten World Mine Production, Reserves, and Reserve Base," US Geological Survey, January 2005, <http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/tungsten/tungsmcs05.pdf>.

41 Remarks made by Chinese Ambassador to Russia Hui Li. "China-Russia relations at their Best: Ambassador," *Xinhua*, September 26, 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-09/26/c_13530762.htm.

42 Iain Mills, "A New Era in China-Russian Relations?," *World Politics Review*, October 18, 2011, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10369/a-new-era-in-china-russia-relations>.

43 As mentioned earlier, China's continued support of North Korea has resulted in high costs to China in the form of tremendous damage to both its bilateral relationships with other states and to its international image as a responsible rising power.

east Asia—is the main reason behind China’s North Korea policy. Particular reference will be made to the geopolitical benefits that China gains in relation to the US and South Korea which are two key states that are inseparable from any analysis on China’s foreign policy approach towards North Korea.⁴⁴

China’s Geopolitical Gains in Relation to the US

As Andrew Scobell said, “China’s North Korea policy is more about Beijing’s view of Washington than their view of Pyongyang.”⁴⁵ Sunny Lee added that “when Chinese scholars, experts, government officials talk about Korea... their eyes are in Washington.”⁴⁶ As such, in light of the above statements, coupled with the importance of the China-US relationship to China and the US’ efforts to contain China’s rise,⁴⁷ I would argue that China’s main geopolitical benefits (gained via North Korea’s continued existence and relatively high dependence on China’s support for its survival) are gained against the US. These geopolitical benefits to China include: 1) a reduced amount of resources that the US can devote to the Taiwan issue; 2) an increased ability to obtain concessions from the US; and 3) maintenance of status quo in the regional balance of power.

Firstly, China wants North Korea to continue to distract the US in the region and prevent it from devoting more of its resources to Taiwan. From China’s strategic perspective, “Taiwan and North Korea are intrinsically linked” and “China’s relations with the DPRK are largely subject to its strategic calculus vis-à-vis the US, and with Taiwan in the background.”⁴⁸ With a continued threat

44 You Ji wrote that: “Under the current international situation... North Korea is an indispensable chip in China’s dealing with the US, the Republic of Korea.” Ji, “China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship,” 391.

45 Official Korea Economic Institute Twitter page: Andrew Scobell, “China’s North Korea policy is more about Beijing’s view of Washington than their view of Pyongyang,” March 16, 2012, 8.47pm. Tweet, <https://twitter.com/KoreaEconInst>.

46 Lee, “Chinese Perspectives on North Korea and Reunification.”

47 There is ample evidence to suggest that at least in a military sense, the US has already been attempting to contain China in recent years: US technology transfer restrictions on trade with China, US pressure on the European Union and Israel not to sell weapons to China, the upgrading of US military capabilities in Guam, the offer of advanced weaponry to Taiwan, increased defense coordination and consultation with Taiwan, and the push for a more active Japanese role in the US-Japan alliance. Thomas J. Christensen, “Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and US Policy Towards East Asia,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 109. US efforts to contain China’s rise were arguably confirmed by US President Obama’s announcement in late 2011 that the US government is going to “pivot” to Asia. This is seen in some circles as a euphemism for a broader US containment strategy of China which is a theory that I subscribe to. “Obama Tells Asia: US ‘Here to Stay’ as a Pacific Power,” *Guardian*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/17/obama-asia-pacific-address-australia-parliament>.

48 You Ji, “Dealing with the ‘North Korea Dilemma:’ China’s Strategic Choices,” (RSIS Working Paper, no. 229, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, June 21, 2011): 12; and Shen, “North Korea’s

from North Korea, the US will be forced to have a significant amount of diplomatic resources and troops “tied down on the Korean Peninsula and looking north toward the DPRK” rather than looking south toward Taiwan.⁴⁹ As reunification with Taiwan remains China’s core national interest, China does not want the US to interfere too much in what it considers to be an internal matter.

Secondly, China wants to use its influence over North Korea to increase its own bargaining power and to get more concessions from the US. Being the only major state in the world that has a relatively higher influence over and access to the top North Korean leadership, China can use this as a bargaining chip against the US which does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea.⁵⁰ China’s influence over North Korea was acknowledged when both the US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley and the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen said that China does have unique influence with North Korea.⁵¹ In addition, China is also the only major state that has “eyes on the ground” in North Korea.⁵² Kurt Campbell added that the US had “asked China to share information on developments” in North Korea following Kim Jong-il’s death.⁵³ Even the CIA seems to lack intelligence about North Korea as a former CIA official pointed out that US intelligence has a “failure to penetrate deep into the existing leadership.”⁵⁴ This unique (and relatively higher level of) influence that China has over North Korea, coupled with the insider information that China has, strengthens China’s position to seek concessions from the US on a broad range of bilateral issues.

