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The Korean Peninsula in Transition

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Foreword

It is most widely assumed in studies of international relations appearing in the mid 1990s that the Cold War has come to an end. Whatever may be the situation in Europe, however, this is hardly the case in East Asia. Even though changes of great importance took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it would be difficult to argue that the region is less tense or more relaxed than it was when the Soviet Union was still in existence.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the Korean peninsula. As has been so for a long time, a development-oriented, thrusting, capitalist state in the south confronts an ultra-centralised, ultra-secretive Stalinist-type state in the north. The border between them remains the most heavily fortified border in the world, where huge numbers of troops confront each other across a coast-to-coast no-man's land which has become the peninsula's most undisturbed (because it is unvisitable) wild-life park. Moreover, while the tense confrontation between the two sides of the Cold War years embodied a certain inbuilt stability, the situation as the century draws to its close may well be regarded as less stable because it is more unequal. Not to put too fine a point on it, North Korea has its back against the wall, both because its erstwhile allies (especially Russia, but to a lesser extent China) have deserted it, and also because it is experiencing the chronic stagnation of a rigid command economy seeking self-sufficiency in a market-liberal international environment. While a best-case scenario might see this as leading to a peaceable liberalisation of the polity and economy and ultimately a happy unification of the peninsula, few would regard that as very likely. Some less palatable alternatives include a continuation of the status quo in which the regime in the north becomes so desperate that it indulges in 'insane' adventures, and a sudden collapse of the northern regime leading to a takeover by the south which is consequently bankrupted by the cost of rehabilitating the northern economy and unifying the country. Neither of these scenarios need occur, but the consequences of either would be

profound, both for East Asia and for the international system as a whole.

The authors of the present book present a comprehensive set of analyses of the Korean situation, from the perspectives of economics, political science and international relations. It would be surprising if a group of scholars such as those here assembled were to arrive at identical conclusions about all aspects of this perplexing subject. In the case of North Korea, so little hard information (including statistics) is allowed to escape from that country that much analysis is hardly more than intelligent guesswork. Thus, for instance, Eui-Gak Hwang's findings about the North Korean economy are more sanguine than those of Aidan Foster-Carter. Between them, however, they bring to bear an interesting variety of theoretical tools and intuitive perceptions to elucidate the factual material that they have assembled. They ask why, for instance, the dependencia model has not worked as a means to the understanding of South Korean economic development, whether Seoul Government policies favouring the chaebol have been economically rational or otherwise, and what theoretical models might possibly throw light upon various behaviours of the North Korean regime, or the future path of the peninsula in the broader international system.

Dae Hwan Kim and Tat Yan Kong have between them performed a valuable service in bringing together the authors of the present volume and fashioning their work into a coherent piece of analysis of the immensely complicated problem of Korea. They are at one in believing that the peninsula is of absolutely first-ranking international importance from several perspectives, and can be ignored by the outside world at its peril.

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Preface

The idea for this volume originated from the *Political Economy of Korean Economic Development Seminar* held at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford in the Hilary Term of 1992. A number of the writers in this volume were participants in that seminar. We felt that the papers provided a firm basis for a publication examining the long-term and contemporary changes taking place on the Korean peninsula and their significance. To make the volume comprehensive we extended the coverage to North Korea (the focus of the seminar was the sources of South Korean industrialisation and its effects) and we also had to ensure that there would be representation from all the major social science disciplines as well as input from policy-oriented authors. Apart from comparing North and South Korea, we hope that the volume also provides comparison of the different analytical approaches to one of the most fascinating case studies of the social sciences.

Dae Hwan Kim
Tat Yan Kong

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