

A multi-layered approach towards North Korean Regime: political, economical, diplomatic, and societal

Background

When evaluating the state of the discourse on recent North Korean developments, we often see – to put it in a straightforward fashion – a continuing reiteration of short-term interests and a consequent lack of feedback. That is to say, researchers' interest in North Korea tends for long periods of time to follow specific events, such as ballistic missile and nuclear tests, the resumption of the Six-party Talks and their abrupt cancellation, the currency devaluation, the succession process, the recent sinking of the South Korean patrol boat *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, and the successive visits to China by North Korean senior officials. The media coverage of these events creates a surge of interest that the discourse obediently follows and, when the next incident occurs, interest in the previous affair quickly dissipates.

Naturally, the reality of this situation shows that North Korean affairs change rapidly. This tends to make research on North Korea “perishable”, with an expiry date and all. As a result, what we see today is a general discourse lacking continuity as well as a tangible “current” (research history), simply vanishing with the passage of time.

As long as this method of research persists, research on North Korea will amount merely to a variation on news commentary. Even in relation to these specific incidents, understanding each event as a consequence of a specific process and placing it within the context of North Korea as a whole becomes immensely difficult. Typical of the state of research is the fact that, while considerable interest has been shown about “successors,” little attention has been paid to the changes that will inevitably occur in North Korean politics during the North Korean succession process, with the exception of the promotion and replacement of senior officials. Still, while incidents occurring as a consequence of the economic reforms, the re-denomination of the won, and the black market are being debated, we are seeing no attempts to observe the consequences North Korea has had to deal with as a result, and discussion about the theory or basis on which North Korea formulates its economic policy in the first place is sorely absent. These are all good examples of what we should be analyzing with regard to North Korea.

In addition, drawing up a future outlook for North Korea under present conditions might narrow our field of view and have a negative effect on our ability to propose and come up with effective policies towards North Korea, particularly as we approach 2012, which the North Korean government has announced will mark a

“historic milestone” with potentially immense consequences for the regime. Building a framework from which the implications of this event can be thoroughly analyzed would contribute to the research history on the subject, and is also regarded as vital from a policy standpoint. Based on this perspective, the study group will attempt to reconstruct the currently myopic framework on North Korean affairs, and to create a long-term model from which we can further the debate over North Korea.

Aims of Research

The study group will select certain subject groupings, analyze the principal topics therein, and derive a picture of the current state of North Korea from various perspectives. Specifically, the researchers will work to establish a holistic depiction of North Korea at present based on a larger framework consisting of four fundamental issues: politics, economics, diplomacy, and society. Through analyses conducted under this loose but still clear categorization of the four aforementioned fundamentals, the conceptualized research in these separate areas will provide a multifaceted view of today’s North Korea and will offer suggestions for examining future developments in these areas. In conjunction with this, the study group hopes to produce research that will evoke in readers a meaningful “image” of North Korea’s present and future.

The ultimate goal of this study group is to thus attain a productive knowledge of North Korea both as a series of case studies and as a comprehensive study of the country.

Plan of Action

The study group’s goal since its creation in October 2010 has been to compile analyses and works from all areas related to the current state of affairs of North Korea and reveal a “portrait” of the country that will lend itself to effective policy suggestions. Utilizing a reliable and seamless research approach, the study group will seek to achieve this goal more effectively on the basis of accumulated expertise deriving from many years of observation. The study group will maintain the layout of the previous year throughout 2011 while further deepening its research. Specifically, the study group members will examine trends in their respective areas of research, give presentations on their progress, and at the end of the year submit reports compiling their findings. As the presentations will basically assume a “year in review” format, the study group will also hold a seminar during the latter half of 2011.

Study Group Members

Leader

FURUTA Hiroshi (Professor, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Tsukuba University)

Members

KURATA Hideya (Professor, National Defense Academy; Adjunct Fellow, Japan
Institute of International Affairs)

HOTTA Yukihiro (Researcher, Department of Culture and Business, Kazankai
Foundation; Editor, "East Asia" Monthly News Magazine)

Member and Secretary

IIMURA Tomoki (Research Fellow, Japan Institute of International Affairs)