Thirdly, China wants to prevent North Korea’s collapse because it wants to maintain the status quo in the regional balance of power. Should North Korea

Strategic Significance to China,” 19.

49 Congressional Research Service, “China-North Korea Relations,” 8.

50 While there is constant debate and uncertainty over the amount of absolute influence that China has over North Korea (i.e., will North Korea actually obey China’s instructions?), China undoubtedly has relatively higher influence over North Korea (and relatively higher level of access to its top leadership) compared to any other major state in the world. This relatively higher level of influence and access is the source of China’s bargaining strength vis-à-vis the other states in Northeast Asia (including the US).

51 “Obama Dispatches Aircraft Carrier to Yellow Sea After North Korean Attack,” *Bloomberg News*, November 25, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-11-23/obama-to-callsouth-korea-s-lee-after-attack-by-north-kills-two-soldiers.html>; and “Admiral Mike Mullen’s Speech in Seoul,” US Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 8, 2010, <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1502>.

52 Victor Cha, “North Korea: What Not To Do,” *PacNet*, no. 1, January 9, 2012, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1.pdf>.

53 “Assistant Secretary Campbell’s Remarks to Media in Tokyo,” US State Department, January 9, 2012, <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2012/01/20120109104517su0.901527.html#axzz1mtqzal00>.

54 “Veil of Secrecy Keeps Foreign Intelligence Agencies in the Dark,” *Straits Times*, December 22, 2011, A8.

collapse in the near future, a pro-US reunified Korea (that is run from Seoul) would emerge on China's border. China would rather "maintain the geopolitical status quo rather than face the possibility of a peninsula unified in South Korea's image" which would greatly tilt the regional balance of power in favor of the US since China would be flanked by US allies (i.e., reunified Korea, Japan, Taiwan) all along its eastern coast and border.⁵⁵ Moreover, should China cease to support North Korea with the result of it to be on the brink of collapse, a desperate North Korea might reach out to the US to ensure its survival.⁵⁶ In the worst case scenario from China's perspective, North Korea might rapidly improve relations with the US and might cease to be a clear pro-China state.⁵⁷ In addition, China also wants to prevent North Korea's collapse as it is concerned that a reunified Korea would emerge as a much stronger nation in the long run—a Goldman Sachs study reported that a reunified Korea's GDP could exceed that of France, Germany and Japan in 30 to 40 years.⁵⁸ This would also affect the regional balance of power especially if this economically powerful and reunified Korea is a pro-US state.

China's Geopolitical Gains in Relation to South Korea

China can also use its influence over and access to North Korea as a bargaining chip to strengthen its political position against other Northeast Asian states. For this paper, I shall focus on the geopolitical benefits that China gains vis-à-vis South Korea.⁵⁹ China's main geopolitical benefits gained vis-à-vis South Korea include: 1) China is able to obtain more concessions from South Korea; and 2) China buys more time to attract South Korea into its sphere of influence.

Firstly, China can use its relatively higher levels of influence over and access to North Korea to get more concessions from South Korea. Since the ef-

55 Thompson, "Silent Partners," 76; and Shen, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China," 21-22; Victor Cha has a similar view and he said that "China does not want to see a unified Korea." Cha, "North Korea: What Not To Do," and Glaser, Snyder and Park, "Chinese Debates on North Korea."

56 This ability of North Korea to look to the US for assistance was again shown in early 2012 when North Korea struck a deal with the US to suspend its nuclear program in return for 240,000 tons of food aid. "North Korea Agrees to Halt Nuclear Activities for Food," *CNN*, March 1, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/29/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-deal/index.html>.

57 This is one of the four "intense debates" surrounding China-North Korea relations that Chinese analysts have had and which is documented in: Glaser, Snyder and Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor."

58 Goo-hoon Kwon, "A United Korea? Reassessing North Korea Risks (Part 1)," Goldman Sachs Global Economics Paper, no. 188, September 21, 2009, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/29410664/Goldman-Sachs-Global-Economics-Paper-a-United-Korea-Reassessing-North-Korea-Risks>.

59 It must be added that China can also gain similar benefits in relation to Japan since Japan does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea.

fective management of inter-Korean relations is always very high on South Korea's diplomatic agenda and since inter-Korean relations/dialogues remain at a low point at this moment,⁶⁰ China can use its close links to the top North Korean leadership to convey messages to North Korea and also help South Korea defuse the tensions that it has with North Korea. Given that, following Kim Jong-il's death, South Korea is "desperate for information about the situation in North Korea," China can discreetly offer to supply South Korea with the information it needs (since it is the state that knows most about what is going on in North Korea's elite circles) in exchange for other concessions from South Korea on a broad range of bilateral issues.⁶¹

Secondly, by preventing North Korea's collapse, China can buy time to attract South Korea into its sphere of influence and away from the US sphere of influence. Should North Korea collapse in the near future, it is certain that a pro-US reunified Korea led from Seoul will emerge which would be detrimental to China's interests in maintaining the status quo in the regional balance of power. By preventing North Korea's collapse, China can continue to work on attracting South Korea into its sphere of influence in the hope that when Korean reunification (led from Seoul) does eventually happen—a view even held by senior Chinese officials but under certain conditions⁶²—it will at least be a neutral state that is neither pro-China nor pro-US. This was also the view expressed by the majority (at 43 percent) of the 46 top Chinese scholars surveyed by Sunny Lee when they were asked for the circumstances under which they would support Korean reunification.⁶³ Since China is becoming an increasing important and attractive trade partner for South Korea, given more time, China hopes to lure South Korea away from the US.⁶⁴

60 South Korea drastically reduced its bilateral dealings with North Korea following its 2010 attacks. Seoul suspended inter-Korean trade and suspended most of its humanitarian aid. South Korean economic aid to North Korea was slashed from about \$370 million in 2007 to \$45 million in 2008 and \$1.9 million in 2010 and the number of inter-Korean talks dropped from an average of 19 per year between 1993 and 2007 to a total of 20 for 2008-10. "Seoul Keeps an Open Mind on North Korea," IISS Strategic Comments, March 9, 2012, <http://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic%20comments/sections/2012-bb59/seoul-keeps-an-open-mind-on-north-korea-5e0c>; and Snyder and Byun, "Cheonan and Yeonpyeong."

61 Cha, "North Korea: What Not To Do."

62 "US Embassy Cables: China 'Would Accept' Korean Reunification," *Guardian*, December 1, 2010; and "Wikileaks Cables Reveal China 'Ready to Abandon North Korea,'" *Guardian*, November 29, 2010.

63 Lee, "Chinese Perspectives on North Korea and Reunification."

64 In January 2012, during an official state visit to China, then South Korean President Lee Myung-bak took part in a business forum that was co-hosted by the Korea Chamber of Commerce & Industry (KCCI) and the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade. He remarked on the phenomenal results of the bilateral relations in all areas over the past two decades and acknowledged the realization of the bilateral trade target of \$200 billion at an earlier date than targeted. He added that: "I believe

The Significance of China's Geopolitical Interests in North Korea

In this section, I will argue that China's geopolitical interests obtained via North Korea represent the key variable and consideration behind its decision to continue supporting North Korea and to prevent its collapse. China is aware of and keen to hold on to the geopolitical benefits that it currently attains from North Korea's continued existence.⁶⁵ Should North Korea collapse, China's power position in Northeast Asia will be significantly weakened, especially since China cannot obtain similar geopolitical benefits via any other state in Northeast Asia. I shall elaborate more on why North Korea is so geopolitically significant to China to the point that this is the main reason why China does its best to prevent North Korea's collapse.

Firstly, North Korea is the only clear anti-US state in Northeast Asia that China can get to be on its side. Given that Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are clearly on the US side and since Mongolia is not a significant political actor in the region, the only other states in Northeast Asia that China could look to in order to help it maintain the balance of power in the region are Russia and North Korea. Given that Russia wants to be neutral (as far as possible) between China and the US in this post-Cold War era and "does not wish for an alliance with either country even if one were on offer,"⁶⁶ North Korea is China's only option left. Should North Korea collapse, the resulting regional balance of power would be tilted in favor of the US and China would be left without an ally in Northeast Asia.

Secondly, North Korea is the only state in Northeast Asia that is directly and openly hostile to the US. Given that Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are all pro-US at the moment (and for the foreseeable future), coupled with the fact that Russia no longer possesses the same level of threat to the US as it once did during the Cold War, North Korea poses the most serious direct threat to the

that the two countries will reach the trade goal of \$300 billion by 2015 without difficulty." South Korean Presidential Website, "The President Brings Consolidated Partnership from Beijing," January 13, 2012, http://english.president.go.kr/pre_activity/summit/diplomacy_view.php?uno=6207&board_no=E05&search_key=&search_value=&search_cate_code=&cur_page_no=1&code=13. In addition, in a commentary written by Sunny Lee, he discussed whether China is trying to (and whether it will be able to) "pull" South Korea away from US influence. Sunny Lee, "Will China's Soft-Power Strategy on South Korea Succeed?," *PacNet*, no. 23, April 8, 2013, <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1323.pdf>.

65 Moreover, the geopolitical benefits that China attains via North Korea are multi-dimensional in the sense that China can use their influence over and information about North Korea to gain concessions from any state in the world that has certain interests in North Korea. For this paper, I shall just focus on the geopolitical benefits that China gains in relation to the US and South Korea.

66 Anatol Lieven, "US-Russian Relations and the Rise of China," *New America Foundation*, July 11, 2011, http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/us_russian_relations_and_the_rise_of_china.

US. North Korea's continued existence means that it will continue to command a large amount of attention and resources from the US. Should North Korea collapse, there is no direct threat to the US on the same scale as North Korea in Northeast Asia and this would enable the US to channel more resources (having had them freed up from the Korean Peninsula) to the Taiwan issue.

Thirdly, as North Korea is highly dependent on China for its survival, China is the only major state in the world that has relatively higher levels of influence over, access to and insider information about North Korea's leaders.⁶⁷ North Korea is still highly dependent on Chinese economic support for its own survival—up to 90 percent of its energy supply, 80 percent of its consumer products and 40-45 percent of its food supply comes from China⁶⁸—therefore it is still subject to certain demands from China in return for continued assistance. No other state in Northeast Asia is as dependent on China for its own survival and thus subject to such a degree of external influence from China. Should North Korea collapse, China would be left without an alternative state that it could “use” as a bargaining chip to strengthen its negotiating position against states such as the US and South Korea.

Conclusion

Robert Jervis said that “only rarely does a single factor determine the way politics will work out” in the post-Cold War future of world politics.⁶⁹ In the case of China's North Korea policy, its geopolitical, military-strategic and economic interests all play some part (but to different degrees) in its decision to support North Korea and to prevent its collapse. Following a critical analysis of the research done thus far by scholars in this field and through an examination of open-source materials, I arrive at the conclusion that China's North Korea policy is largely driven by a pursuit of its own geopolitical interests and less so by its military-strategic and economic interests in North Korea.

In this paper, I have shown that the often-cited military-strategic concerns China has (with regard to North Korea's collapse) are largely unfounded. There is no strong evidence to suggest that the US actually has concrete plans to station its troops for the long haul north of the 38th parallel following North Ko-

67 “Obama Dispatches Aircraft Carrier to Yellow Sea After North Korean Attack,” *Bloomberg News*; “Admiral Mike Mullen's Speech in Seoul,” U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 8, 2010; and Cha, “North Korea: What Not To Do;” US State Department, “Assistant Secretary Campbell's Remarks to Media in Tokyo.”

68 Lee, “Chinese Perspectives on North Korea and Reunification.”

69 Robert Jervis, “The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?” *International Security* 16, no.3 (Winter 1991/1992): 4.

rea's collapse. Even if some of the other problems such as the influx of refugees into China's northeastern region and the problem of loose nuclear weapons/materials do arise, these are problems that China has the resources and capabilities to manage, especially since it has already formulated contingency plans to deal with these scenarios.

Regarding the economic interests that China has in North Korea, I have also shown that, should North Korea collapse, the loss of economic benefits in North Korea will not represent significant losses for China as it does have alternatives it can look to. In the case of the loss of access to the Rason ports, China has alternative ports in Liaoning Province that can do just as effective a job in guaranteeing sea access for shipments out of northeastern China that are aimed at accelerating the development of China's landlocked Northeastern provinces. In the case of the loss of access to the minerals that China currently obtains from North Korea, China is also not overly concerned about this issue as its coal imports from North Korea do not represent a large percentage of China's total coal imports and the non-coal minerals that China wants are also attainable in other parts of the world.

Most importantly, I have shown that China's key interest in preventing North Korea's collapse is actually the geopolitical benefits that it is currently gaining via North Korea. These geopolitical benefits include: getting the US tied down on the Korean Peninsula so that they can devote less resources to Taiwan; China using its influence over and access to North Korea as a bargaining chip to obtain more concessions from the US and South Korea over a broad range of bilateral issues; and the use of North Korea to maintain the status quo in the regional balance of power. China cannot afford to lose these geopolitical benefits which are highly significant to it especially in a period of increasing China-US competition. Moreover, there is no other state in Northeast Asia that China can "use" to obtain similar geopolitical benefits to what North Korea can provide it with.

In sum, in an era where the US is still the dominant superpower in the world and when it is trying to contain China's rise, if China wants to make full use of what Jiang Zemin termed the "20 years' period of strategic opportunity" to rise to become a great power, it will definitely need to continue to support North Korea and to prevent its collapse for the foreseeable future. Y